“Too Good for Mere Wit”: How Coleridge Read Donne’s Poetry

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Synopsis
The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Coleridge read Donne’s poetry, with particular attention paid to “passion” and “wit,” to both of which Coleridge frequently refers when he considers Donne’s poetry. As for Donne’s passion, Coleridge stresses that it is inextricably intertwined with the metre and the language of his poetry. As for his wit, some expressions in his poetry come from <good> wit, others from <bad> wit, though Coleridge’s remarks on it are sometimes seemingly contradictory.

Coleridge was an enthusiastic reader of Donne’s poetry. Considering that his poetry had been nearly ignored during the 18th century, we may feel all the more curious why Donne appealed to Coleridge. It was Charles Lamb who aroused Coleridge’s interest in the metaphysical poets first. Coleridge borrowed from him a copy of Donne’s poetry published in 1669, and interpolated comments in it. Coleridge also borrowed from Gillman an anthology of English poetry, which includes Donne’s poetry, and in this book too, Coleridge wrote some notes. These marginal notes give us valuable clues for understanding how Coleridge read Donne, in what respects his critical acumen led him to esteem, and in what respects to criticize, Donne’s poetry. However, for all their worth, only few attempts have so far been made to analyze them. In this paper, I examine what they are intended to convey, with Coleridge’s other related writings taken into consideration, because they are often laconic, reserved, fragmentary, seemingly contradictory and disorganized owing to the limited space on the pages.

Although Donne’s poetry is ostensibly intellectual, Coleridge was sensitively aware of the need, when reading it, to become unified with
Donne, and thereby to capture the passion latent in his poetry, and running with its metre. Coleridge’s way of reading Donne is just like a “dialogue of one,” which the lovers in “The Extasie” have. Coleridge as the reader has a dialogue with Donne as the poet in his “well wrought urn,” i.e. his poetry, but their dialogue is a dialogue of not two, but one, as Coleridge becomes Donne with the help of imagination and feels his passion, in order to appreciate the vast richness of Donne’s poetry. His is a way of reading which sacrifices neither heart nor head.

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1. Introduction

Like Wordsworth, who proposed to imitate and adopt in poetry “the very language of men” instead of poetic diction (390), Coleridge objected to conventionalized artificial style being employed, emphasizing the appropriateness of natural language. Remembering how his taste for natural expression in poetry was formed in his youth, Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria* (hereafter *B.L.*), gratefully records his encounter with the poetry of W. L. Bowles, whom he considered “the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction” (1: 25).

This position of theirs on poetic diction made T. S. Eliot feel a contradiction between their theory and their actual assessment of poetry. He asserts that, despite their advocacy of expressive naturalness, they did not recognize the value of John Donne’s poetry, where a colloquial, and therefore natural, style is conspicuously utilized.

Donne has seemed to us . . . as striking a peculiarly conversational style; but did Wordsworth or Coleridge acclaim Donne? No, when it came to Donne—and Cowley—you will find that Wordsworth and Coleridge were led by the nose by Samuel Johnson . . . (72)

It is true that, in comparing his contemporary poets with the metaphysical poets including Donne, and criticizing the former in *B.L.*, Coleridge also pointed out “the most fantastic out-of-the-way thoughts” as a defect of the latter, although his remark focused rather on their “most pure and genuine mother English.” He observed that the Metaphysicals “sacrificed the passion, and passionate flow of poetry, to the subtleties of intellect, and to the starts of wit . . . ” and summarized the comparison succinctly and impressively by stating that “[the Metaphysicals] sacrificed the heart
to the head; [the moderns] both heart and head to point and drapery” (1: 23–24). This view of Coleridge’s on the Metaphysicals has something in common with Samuel Johnson’s.

