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## THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOUTHEY-COLERIDGE CIRCLE<sup>1</sup>

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In this joint paper the Southey-Coleridge circle is looked at from two points of view. The first part of the paper, written by Pratt, employs a literary-historical approach in order to establish the boundaries of the network and to explore its complex social and textual dynamics. Concentrating on both the public and private identities of the Southey-Coleridge circle, it reveals the complex nature of literary and political culture in the closing years of the eighteenth century. The second part, written by Denison, examines a linguistic innovation, the progressive passive, and relates it to usage by members of the circle acting as a social network. A brief conclusion draws both parts together.

### The Southey-Coleridge Circle in the 1790s

In his 1802 appraisal of the Oriental romance *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), Francis Jeffrey, one of the leading lights of the recently founded *Edinburgh Review*, identified a 'sect of poets' who were all 'dissenters from the established systems in poetry and criticism' and whose writings were fuelled by a 'splenetic and idle discontent with the existing institutions of society' (*Edinburgh Review* 1 (October 1802), quoted in Madden, 1972: 68, 76). This group included Robert Southey, the author of *Thalaba*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.<sup>2</sup> It was a sect which early nineteenth-century contemporaries and critics were

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Grevel Lindop for helpful encouragement, and to Sylvia Adamson for numerous cogent promptings towards clarity. Neither is to be held responsible for what follows, however.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey does not mention Wordsworth by name.

soon to describe as the Lake School.<sup>3</sup> From its inception in c. 1793-5, its core membership was made up of Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Charles Lloyd, Charles Lamb, Amos and Joseph Cottle, and, until his premature death in 1796, Robert Lovell.<sup>4</sup> Other, less central, members included John Thelwall, Romaine Joseph Thorn, Mary Robinson, James Jennings and John Prior Estlin.<sup>5</sup> There is substantial surviving evidence that the core circle of eight writers on some occasions constructed, on others had constructed for them, a private and public group consciousness;<sup>6</sup> in other words, that, both to themselves and to their immediate contemporaries, they formed a fairly easily recognisable network — a group which this paper will henceforth describe as the Southey-Coleridge circle.

To begin with the private network. Literary relationships between the first generation of British Romantic poets, those whose careers began in the hothouse decade of the 1790s, are notoriously intricate. Indeed, as members of the group matured, this complexity was increased both by disagreements between erstwhile collaborators such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Coleridge and Southey, and by shared desires to rewrite the past in order to make it more palatable to public and private audiences who did not share the circle's previous revolutionary idealism. Yet in spite of later personal and political revisionism, there is no doubt that in the 1790s members of the Southey-Coleridge circle were drawn to one another by a communality of experience and of cultural and political sympathies. Firstly, shared social and educational backgrounds. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Amos Cottle all went to university, and even the four who did not receive the dubious benefits of a late-eighteenth-century higher education were all highly literate and well read. Secondly, from the mid-1790s to the end of the decade, all eight lived in the same area of the country, Bristol and the south-west of England. Thirdly, they had very similar political views. Although they may have disagreed over details, the members of this network shared a broad-based sympathy

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<sup>3</sup> The standard biographies of the Lake School are: Ashton (1996), Gill (1989), though this has recently been supplemented by Johnston (1998), and Storey (1997).

<sup>4</sup> The standard biography of Charles Lamb (1775-1834) is Courtney (1982). Although there is no biography of Charles Lloyd (1775-1839), important information on his life and literary associations can be found in Lucas (1898) and Beatty (1957). There are no biographies of Amos Simon Cottle (1768[?]-1800) or Joseph Cottle (1770-1853), but the latter's memoirs (1837, 1848) offer partial, though distorted, glimpses of his literary friendships. Further information can be found in B. Cottle (1987). Although he receives fleeting mentions in Ashton (1996) and Storey (1997), Robert Lovell (1771[?]-1796) has largely escaped the attention of biographers. For a contemporary account see anon. (1795).

<sup>5</sup> John Thelwall's (1764-1834) connections to the network have been the subject of much recent attention; see, for example, Thompson (1997); for Romaine Joseph Thorn (fl. 1793-1820) see Lamoine (1973); Mary Robinson's (1758-1800) connections with the network are explored in Curran (1994); the only study of James Jennings (1772-1833) is Carnall (1954); John Prior Estlin's (1747-1817) affiliations to the network are elucidated in Trott (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Although Lovell died in 1796, some of his poems appeared posthumously in group publications.

with revolutionary France and were disenchanted with British government policy both abroad (the conflict with revolutionary France) and at home (the repressive legislation of William Pitt's war-time administration). All eight authors pitied the plight of the politically and socially dispossessed and, to varying degrees, were prepared to speak out in public against the establishment: in 1793 Wordsworth wrote, but did not publish, a 'Letter' in response to the political turncoatism of the Bishop of Llandaff; in 1794 Robert Lovell published a satire condemning the involvement of Bristol, his native city, in the slave trade; and in the following year Bristol was the venue for Coleridge's and Southey's lectures on politics, religion and history.<sup>7</sup> Fourthly, all eight men had literary ambitions and were discontent with the cultural norms of their age.

A community of interests was one thing, but the ties between the Southey-Coleridge circle were enhanced by the conditions under which it operated. All eight inner members knew each other and were well informed of the activities of each other's friends. Such intricacy of association is amply illustrated through the example of Southey. Southey and his fellow Bristolian Lovell first met in the closing months of 1793. They were introduced by Southey's childhood friends the Fricker sisters and, not unusually for this particular network, friendship was soon translated into familial ties: Lovell married Mary Fricker in 1794, Coleridge married her elder sister Sara in October 1795, and one month later Southey married a third sibling, Edith.<sup>8</sup> Within weeks of meeting Lovell, Southey returned to Oxford and, unable because of his political principles to enter the church or to become a lawyer, turned to medicine. Although his enthusiasm for the subject quickly passed, medical studies brought Southey into close contact with a fellow student at Balliol, Robert Allen.<sup>9</sup> Allen himself does not figure in the network outlined in this paper; he was, however, the unwitting catalyst in

