JOHN BEER

John Bernard Beer

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 1994

by

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John Beer, Professor of English Literature and Fellow of Peterhouse in the University of Cambridge, was one of the pre-eminent Coleridgeans of modern times. A prolific scholar, he edited authoritative editions of both Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry and his theological and psychological works. He had a distinctive habit of publishing monographs in pairs: two on William Blake, two on William Wordsworth, two on theories of consciousness in Romantic and post-Romantic literature, as well as numerous books on Coleridge himself. His range extended back to the intellectual influences on Romanticism and forward to later writers—notably E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence—who in different ways might be numbered among the last Romantics.

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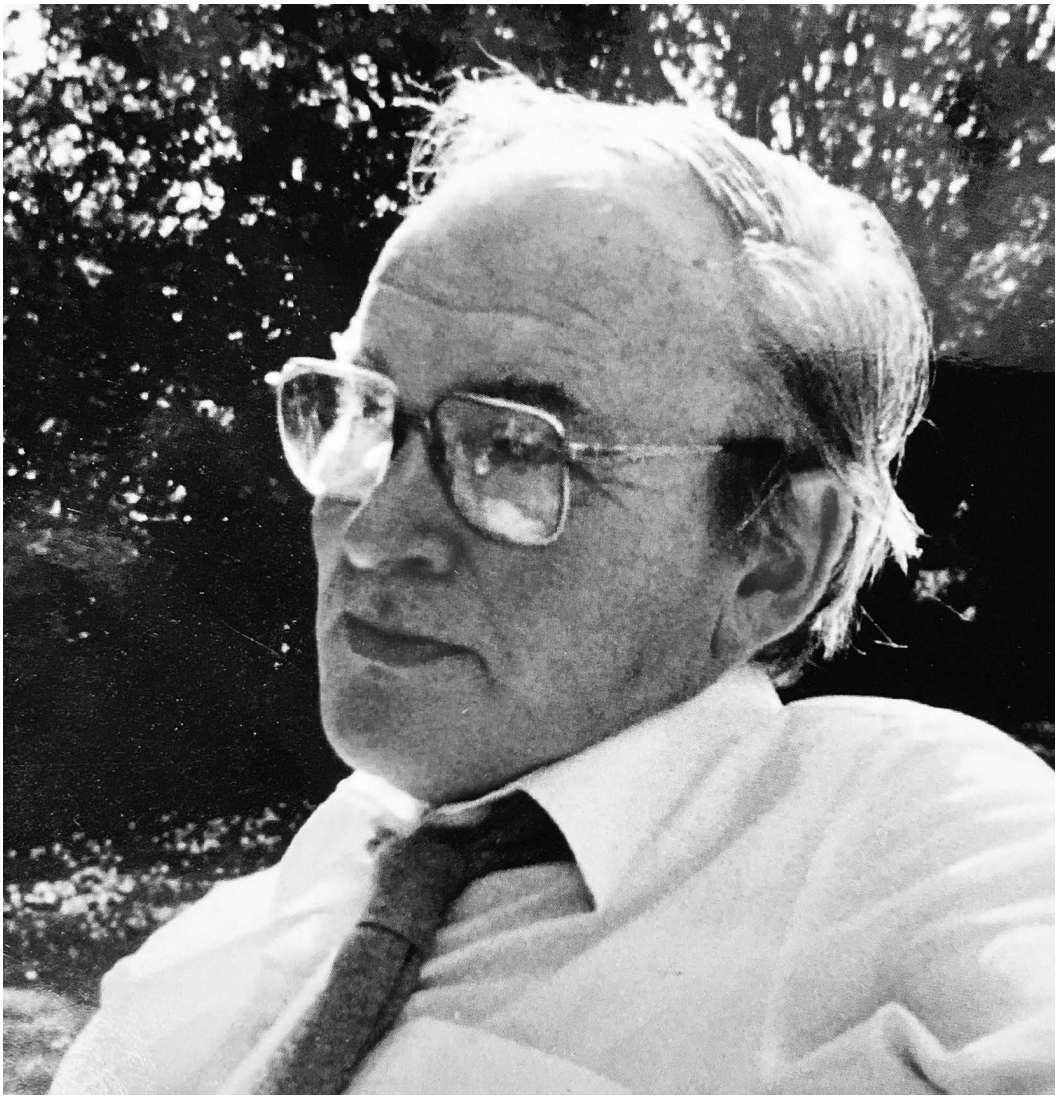

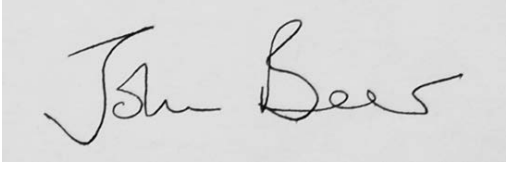

‘To remember Basil Willey’, John Beer began his British Academy memoir of his doctoral supervisor, ‘is to recall a certain kind of presence: a readiness of sympathy, a touch of mannered quirkiness, a quickness of mind, a kindly humour … This is not a nature which would be memorable for setting human thought in a new direction or for startling innovation: the determinedness was rather that of a man who wished to remain true to everything he knew and to everything that his wide-ranging sympathies taught him.’[1] He might just as well have been writing his own obituary.

John Bernard Beer was born in Watford on 31 March 1926. His father, Jack, was a civil servant who worked in the Labour Exchange and was much affected by his experiences in Aden and Palestine during the Great War. Mother, Eva, having run her family’s bicycle shop and overseen a bevy of younger siblings, was only too glad to give up work when she married. John had an older sister, Nancy, to whom he was always close. She was about to go to art college when Hitler invaded Poland. She served in the Land Army. She lost two fiancés to the war and never married; her later life was full of friends and theatrical interests.

A diligent pupil at Watford Grammar School, John’s natural destination was Cambridge. But it was still wartime, so instead of going straight to university, he was called up. He was assigned to the mines and became a Bevin Boy in Nottinghamshire. He worked underground for more than a year and then when the war ended was re-assigned to the Air Force and based in Kidlington, outside Oxford. He never flew a plane: it was all office work. One is reminded of the National Service experience a few years later of Ted Hughes, the contemporary poet he would come to admire more than any other, for whom the boredom of service life was above all an opportunity to read voraciously.