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour. . . . Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be . . . considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. (22–23)

However, Coleridge, again in *B.L.* but this time more favourably, refers to Donne’s poetry as having “the vividness of the descriptions or declamations,” which he thinks comes partly “from the force and the fervour of the describer” (2: 72). Moreover, citing in the same chapter the 2nd and 4th stanzas of Donne’s “The Progress of the Soul,” he extols “the legitimate language of poetic fervor self-impassioned” (2: 84). In addition to these observations in *B.L.*, many of Coleridge’s marginal notes on Donne’s poetry serve as evidence of his favourable appreciation of it. His comments include: “Too good for mere wit. It contains a deep practical truth—this Triplet” on the last three lines of “The Good-morrow,” “One of my favorite Poems” on “The Canonization,” “An admirable Poem which none but Donne could have written. Nothing were ever more admirably made out than the figure of the Compass” on “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” and “I should never find fault with metaphysical poems, were they all like this—or but half so excellent.—” on “The Extasie” (*Marginalia* 218, 220, 223, 224).

Now, let me repeat Eliot’s question; did Wordsworth and Coleridge acclaim Donne? Putting Wordsworth aside, and confining the question to Coleridge, my answer is basically yes. Coleridge was not led by the nose by Johnson, but assessed Donne’s poetry by his own criteria. Coleridge criticized some poems (or parts of poems) of Donne, but was fascinated by more. Then, in what respects did Coleridge’s critical acumen led him to esteem, and in what respects to criticize, Donne’s poetry?

The purpose of this research is to investigate how Coleridge read Donne’s poetry, with particular attention paid to “passion” and “wit,” to both of which Coleridge frequently refers when he considers Donne’s poetry. In the process, what his seemingly contradictory comments arise
from will be made clear. This investigation necessarily includes the question of what Coleridge thinks the poet should be. I turn to Coleridge’s marginal notes on Donne’s poetry, because they have not been scrutinized enough so far in spite of their value as clues for understanding Coleridge’s reading of Donne, and they have been more often quoted than profitably analyzed. However, because of the limited space on the pages, they are often laconic, reserved, fragmentary and disorganized, so they require us to read between the lines, with Coleridge’s other writings taken into consideration.

2. Metre and Passion

How enthusiastic a reader of Donne’s poetry Coleridge was was recorded by Baron Hatherley (William Wood).

In the evening with B. Montagu to Coleridge’s. He had been seized with a fit of enthusiasm for Donne’s poetry, which I think somewhat unaccountable. There was great strength, however, in some passages which he read. One stanza or rather division of his poem, on the “Progress of the Soul,” struck me very much; it was, I think, the fourth, in which he addresses Destiny as the “Knot of Causes.” (qtd. in Brinkley 529)

We should notice that what Coleridge was reading enthusiastically then was the 4th stanza of “The Progress of the Soul,” the expression of which, as referred to earlier, he admires in B.L. as “the legitimate language of poetic fervor self-impassioned.” Considering the fact that Donne’s poetry had been nearly ignored during the 18th century, we may feel all the more curious to know what in Donne appealed to Coleridge so much as to make him such an enthusiastic reader of his poetry. It is known that it was Charles Lamb who aroused Coleridge’s interest in the metaphysical poets first, and Coleridge borrowed from him a copy of Donne’s poetry published in 1669, and interpolated comments in it. One of them is:

To read Dryden, Pope &c, you need only count syllables; but to read Donne you must measure Time, & discover the Time of Each word by the Sense & Passion. (Marginalia 2: 216)

This annotation suggests that Coleridge was keenly interested in how to read Donne’s poetry, and it corresponds with his enthusiastic way of
reading which struck Baron Hatherley. What is emphasized here is the importance of the quantitative value of words, or syllables. Historically, accessional verse, which is based not on the number of syllables but on the number of stresses in a line of verse, was initially predominant in English poetry, but with the increase of the influence of French following the Norman Conquest, it was marginalized, and the metrical system based on the number of syllables began to prevail. It became most common particularly in the age of classicism. Opposing the too rigid use of the system as artificial and mechanical, Coleridge suggests that more attention should be paid to the quantitative value of syllables, instead of the number. But it must be differentiated from such quantitative verse as can be found in Latin or Greek, where the duration of each syllable is decided according solely to the pattern of the foot composed of long and short syllables. Coleridge stresses that the amount of time assigned to each syllable should be determined with the sense and passion in view. In other words, what the poet means and how he feels should determine the metre, not vice versa. A note of Coleridge’s written in a copy of the dramatic works of Beaumont and Fletcher also says “Since Dryden the metre of our Poets leads to the Sense: in our elder and more genuine Poets the Sense, including the Passion, leads to the metre” (Marginalia 1: 377).