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<sup>7</sup> 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff', W. Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (3 vols, Oxford, 1974), i. 29-49. Robert Lovell, *Bristol, A Satire* (Bristol, 1794). For Coleridge's lectures, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 75: (i) *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, eds. L. Patton and P. Mann (Princeton NJ, 1971). Southey, unlike Coleridge, did not publish his lectures and, with the exception of a few fragments (see *Ibid.*, p. xxxv, 233), they do not seem to have survived.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Fricker (1771-1862): Second surviving child of Stephen Fricker and his wife Martha Rowles. Mary worked as an actress in Bath and Bristol repertory theatre. Lovell's family disapproved of the marriage and, after his death, were unwilling to support Mary or her son Robert. She maintained her links with Southey and eventually went to live with his family at Greta Hall, Keswick. Sara Fricker (1770-1845): Elder sister of Mary. Married Coleridge on October 4 1795. Edith Fricker (1774-1837): Younger sister of Sara and Mary. Married Southey on November 14 1795. A shadowy figure, her later life was dogged by ill-health and recurrent depression. A fourth sister, Martha (b. 1777), rejected a proposal of marriage from George Burnett (1776-1811), a fringe member of the Southey-Coleridge group. For further details of the Frickers, see Lefebure (1986).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Allen (1772-1805): Educated Christ's Hospital and Oxford. Occasional poet and, possibly, an early convert to Pantisocracy. In later life worked as a military surgeon and, then, a journalist.

forging one of its most complex affiliations.<sup>10</sup> In June 1794 Allen introduced his new friend Southey to his old schoolmate, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The impact on both men was dramatic. Whilst to Southey, Coleridge was ‘a man of the most uncommon merit — of the strongest genius, the clearest judgement, the best heart’ (Curry, 1965: i. 58), to the latter his new soul mate was a fellow ‘sturdy Republican’ (Griggs, 1956-71: i. 84). Their time in Oxford was spent discussing metaphysics, poetry and politics and concocting a scheme in which they and a group of like-minded friends would emigrate to America and found a utopian society. Pantisocracy, the name chosen by Coleridge for the project, was still in its embryonic stages when the latter departed for a walking tour of Wales and Southey returned to Bristol. The two kept in touch (though only Coleridge’s side of the correspondence survives), and in early August 1794 Coleridge arrived in Bristol, where he immediately made the acquaintance of Lovell and the Frickers. Coleridge and Southey’s attempts to drum up support for Pantisocracy inevitably led to a growth in membership of the network, and in the closing months of 1794 one of its most important, though also most ridiculed members, was recruited. Joseph Cottle, poet, bookseller and aspiring publisher, was introduced to Southey and Coleridge by Robert Lovell. The meeting was almost as momentous as that between Southey and Coleridge, because Cottle was able to unite sociability with the fulfilment of literary ambition, offering to pay for and to publish any poetry they cared to produce. It was a synthesis of friendship and professional self-interest which Cottle himself (though not always the most reliable of witnesses) later recognised:

I could not be insensible to the kindness of their [Lovell, Southey, and Coleridge’s] manners, which, it may be truly affirmed, infused into my heart *a brotherly feeling, that more than identified their interests with my own.* (Cottle, 1848: 6; my emphasis)

As well as publishing volumes by Southey and Coleridge, Cottle also helped to expand their social horizons, introducing them to his family, friends and fellow provincial writers. It was through this growing network, centred on his shop in Bristol, that Southey and Coleridge eventually met Dorothy and William Wordsworth in 1795. Other figures were also gradually drawn into the group. Lamb had been a fellow pupil of Coleridge’s at Christ’s Hospital. Lloyd, eldest son of a prosperous Birmingham Quaker family, met Coleridge on the latter’s

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<sup>10</sup> Allen did maintain contact with Southey. He visited Bristol in 1796 and in the following year took four copies of Southey’s *Poems* (Bristol, 1797) and *Letters written during a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal* (Bristol, 1797) to Portugal, presumably to deliver to Southey’s uncle Herbert Hill, chaplain to the British Factory in Lisbon.

1796 tour of the midlands to drum up subscribers to his short-lived periodical *The Watchman* and was rapidly assimilated into his south-western network.

Close personal acquaintance was enhanced by physical proximity. Not merely did the circle all live in the same part of the country for large parts of the period 1794-1800, but, as the example of Charles Lloyd demonstrates, members of the group often shared the same roof. Lloyd joined the inner circle in 1796, initially as a pupil-boarder in Coleridge's house in Bristol. When early infatuation with his mentor palled, Lloyd moved on physically and intellectually, firstly to London and Charles Lamb, and then back to the south west of England and into the household of another member of the network. In the summer of 1797 Lloyd invited himself to stay with Southey and his wife in Burton, Hampshire.<sup>11</sup> His visit did not end with the Southey's tenancy of their cottage. He accompanied them initially to the Bath-Bristol area and then, in November 1797, to London. Such a prolonged visit seems to have stretched Lloyd's nascent friendship with Southey to breaking point, the latter describing the experience of sharing a house with this unwanted, emotionally disturbed guest as 'unpleasant' (Curry, 1965: i. 144-5). Yet such an intimate level of everyday physical contact was far from unusual within the Southey-Coleridge circle. Just as Lloyd was embarking on his stay at Burton, Coleridge, whose friendship with Southey had been marred by the failure of Pantisocracy and by a bitter quarrel in late 1795, attempted to reforge their previous personal and literary intimacy. Although his effort provided a telling indication of his own changing allegiances (the relationship he was proposing was to be triangular, to include his new friend Wordsworth, rather than a restoration of the earlier bipartite association), Coleridge used the offer of shared accommodation as a lure. As he explained in a letter to Southey of c. July 17 1797:

I would make a shift by some means or other to visit you, if I thought, that you & Edith Southey would return with me ... And Wordsworth at whose house I now am for change of air has commissioned me to offer you a suit of rooms at this place, which is called All-foxen — (Griggs, 1956-71: i. 336)

As Coleridge's letter affirms, the network was united not merely by a desire for physical proximity. It was also connected by the inescapable literariness of its individual members. For Coleridge's offer of accommodation was accompanied by the prospect of professional improvement (new scenery would provide fresh material for poetry) and by a poem (Griggs, 1956-71: i. 334-6). With its appropriation of Lamb and the Wordsworths as