In Hughes’s case, it was the psychology of Jung and the whole of Shakespeare many times over. Beer, too, immersed himself in literature and psychology, but also read deeply in theology. This was the period, prior to the English reception of existentialism, when earnest youths were captivated by ideas such as A.N. Whitehead’s philosophy of nature as process and Martin Buber’s theology of I and Thou. Beer duly enrolled for a distance learning degree in Theology at King’s College, London. His posting to the airfield in Kidlington was fortuitous in that it allowed him to spend every spare hour in the library of Pusey House. Dr Pusey’s personal library of rare theological texts was a spur to a lifetime of deep reading and thinking. At some point, Beer came to the realisation that he was following in the footsteps of another self-proclaimed ‘library cormorant’ who was fascinated by the intersections of literature, psychology, philosophy and theology: Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

[1] ‘Basil Willey 1897-1978’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 66, *1980* (1982), 473-93. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/memoirs/pba-66/willey-basil-1897-1978/

Eventually he was de-mobbed and able to take up his place as a Scholar at St John's College. Though he did not occupy the same undergraduate rooms as William Wordsworth, he was inspired by the poet's memory of neighbouring Trinity:

> And from my pillow, looking forth by light
> Of moon or favouring stars, I could behold
> The antechapel where the statue stood
> Of Newton with his prism and silent face,
> The marble index of a mind for ever
> Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.
> (*The Prelude* [1850], 3. 58–63)

He read English for Part 1 of the Tripos and gained a First. Among his supervisors was the extraordinary figure of Hugh Sykes Davies, a John's man who had become the College's first ever Fellow in English. As an undergraduate, Davies had co-edited an experimental literary magazine with William Empson; in the Thirties, he became a communist, met Dalí and was an organiser of the London International Surrealist Exhibition; he was married five times to four women, the first of them being the poet and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine. By the time that John Beer was his student, he had published not only a body of surrealist poems, but also a study of 'Macaulay's Marginalia to Lucretius' (1937). Beer was intrigued by the idea of a writer's marginalia charting his response to another writer. Wordsworth, meanwhile, was Davies's greatest love and the subject of his most inspirational supervisions (his superb book, *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words*, was edited posthumously by a later Fellow of St John's, John Kerrigan FBA).

'Yet may we not entirely overlook / The pleasure gathered from the rudiments / Of geometric science', Wordsworth also wrote of his time at John's (*Prelude*, 6. 115-17). So too for John Beer: for Part II of the Tripos, he switched to Natural Sciences, concentrating his courses in the growing field of Psychology. Again, he was awarded a First. It was as a result of this combination of talents that Sykes Davies suggested that his former pupil would be well suited to 'work on Coleridge's psychological ideas'.[2] This became his doctoral subject. His supervisor was the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature, Basil Willey FBA. In contrast to the forceful but contentious Leavisite method of attending only to close reading of the text and the evaluation of the 'felt life' of the timeless literary classics, Willey was best-known for his books *The Seventeenth Century Background* (1934) and *The Eighteenth Century Background* (1940). He was the leading apologist for the denomination of the period papers of the Part 1 Tripos as the study of 'English Literature, *Life and Thought*' (my italics). For Beer, context and text had to be held together. The question he asked was how did Coleridge's thought relate to his poetry? And what were the shaping influences in the background of that thought?

[2] John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (Chatto & Windus, 1959), p. xii.

By good fortune, in 1951-2 the Trinity College Clark Lectures (delivered annually by a distinguished visiting critic) were given by Humphry House on the subject of Coleridge. They provided a template for Beer's own work, and House became a good friend. Still one of the best introductions to the 'myriad-minded' poet-philosopher, House's lectures (published in 1953) emphasised the importance of integrating Coleridge's poetry with his prose writings. He offered acute insights into Coleridge's theory of the 'One Life', his 'Miltonising', the 'collaboration with Wordsworth', the 'critique of Associationism' and the distinction between Will and Volition, and such particulars as the complex evolution of the 'Dejection' ode (the published poem, he argued, was a serious distortion of Coleridge's original purpose). These were all themes that John Beer would take up and elaborate upon in the PhD that would form the basis of his first book, *Coleridge the Visionary*.

At the end of the first Clark lecture, House spoke about the need for more rigorous and thorough editing of Coleridge, citing an example from a manuscript Notebook that had recently been deposited in the British Museum library. The 1950s witnessed the birth of modern Coleridge studies and the superseding of *The Road to Xanadu*, Harvard scholar John Livingston Lowes's monumental but flawed 1927 account of the origins of 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan'. A couple of years after the publication of Lowes's enthralling research, a young Canadian graduate student called Kathleen Coburn had visited the third Baron Coleridge at the family home in Ottery St Mary in Devon, where she was shown a huge cache of manuscripts, most notably thousands of pages of hitherto barely tapped notebook entries. Baron Coleridge gave her full access to the archive and eventually, in the very year of House's lectures, it was deposited in the British Museum. Coburn embarked on the lifelong task of editing the notebooks (a project that endured from 1957 until 1990, the year before her death). John Beer began to relish his trips to London, where he could examine the manuscripts—especially those that informed the development of Coleridge's thought—prior to their publication.

In 1955, he was elected to a Research Fellowship at his own college, during which he also spent a year on a visiting scholarship to the Scuola Normale at Pisa. His first article appeared in 1956. It was on a subject close to his heart: a brief contribution to *Notes and Queries* identifying the 'great circulating library' in Cheapside that, according to Coleridge, had inspired his interest in theology as a teenager at Christ's Hospital: 'At a very premature age, even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in metaphysicks, and in theological controversy. Nothing else pleased me' (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, chapter 1). The library cormorant worked his way through the entire catalogue, borrowing at the allowed rate of two books a day. Beer discovered that this was John Boosey's City Library. He lamented that a catalogue of its contents, which would have been an invaluable guide, would probably never be unearthed. Over

fifty years later, one was found in Barcelona by a Dutch scholar.[3] The preponderance of works of theology and philosophy among the eight thousand volumes it held in the 1780s confirmed many of Beer's subsequent speculations—themselves highly informed by the notebooks and marginalia—regarding Coleridge's formative reading experience.

The Research Fellowship at John's came to an end in April 1958, because of the curious custom at the time of starting the stint on the day of election, not at the beginning of the ensuing academic year. He had an anxious few months before he was appointed to a Lectureship at the University of Manchester. The newly-arrived Head of Department and John Edward Taylor Professor of English Literature was Frank Kermode (Sir Frank Kermode FBA), who, following the publication of his Arden edition of *The Tempest* (1954) and his groundbreaking study *Romantic Image* (1957), was establishing himself as the leading literary critic of the day. Beer taught there for six years, benefiting especially from another great library, the John Rylands.

Coleridge the Visionary sought 'to explore some of the fields where poet and thinker met, and thus to throw light on both the intellectual organization of the poetry and the imaginative qualities implicit in the philosophy' (p. v). It was a book that immediately revealed the range of John Beer's mind. An opening chapter wrestles with the definition of Romanticism—a necessary rite of passage for scholars of the field in the decades following A.O. Lovejoy's perennially influential essay on 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms' (1924). Rather than confine himself to the traditional 'Romantic' period of 1780-1830, Beer invoked F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby as 'romantic man in a blatant form' because his identity sprang from his 'platonic conception of himself' (pp. 14-15). Kafka and Rilke also get a look-in. But already at the core is the relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth. The latter is described as 'the supreme example of an artist who lost faith in the imagination as an ultimate value, and created a poetry which avoids reliance upon it' (p. 16). Hitherto, most Wordsworth critics had tended to celebration of moments of sublimity and uplift in the poetry, whereas Beer probed into the 'visionary dreariness' of passages such as the sequence in *The Prelude* where the young Wordsworth is confronted with a gibbet, a beacon and a girl struggling to walk against the wind.

The bulk of the book is given over to a yoking of the imagery in Coleridge and its symbolic meaning. Special attention is given to the glory of light, especially at dawn. There are pages that tease out STC's ambivalent relationship with Unitarianism and, as a running theme throughout, his immersion in esoteric traditions—Swedenborg, the Cambridge Platonists and above all the mystical *Aurora* (1612) of Jacob Boehme. In this, Beer was beginning to see Coleridge as in many ways closer to William Blake than William Wordsworth.