Let us examine further how metre is related to passion by considering a rationale Coleridge provides for metre. He claims that metre is originally and essentially derived from “the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion” (B.L. 2: 64). Passion, arising as the germ of poetry, is to be accompanied by an instinctive effort to bring order, and the resultant equilibrium between the effort and the passion produces metre. Coleridge asserts that it is “an interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and voluntary purpose” (B.L. 2: 65). He also writes in a letter addressed to Sotheby, “metre itself implies a passion, i.e. a state of excitement, both in the Poet’s mind, & is expected in that of the Reader . . .” (Collected Letters 2: 812). Recall that he admired Donne’s “legitimate language of poetic fervor self-impassioned” in “The Progress of the Soul.” What Coleridge suggests by “self-impassioned” is that passion is an intrinsic element of the language of the poem. The passion is not given to the poem from outside as a subject, as an element independent of the language, but is inextricably intertwined with, or rather an integral
element of it. It is not passion *ab extra* but passion *ab intra* that Coleridge appreciates in the poem.

It may be worth mentioning, in passing, that this issue of how passion and expression, or metre, interrelate is where Coleridge differs from Wordsworth in opinion. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth claim that passion is an essential element of poetry. Wordsworth even defines poetry concisely as “a passion,” which is a simplified and bold rewording of his more well-known definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (387, 400, 409). But, whereas Coleridge, as we have seen, regards metre as inseparable from passion, Wordsworth assumes that metre obeys fixed laws decided by tradition, not by passion. In Wordsworth’s view, the purpose of poetry is to produce, or rather reproduce through the alembic of memory, excitement, but if the words representing the excitement are in themselves too powerful, they will incur the danger of the excitement becoming uncontrollable. So metre, which is regular, is expected to “have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion” (399). As Wordsworth regards poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” he has good reason to be cautious of poetry getting too emotional and therefore chaotic. However, it should be noted that his theory presupposes that metre and passion are discrete elements of poetry, though he considers both indispensable for it.

This divergence of opinion between Coleridge and Wordsworth on passion leads to another on poetic language. Referring to Kenelm Digby’s theory and applying it to poetry, Coleridge writes in *B.L.* of the relationship between passion and the language, “as every passion has its proper pulse, so will it likewise have its characteristic modes of expression” (2: 71). He claims that a passion, which is implied in metre, demands its correspondent expression. On the other hand, Wordsworth holds the view that there is no disparity between the language of poetry and that of prose. He insists “that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem . . . must necessarily . . . in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written” (391). As mentioned above, Wordsworth regards passion and metre as discrete elements, and asserts “Metre is but adventitious to composition . . .” (409).

We have seen that, in Coleridge’s view, passion is inseparable from
metre, or the language of poetry. Then, what does passion do for, and how does it work in, poetry? We need to look further into the workings of passion, but before tackling this problem, it is helpful to consider wit, to which Coleridge thinks the Metaphysicals sacrificed passion in their poetry.

3. Wit and Fancy

In pointing out that the Metaphysicals sacrificed passion to wit, Coleridge specifically named Donne and Cowley together (B.L. 1: 23). Nevertheless, there is dissimilarity as well as similarity between them, of which Coleridge was well aware. He writes in a note on Donne, “How legitimate a child was not Cowley of Donne; but Cowley had a Soul-mother as well as Soul-Father. . . .” Coleridge conjectured that Cowley’s “Soul-mother” was “sickly Court-Loyalty” and “a discursive Intellect,” and they, he writes, made Cowley’s poetry “less vigorous, & daring” (Marginalia 2: 219). In B.L., Coleridge, immediately after praising Donne’s “legitimate language of poetic fervor self-impassioned,” cites Cowley’s free translation of Pindar’s second Olympic, pointing out that it causes “the excitement of surprize by the juxta-position and apparent reconciliation of widely different or incompatible things” (2: 87), which cannot be found in the original. Obviously “this compulsory juxta-position” shares certain similarities with the function of wit defined by Johnson, who states, “The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together” (23). Coleridge goes on to maintain that “such rhetorical caprices” are not derived from fancy or imagination but from “a species of wit,” which “implies a leisure and self-possession both of thought and of feeling, incompatible with the steady fervour of a mind possessed and filled with the grandeur of its subject.” Coleridge here contrasts wit with passion.

