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Coleridge and the Bible

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Just before I sat down to write this paper, T.S Eliot's words popped into my mind: 'We outgrow most of the books we read.' I recently re-read *The Wind in the Willows*, a book which one might be expected to outgrow. Not only did I find a renewed delight in the rich and delicate language depicting that now almost vanished landscape, but I also found, in the remarkable chapter, 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn', what I had not found before, a transcendental excursion from the main narrative, tied to a rare, touchingly aristocratic spiritual insight, unusual in Romantic or post-Romantic literature. So I felt I was more growing into than out of that book. But was there too much nostalgia in my pleasure, too much sentimentality? That question was put to me by the scepticism that William Faulkner betrays so uncomfortably in *Light in August*, in which Hightower, a priest whose name indicates his alienation from his community, soothes himself with a volume of Tennyson:

'Yes,' he thinks, 'I should never have let myself get out of the habit of prayer.'... One wall of the study is lined with books. He pauses before them, seeking, until he finds the one he wants. It is Tennyson... He sits beneath the lamp and opens it. It does not take long. Soon the fine galloping language, the gutless swooning full of sapless trees and dehydrated lusts begins to swim smooth and swift and peaceful...(end of Ch.13)

Though that was written in the 1930s, when Tennyson was out of fashion, nonetheless I was rather shocked, for there's much I like in Tennyson's poetry: is my pleasure of the kind Faulkner describes, and should I have outgrown him, as Faulkner clearly felt that he had himself? That phrase, 'It does not take long', is particularly disturbing, as Hightower seems to sink into a satisfying and sensual addiction. Have enchanting rhythms and diaphanous words become a substitute for prayer? Was my reading of *Wind in the Willows* a sort of sapless and dehydrated incantation to a lost world?

Finally, after this uncomfortable meditation, seeming to suggest that it is the mark of energetic minds to outgrow the books they read, and of lesser minds to be immured within them, I thought again of Coleridge, who of course realized my worst fears. For at least in respect of his intellectual progress, Eliot's words had the ring of truth. Not only had Coleridge glimpsed, when hardly out of his teens, what he felt were the essential weaknesses of a whole school of philosophy, the materialists or atheists as he called them, but in his twenties he read his way quickly through the major works of those thinkers more in tune with his own developing philosophical aspirations. And for every author or book he has serious dealings with, Coleridge shows initial enthusiasm (think of Kant grasping him 'as with a giant's hand') followed by a closer

scrutiny which results in continuing respect combined with significant reservations. He will often summarize his reading in a pithy sentence or two—perhaps the best known of which is his admiration of Spinoza’s ‘chain of adamant logic stapled to a rock of ice’—to God as object, not God as act. One could probably trace Coleridge’s intellectual development through a series of such aphoristic images, and with it his growing out of book after book, author after author. But if there is a book that one would not expect Coleridge to grow out of, it is the Bible.

NATURE

However, Coleridge believed that there were two schemes of revelation, and in order to express their complementarity, sometimes asserted that there were two Bibles. It would be a mistake to take this as a mere figure of speech, for his belief in the revelatory powers of nature was for many years as literal as that of Wordsworth. But his understanding of Nature underwent a considerable development in his later life, and we shall see that the relationship he finally establishes with Nature clarifies, I believe, the method by which he came to read the Scriptures. Or, growing out of one reading of Nature, he grew into his reading of the Bible.

Nature as a book¹ permeates Coleridge’s first attempt to address political problems by preaching the Gospel, the *Lectures on Politics and Religion*, delivered in Bristol in 1795, when he was 23.² Remonstrating with those who do not believe in God and his goodness when the evidence lies all around them, he declares

I could weep for the deadened and petrified Heart of that Man who could wander among the fields in a vernal Noon or summer Evening and doubt his Benevolence! The Omnipotent has unfolded to us the Volume of the World, that there we may read the Transcript of himself. In Earth or Air the meadow’s purple stores, the Moons mild radiance, or the Virgins form Blooming with rosy smiles, we see pourtrayed the bright Impressions of the eternal Mind.³

To read nature aright one must have a belief in God and his benevolence.