[3] Marianne Van Remoortel, 'A Catalogue of Coleridge's "Great Circulating Library",' *Notes and Queries*, 57:2 (2010), 210–11.

Kermode encouraged his junior colleagues to follow his own example and refuse to confine themselves to a narrow field of specialism—having veered from Shakespeare to Yeats, in 1961 he published the first English critical book on Wallace Stevens. By the same account, the following year John Beer became the author of a study of his favourite novelist: *The Achievement of E. M. Forster* (Chatto & Windus, 1962). He began by taking issue with an earlier critic's characterisation of Forster's books having a 'shy, unworldly quality', 'almost diffidently presented', by a man 'at heart a scholar' (p. 5). In a way this was curious since all those epithets are eminently applicable to John Beer himself. But perhaps that was the point: the aim was to open up the more emotional and visionary side of Forster, and in so doing to break free from any self-image as a Casaubon: 'His devotion to love is backed by an admiration for spontaneous passion which finds its best model in the culture and mythology of ancient Greece' (p. 9). As with the study of Coleridge, the book is at its best in tracing intellectual roots: Forster's family association with the Clapham Sect, the influence of Cambridge, the meeting of West and East—the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India* as 'a touchstone by which reality is tested' (p. 131).

The book ranges with assurance across all Forster's published writings, for example by contrasting the factual India of *The Hills of Devi* with the fictional of *Passage*, and by using the biography of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson as well as *The Longest Journey* in an account of the allure of Cambridge to a thoughtful young man. A young man such as John Beer himself? Although in his case the transition was from Grammar school, not Public, he was, I am sure, in perfect concord with the following passage that he quotes from the Dickinson biography:

> He had no idea what Cambridge meant—and I remember having the same lack of comprehension about the place myself, when my own turn came to go up there. It seems too good to be real. That the public school is not infinite and eternal, that there is something more compelling in life than teamwork and more vital than cricket, that firmness, self-complacency and fatuity do not between them compose the whole armour of man, that lessons may have to do with leisure, and grammar with literature—it is difficult for an inexperienced boy to grasp truths so revolutionary, or to realize that freedom can sometimes be gained by walking out through an open door.[4]

John Beer continued to publish on Forster in subsequent years. He had a gift of soliciting fine essay contributions from other scholars. So, for instance, the important collection *E. M. Forster: A Human Exploration: Centenary Essays*, co-edited with G.K. Das (Macmillan, 1979), included not only Beer himself developing a comparison and contrast he had earlier made between Forster and D.H. Lawrence, but also a notable account by S.P. Rosenbaum of *The Longest Journey* as a refutation of idealism inspired by the 'realism' of the Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore. Again, his edited collection

[4] Forster, *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* (1934), quoted, *Achievement*, p. 25.

A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation (Macmillan, 1985) included an especially insightful essay on 'negation' in the novel by one Gillian Beer (of whom, more in a moment).

It has to be said, though, that there is an obvious lacuna in the work on Forster—fully understandable, since the man was still alive and living in King's College, Cambridge. Despite the hint dropped in that allusion to the 'spontaneous passion which finds its best model in the culture and mythology of ancient Greece' and an account in Beer's own contribution to *A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation* of how Forster's own 'passage to freedom' was shaped by 'the Platonism of his friend Lowes Dickinson' (p. 125), there is no reference to the principal cause of the inhibition upon freedom endured by both men: their homosexuality. *The Achievement of E. M. Forster* attributes his notorious abandonment of the novel after *A Passage to India* primarily to disillusionment in the wake of the Great War: Beer was not to know that the real reason was that Forster was caught in a pre-Wolfenden bind whereby he could neither publish the overtly gay *Maurice* nor dishonestly write another heterosexual love story. So it is that a reference to Cavafy (pp. 137-8) does not make the obvious connection, nor was it possible for Beer to speculate that Forster's remark in 'The Art of Fiction' that Lowes Dickinson's sisters were inspiration for Margaret and Helen Schlegel in *Howards End* might suggest that their camp aesthete brother Tibby, bound for Oxbridge, is gay.

In the summer of 1962, John Beer married Gillian P.K. Thomas (Professor Dame Gillian Beer FBA). Almost a decade younger than him, she had been a gifted Oxford undergraduate and graduate student, developing particular expertise in 19th-century fiction; aged twenty-four, she had obtained her first teaching job, at Bedford College in the University of London. They met, as so many academic couples do, at a conference: in those days, there was only one annual conference, for all teachers of English in Higher Education. In 1961, it happened to be held at John Beer's alma mater in Cambridge. He caught Gillian's eye in the pub: 'he was so quiet and so alert', she recalls.[5] So it was that, just as she was establishing herself, she took the bold (loving) step of quitting her post and following her new husband to the north. Luckily, she was appointed to the William Noble Research Fellowship at the University of Liverpool—only a short commute away—in an equally distinguished English department headed by the renowned Shakespearean Professor Kenneth Muir FBA. Soon she was pregnant with the first of their three sons, Daniel (the others were named Rufus and Zachary).

The marriage and the family would be their first priority for more than sixty years. Though Gillian had the charismatic presence and was the one who achieved the fame and the plaudits—Damehood, presidency of a Cambridge College, Vice-Presidency of the British Academy, honorary degrees, lecturing invitations around the world—to her it

[5] Personal communication.

was always a partnership of equals, John the bedrock bringing stability and quiet wisdom. His intellectual debt to her is duly measured in the acknowledgments to his many books, an especially touching example being that in *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester University Press, 1968): 'I am particularly grateful for the help and encouragement of my wife, who was reproved by her grandfather for reading Blake at the age of seven and has been enjoying him ever since' (p. xii).

Given the direction of his research on Coleridge, Blake was indeed the obvious next subject for John. He deepened his understanding of the lines of esoteric thought stretching back into the 17th and 18th centuries. Sykes Davies's ex-wife Kathleen Raine generously shared with him her as yet unpublished work on Blake and what she called the 'perennial philosophy'. The debt is duly acknowledged in *Blake's Humanism* (p. 224), a book which argues that the humanism in question 'is idiosyncratic: it rests on the presupposition that all men possess an eternal form which subsists in the interplay between vision and desire. Eternal Man exists primarily by these two faculties, which nourish his genius and promote his generosity. But men as we know them have fallen from this estate. As a result, the fruitful dialectic between Vision and Desire is replaced by a warring and fruitless dialectic between Reason and Energy' (p. 23). Beer guides his reader through Blake's 'Fourfold Vision' and his theory of the 'Energies of Desire'. He demonstrates how the visionary element was linked to radical politics in the 'prophetic books' *The French Revolution*, *America*, *Europe* and *The Song of Los*, but also argues that 'a final key to the subterranean element in Blake's work' is that 'As with Wordsworth, his buried integrity was that of a disappointed social revolutionary' (p. 224). He even ventures a valiant reading of the almost incomprehensible *Vala; or, The Four Zoas*. The book ends with a chapter called 'Unwanted Prospero' in which it is suggested that Blake lived through, and exemplified, all the phases of Romanticism, beginning with the Gothic. His divine vision is compared with that of the 17th-century poet-priest Thomas Traherne, but the stronger undercurrent of the argument is Blake's wrestling with the greatest poet of that era, John Milton.