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<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, accompanied by Lamb, arrived at Southey's home on August 14 1797. Lamb returned to London on the following day.

non-speaking surrogates for Coleridge, allusions to three Southey poems, and the fact that manuscript copies were sent to the latter and Lloyd, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison' offers textual affirmation of the network. (For further details see Pratt, forthcoming, a.) Southey's decision to construct his own reply to 'This Lime-tree Bower', an answer addressed not to Coleridge but to the Cottle brothers, only serves to confirm the image of a fully functioning, even somewhat incestuous, poetic coterie in which literary interchange was the norm.<sup>12</sup> What we find in the Southey-Coleridge circle in the 1790s is that literary production and textual interconnection are a way of life. Members of the group read each other's most recent work, annotated one another's manuscripts, contributed to each other's poems, dedicated books or individual works to one another, produced joint volumes, and at times their styles are so alike that, as is the case with the sonnets jointly written by Coleridge and Southey in 1794-5, it is literally impossible to tell where one author's contribution ends and the other's begins (Curran, 1986: 226 n.15). As recent criticism has begun to show, what the circle also developed was a complicated 'Language of Allusion', a discourse carried on at both private and public levels and allowing for the simultaneous articulation of assent and dissent amongst its members (see for example Newlyn, 1986b).

This complex intertextuality emerges clearly in the group of three sonnets 'Attempted in the Manner of Contemporary Writers' published by Coleridge under the pseudonym of Nehemiah Higginbottom in the *Monthly Magazine* for November 1797.<sup>13</sup> The sonnets caused immediate offence to three members of his circle: Lloyd and Lamb, the 'young Bards' whose stylistic defects Coleridge privately and somewhat patronisingly admitted to parodying,<sup>14</sup> and Southey (Griggs, 1956-71: i. 358). In both the immediate aftermath of the Higginbottom poems' publication and in his literary autobiography *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge expressed amazement at his friends' responses, particularly singling out Southey's conviction that the sonnet 'To Simplicity', with its critique of 'infantine simplicity, vulgar colloquialisms, and lady-like Friendships', was an attack on himself (Griggs, 1956-71: i. 359). Recent criticism has sided with Coleridge, playing down the connections between the Higginbottom sonnets and Southey in favour of emphasising their playfully allusive and

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<sup>12</sup> This answer, 'Southey's to A. S. Cottle', was published in A. S. Cottle, *Icelandic Poetry, or the Edda of Saemund Translated into English Verse* (Bristol, 1797), pp. xxxi-xlii. For the circle's interest in northern mythology, see Pratt (1994).

<sup>13</sup> *Monthly Magazine* 4 (1797), p. 374. The sonnets were: 'Pensive at eve on the *hard* world I mus'd', 'To Simplicity', and 'On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country'.

<sup>14</sup> Lamb and Lloyd both had good reason to be annoyed by the sonnets' publication in the *Monthly Magazine*, as they were regular contributors to its 'Original Poetry'. For example, from July to December 1797 it published seven signed poems by Lloyd and three by Lamb, *Monthly Magazine* 4 (1797), pp. 52, 133, 134, 228, 453-4.

parodic relationships both to Coleridge's own early poetry and to the work of his friend Wordsworth (see for example Erdman, 1958; Newlyn, 1986a; Stones, 1997). This simplifies the complex nature of literary affiliations and disaffiliations within the circle at this period. As explained elsewhere, eagle-eyed contemporaries could very easily have read 'To Simplicity' as an assault on Southey's revisionist poetics (Pratt, forthcoming, b). Moreover, they could also have made connections between Southey and the third Higginbottom poem. 'On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country' has recently been portrayed as a critique of Wordsworth, whose unpublished poem 'The Ruined Cottage' Coleridge had read in manuscript (Newlyn, 1986b: 258). Yet the poem also has links with Southey. Its central lines offer a parody of archaism used merely for its own sake: 'Yet *aye* she haunts the dale where erst she stray'd; | And *aye* beside her stalks her amorous knight'. For a recent critic this is evidence of a characteristically Coleridgean self-parody, a reflection of his increasing critical self-consciousness and determination to remedy his own previous stylistic and linguistic faults (Newlyn, 1986b: 258). Yet when read in the context of criticism from the 1790s, a potentially different interpretation emerges. Coleridge's poem may well be alluding to the *Critical Review's* analysis of Southey's epic *Joan of Arc* (1796):

Mr. Southey sometimes uses quaint and antiquated expressions ... This practice, however, requires judgment, and, by a young writer, should be followed with caution. Frequent instances occur throughout this poem of receding, and sometimes we think not happily, from the customary language, — as in the frequent use of the word *aye* for *always*, and particularly when the same monosyllable is compounded with an adjective, as it is sometimes used in the manner of Spencer [sic], both by Mr. Southey and Mr. Coleridge.<sup>15</sup>

The sonnet's carefully italicised archaisms are then a reminder of past, shared defects and possibly also a warning to Southey to avoid such faults in any future productions. Their parody of what contemporary critics had identified as a characteristic of the circle's linguistic practice, represents Coleridge's awareness of literary and linguistic community and, simultaneously, his need to distance himself from it.<sup>16</sup>

Coleridge's silent appropriation of the *Critical Review's* observations and the Higginbottom sonnets' fusion of public parody with private, allusive critique, take us into the

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<sup>15</sup> *Critical Review* 2nd series 17 (1796), pp. 182-92. The same reviewer had also recommended prudent use of compound adjectives which, 'if not skilfully introduced, inflate [rather] than dignify verse', and cited several examples from *Joan* (1796) of this kind of inflation. Coleridge later claimed that 'On a Ruined House' was written to ridicule indiscriminate use of elaborate and swelling language and that it contained 'phrases ... borrowed entirely from my own poems' (*Biographia Literaria*, i. 27).