1 I have noted the following phrases all speaking of nature as a book: ‘The Omnipotent has unfolded to us the Volume of the World, that there we may read the Transcript of Himself; ‘...to the pious man all Nature is thus beautiful because its every Feature is the Symbol and all its Parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all-powerful Intelligence; ‘We see our God everywhere—the Universe in the most literal Sense is his written Language.’ In later works he speaks of Nature in the just the same way; thus in his second attempt to find solutions to political problems, which he called *The Statesman’s Manual*, or *The Bible The Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*, published in 1816, he writes, ‘Let it not weary you if I digress for a few moments to another book, likewise a revelation of God—the great book of his servant Nature.’ And in his philosophical lectures of 1819 we find, ‘And then... will the other great Bible of God, the book of nature become transparent to us when we regard the forms of matter as words, as symbols valuable... only for the life they speak of,...an unrolled but yet a glorious fragment, of the wisdom of the supreme Being.’

2 CL I 126, 6 Nov 1794, to George: Solemnly, my Brother! I tell you – I am not a Democrat... Talk not politics – [but] *preach the Gospel*!; cf. CL I 395

3 As one of the eternal mind’s bright impressions, blooming virgins make their only appearance here – they and their rosy smiles don’t seem to have outlasted Coleridge’s marriage.

However to what degree Nature reveals God as a person, rather than just his qualities, appears to be something of a debate in Coleridge's mind at this time. Discovering the presence of God as a person will become a major concern in his study of the Bible in the 1820s and 30s, but there are certainly hints that the person of God may be revealed in Nature in these early lectures. Thus discussing 'the detested System of Atheism', that is, all materialistic philosophies, Coleridge suggests that to

the philanthropic Physiognomist a Face is beautiful because its Features are the symbols and visible signs of the inward Benevolence or Wisdom—to the pious Man all Nature is thus beautiful because its every Feature is the Symbol and all its Parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all powerful Intelligence. (LPR 158)

Again, nature is only good or beautiful to 'the pious Man'. Nature is here tentatively portrayed as the face of God, but what is revealed are more the powers and the qualities of God than his person, or to use a later term, his personēity. However in *Religious Musings*, mostly written in the year following his Bristol lectures, 1796, Coleridge makes an important distinction between nature as the impress of God and the meek Saviour as his truest image, thus raising the idea of a person above the images of nature:

Fair the vernal Mead,
Fair the high Grove, the Sea, the Sun, the Stars;
True Impress each of their creating Sire!
Yet nor high Grove, nor many-coloured Mead,
Nor the green Ocean with his thousand Isles,
Nor the starr'd Azure, nor the sovran Sun,
E'er with such majesty of portraiture
Imag'd the supreme beauty uncreate,
As thou, meek Saviour! (ll.14 ff.)

This compares two possible images of God, Nature and Christ, which rest in the background of Coleridge's thinking for a long time; but eventually these competing images will be resolved into an orthodox trinitarianism, and Christ, or the Word, come to perform an important function in his understanding of nature.⁴

Tied in with the necessity of maintaining a 'most believing mind' to see God present in Nature, there is a deeper level of debate going on in Coleridge's thinking of the 1790s. Are we to be active or passive in receiving the influences of nature? To what extent should the mind involve itself in this

⁴ The first signs can be found in the notebooks written in Malta, and one note in particular, written after his return, remains in my mind as a kind of poem. He observes the sun reflected in the sea, which he takes as an image of God's sustaining creativity, and glimpses what he calls the 'Logos ab ente', or the Word from the beginning; that is, it is the creative word that is sustaining nature, the son not the father. The sun as the Son of God is an intentional pun – and a critical commonplace. (CN II 3159)

reception? Do God's powers work directly on us through the influences of Nature, or should the mind co-operate in producing the desired effect, a consciousness of God's presence? On the one hand, even this early in his career, Coleridge seems to recognize that pure passivity is not compatible with an insight into the divine presence revealed in the images of Nature:

The noblest gift of Imagination is the power of discerning the *Cause* in the *Effect*, a power which when employed on the works of the Creator elevates and by the variety of its pleasures almost monopolizes the Soul. We see our God everywhere—the Universe in the most literal sense is his written Language. If we could suppose an Atheist educated in the total disbelief of an intelligent first Cause, all this magnificent work would be a blank. (LPR 338-9)

Discerning the cause is the primary task of the imagination, from all the effects or sensations of nature producing a vision of God. Such images will certainly not convert an atheist, or even as Coleridge adds in the next sentence, a deist. The imagination is required, in conjunction with the believing mind, to discern the cause of these effects, thus discerning 'God everywhere'. The pious mind must be active, seeking a distinct vision, or, in another word, prayerful.