That was a subject so large that it required a second volume, published the following year. *Blake's Visionary Universe* (Manchester University Press, 1969) is a longer and more ambitious study, offering a full unfolding of his poetic career. As with Coleridge and Wordsworth—and perhaps himself—Beer reads the work as a perpetual shuttle between confidence and doubt. Thus one moment there is afflatus:

> The Bard replied. I am Inspired! I know it is Truth! for I Sing
> According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius
> Who is the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity
> To whom be Glory & Power & Dominion Evermore Amen
> (Blake, *Milton*, plate 14)

The next, however, there is a sense of profound inadequacy, stemming not least from consciousness of Milton's incomparable, unsurpassable greatness.

By this account, Blake needed to develop his own idiosyncratic systems of both mythological universe (Urizen, Los and company) and poetic line (influenced more by the Old Testament prophets and the primitivist pastiche of Macpherson's Ossian than by the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare and Milton). And as a golden thread unifying the sprawling corpus, a series of images out of Paracelsus, Boehme and Swedenborg, none more potent—as with Coleridge—than that of sunrise. If one wished to bind in a nutshell for the benefit of a student John Beer's vision of William Blake's vision of infinite space, it would be via a remark in the prose description the poet appended to his extraordinary 1808 watercolour *A Vision of the Last Judgment*:

> 'What!' it will be questioned, 'when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire, somewhat like a guinea?' Oh! no! no! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host, crying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!' I question not my corporeal eye, any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it, and not with it. (quoted, *Blake's Humanism*, p. 169)

In the acknowledgments prefacing *Blake's Visionary Universe*, Beer notes that 'The presence of Harold Bloom and David Erdman in London during the summer of 1967 was a double pleasure' (p. xiv). It was Erdman who had made major advances in Blake scholarship not only by placing him in his political context but also by paying due attention to the interplay of word and image in the self-engraved prophetic books. John Beer followed in his footsteps in parsing the visual as well as the verbal. So it was that his later survey, *William Blake, A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), sketched the artist's as well as the poet's life (and his posthumous life—the final chapter is a valuable account of Blake's influence on various modernist writers, notably D.H. Lawrence).

As for Harold Bloom, he too had been writing since the late 1950s about the Romantics as *The Visionary Company* (the title of his 1961 book). By this time, though, he was developing his theory of 'the anxiety of influence'—the idea that poets were locked in an Oedipal struggle with their admired forbears. His prime example was the Romantic attitude to Milton: Keats giving up his epic *Hyperion* because it had too many Miltonic inversions, Blake protesting that the old Puritan and apologist for regicide, free speech and divorce was a true poet and of the devil's party without knowing it. John Beer, too, had been exploring the Romantics on Milton: this was a strand of 'Milton, Lost and Regained', his 1964 British Academy Chatterton Lecture on an English Poet (to be delivered by a critic under the age of forty), in which he also listened for the Orphic strain in Milton's poetry.[6] Music was a delight he shared with Gillian—along with the

[6] *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 50: 143–68. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/proceedings-british-academy/50/beer/

music of lyric poetry, which is amply on display in a charming anthology for young readers that they co-edited under the title *Delights and Warnings* (Macdonald, 1979).

Although it was Manchester University Press who loyally published the two books on Blake, by the time they appeared John Beer had become a University Lecturer at Cambridge and a Fellow of Peterhouse, while Gillian had won a Research Fellowship at Girton. They would spend the rest of their academic careers in Cambridge. In *Blake's Visionary Universe*, John thanks the Master and Fellows of the college for giving him an intellectual home 'where I have been enabled, after several years, to bring together my teaching and research into one place again' (p. xiii). Presumably what he meant was that the resources of the John Rylands Library in Manchester were insufficient for his research, whereas Cambridge offered all that he needed, as well as greater proximity to the Coleridge and Blake papers in the British Museum. He settled into the life of college and faculty, teaching in his rooms on the ground floor of the William Stone building, with John Linnell's portrait of *William Blake Wearing a Hat* hanging on the wall behind his desk.

Initially, his arrival in college was treated with some skepticism: Peterhouse was a very traditional college where some of the dons still harboured serious doubts as to whether English Literature was a proper subject for study in the Tripos, as opposed to a pastime for perusal in a gentleman's bath. But Beer's diligence and unflappable spirit ensured his success. And he managed to stay out of the controversies for which Peterhouse became notorious: the nurturing of a generation of ultra-Conservative ideologues under Maurice Cowling, the ill-fated Mastership of Baron Dacre of Glanton (Hugh Trevor-Roper FBA), the belatedness in admitting women. Martin Golding, a close colleague for more than twenty-five years, writes:

> What John made of Peterhouse when he joined it in 1964, and what the College expected and found of its new Fellow in English, I find very difficult to imagine. Although Basil Willey—a Peterhouse man but a Fellow of Pembroke—had at short notice stood in as Director of Studies the year before John arrived, the Fellows' most recent sustained experience of a teaching Fellow in English had been Kingsley Amis. A greater contrast with John in character, manner and outlook could scarcely be imagined.
>
> His characteristic response to philistinism, wherever he found it, was understated, wry and ironic. He retained the ability to be compassionate about people's ignorance or self-deception without patronising them. I felt that he never put on a front; he could always be himself, and allow his ordinary vulnerability to show. And this could carry with it, when necessary, real authority. I was also struck, when interviewing candidates for English with him, by the patience and delicacy with which he would try and encourage a new thought to emerge for them from what might at first have felt a muddle. John's delicacy, I always felt, was his means of doing justice.

> In College he wasn't active politically, except for consistently voting for the admission of women when the question of Statute I came up, as it did several times before it was passed.[7]

Within the English Faculty, he was eventually elevated to the rank of Reader and then to a personal Chair. This would mean that in the latter part of his career, much of his teaching was focused on graduate students. He hosted a regular seminar on Romanticism in the upstairs sitting room of the beautiful Peterhouse-owned house on Belvoir Terrace, just off the Trumpington Road, that was the home he shared with Gillian and the boys. One of his PhD supervisees, Tim Fulford, now a distinguished professor of Romanticism, remembers how he would 'brandish an outsize teapot', then 'sleep, or seem to sleep, through the presentation, only to ask the salient question afterwards'.[8]

With promotion came administrative responsibility, not always welcome. Martin Golding again:

> The events that stood out in his time that I remember best were to do with his having to chair the Faculty at the time of the MacCabe affair. He managed all that—though I know he found the whole business deeply wounding—with grace, lack of rancour, and a remarkable and admirable capacity for containment. He was extraordinarily tolerant and forgiving. His deepest instincts were eirenic.