Then, what about Donne’s wit? It is true that Donne’s wit at times functions in a similar way to Cowley’s, whereby two ideas are forcibly connected, striking one as artificial, far-fetched, awkward and odd. Coleridge, for instance, complained that the metaphor likening a pair of lovers to hemispheres in “The Good-morrow” cannot be rescued “from the charge of nonsense or a bull” (Marginalia 2: 17). All the lines, except the last four, of “A Feaver,” Coleridge writes, are “detestable,” probably because of the conceit whereby a woman is compared to the world’s soul.
Regarding the 2nd stanza of “Air and Angels,” where the lovers are spoken of as an angel and the air he wears, he writes, “I do not understand” (Marginalia 2: 221–222). Coleridge deprecates these parts of Donne’s poetry because they are lacking in naturalness, with different ideas forcibly juxtaposed. In them, passion is stifled by “the most fantastic out-of-the-way thoughts” (B.L. 1: 23).

However, Coleridge left favourable comments on Donne’s wit, too. He praises Donne’s wit, when it works well. His comment below shows his admiration.

Wonder-exciting vigour, intenseness and peculiarity of thought, using at will the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory, and exercised on subjects, where we have no right to expect it—this is the wit of Donne! (Marginalia 2: 17)

Coleridge is conscious of the ambiguity of the term “wit,” which is applicable not only to Donne, but also to Butler, Pope, Congreve and Sheridan with different meanings. So, just before the passage quoted above, Coleridge deplores, “how many disparate things are here expressed by one and the same word, Wit!” As for Donne’s wit described above, its function is to associate two ideas taken from different fields in vast stores of memory, and to arouse surprise by an unexpected association. Hence comes “peculiarly of thought.” So far, it is basically the same as <bad> wit mentioned above. What differentiates this wit, or <good> wit, from <bad> wit is “vigour” and “intenseness of thought,” without which wit would be less persuasive and more perplexing, and make a poem something like a superficial intellectual game.

Below are the lines composed by Coleridge to pay homage to Donne’s wit.

With Donne, whose muse on dromedary trots,  
Wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots;  
Rhyme’s sturdy cripple, fancy’s maze and clue,  
Wit’s forge and fire-blast, meaning’s press and screw.  
(Marginalia 2: 16)

In this poem, Coleridge enumerates the characteristics of Donne’s poetry, such as its seemingly irregular but steady and strong metre, astonishing metaphors and imagery, complicated development of stories, brain-rack-
ing puzzles, and contorted meanings. He praises them as Donne’s tour de force, using Donnesque metaphors himself.

As is suggested in the poem, there seem to be affinities between wit and fancy. When Coleridge characterized Cowley’s wit as a “compulsory juxta-position,” taking an example from his free translation of Pindar’s work, he asserted that it is not fancy nor imagination (B.L. 2: 87). Also in his lecture on Shakespeare, Coleridge tried to differentiate wit and fancy.

It is not always easy to distinguish between wit and fancy. When the whole pleasure received is derived from surprise at unexpected turn of expression, then I call it wit; but when the pleasure is produced not only by surprise, but also by an image which remains with us and gratiﬁes for its own sake, then I call it fancy.

(Shakespearean Criticism 2: 90–91)

Nevertheless, as Coleridge himself admits, it is difﬁcult to make the difference clear. Actually, Coleridge emphasizes, just before the part quoted above, that it is characteristic of Shakespeare’s wit to be produced by a combination of images, but this seems to contradict the deﬁnition above. Henry Crabb Robinson, who attended the lecture, recorded “He distin-guished between wit and fancy, not very clearly” (Shakespearean Criticism 2: 170). Coleridge himself seems to be staggering in deﬁning wit.