On the other hand his poetry of the 1790s is redolent with the necessity of 'a wise passiveness'. Young men should stretch their limbs at noon halfway up a hill, or lie on fern or withered heath to receive Nature's sweet influences, or gaze on the wide landscape till all doth seem less gross than bodily. If we accept that Coleridge did not believe that simple passiveness of mind or body was sufficient to read the book of nature, to reveal God's presence, then what is it that he is trying to encourage in these various assertions? Two connected things, I think. Because he supposes that these surrenderings will take place at a remove from society, he is asking his ideal figure to abandon the cultural baggage, the unexamined clichés, that he might otherwise thoughtlessly fall back into, imposing on nature an old and unexamined order, and thus failing to benefit from her influences, to reach that vision of God that inspires Coleridge's reading of Nature. This is the impetus behind 'The Nightingale', in which Coleridge takes issue with unreflecting assent to Milton's "most musical, most melancholy" bird, because 'In nature there is nothing melancholy'.⁵

But I think Coleridge is also seeking something more difficult to get hold of—a purity of mind and spirit, the kind of condition he described later in a note on Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty', where he admits to a decline in his 'Enthusiasm for the Happiness of mankind...' corresponding inversely to a rise in his 'sense of Duty, my hauntings of conscience from any stain of Thought or Action!' (CN II 2531) This is remarkable idea, that Duty requires not the protestant need to be up and doing, imposing certain forms of action upon oneself, but rather a freeing of oneself from the stain, not only of action,

⁵ Though I have always felt that is merely to substitute one pathetic fallacy for another.

but of thought as well.⁶

But however much Coleridge may have criticized Wordsworth in that poem, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth frequently speaks of a withdrawal from the tyranny of sense impression in order to purify the spirit; and he, like Coleridge, finds in geometry a paradigm for that process:

Yet from this source more frequently I drew
 A pleasure calm and deeper, a still sense
 Of permanent and universal sway
 And paramount endowment in the mind,
 An image not unworthy of the one
 Surpassing life, which—out of space and time,
 Nor touched by welterings of passion—is,
 And hath the name of, God. Transcendent peace
 And silence did await upon these thoughts
 That were a frequent comfort to my youth. (VI 150-59, 1805)

For Coleridge this initial passiveness, this tranquil state that muses upon tranquillity, is nonetheless only preparatory. An activity usually then ensues in his poetry which translates the language or images of nature into a consciousness of the presence of God. Even in 'Frost at Midnight', where the images of nature are pretty much presented as the immediate language of God—'The lovely sounds and shapes intelligible/ Of that eternal language, which thy God utters...', and where to be in their presence is as good as being in God's presence, nonetheless the 'Great universal Teacher' will mould Hartley's spirit, 'and by giving make it ask'. The next line begins with 'Therefore...' and so this action, this asking, this act of prayer perhaps, sets the condition upon which 'all seasons shall be sweet to thee.'

In 'Fears in Solitude', speaking of another, probably himself, and in the past tense, he describes how this 'humble man...' who had known just so much youthful folly as to make him 'securely wise', lay on the heath,

And from the Sun, and from the breezy Air,
 Sweet influences trembled o'er his frame:
 And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,
 Made up a meditative joy, and found
 Religious meanings in the forms of nature!

⁶ What I take as a good-humoured version of this impetus might have been behind Coleridge's teasing of Thelwall. In a letter David Fairer sees as insensitive to Thelwall's outcast status and material hopes, Coleridge describes his wish 'like the Indian Vishna, to float about along in an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes – just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more.' (CL I 349-52, 14 Oct.1797; *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 21 (NS) p.25) This, I feel, is the response of an idealist, seriously challenged by a materialist with whom he shares much, asserting his right to be. It is an extreme version of the passive state that Coleridge requires for the right reading of Nature. And I wonder if Eliot isn't saying much the same thing in *East Coker* when he writes 'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope/ For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love/ For love would be love of the wrong thing...'