The matter at issue, in 1980-81, was whether or not to elevate to full tenure a fixed-term Assistant Lecturer called Colin MacCabe, a Joycean and linguistician regarded by some as an *enfant terrible* who was importing faddish French theory (Althusser, Derrida, Lacan and the rest) from Paris to Cambridge. As Chair of the Faculty Board, Beer found himself having to mediate between the two most famous critics in the land: his old boss Kermode, who was now King Edward VII Professor, and the recent arrival from Bristol, the dazzling Christopher Ricks (Sir Christopher Ricks FBA). Kermode, by this time legendary for his seminars at University College London that had indeed been the conduit of structuralist and post-structuralist theory into Britain, was a supporter of MacCabe; Ricks, the close reader highly suspicious of theories as opposed to principles in the conduct of literary criticism, was not. Somehow, though, the affair escalated into a battle about the future not just of Cambridge English but of the very foundations of the discipline. Rival briefings of the press, portraying MacCabe as either martyr or renegade, led to the bizarre spectacle of tabloid newspapers attempting to explain structuralism to readers more accustomed to the delights of Page Three girls and the football results. For both Kermode and Ricks, the affair poisoned their time in Cambridge; that John Beer weathered it in the manner described by his colleague is high testimony to his character

[7] Personal communication.

[8] 'Reflections on the Work and Life of John Beer', *Coleridge Bulletin*, ns 51 (Summer 2018), 23, https://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/images/02_The_Life_and_Work_of_John_Beer.pdf

and resilience. Maybe those months as a Bevin Boy in the pits had something to do with it.

What, meanwhile, of the work on Coleridge? Back in 1960, as Coburn was embarking on her epic endeavour of transcribing and annotating the Notebooks, a plan was hatched to produce a comprehensive multi-volume edition of all his writings. Funding came from the Bollingen Foundation, which had been established by Paul and Mary Mellon with the original purpose of publishing the complete works of Carl Jung. Coburn took on the general editorship, with another Canadian scholar, George Whalley, overseeing multiple volumes of Coleridge's copious marginalia. In the light of *Coleridge the Visionary* and John Beer's expertise in theology, he was assigned the editorship of *Aids to Reflection* (1825), the most significant work of the older, theologically-inclined Coleridge. The Bollingen Series was taken over by Princeton University Press in the late 1960s, and the Coleridge volumes were gradually rolled out over the decades, culminating in 2002 with an edition of the unfinished *Opus Maximum* by John Beer's good friend Thomas McFarland. Beer himself worked on the *Aids to Reflection*—to be discussed below—for more than thirty years.

Another of his friends in the companionable community of Coleridgeans, Jim Mays, took on the poetry. This was also to be a task that would not come to fruition for many years, not least because of the formidable problems created by Coleridge's inveterate habit of revision (a tendency he shared with Wordsworth). Something therefore needed to be done in the short term: there had not been a scholarly edition of the poems since that of Coleridge's grandson, Ernest Hartley, published in 1912. Beer filled the gap via the medium of the venerable Everyman's Library. His edition was published in 1963, with several distinctive features.

There is a substantial introduction, which condenses the argument of *Coleridge the Visionary* as well as covering such topics as 'the search for a poetic voice' (pp. xix-xxiv) and an account of Victorian attitudes to the poetry. The arrangement is chronological, with division into sections such as 'From Clevedon to Stowey', 'Friendship with Wordsworth', and 'From Stowey to Keswick'. The debut collection *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796) appears more or less in its original form, whereas the most celebrated works—'Kubla Khan', 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel'—are given discrete treatment, with due attention to the process of revision. Crucially, variant texts—the Crewe manuscript of 'Kubla Khan' and the original *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) version of 'The Ancient Mariner'—are included in appendices. Each section has an introductory essay that skilfully mingles biographical context and critical appraisal.

Thirty years later, a revised edition was published as an Everyman paperback. Now, there were facing-page parallel texts of the two versions of 'Kubla Khan', 'The Ancient Mariner' and, most importantly, the manuscript 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson' and its much revised and compressed revision (with personal references removed), the 'Dejection'

ode, published on Wordsworth's wedding day in October 1802. The call of Humphry House's Clark Lecture on the evolution of this great but painful poem had finally been answered. Provocatively, Beer also included in this revised edition a poem called 'The Barberry-Tree', which the Oxford scholar Jonathan Wordsworth had ascribed to his ancestor, but which Beer believed might well have been a joint effort or indeed a Coleridgean parody of his friend (since it first appeared in 1807 in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journey*, an outlet for some of Coleridge's other writings, he is probably right). A further revision of the Everyman *Poems*, now expanded to more than 600 pages, with additional historical notes and selected criticism, appeared in 1999.

Coleridge's connections were a constant preoccupation (Beer's contribution to *The Coleridge Connection*, a 1990 Festschrift for Thomas McFarland, was a characteristic account of 'Transatlantic and Scottish Connections: Uncollected Records'). Prior to the friendship with Wordsworth, no connection was more important than that with schoolmate Charles Lamb. A 1976 essay entitled 'Coleridge and Lamb: The Central Themes' was the first of several genial and insightful contributions that John Beer made to the *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, the journal of the Lamb Society, of which he served as President from 1989 to 2002.

In 1971, a hand grenade was thrown into the world of Coleridge studies. An ex-serviceman named Norman Fruman published a damning indictment called *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*, arguing that Coleridge's plagiarisms, especially from German philosophy, but also from a bewildering variety of other sources, were far more thoroughgoing than had been acknowledged. Beer's review offered a stylish, masterly response, beginning from Lamb's kindly use of the epithet:

> 'I think his essentials not touched: he is very bad, but then he wonderfully picks up another day, and his face when he repeats his verses hath its ancient glory, an Archangel a little damaged.' The transition from the probing, generous, quizzical, rueful delicacy of Lamb's 1816 statement to the stark, cynical, cutting edge of Professor Fruman's title epitomizes the main vices and virtues of his book. He is shrewd and hard-hitting, determined not to be fooled; he knows just when to dally gracefully with the evidence and when to be ruthless; but the sensitivity and discrimination that are the hallmark of humane criticism have escaped him.[9]

The review goes on to have some fun with Fruman's persistent military metaphors and to (gently) chide him for his neglect of McFarland's authoritative study *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (1969).

John Beer's second monograph on STC, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (Macmillan, 1977), neatly evades Fruman by pointing out that most of the borrowings occurred after Coleridge returned from his time in Malta, whereas this was to be a study of the formation

[9] *Review of English Studies*, ns 24:95 (Aug 1973), 346.

of his thought and the execution of his poetry in the fertile years prior to his taking up his secretarial position in the Mediterranean. Once again, Beer tracks Coleridge's reading: Hermeticism, Eastern romances, Boehme in the translation of William Law, Iamblichus and Neoplatonism, Erasmus Darwin, Priestley, Hartley (so influential that Coleridge named his first son after him, though he subsequently rejected the theory of Associationism because it made the mind seem an excessively passive instrument). One chapter ends with a quotation from *Aids to Reflection*: 'in Wonder all Philosophy begins' (p. 94), and the reader senses that Beer is striving to convey his sense of wonder at the mind of Coleridge. As in all his scholarship, the ambition is to yoke together the poetic achievement and the history of ideas—there is a Willey-influenced reference to 'the eighteenth-century world picture' (p. 70). One highlight is a sensitive reading of 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' as Coleridge's first truly achieved poem.