<sup>16</sup> For Lamb's awareness of communal linguistic practice, see his comments on Joseph Cottle's appropriation of Southey's use of the constructions 'one, a man' and 'he, the king' (Marrs, 1975-8: i, p. 236).

borderline between the circle's public and private identities. Whereas in private key members of the group (especially Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, but to a lesser extent also Joseph Cottle) increasingly disagreed with one another, in public they attained an increasingly coherent network persona — a public identity which, of course, they might not have either agreed with, or have actually wanted. Yet, given the fact that the circle itself provided ample evidence of its existence, it is not at all surprising that contemporary critics took prefaces, footnotes and poems at their face value. For example, early readers and reviewers of the circle's works were informed that Coleridge had contributed several hundred lines to Southey's *Joan of Arc*; that Coleridge's *Poems* (1797) also included poems by Lamb and Lloyd; that Lamb and Lloyd's small volume *Blank Verse* (1798) contained poems to one another, references to Coleridge and Southey's aborted emigration scheme, Pantisocracy, and that Lloyd's own contributions to the volume were fulsomely dedicated to Southey, under whose very roof most of them had been written.<sup>17</sup> When confronted with such specific references detailing literary interaction, even collusion, it was hard for contemporary critics *not* to think of the circle as anything else but a rather self-sustaining, even self-promoting, poetic clique, and that is exactly what they did.

There is plenty of evidence to confirm this public identification of the Southey-Coleridge circle. For example, in 1796 and early 1797, a time when Coleridge was privately trying to distance himself from his erstwhile literary associate, reviewers repeatedly and publicly confirmed his poetic relationship with Southey. John Aikin's review of *Joan of Arc* reminded the reader of Coleridge's contributions to the poem of his friend, and the *Critical Review*, in its analysis of Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), pointed out that 'Mr. Southey, the ingenious author of *Joan*' had written the first half of the volume's fifteenth 'Effusion'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, there is evidence that reviewers did not need the prompting of the authors themselves in order to make connections between the two. The anonymous writer of the *Monthly Visitor*'s assessment of Southey's *Poems* (1797), commenting on that volume's public repudiation of the ode, pointed out that not merely was this unjustified:

whilst these days (deemed those of poetical declension) present us with the emanations of a Coleridge [who had recently published an Ode on the Departing Year], we cannot subscribe to his [Southey's] opinions.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Poems, to which are now added Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd* (2nd. edit., Bristol, 1797); C. Lamb and C. Lloyd, *Blank Verse* (London, 1798).

<sup>18</sup> *Monthly Review* n.s. 19 (1796), pp. 361-8; *Critical Review* 17 (1796), p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> *Monthly Visitor* I (1797), p. 273. 'The Departing Year' had been reviewed in *Ibid*, I (1797), p. 190.

Individual critics were, as this demonstrates, independently and publicly able to make connections between individual members of the circle, projecting them as a set (or sect) of political and literary radicals (even revolutionaries) who consistently railed against the governmental and cultural *status quo*. Nowhere was this image promoted more forcefully than in the *Anti-Jacobin*, the pro-government periodical established at the very end of 1797. Its very first edition, published on November 20 of the same year, set out a programme for defining and neutralising what it identified as the seditious, ‘Jacobin’ school of poets. The editors would:

select from time to time from among those effusions of the Jacobin muse ... such pieces as may serve to illustrate some one of the principles on which the poetical, as well as the political doctrine, of the NEW SCHOOL is established — prefacing each of them ... with a short disquisition on the particular tenet intended to be enforced or insinuated in the production before them — and accompanying it with a humble effort of our own ... in further illustration of its principle. (*Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner* 1 (November 20 1797), p. 6)

The *Anti-Jacobin*’s foremost target was Southey, whose radical ‘Inscription. For the Apartment in Chepstow Castle, where Henry Marten, the Regicide, was imprisoned thirty years’ was parodied in the first issue.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, its public animus was gradually extended to Southey’s literary friends and associates. The long satirical poems ‘The New Morality’ and ‘The Anarchists’, both published in 1798, named the circle’s members as ‘Coleridge and Southey, Lloyd, and Lamb & Co.’.<sup>21</sup> Gillray’s accompanying cartoon for ‘The New Morality’ went even further, caricaturing the radical bards as two braying asses, one frog and one toad.

For conservative writers and readers, political radicalism was heinous enough, but the Southey-Coleridge circle was also identified by its literary malcontentedness, in particular by its exaltation of generic, metrical, and stylistic experimentation. As the example of Southey reveals, for the authors themselves and also for their reviewers and readers, such innovation was irrevocably connected to the call for political change. Southey saw his own experiments with different metres, his attempt to adapt classical metrics to modern English verse, in an

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<sup>20</sup> *Anti-Jacobin* 1 (November 20 1797), p. 7. Southey’s original first appeared in his *Poems* (1797), pp. 59-60. The *Anti-Jacobin* consolidated his reputation over the ensuing weeks by rewriting other choice morsels: *Anti-Jacobin* 2 (November 27 1797), p. 15; *Ibid.*, 5 (December 11 1797), p. 39 and *Ibid.*, 6 (December 18 1798), p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Anti-Jacobin* 36 (July 9 1798), p. 286; *Anti-Jacobin Review* 1 (1798), pp. 365-7. The *Anti-Jacobin*’s attacks on the circle were not unique. In 1798 a hostile anonymous reviewer of D. River’s *Literary Memoirs of Living Authors of Great Britain* (2 vols., 1798) drew attention to Coleridge’s chequered past, *Gentleman’s Magazine* 68 (1798), p. 774. Moreover, at a time when it was increasingly dangerous to be publicly associated with radicalism, Lloyd’s anxiety at being labelled a Jacobin led him to engage in a pamphlet debate with his conservative critics. See C. Lloyd, *A Letter to the Anti-Jacobin Reviewers* (Birmingham, 1799) and *Lines Suggested by the Fast* (Birmingham, 1799) and Pollin (1973).

explicitly political light. As early as January 1793 he advised a friend with literary ambitions not to ‘fetter yourself in the chains of precedent — regular lyrics are like despotic monarchies — they look stately but lose all the energy of freedom’.<sup>22</sup> The works he published in the 1790s put this determination to link metrical and political innovation into the public sphere, and in their turn contemporaries read his experiments with classical metre as subversive acts. Indeed, for the loyalist periodical the *Anti-Jacobin*, which published three separate parodies of Southey’s sapphics and dactylics between November 27 and December 18 1797, this was proof positive of their author’s literary and political malcontentedness. As it succinctly explained, Southey’s radicalism was demonstrated both by his use of contentious subject-matter (the socially and politically disadvantaged) and by his ability to ‘traffic dactylic and sapphic’ (*Anti-Jacobin* 13 (February 5 1798), p. 449).

