EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

In treating of Shakspeare, said one of the best of Coleridge’s critics, “he set the sun in heaven.” The present volume, imperfect record as it is, contains the greater substance of all that the most inspired English critic said, whether casually or deliberately, of the most inspired poet. Its contents are those of the two posthumous miscellanies of notes for lectures and reports of lectures, which were prepared by Henry Nelson Coleridge and his wife Coleridge’s daughter, Sarah—in 1836, and by Payne Collier in 1856. The first deals principally with the lectures given by Coleridge in 1818, but it contains many notes and memoranda which belong equally to the earlier period. And one suspects Payne Collier’s contribution of the 1811-12 lectures, although he was a less unreliable recorder than is usually supposed, to have been in some instances from the earlier publication. Perhaps the best way to read in this double collection is to turn up first the Notes upon Shakspeare’s plays—“Hamlet” for preference, in which Coleridge (who was himself an intellectual Hamlet) used to perfection the subtle mirror afforded by his own mind; and then from that to work through the maze of his lectures and poetic homilies. It must be remembered that the whole book, as here constituted, is the tell-tale memorial of the Coleridge who was too indolent to make good his harvest. He had a magnificent intellect, a superb imagination, but no corresponding will-power. The consequence is that his lectures on Shakspeare were imperfectly prepared, often ill-delivered, and left in the end to the mercy of careless reporters. But to those who can discern the god in the cloud, these transcripts are of inestimable value. Intermittent flashes of creative criticism break continually through the misty envelope, and the brilliance is according to the assimilative or the refractive quality of the reader. For, as Coleridge quotes and says, “we are not all Mogul diamonds, to take the light.” There are readers that are
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sponges, and others that are sand-glasses or strain-bags, who let
the creative element escape, and retain only the dregs. There
are plentiful dregs in these pages.

A page ought to be added to enable us the better to realise
Coleridge, the lecturer, as he appeared to his hearers and
contemporaries.

Byron, in one of his letters, says: "We are going in a party to
hear the new Art of Poetry by the reformed schismatic." \(^1\) This
was toward the end of the course, which according to Crabb
Robinson ended with éclat. "The room was crowded, and the
lecture had several passages more than brilliant." This was after
a very fluctuating success. At a December lecturc, ostensibly
on Romeo and Juliet, he is said to have "surpassed himself in the
art of talking in a very interesting way without speaking at all on
the subject announced." On the same occasion Charles Lamb
whispered to his neighbour in the audience: "This is not
much amiss. He promised a lecture on the Nurse in Romeo and
Juliet, and he has given us instead one in the manner of the
nurse." Four times in all were his hearers invited to a lecture on
Romeo and Juliet, it seems; and at least three times did he dis-
appoint them. Instead of the expected discourse, "We have," said
Crabb Robinson in a letter to Mrs Clarkson, "an immethodical
rhapsody. . . . Yet I cannot but be charmed with their splendida
vitia, and my chief displeasure is occasioned by my being forced
to hear the strictures of persons infinitely below Coleridge,
without any power of refuting or contradicting them."

For this course of 1811-12, Coleridge did not write out his
lectures, and they were nearly all delivered extemporaneously.
The Morgans, with whom he was staying at the time, found it
hard to get him to make any direct preparation. He would not
look into his Shakspeare, although they purposely put it in his
way, and an old MS. commonplace book seems to have been his
sole remembrance.

For the course of 1818, he did, on his own declaration,
make a more settled preparation, on an eclectic plan of his
own.

"During a course of lectures," he writes, "I faithfully employ
all the intervening days in collecting and digesting the materials.
The day of the lecture I devote to the consideration, what of the

\(^1\) Crabb Robinson speaks of seeing Byron and Rogers at one of the lectures of this
course. He says of Byron: "He was wrapp’d up, but I recognised his club foot, and
indeed his countenance and general appearance."
mass before me is best fitted to answer the purpose of a lecture, that is, to keep the audience awake and interested during the delivery, and to leave a sting behind,” that is, he explains, a wish to study the subject anew, in the light of a new principle. “I take far, far more pains,” he adds, “than would go to the set composition of a lecture, both by varied reading and by meditation; but for the words, illustrations, etc., I know almost as little as any one of the audience . . . what they will be five minutes before the lecture begins.”

The 1811-12 lectures were delivered in rooms in Crane Court, Fetter Lane, Fleet Street. The 1818 course was held in rooms at Flower-de-Luce Court—“near the Temple,” Gilman says; but no doubt the Fleur-de-lis Court, off Fetter Lane, is the actual place. Coleridge, it is well to note, gave some earlier courses of lectures in London; one in 1806-7, at the Royal Institution, was “On the Principles of the Fine Arts”; and in 1807-8, he actually began five courses of five lectures each on the English poets, of which only the first course, that on Shakspeare, was delivered. But this first course, and its date, are important, because of the old question of Coleridge's debt to Schlegel. Schlegel's lectures were given in 1808, as Mr. Ashe points out in this connection (in his interesting edition of Coleridge's Lectures which was published in 1883). Coleridge himself speaks of one London detached lecture of his, at the “Crown and Anchor,” whose date was probably 1817 or 1818.

Other lectures were given in 1813 at the Surrey Institution, on Belles Lettres; and in Bristol, at the great room of the “White Lion,” in 1813-14. After some characteristic delays and disappointments, these Bristol lectures gave immense pleasure to the few elect who went to them. Cottle describes them as of a conversational character, and says, “The attention of his hearers never flagged, and his large dark eyes, and his countenance, in an excited state, glowing with intellect, predisposed his audience in his favour.” We gather from other references that they did not bring him much gold, greatly as he and his unlucky family needed it. The London course of 1818 ends his career as a lecturer; and if it was a rather more profitable adventure, it was hardly one to reinstate his poor fortunes. He was then a man of forty-six. In 1834 he died.
THE FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF HIS PUBLISHED WORKS


A Moral and Political Lecture, 1795. Conciones ad Populum; or, Addresses to the People, 1795. The Plot Discovered: An Address to the People, 1795.

First Collected Edition of Poems and Dramas, 1828.

POSTHUMOUS WORKS

Specimens of his Table Talk (Edited by H. N. Coleridge), 1835. Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Edited by T. Allsop), 1836, 58, 64. Literary Remains (Edited by H. N. Coleridge), 1836-1839. Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit (Edited by H. N. Coleridge), 1840. Hints towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life (Edited by S. B. Watson), 1848. Notes and Lectures upon Shakspeare and some of the Old Dramatists (Edited by