Beer explains in his preface that whereas his first book sought to explain the poet's imagery in relation to his complex ideas, this one would focus more on 'Coleridge's original theory of human consciousness' (p. ix) by way of demonstrating his distinctive theory of the organic. *Contra* Fruman, for Beer this was subtly different from the ideas that Coleridge found in his readings of the German philosophers and literary theorists. The distinction, it is contended, came partly from Coleridge's interest in hypnosis and the animal magnetism of Franz Mesmer. Though Coleridge became disillusioned with Mesmer, this field of inquiry led him to a belief that we have two consciousnesses, one organic (we might now call it 'core consciousness'), the other 'vital' (manifested in our relationship to the world). The proposition is closely related to, though subtly different from, the well-known idea, articulated in the *Biographia Literaria*, of the primary and secondary imagination. Opium visions such as 'Kubla Khan' were, perhaps, products of that organic consciousness. In some respects, Coleridge was anticipating Freud's theory of the unconscious (Beer notes in passing [p. 286] that at the outset of his career the Viennese master used Mesmerism), but a richer analogy—as Beer would point out many years later—is with the theory of double (core and extended) consciousness articulated by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in his remarkable work of cognitive philosophy *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999).

An especially rich passage in *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (pp. 280–2) is condensed from one of two essays that Beer had contributed to his edited collection, *Coleridge's Variety: Bicentenary Studies* (Macmillan, 1974), in which he unwound a wonderful elucidation of the train of thought recorded by John Keats in his letter about Coleridge's conversation (or rather monologue) on the occasion when they bumped into each other on Hampstead Heath. In the words of a reviewer:

> Dr Beer brings a fascinating array of material connected with, of all subjects, animal magnetism to bear on the celebrated, but till now largely baffling, account by Keats of his walk with Coleridge. Here all doubts disappear, and one of the greater literary mysteries is solved. This is scholarship of the highest quality, painstakingly yet imaginatively bringing to light the coherence in the apparent chaos of Coleridge's remains.[10]

What next, after two books on Blake and two on Coleridge? Two on Wordsworth, of course. *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (Macmillan and Columbia University Press, 1968) and *Wordsworth in Time* (Faber and Faber, 1969) were published in quick succession. Predictably, both make much of Coleridge's influence on Wordsworth's intellectual development and growth into the so-called 'great decade' of his best poetry (1797-1806). They might be described as evocations of light and shade. The warmth of Wordsworth's relationships with both Coleridge and sister Dorothy shines through the book published by Macmillan and Columbia, which is structured around Wordsworth's evolving use of the word 'heart' and the ideas associated with it, physiological as well as emotion. By contrast, the study for Faber reaches to the darker hiding places of Wordsworth's power. It has striking epigraphs, taken from their original contexts and arrestingly applied to Wordsworth: 'he was like a mind racing between separate madnesses' (Norman Mailer, *An American Dream*) and 'to give up a portion of myself, a dark and inward and fruitful portion' (William Golding, *Free Fall*). The book's key words and phrases include 'disturbance', 'mortality', 'haunted places' and 'clouds from the abyss'. Throughout, 'paradoxes are left trembling in the air' (p. 187).

Wordsworth and the Human Heart portrays a poet divided between reason and passion. The famous definition in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* of the poet as a person 'being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, [who has] also thought longly and deeply' is nicely reformulated, via some of Thomas De Quincey's thoughts on Wordsworth, as 'a Romantic version of "undissociated sensibility"' (pp. 18-19). The book is peppered with noticings of the thitherto unnoticed, such as the evocative phrase 'the web of benevolence' in the little-read pamphlet on the Convention of Cintra and Byron describing Wordsworth as 'this new Jacob Behmen' (letter to Tom Moore 1818, cited p. 235).

Wordsworth in Time, meanwhile, asks how such a writer as Wordsworth, who read little philosophy, 'came to write so perceptively on topics (the mind's relationship to nature, knowledge of one's own mind and so on) which are normally regarded as the province of professional philosophers" (p. 10). The answer, of course, is the influence of Coleridge. Beer's gift for apt epigraphic quotation is especially apparent when he cites Coleridge's insight 'Wordsworth's words always *mean* the whole of their possible

[10] J.H. Alexander, review of *Coleridge's Variety*, *Yearbook of English Studies,* 6 (1976), 292.

Meaning'.[11] The essence of the argument is revealed in a detailed reading of the 'Matthew' poems, where Wordsworth 'expresses a feeling that as human beings we live in a contradiction, mediated by different areas of our consciousness' (p. 100). That idea of double consciousness again.

Whereas the books on Coleridge and Blake were met with widespread critical acclaim, the response on Wordsworth was mixed. The critic and priest Robert Barth SJ warmed to the warmer study: 'This is a remarkable and important book. Through his focus on the human heart, John Beer shows us a Wordsworth who is more passionate, more feeling, than many of us have admitted him to be'.[12] But the reviewer in the house journal of Wordsworth studies suggested that the harping on mesmerism was becoming something of a tic in Beer's work, not really relevant to Wordsworth, and indeed that his quasi-Coleridgean stylistic divagation was a potential irritant: 'Beer's prose is wordy and parenthetical, choked with qualifiers, quotations, extraneous facts and unrelated ideas … He circles around central topics, returning to them frequently, but too often demanding that the reader supply the logical connections'.[13] For Lucy Newlyn, a protégé of Jonathan Wordsworth who would become perhaps the definitive chronicler of the exquisite interplay between the William-Dorothy-STC triad, *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* gave the appearance of 'oscillating continually between quirkiness and excellence'.[14]

Over the following decade, Beer concentrated his attention on preparation of the edition of *Aids to Reflection*, while publishing numerous shorter pieces, ranging from an essay on 'Forster, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury',[15] to a pamphlet-length treatment of Blake for the British Council's 'Writers and their Work' series (1982), to many more essays on Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincey and others. 'Coleridge's Originality as a Critic of Shakespeare'[16] grew from his teaching of a new special topic for Part II of the Cambridge English Tripos, 'Shakespeare and Romanticism', which he had devised together with Leo Salingar of Trinity. It was first offered in 1979-1980, when it was taken by the present memoirist, who remains deeply grateful that it gave birth to his entire career as a twin-track Romantic Shakespearean.

It was a difficult decade in Cambridge, with many ructions over appointments, Tripos reform and divisions between close readers and theorists. There is perhaps a touch of further veiled autobiography in Beer's British Academy memoir of his PhD supervisor: 'Willey made some attempts, in fact, to bring about a reconciliation between F.R. Leavis

[11] *Wordsworth in Time*, p. 15, quoting a letter from Coleridge to Southey of 14 August 1803.
[12] *Thought: A Review of Culture and Idea*, 54:4 (Dec 1979), 459.
[13] James Averill, reviewing both books in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 11:3 (Summer 1980), 132.
[14] *Review of English Studies*, ns 32:126 (May 1981), 229
[15] *Aligarh Journal of English Studies*, 5 (1980), 6-37.
[16] *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 19 (1986), 51-69.

and the rest of the Faculty, but the task proved too much for his mediating powers' ('Basil Willey', p. 483). Escape from the frequently bitter chill of Cambridge air became imperative: to a family retreat on the Norfolk coast and, in the first two weeks of every August, to Wordsworth's Lake District. Though the Board meetings of the Faculty of English were not quite so sinister a place as the Marabar Caves, he still felt himself in sympathy with the sequence in *A Passage to India* that he had cited in his monograph many years before: '"Ah, dearest Grasmere!" Its little lakes and mountains were beloved by them all. Romantic yet manageable, it sprang from a kindlier planet.'[17]