As the contemporary critical response to Joseph Cottle’s national epic *Alfred* (1800) also reveals, the circle’s adoption of a levelling, plain style for poetry — in an age when the very use of language was a politically significant and contested act — was also regarded with suspicion (Smith, 1984). *Alfred* is very much a product of the complex literary relationships in this network. A pacifist reworking of traditional epics, it has affinities with Southey’s revisionist *Joan of Arc*, which Cottle had actually published in late 1795 (Pratt, forthcoming, c, d; Curran, 1986: 168-9). Early reviewers of Cottle’s poem did not pick up on this particular intertextual relationship, but they did connect his use of a simple, almost prosaic, language with experiments already carried out by other members of the circle. These included Southey’s ‘English Eclogues’, published in 1799,<sup>23</sup> and Wordsworth’s ‘Advertisement’ (1798) and ‘Preface’ (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads*. As John Ferriar’s extremely hostile assessment of *Alfred*, which could in fact have been aimed at any of the circle, pointed out:<sup>24</sup>

... his work, therefore, is a plain *tale*; not highly elevated above prose, either by imagery or versification. In this undertaking, we see the bad consequences resulting from some hasty opinions lately promulgated, respecting simplicity of diction. (*Monthly Review* 35 (May 1801), p. 2)

<sup>22</sup> R. Southey-Grosvenor Charles Bedford, January 16 1793, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng. Letts. c.22, f.45.

<sup>23</sup> R. Southey, *Poems* (2 vols., 3rd edit. vol. 1, 1st edit. vol. 2, Bristol, 1799), ii.

<sup>24</sup> Ferriar’s earlier review of Southey’s ‘English Eclogues’ had described them as the product of a poet of ‘real talents’ who, in an attempt to ‘make the Muse descend a step lower had in reality, brought her to the level of prose’, *Monthly Review* 31 (1800), pp. 261-7. It is possibly significant that Southey’s earliest English Eclogue, ‘Hannah’, had originally been subtitled ‘A Plain Tale’; through a copy-setting error it was mistitled ‘A Plaintive Tale’ (Robberds, 1843: i. 238; Jacobus, 1976: 171 and n.2).

The *Monthly Review* was not alone. The *Monthly Mirror* informed readers that the defects of *Alfred* (simple style and too familiar and prosaic versification) were the result of:

a false taste, contracted by an admiration of the new school of poetry, which, like that of philosophy, has in these days gained an ascendancy rather alarming to the lovers of classical and genuine composition. (*Monthly Mirror* 11 (1801), p. 396)

For their immediate contemporaries, Cottle and his friends — the Southey-Coleridge circle — formed a readily identifiable network. Moreover, they constituted a grouping whose linguistic, generic, metrical and stylistic experiments were perceived as attacks both on the classical and genuine composition of literary culture and on the body politic itself.<sup>25</sup>

### Language history

We now turn to the general linguistic history of English.<sup>26</sup> In order to explain an important syntactic innovation of the eighteenth century — indeed the single most striking syntactic change of the last three centuries — it is necessary to exemplify some verbal patterns and convenient to give them labels as follows:

- |     |    |                        |  |
|-----|----|------------------------|--|
| (1) | a. | Progressive:           | <i>A barber was pulling out his tooth.</i>           |
|     | b. | Passive:               | <i>His tooth was pulled out (by a barber).</i>       |
|     | c. | Passival:              | <i>His tooth was pulling out (by a barber).</i>      |
|     | d. | Progressive + passive: | <i>His tooth was being pulled out (by a barber).</i> |
|     | e. | Progressive of BE:     | <i>He was being {silly/a nuisance}.</i>              |

**Progressive**, (1)a, and **passive**, (1)b, are straightforward and familiar grammatical labels. Each in itself represents a construction already well established in the language long before the eighteenth century. Usage of the simple passive then was similar to usage nowadays, while the distribution of the progressive was subtly different from ours — in general, rather narrower. When used, however, its meaning was not greatly different from the present-day value. It is (1)d, however, the combination of the two in a single clause, which is significant here. Type (1)e contains a similar string of two consecutive occurrences of BE. One now-obsolete construction remains to be described, (1)c.

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<sup>25</sup> Cottle, unlike Lloyd, did not retreat from his public image, and the extended preface he added to the second edition of *Alfred* in 1804 was in fact a vigorous defence both of his own poetic principles and those of his better-known contemporaries, J. Cottle, *Alfred, An Epic Poem in Twenty-Four Books* (2 vols, London, 1804), i. Preface. Ferriar too kept on the offensive. His review of the second edition of *Alfred* reiterated the complaint that ‘some modern writers do not distinguish between simplicity and meanness and his personal determination to continue to expose that low style of writing ... which we conceive to proceed from the antipodes of good taste and true genius’, *Monthly Review* 48 (December 1805), p. 437.

<sup>26</sup> Earlier, less explicit versions of this material lacking some of the most recently-discovered data have been published in Denison (1993, 1998).