Although the deﬁnition of the word wit is not as clear as expected, and its relationship with fancy is also vague, at least we can safely say that they are not totally exclusive of each other, but rather overlap to some extent, given Coleridge’s deﬁnition of fancy. He deﬁnes fancy as “the bringing together images dissimilar in the main by some one point or more of likeness distinguished” (Shakespearean Criticism 1: 191), which also could be the deﬁnition of wit. Another deﬁnition can be found in chapter 13 of B.L.

Fancy . . . has no other counters to play with, but ﬁxities and deﬁnites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modiﬁed by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (B.L. 1: 305)

Note that fancy only deals with “ﬁxities and deﬁnites,” which themselves are never modiﬁed, but are left as they are. All the materials for the
activities of fancy are brought by “Memory,” according to “the law of association,” but cannot be changed nor merged into others by the power of fancy. This reference to memory reminds us of Coleridge’s note on Donne’s wit, which, he writes, uses “at will the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory.” Granqvist insists that, in Coleridge’s criticism, Donne’s wit is equivalent to Coleridge’s “secondary imagination,” over-estimating Donne’s wit (79). Wit, however, is undeniably different in kind from passion or imagination, whereas it is different from fancy only in degree. As mentioned before, Coleridge calls Donne’s “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” “An admirable Poem,” and praises the conceit of the compasses. In the poem, the lovers are compared to a pair of compasses, but the compasses themselves are never modified nor merged with the lovers. The excellence of the poem consists in the unexpected but pleasantly surprising juxtaposition of the images of lovers and compasses without impressing the reader as far-fetched.

4. Passion and Imagination

Now, let us return to the discussion on passion. It is noteworthy that Coleridge classified human minds into two types: continuous minds and discontinuous minds.

In the men of continuous and discontinuous minds explain & demonstrate the vast difference between the disjunction conjunctive of the sudden Images seized on from external Contingents by Passion & Imagination (which is Passion eagle-eyed) — The Breeze I see, is in the Tree — It comes to cool my Babe and me. — which is the property & prerogative of continuous minds of the highest order, & the conjunction disjunctive of Wit —

And like a lobster boil’d the Morn
From black to red began to turn,

which is the excellence of men of discontinuous minds —

(Notebooks 2: #2112)

Coleridge says that the discontinuous minds carry out the conjunction disjunctive of wit. The example is from Samuel Butler’s Hudibras, where morning is compared to a lobster. Their similarity solely depends on the fact that both change colour; morning with time, and a lobster by being
boiled. However each of the images themselves does not change at all, but remains what it is. They are merely chosen from different and distant fields, and combined in an unexpected way, causing a surprise. But they continue to be “fixities and defnites.”

Meanwhile, the continuous minds carry out the disjunction conjunctive, where two disparate ideas are associated and fused by the power of imagination and passion. Interestingly, imagination is called “Passion eagle-eyed,” which suggests that both work in a similar way, but unlike passion, imagination has the power of keen observation, and receives its material quickly via sight. The example is taken from Wordsworth’s “The Mad Mother.” The breeze was an alien object, but the mother’s passion, coming from her love for her baby, associates the breeze with her and her baby; the breeze is blowing not as a mere natural phenomenon, but to cool her and her baby. The same lines are quoted in B.L. to illustrate one of Wordsworth’s excellences, i.e. “a meditative pathos, a union of deep and subtle thought with sensibility; a sympathy with man as man. . . .” (B.L. 2: 150–151).

Another example to illustrate the workings of such “blending, fusing power of Imagination and Passion” can be found in Act III, Scene iv of King Lear, where Lear, encountering Edgar disguised as a madman, presumes that he was also driven mad like him by being betrayed by his daughters, and also in Act III, Scene ii, where Lear apostrophizes the elements, believing that they are attacking him like his cruel daughters (B.L. 1: 85). In either case, Lear entertains passion caused by his daughters’ betrayal, and this passion modifies Edgar and the elements so as to associate them with Lear himself. It is not by chance that both examples are from passages describing deranged states of mind, because Coleridge maintains that imagination without sense and reason would lead to mania, while fancy without them delirium. They are extreme examples, but extreme examples can reveal essential qualities.