It was there that the poet's descendant Richard Wordsworth, best known for his role as a manic astronaut in the Hammer Horror film *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955), ran an annual conference with several features distinct from those of most academic gatherings. For a start, it lasted a full two weeks. There was a brisk three-mile pre-breakfast walk around the lake; afternoon ascents of every peak from Wordsworth's Helvellyn to Coleridge's Skiddaw; evenings of poetry readings, theatricals (if I remember correctly, John Beer had a small but memorable part in my production—its first revival in two centuries—of the Reverend James Plumptre's 1798 parody *The Lakers*), and even an auction, at which Jonathan Wordsworth and the seemingly chaotic but utterly brilliant Robert Woof raised funds for the Dove Cottage Library. John Beer lectured on the conference every year, staying with Gillian at a Quaker bed and breakfast in the village, and walking the fells in company not only with the world's most distinguished Romanticists such as Geoffrey Hartman and Thomas McFarland, but also with enthusiasts such as twinkle-eyed Seamus Heaney, the Right Honourable Michael Foot (there to make the case for Byron and Hazlitt), and the redoubtable Molly Lefebure, a former Home Office pathologist's assistant who had endured the Blitz, hunted on foot with the Blencathra Foxhounds for half a century, and was now writing books about Coleridge's opium addiction and his dysfunctional marriage. There, too, was the next generation of Wordsworthians and Coleridgeans: Lucy Newlyn, Duncan Wu, Seamus Perry, Nicola Trott, Nicholas Roe FBA, Jane Stabler.[18] Richard Gravil, who took over leadership of the conference after Richard Wordsworth's death, had a vivid memory of one of John Beer's lectures in the early years:

> It was an impassioned meditation on Milton's 'Methought I saw my late espoused Saint' and Wordsworth's 'Surprized by Joy'. There is nothing quite like an hour of sustained concentration on fourteen or twenty-eight lines of poetry, to display the intellectual resources of a lecturer and remind one what poetry can do. The fact that no such essay appears in the bibliography of John's work is a mystery to me, so I cannot check at this

[17] Quoted, *Achievement of E. M. Forster*, p. 135.

[18] A few phrases in this paragraph are adapted from my own tribute to the Wordsworth Summer Conference in *Radical Wordsworth* (Yale University Press, 2020), pp. xvii-xviii.

> date what made it so intellectually and humanly impressive. It just stands out in memory as one of the most authentic meditations on Wordsworth I ever heard, welling from sources deep within the human heart, but with all of John's perfect control and finesse. Masterly: but, as far as I can tell, never published. 'Loss' indeed.[19]

Since Wordsworth had a summer conference, Coleridge needed one too. In 1988, the Friends of Coleridge inaugurated an annual event in Nether Stowey, within yards of Coleridge Cottage, among the gently rolling Quantock hills where he wrote his greatest poetry. Here, too, John Beer became a regular fixture. His former doctoral student Tim Fulford remembers how

> pacing steadily across Exmoor, he was the best kind of companion, always alive to the landscape, content to talk or to enjoy silently. I discovered an unexpected wry humour—as when, after trudging many miles accompanied by a stray sheepdog who seemed to form an attachment to us, we arrived, muddy and exhausted, at Molland, to see, in the churchyard, gravestone after gravestone commemorating one or another Beer. 'I thought this was where I would end up,' said John.[20]

John Beer reached Cambridge's statutory retirement age in 1993 and was elected Fellow of the British Academy the following year. In a wittily Coleridgean gesture, he marked his departure from his Chair by delivering his Inaugural Lecture and calling it 'Against Finality'. Jennifer Wallace, who followed in his footsteps as the English don at Peterhouse, identifies a characteristic moment:

> I still also remember John's inaugural lecture at Cambridge, which reflected upon 'Surprised by joy', and paused to recall walking over the fens from Cambridge to Grantchester and stopping to admire the stillness of a heron, casting a shadow silently over the river. That quality of attention and willingness to notice the moments of unexpected surprise, quietly beyond the noise of the everyday and particularly of academic life, were the main characteristics of John Beer which run through the memories I have of him.[21]

It was also in 1993 that the edition of *Aids to Reflection* reached the finality of print. The work will never have to be done again: forty pages of preliminary matter; an introduction of more than a hundred pages; four hundred pages of text, each filled from midpoint with double-columned small print footnotes; a further hundred and fifty pages of editorial appendices and excursus notes; an index of more than a hundred pages. The introduction provides a comprehensive survey of the evolution of Coleridge's religious

[19] Gravil, 'John Beer at the Wordsworth Conference', https://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/images/02_The_Life_and_Work_of_John_Beer.pdf, p. 1. The bibliography mentioned here is 'John Beer: Publications 1956–2016', https://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/images/03_JBB_bibliog.pdf.
[20] Fulford, 'John in Cambridge, Cannington and Snowdonia', ibid, p. 23.
[21] Personal communication.

thought and the evolution of *Aids to Reflection* itself, beginning from an 1802 notebook entry listing projected theological writings. Coleridge, who explained his literary procrastination by saying that he had a smack of Hamlet about himself, liked to quote the line in the 'How all occasions do inform against me' soliloquy about mankind's 'large discourse, / Looking before and after' (act 4 scene 4). And it is the gift of discoursing on before and after that is the principal achievement of Beer's long-gestated edition of Coleridge's long-gestated treatise in the form of a series of aphorisms inspired by the obscure 17th-century theologian Archbishop Leighton. The capacious introduction looks back to Coleridge's early Socinianism and his rejection thereof, forward to the influence of *Aids to Reflection* on the Cambridge Apostles. Particular attention is given to the book's influence in America, via the 1829 edition prepared by James Marsh, President of the University of Vermont, who was especially impressed by Coleridge's account of the interconnection of knowing and being, arguing that STC had successfully formulated his own position rather than (as some had suggested) merely misunderstood Kant's distinction between reason and understanding. Only John Beer, with his theological and psychological as well as literary training, could have brought off this project.

Simultaneously with the edition, Beer published a collection of essays on *Romantic Influences: Contemporary – Victorian – Modern* (Macmillan, 1993), deepening his treatment of Victorian responses to the Romantics, and reaching forward to 'Counter-Romanticisms: Hardy – Eliot – Lawrence' (Hardy was another of his passions—back in 1975 he had edited a selection of the poems). And the retirement year was capped by a Festschrift, *Coleridge's Visionary Languages*.[22] But he was against finality indeed: more than twenty years of further writing lay ahead of him. His later works garnered less attention than they deserved, partly because their range went against the grain of specialism within the academy, but also because they were out of tune with the age in which the discipline of English immolated itself on the altar of Isms (feminism, new historicism, postcolonialism, etc. etc.).

One notable project was a kind of 'selected highlights' from the Collected Coleridge. Recognising that only the most dedicated graduate students and scholars would consult the weighty Bollingens, Beer became general editor of a series for Macmillan called 'Coleridge's Writings', in which each volume stitched together extracts on a particular theme from notebooks, marginalia, lectures, letters, occasional essays and so forth. His own volume in the series was number 4, *On Religion and Psychology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), in which he demonstrated how 'many of the investigations described in [Coleridge's] notebooks represent attempts to explore connexions between the "nature" that was revealed in the external world, and the "nature" that worked in the human unconscious through dreams and abnormal mental phenomena' (p. xlii).