(1838-9 Dickens, *Nickleby* v.52)

Sometimes, however, it must have been difficult to avoid the progressive passive, as the following example demonstrates:

- (4) ... Polyxena at the moment of her sacrifice on the tomb of Achilles, as the bride that *was being married* to him at the moment of his death.  
 (1846 De Quincey, 'The Antigone of Sophocles',  
*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 13, p. 162 [Visser])

Consider the alternatives that De Quincey might have chosen:

- (4)' the bride that *was married* to him  
 (4)" the bride that *was marrying* to him  
 (4)''' the bride that *was getting married* to him

Here the usual omission of progressive marking, as in (4)', would suggest that Polyxena and Achilles were already married, while the passival, as in (4)", would be inappropriate with a potentially agentive subject, and the GET passive, as in (4)''', was hardly known in the progressive then (and might in any case have been interpreted as nonpassive with MARRY). So the progressive passive had a real advantage here. Furthermore, the adoption of the progressive passive makes the English auxiliary system much more symmetrical. A functional explanation relies on facts such as these.<sup>27</sup>

When exactly did the progressive passive enter the language? Certainly many decades earlier than the De Quincey example, (4). An apparent example from Ward's *London Spy*, which at first sight dates from the turn of the eighteenth century, has proved to be a silent piece of twentieth-century editing: all the early editions have a passival. However, two syntactically uncertain quotations from *OED*, one of them given here as (5), have led to the discovery (by Roger Higgins) of two cast-iron examples of the progressive passive in the same collection of informal family letters, (6). They date from the 1770s:

- (5) Sir Guy Carlton *was four hours being examined* at the Bar of the House.  
 (1779 J. Harris, in *Ser. Lett. 1st Earl Malmesbury* I.410 (23 May) [*OED*])
- (6) a. I have received the speech and address of the House of Lords; probably, that of the House of Commons *was being debated* when the post went out.  
 (1772 Mr. Harris, *ibid.* I.264 (8 Dec.))
- b. The inhabitants of Plymouth are under arms, and everything *is being done* that can be.  
 (1779 Mrs. Harris, *ibid.* I.430 (22 Aug.))

<sup>27</sup> Warner (1997) has denied that structural symmetry is relevant to the innovation. He gives the most coherent formal linguistic account of the syntactic change discussed here.

Examples (6) were first made public in Warner (1995) and are the earliest so far found. Another early example, this time from a comedy, has recently been discovered by Linda van Bergen in the Chadwyck-Healey *Literature Online* database:<sup>28</sup>

- (7) and while you *are being lampoon'd* in ballads and newspapers, I mean to cut a figure in the history of England;  
(1790 Frederic(k) Reynolds, *The Dramatist* III.i p. 34)

The next and long-known example is by Robert Southey in his twenty-second year, in a jokey passage contained in a letter, not written for publication, to his old schoolfriend and long-time correspondent Grosvenor Bedford (an earlier letter has already been cited in note 22):

- (8) Never mind, 'tis only a *flash*, and you, like a fellow whose *uttermost upper grinder* [original emphasis] *is being torn out* by the roots by a mutton-fisted barber, ... will *grin* and endure it.  
Gaiety suits ill with me; the above extempore witticisms are as old as six o'clock Monday morning last, and noted down in my pocket-book for you.  
God bless you! Good night.  
(1795 Southey, *Life* I. 249 (9 Oct.) [OED])

The next recorded user is Coleridge. There are many other examples in the writings of Southey and Coleridge. I give a selection of examples gleaned from various sources (the best collection being in Visser, 1963-73: §2158):

- (9) a. While my hand *was being drest* by Mr. Young, I spoke for the first time.  
(1797 Coleridge, *Biog. Literaria* (ed. 1847) ii. 317 [Visser])  
b. ODE  
To a PIG, while his Nose *was being bored*.  
(1799-1800 Southey, *Annual Anthology* II.264 [Literature Online])  
c. We were allowed two hours for dinner, and two more were wasted in the evening while the coach *was being changed*.  
(1817 Mary Shelley, *6 Weeks' Tour*, in *Complete Works of P. B. Shelley*, ed. Ingpen & Peck (Gordian, 1965) VI.110 [Visser])  
d. the numberless scenes of injustice and misery which *are being acted* in every part of the inhabited world  
(1818 Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey* (Penguin, 1969) x.93 [Literature Online])  
e. My Prometheus ... *is now being transcribed*  
(1819 Shelley, *Shelley Memorials* 118 [Visser])  
f. the pitiable infirmities of old men ... *are being acted* before us.  
(1823 Lamb, *Essays of Elia* 2.20 [Visser])  
g. While the goats *are being milked*, and such other refreshments *are preparing* for us as the place affords.  
(1829 Landor, *Imag. Conv., Odysseus*, etc. [OED])

<sup>28</sup> Personal communication, 27 Oct. 99. Ms. van Bergen also spotted example (9)d (and there was a second example by Peacock in the same work) and the progressive of BE in (12). I am grateful to Julie Davidson of the Brotherton Library, Leeds, for checking the texts of (7) and also (10)d, and to David Mayer and Jane Moody for advice on the playwright Reynolds.

- (10) a. 'It [*sc.* a bill] *is being made out*, I am informed, Sir.'  
(1801 tr. *Gabrielli's Myst. Husb.* I.125 [OED])
- b. The King much pleased, but would not leave the novels that *were being read* to him.  
(1808 [Ellis] Cornelia Knight, *Autobiography* II.262 (9 Jun.) [ARCHER]<sup>29</sup>)
- c. The extortionate profiteering that *is being practised* by the tradesmen in the public market.  
(1814 *Guernsey Star & Gaz.* in *New Age* (1919) 21 Aug. 278/2 [OED])
- d. the daughters of Horne Tooke, for whose benefit his books *were being sold*;  
(1815 W. H. Ireland, *Scribbleomania* p. 239 (footnote to footnote) [*Literature Online*])

First some scattered comments on individual examples. Example (9)b is the title of a humorous political poem, cited here from a collection edited by Southey himself, and it differs from the form in the *Morning Advertiser* of 8 July 1799 (as quoted by Curry, 1984: 159). There the title is a more conventional passival: *ODE, TO A PIG, WHILE HIS NOSE WAS BORING*. Did Southey insist on a passive progressive which had been rejected by a newspaper editor?<sup>30</sup> Incidentally, it is one of only three progressive passives prior to 1835 in the poetry database now included in Chadwyck-Healey's *Literature Online* (the others are *is being realized* (1800 Coleridge) and *is being printed* (1824 Conder); Conder was known to both Southey and Coleridge). In (9)c notice how Mary Shelley uses the progressive passive near an indirect passive, another construction that was probably disfavoured in formal writing. (The subject of an indirect passive corresponds to an indirect object in the active; it has no Latin equivalent.) Example (9)g is interesting in its use of the new construction for an animate subject, side by side with the old one.