5. Coleridge’s Imaginative Reading of Donne

Now that the difference between wit/fancy and passion/imagination are made clear, we must return to Coleridge’s view of Donne. His comment on the last three lines of Donne’s “The Good-morrow” is rather brief, but seems to be of no small significance.
What ever dies is not mixt equally;  
If our two loves be one, both thou and I  
Love just alike in all, none of these loves can die.¹

(“The Good-morrow,” 19–21)

Too good for mere wit. It contains a deep practical truth — this Triplet.  
(Marginalia 2: 218)

In “The Good-morrow,” the narrator states how he and his love have changed after awakening, and he likens them to two hemispheres. This comparison between the lovers and two hemispheres is produced by <bad> wit, criticized by Coleridge. The lines above on which Coleridge made the note, however, describe the ideal union of the lovers without making the description seem far-fetched. Relying on Galen’s theory that death is caused by a disproportion of our constituent elements, the narrator claims that their loves are immortal, being mixed perfectly.

What Coleridge suggests here is that the last part of “The Good-morrow” does not come from wit, but from a higher function, i.e. imagination and its helpmate passion. In the poem, the narrator says that he and his love have not loved before the wakening of their souls, but now their souls have awoken, they should really start to love each other with their souls harmoniously united. Their love makes their small room every part of the world, and they share one world, while each becoming one (“Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.” 14). The description of their union seems to Coleridge to be fairly natural, and also symbolic of the workings of imagination unifying two different ideas, supported by passion. That is why, I presume, he jotted down “It contains a deep practical truth.”

Another poem of Donne’s which aroused Coleridge’s admiration is “The Extasie.” His note on lines 41–2 and 65–76 of the poem is “I should never find fault with metaphysical Poems, were they all like this, — or but half so excellent. —” (Marginalia 2: 224).

When love with one another so  
Interinanimates two souls,  

(41–2)

So must pure lovers souls descend  
T’affectations, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies,
To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love reveal’d may look;
Loves mysteries in Souls do grow,
But yet the body is the book,
And if some lover such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change when we are to bodies grown.

(65–76)

Like “The Good-morrow,” “The Extasie” deals with the union of love. The opening shows the lovers being physically joined by holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. Then the narrator goes on to describe how their souls are also unified by the power of love (“Love, these mixed souls doth mix again, / And makes both one, each this and that” 35–36). Lines 41–42, annotated by Coleridge, include the word “Interinanimates” to describe the union of the souls. Coleridge might have been attracted to this word, finding it felicitous, because the word implies the two souls being mutually animated not merely superficially but also inwardly. It corresponds to the function of imagination, which animates, or modifies, two ideas not merely outwardly but inwardly for their ideal fusion to be achieved. Another expression that might have arrested Coleridge’s attention is “this dialogue of one,” which occurs in line 74. It is paradoxical, but again it reminds us of the workings of imagination.

After a new, and abler soul (not plural any longer, but singular) has proceeded from the union, then the narrator of “The Extasie” complains that their bodies are left alienated, and urges the necessity of the union of their souls and their bodies, so that the souls can be sensed. This unification of the soul and the body also corresponds to the unification by the workings of imagination, which creates images apprehended by senses.

All Coleridge’s comments on Donne’s poetry which I have quoted so far, except the first one on reading and passion, concern what Coleridge read in Donne. Now we have a second comment on how to read Donne. In this note on “The Canonization,” Coleridge discloses his esoteric way of reading Donne’s poetry.
One of my favorite Poems. As late as 10 years ago, I used to seek and
find out grand lines and fine stanzas; but my delight has been far greater,
since it has consisted more in tracing the leading Thought thro’out the
whole. The former is too much like coveting your neighbour’s Goods:
in the latter you merge yourself in the Author—you become He. —
(Marginalia 2: 220)

Coleridge’s former way of reading was aimed at “grand lines and fine stan-
zas,” but it never attains the sanctum sanctorum of a poem. It is merely to
desire its fringes, or “your neighbour’s Goods,” with the distance between
you and your neighbor never lessening. His new way of reading is to
trace “the leading Thought thro’out the whole” and to “merge yourself
in the Author.” But what does this mean? How can it be achieved? And
in what way is this way of reading relevant to “The Canonization”? The
answer to these questions, all closely correlated, will be the conclusion of
this essay.