[22] Ed. T. Fulford & M. Paley (D.S. Brewer, 1993).

This perennial theme of consciousness, together with the habit of publishing books in pairs, led to *Romantic Consciousness: Blake to Mary Shelley* and *Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath* (both Palgrave Macmillan, 1993). Coleridge on Being remains at the centre, but here the scope is widened impressively: De Quincey takes on increasing importance and Mary Shelley emerges as a mediator between her husband's and Byron's conception of the relationship between mind and world. Then in the second volume, Tennyson and the Apostles, both Victorian originators and Bloomsberries, enter the fray, while Dickens is approached via the mystery of the inconclusiveness of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Beer reveals himself as a reader of William James, Heidegger, Sartre, even Václav Havel. And in a bravura final chapter, the Sylvia Plath-Ted Hughes dyad is seen to replicate WW and STC in uncanny detail—a treatment that could have been refined further in the light of the biographical materials made available by the subsequent opening of the two Hughes archives in Emory University and the British Library.

In 2006, Beer gave the Stanton Lectures in the Philosophy of Religion for Cambridge's Divinity Faculty on 'The Crisis of the Word in English Romantic Literature'. They were published under a slightly different title, *Romanticism, Revolution and Language: The Fate of the Word from Samuel Johnson to George Eliot* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). Though the title perhaps prepared the audience for a ponderous sequence of disquisitions on the *Logos*, the lectures and subsequent book were enlivened by occasional polemical interventions and memorable, often little-known connctions, the former exemplified by a critique of Beer's sometime colleague Professor Marilyn Butler FBA's reading of Jane Austen as an unalloyed Tory, the latter by an opening vignette taken from the diary of the reactionary rector of Over Stowey:

> [S]aw that Democratic hoyden Mrs Coleridge, who looked so like a friskey girl or something worse that I was not surprised that a Democratic Libertine should choose her for a wife. The husband gone to London suddenly, no one here can tell why. Met the patron of democrats, Mr Thos. Poole who smiled and chatted a little. He was on his gray mare. Satan himself cannot be more false and hypocritical.[23]

The quirkiest but in many ways most interesting of the books written in his retirement was *Providence and Love: Studies in Wordsworth, Channing, Myers, George Eliot, and Ruskin* (Clarendon Press, 1998). This begins with a rare foray into overt biography: an attempt to track down a real-life origin for Wordsworth's Lucy, as if in denial of Coleridge's supposition that the figure was merely a fantastic projection based upon an imagining of Dorothy's death. By way of a suggestive allusion in the River Duddon

[23] Cited, *Romanticism, Revolution and Language*, pp. 1-2, with due acknowledgment to Tom Mayberry, who unearthed the diary of William Holland.

sonnet sequence, Beer suggests that the beloved dead girl might have hailed from that corner of the Lake District. But the real tour de force in the book is a reading of the intriguing figure of Frederic William Henry Myers. The son of a Keswick clergyman who knew and revered Wordsworth, Myers was a bisexual ex-don from Cambridge who, like Matthew Arnold, had become an inspector of schools. A few years before writing the volume on Wordsworth for John Morley's widely-read 'English Men of Letters' series, he was deeply scarred by the gruesome suicide in the Lake District of his cousin's wife Annie Marshall, with whom he had fallen in love and was having a (very intense but almost certainly unconsummated) affair. This sparked an interest in spiritualism and membership of the Society for Psychical Research. All this leads Beer to trace fascinating cross-currents running between Romanticism, the high Victorians and the Modernists.

A recurring figure in Beer's many articles linking Romanticism to Modernism was given full-length treatment in a final monograph, *D. H. Lawrence: Nature, Narrative, Art, Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Beer must be one of the few Lawrentians actually to have worked down a coal mine in the manner of the author's father. Once again, he moves between close reading of key passages and learned discussion of intellectual influences on his subject—in this case, particularly the spiritual autobiography of 'Mark Rutherford' (William Hale White). He argues that Lawrence was at its best in the poetry, 'Snake' exemplifying that familiar theme the 'divided consciousness':

> caught in the vertiginous twofold experience of being at one and the same time arrested, trance-like, in the contemplation of a basking reptile, princess-like in its static beauty, and indulging in the worrying, inquiring, conscious need to capture the creature in its fullness before it could vanish, with a flick of its tail, into the unknown. In the full interplay of this systole and diastole between expansive warmth and narrow, focused concentration, [Lawrence's] whole being subsisted: one ignores any part of the full process at one's peril' (p. 225).

This (by no means comprehensive) account of the arc of John Beer's prolific output might give the impression that his many books persistently turned over the same few arguments and that his scholarship was serious-minded to the point of potential aridity. Far from it. He would always leaven argument with anecdote, or, better, allow argument to emerge from anecdote, as when he opened an account of 'Wordsworth the Revisionary', his very final essay (a lecture published in *The Wordsworth Circle*, the journal edited by his devoted friend Marilyn Gaull), with a moment of ridicule of the kind that would sometimes lead Wordsworth to undertake his revisions:

> Coleridge asked Fanny Allen [a friend of his patrons, the Wedgwoods] whether she liked poetry, and, when she said she did, proceeded to read to her Wordsworth's 'The Leech-gatherer.' Unfortunately, when she reached some lines about the old man's skin being so

> old and dry that the leeches would no longer stick to it, she found herself overcome with mirth; the more she tried to stop herself laughing the more she laughed, until she was quite convulsed, at which point Coleridge became angry and put the manuscript away, saying that to anyone who could not respond to genius such a poem might seem absurd.[24]

Beer's final monograph on the myriad-minded genius to whom he devoted more time and pages than perhaps any other critic of the 20th century was entitled *Coleridge's Play of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2010). It might be described as a partial intellectual biography, with the unifying theme of experimentation and play. John Beer closed his treatment of Coleridge with a chapter, echoing his valedictory inaugural against finality, called 'Questioning Closure':

> An unregenerate Romantic liveliness leavened his final conclusions, therefore. There may even have been a touch of sad retrospect at his failure quite to fulfil the promise hoped for by those who had once discerned in him the quality of a 'young Mirandula', previously manifest in the juvenile John Donne. His final recorded words were
>
> 'I could even be witty.' (p. 237)

John Beer may not have made disciplinary innovations as Gillian did with her ground-breaking linkage of Victorian literature and science, but, unlike Fanny Allen, he *could* respond to genius, and he knew that humour and self-deprecation were essential elements of the truly rounded mind. His final lecture on Coleridge, learned in ornithological history but light in literary touch, was called 'How Big was the Albatross?'[25]

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Note on the author: Sir Jonathan Bate CBE is Foundation Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University and Professor of English Literature in the University of Oxford, where he was formerly Provost of Worcester College. Taught by John Beer at Cambridge, he is the author of numerous award-winning books including biographies of William Wordsworth, John Clare and Ted Hughes. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1999.

[24] *The Wordsworth Circle*, 47.2 (Autumn 2016), p. 92.
[25] *Coleridge Bulletin*, 41 (Summer 2013), https://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/images/05_Beer_John_-_How_big_was_the_Albatross_pdf.pdf

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