### Social networks

It seems worthwhile to examine the sociolinguistics behind early progressive passives as represented by (6)-(10). Most early examples tend to come from the pens of young people writing informally, and the vast majority are from Southey, Coleridge, Lamb, and later members of their circle such as Mary Shelley, Shelley, Peacock, Keats, De Quincey, and W. S. Landor. Two progressive passives in *OED*, for instance, dated 1826 and 1828, come from a collection of reminiscences about Samuel Parr, a sociable schoolmaster and cleric with a vast correspondence, known by De Quincey and acknowledged by Landor for his kindness

<sup>29</sup> ARCHER — A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers — was generously provided by Edward Finegan and Douglas Biber, to whom I am most grateful; it is described in Biber *et al.* (1994).

<sup>30</sup> There would be a possible precedent in the alteration by a newspaper publisher of the subtitle of Southey's *Hannah* from *Plain tale* to *Plaintive tale* (see note 24 above).

(Denison, 1993: 27).<sup>31</sup> Visser quotes one in the writings of R. H. Froude, a divine who lived with Coleridge's elder brother as a schoolboy. A mere scattering of examples fall outside this group. There are the two Malmesbury examples, (6) — geographically very close to Bristol (23 miles), if perhaps socially distant from our circle. The author of the next occurrence, (7), cannot be convincingly tied to the circle, though he does seem to belong on its fringes.<sup>32</sup> There are two early examples in Gothic novels of little literary merit. 'Gabrielli' in (10)a is probably Mrs Mary Meeke, whose novels were apparently very popular; all the reference books, for instance, note that she was Macaulay's favourite 'bad' novelist. She was much given to writing under pseudonyms. The other is an 1802 citation in *OED* and Visser from a translation by Mary Charlton, likewise a novelist and translator with the Minerva Press (and just conceivably the same person). And there are isolated examples from a female diarist, a provincial newspaper, and a notorious erstwhile forger of Shakespeariana, (10)b,c,d, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, however, most come from a group of literary people who all knew each other, sometimes lived in close proximity, and/or corresponded copiously. The intricacy of their network relations in the last decade of the eighteenth century has been sketched in the first part of this paper. I propose that the Southey-Coleridge circle be treated as a kind of social network in the Milroyan sense. The following quotation is irresistible at this point:

Affection has one or two strong cords round my heart, and will try me painfully — you and Wynn! A little network must be broken here; that I mind not, but my mother does; (1794 Southey, *Life* I. 226 (19 Oct.))

Certainly by the second decade of the nineteenth century, the network tying all the relevant literati together was somewhat looser-knit, while Southey's politics had lost their radical strain, so that one should rather posit two linked networks corresponding to the different generations involved, or else an evolving network with membership and characteristics which change over time. Still, Marilyn Butler can write of a 'coherent and even tight-knit' circle involving Thomas Love Peacock and the Shelleys in the late 1810s (1979: 103).

Social networks can contribute to linguistic stability (Milroy, 1987: 190-207), so linguistic change may follow disruption of a social network. And even in a period of social stability, linguistic change may be initiated by the spread of some usage from one social

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<sup>31</sup> Southey (1802 *Life & Corr.* II 198) says, of the Edinburgh critics, 'when they abuse Parr's style, it is rather a knock at the dead lion, old Johnson'. This, I take it, is a reference to Samuel Parr.

<sup>32</sup> Reynolds's family came from Trowbridge, less than 20 miles from Bristol and from Malmesbury. He went to Westminster School some ten years before Southey. He tells us (1826 *Life & Times* II 216) that in 1795 he began an intimacy with Godwin, then an associate of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, just as his father had been intimate with Horne Tooke.

<sup>33</sup> Note that (10)c at least is only recorded in a twentieth-century source, which, as we have seen, does not always guarantee authenticity.

network to another by means of individuals who are peripheral members of both.<sup>34</sup> Now, members of the putative Southey-Coleridge network(s) were extremely self-conscious linguistically. In the politicised English literary world of the decades around 1800, with its aggressive reviews, often highly critical about diction, it is certainly possible that consciously or otherwise, groups of literary people might have wanted to distance themselves from other, older and more conservative groups. That this was actually the case for the Southey-Coleridge circle is demonstrated in the first half of this paper. What we now have to argue for is that the progressive passive might have been a linguistic sign of group identity.

To explain the clustering of examples, two hypotheses are open to us (the Malmesbury data, examples (6), and the Reynolds example, (7), make it highly unlikely that the Southey-Coleridge circle actually initiated the development of the progressive passive):

- (11) a. The data are a mere accident of sampling and of the subsequent status of the writers.  
 b. The progressive passive was already a general if ‘unrespectable’ form in speech, possibly dialectally restricted, but was rarely written (except in private letters or trashy novels or newspapers?); it was seized on by the young iconoclasts of the Southey-Coleridge circle in a kind of radical experimentation.

Hypothesis (11)b is compatible with the idea of deliberate ‘siding with the politically and linguistically dispossessed’. (Both of the Southey examples quoted above as (8) and (9)b had political and humorous applications [L.P.], and the context and content of (7) fit well with ‘unrespectableness’.) If we adopt that hypothesis, then we can further suggest that the progressive passive spread slowly outwards from that circle at first, only later becoming acceptable in print as they themselves got older and more respectable.