In “The Canonization,” the narrator predicts that he and his love will
be martyred and canonized after sacrificing their lives to their love, and
again like “The Good-morrow,” or “The Extasie,” this poem also deals
with the union of lovers (which is Coleridge’s favorite theme).

And we in us find the eagle and the dove,
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us; we two being one, are it.
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

(22–27)

The lovers become the eagle and the dove, which symbolize strength and
gentleness respectively. The riddle of the mysterious phoenix, which is be-
lieved to be hermaphrodite, both sexes united, is elucidated by them. They
die and live as the phoenix does. The union of opposite ideas underlies this
poem. The narrator declares that their legend of love will be fit for verse,
even if it is not fit for tombs and hearse (29–30), and this declaration is
of symbolic significance, because it can be interpreted as a manifesto that
unification by love / passion should be the main theme of poetry. And this
idea of the unification of two persons also corresponds to the idea of the
reader becoming the poet himself as explained laconically in Coleridge’s
note. In reading “The Canonization,” Coleridge “becomes” Donne by tracing the union of opposites as “the leading Thought” of the poem.

Let us look at a passage from his Notebooks, which also deals with the unification of the subject and the object.

— and the deep power of Joy
We see into the Life of Things—

i.e. — By deep feeling we make our Ideas dim — & this is what we mean by our Life—ourselves. I think of the Wall—it is before me, a distinct Image—here. I necessarily think of the Idea & the Thinking I as two distinct & opposite Things. Now <let me> think of myself—of the thinking Being—the Idea becomes dim whatever it be—so dim that I know not what it is—but the Feeling is deep & steady—and this I call I—identifying the Percipient & the Perceived—.

(Notebooks 1: #921)

Here, Coleridge, quoting a passage in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” explains the process of unification between the subject and the object. What encourages the unification is, asserts Coleridge, “deep feeling” or passion, whereby our ideas become dim. This dimming of ideas, however, is not mere obscuration, but the shedding of their accidental details, with their essentials kept. This enables the ideas to be fused with feelings. Coleridge tries to explain this process by using a wall in front of him by way of example here, and in B.L. as well, using the breeze described in Wordsworth’s “Mad Mother” and referring to “the blending, fusing power of Imagination and Passion” (2: 150–151). Coleridge, in his Notebooks, writes that old languages are more suitable for poetry than modern French, because, while French tends to make ideas clearer, old languages “expressed only prominent ideas with clearness, others but darkly.” And in the case of old languages, “Feelings created by obscure ideas,” he points out, “associate themselves with the one clear idea” (1: #383).

What Coleridge tries to clarify here is how imagination and passion collaborate in unifying two different ideas, thought with feeling, the subject with the object, or a person with another person. Although Donne’s poetry is ostensibly intellectual, Coleridge was sensitively aware of the need, when reading it, to become unified with Donne, and thereby to capture the passion latent in his poetry, and running with its metre. Coleridge’s way of reading Donne is just like a “dialogue of one,” which
the lovers have in “The Extasie.” Coleridge as the reader has a dialogue
with Donne as the poet in his “well wrought urn” (“The Canonization” 33), i.e. his poetry, but their dialogue is a dialogue of not two, but one,
as Coleridge becomes Donne with the help of imagination and feels his
passion, in order to appreciate the vast richness of Donne’s poetry. His is
a way of reading which sacrifices neither heart nor head.

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Note

1 For quotations from Donne’s poetry, I used the 1669 edition insofar as
it is available in Coleridge’s Marginalia Vol. 2. Otherwise, John Donne: The
Complete English Poems, edited by A. J. Smith, was used.

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