What exactly is being claimed here? The progressive passive might possibly have been a regional innovation: every single eighteenth-century example discovered to date appears to be associated with a small area that has Bristol as its westernmost point. This must remain a speculative suggestion, given the rather sparse evidence for localisation. The core claim of this paper is that the Southey-Coleridge circle in Bristol in the 1790s formed on a small scale a dense and multiplex network which might have promoted idiosyncrasies of usage as part of their group identity, whether consciously or not. (‘Density’ refers to the

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<sup>34</sup> A number of scholars have recently begun to apply Milroyan ideas to problems in historical linguistics, ranging from van der Wurff’s (1992) use of hypothetical networks in Middle English to the more specifically identified networks in the work of Fitzmaurice, Hope and Tieken-Boon van Ostade. At the Tenth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (Manchester, 1998), Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade convened a workshop on ‘Social network analysis and the history of English’. Evidence was presented for the relevance of social networks in historical change, including such literary networks as those centred on Addison and Johnson. The paper by Bax (1998), for example, concerns the ‘Streathamites’ who met in the Thrall household.

degree to which members of a network are all linked to each other; ‘multiplexity’ to the number of *kinds* of relationship — kinship, friendship, lodgings, professional, etc. — which link any two members.) The progressive passive was one such usage and seemed to have a political or social significance. If the network of the late 1810s is treated as a separate entity, we could further speculate that figures like Lamb and especially Coleridge, as peripheral members of the later network, might have been instrumental in transmitting the usage to it. Of course the scale and social settings of these networks and the time separating them are quite different from the Belfast communities studied by the Milroys, but the density and multiplexity of their internal relationships are sufficiently strong to justify the attempt to apply social network theory to them. From these linked networks (though perhaps not the exclusive source), the usage diffused out into the rest of society, gradually losing political associations and later any stylistic marking.

Returning to (11), the ‘null hypothesis’, (11)a — which may, of course, turn out to be the mundane truth — would lose us our sociolinguistic insight into this important syntactic development. The next step should perhaps be further research into nonliterary writings, especially perhaps vulgar forms of publishing from Bristol and the south-west midlands, work by women writers of the late eighteenth century, correspondence of the Fricker sisters, and political pamphlets. This remains to be done, except that a search of some 1.8 million words of miscellaneous text dated prior to 1830, generously made available by the Women Writers Project at Brown University, has not revealed any further examples.

### Related constructions

A widely-held suspicion that the progressive passive and the progressive of main verb BE, (1)e, have related origins tends to be confirmed by the provenance of examples of both, though the dating shows clearly that the progressive passive was the earlier of the two.<sup>35</sup> The (so far) earliest known ‘English’ user of progressive BE + Adjective Phrase (AP) is Keats, and of progressive BE + Noun Phrase (NP) is R. H. Froude, both of whom are among the early users of the progressive passive. Edgeworth is a different case:<sup>36</sup>

(12) ‘Ah, *don’t be being* jealous of that,’ says she;

(1800 Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (Penguin, 1992) 113)

(13) a. You will be glad to hear ... how diligent I have been, and *am being*.

<sup>35</sup> See now the detailed syntactic studies of Warner (1995, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Example (12) is clearly meant to be an Irishism and stands outside the history of mainland English; narration and dialogue in that novel are full of locutions like *don’t be trusting to him*, *don’t be denying it*. Perhaps it is worth noting, however, that Maria Edgeworth lived in Clifton (Bristol) in 1792-3, and that her full sister Anna married Dr Thomas Beddoes, so that even here there is a genuine connection with Coleridge’s circle.

(1819 Keats, *Letters* 137 p. 357 (11 Jul.))b. I really think this illness *is being* a good thing for me.(1834 R. H. Froude *Rem.* (1838) I. 378 [*OED*])

And syntagms like *is being* were real neologisms in the nineteenth century, arousing what now seem the most extraordinary reactions. J. H. Newman, a friend and colleague of Froude, wrote in a letter c. 1871: ‘but this I do know, that, rationally or irrationally, I have an undying, never-dying hatred to *is being* ...’ (Mossé, 1938: §279) (though in fact over thirty years previously he had more than once used the progressive passive himself!). For over fifty years the progressive of BE and/or the progressive passive attracted such comments as the following: ‘uncouth English’, ‘an outrage upon English idiom, to be detested, abhorred, execrated’, ‘clumsy and unidiomatic’, ‘a monstrosity’, ‘an awkward neologism’, containing ‘an absurdity so palpable, so monstrous, so ridiculous, that it should need only to be pointed out to be scouted’. (Visser, 1963-73: §2158 gives generous coverage.) An analogy in our own time might be the reactions to *hopefully* as sentence adverb, usages like *less students* or *this criteria*, or misuse of the apostrophe. Yet now the progressive passive passes completely unnoticed as a natural and obvious possibility of English verbal usage. The extent of nineteenth-century reaction to the progressive passive fits in with the idea that there might have been a whiff of *épater les bourgeois* in its use by the Southey-Coleridge circle.

Finally, here, it seems appropriate to ask readers of this volume to keep an eye open for examples of the following constructions at any dates earlier than those stated:

- |      |                           |  |
|------|---------------------------|--|
| (14) | <i>is/was being Ved</i>   | pre-1830, esp. pre-1810 (e.g. <i>It was being read</i> )     |
|      | <i>is/was being AP/NP</i> | pre-1830 (e.g. <i>He was being {silly/a fool}</i> )          |
|      | <i>... been being Ved</i> | pre-1920 (e.g. <i>He's been being interviewed all week</i> ) |

I [D.D.] would be grateful to be notified of any such examples, as they have the potential to shed light on the history of this important syntactic change.

## Conclusion

The contribution of named individuals to general linguistic history is usually assumed to be confined to matters of vocabulary and spelling: ‘Lewis Carroll’ and the coining of *chortle*, Nabokov and the (re)invention of *nymphet*, or Johnson’s and Webster’s respective influences on standard orthography, to pick some familiar cases. Linguistic prescription may also stem from the example of individuals, for instance Dryden’s decision to condemn stranded prepositions. Otherwise, however, syntactic or phonological change has usually been regarded as a structural matter going on below the level of consciousness, and attributable at

best to large, anonymous groups of speakers, for instance a social class or dialect grouping. Recent work, though, has demonstrated that linguistic conservatism and change can be regulated on a relatively small scale by social networks.

Now, we have shown in detail that the Southey-Coleridge circle formed a close-knit social network, especially over the last decade of the eighteenth century, and the interconnections continued and developed into the nineteenth. The network's significance in the literary politics of the period is clear. We have gone on to trace the progressive passive from its earliest, isolated appearance to an apparent association with the Southey-Coleridge circle, at first geographically localised. Adoption of the construction by members of the network at a critical period for the auxiliary system may have facilitated its later entry into the mainstream of English usage. Our hypothesis, then, is that use of the progressive passive in the social network centred on Southey and Coleridge may have turned out to play a significant part in the syntactic history of English.

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