'Made up' and 'found' are both active verbs of course, and it is through the joy that this young man 'made up' that he 'found' the rather vague 'religious meanings' in the images of nature. A similar process is observable in 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison'. On this occasion, Coleridge's generous prayer for nature to intensify her presence so that Charles Lamb may be 'Struck with deep joy' does indeed suppose his passivity; but subsequent to and enabled by the experience of joy, Charles is to gaze 'till all doth seem less gross than bodily; and of such hues/ As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes/ Spirits perceive his presence.' This gazing is an active process which spiritualizes the gazer; it certainly isn't a seeing or a looking, and Coleridge supposes that it will dematerialize what it gazes upon, in order to reveal the lightly veiled presence of God.

What is not asserted here is the internality of this action, and there is a certain indeterminacy as to who takes the leading role in the reading of this particular book—Nature herself, or man, or God. However, given Coleridge's earlier connection of the imagination with the rendering of nature as the intelligible language of God, it is not surprising to find that as his thought matured, he began to make clear distinctions between the passive images of sensation and the active work of the imagination required to reveal their significance. This is the essential distinction of the Verse Letter and the Dejection ode, a little obscured by the emotional turmoil these poems betray. If we are to behold anything more in nature than an 'inanimate cold world', the limited vision of the loveless and, we might add, the atheist, then from our souls 'must issue forth/ A Light, a Glory...' That power is of course dependent on our realization of joy, something that Coleridge feels he is incapable of managing. Nature alone cannot create this joy within us.

Some readings of these poems suggest that the dejection of the title stems from Coleridge's disturbance at realizing that Nature was no longer efficacious, no longer had the power it once had for him; but this is to confuse the trouble Wordsworth was having with the trouble Coleridge was having. I think that the images of Nature never act for Coleridge, as they seem on occasion to have done for Wordsworth, without the mediation of another power, in the form of imagination, or joy, or the most believing mind. Coleridge is, I think, conscious of this difference between them, and offers Wordsworth a corrective in the poem written after hearing the 1805 Prelude. He might have in mind his own lines—'we receive but what we give,/ And in our Life alone does Nature live'—when he writes to Wordsworth 'of moments awful,/ Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,/ When Power streamed from thee, and thy soul received/ The light reflected as a light bestowed.' (PW I ii 816)

In the twelfth of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, given on March 15th 1819, Coleridge outlines the method by which the philosophic materialist can be helped to a reading of his senses by the metaphysician, or 'friendly missionary'—who 'explains to him the nature of written words, translates them for him into his native sounds...' Thus,

the depth is opened out, he communes with the spirit of the volume as a living oracle. The words become transparent, and he sees them as though he saw them not. And then... will the other great Bible of God, the book of nature become transparent to us when we regard the forms of matter as words, as symbols valuable... only for the life they speak of,...an unrolled but yet a glorious fragment, of the wisdom of the supreme Being.

The missionary mind must act on savage sense; but note the future tense. Coleridge was 46, and he had moved that great vision of nature from the present to the future.

How the vision of God present in nature could be realized was a debate that continued in Coleridge right into the 1820s, and had a remarkable outcome, a radical change in his understanding of nature. For readers of the Collected Coleridge, the first hints of this change appeared in *The Statesman's Manual*, in the form of Coleridge's own marginal comments in one surviving copy. He is looking out of his window, and 'the flowery meadow' he looks upon, he calls, continuing the idea of Nature as a book, 'one of its most soothing chapters, in which there is no lamenting word, no one character of guilt or anguish.' Thus, we might say, the one attribute of the Almighty that he sees immediately in Nature is innocence, and the sad intensity of the sentence bespeaks Coleridge's alienation. The particularly interesting thing is what Coleridge later thought of the second half of this paragraph. He allowed Nature to represent the innocence from which we have fallen, but his marginal note thought that the 'best amendment' for the sentence beginning 'Such shouldst thou still become...' to the end of the paragraph would be a crossing out, commenting that, 'At the time, I wrote this work, my views of *Nature* were very imperfect and confused.' To explain this the editor points us to Coleridge's response to a remark recorded in about 1830, concerning those who deify Nature: 'No! Nature is not God; she is the devil in a strait waistcoat.' Whatever has happened in the 14 or 15 years between the writing of *The Statesman's Manual*, and this remark, represents a remarkable turn around.

But this striking image can be read as an accurate insight into Coleridge's mature views. What I hope to show is that the strait waistcoat Nature must put on to become a readable book, is that very straitjacket we must put on to read the Bible aright. An energy, a power or an idea must act on what is presented by the senses to create an intelligible world. Nature, as represented by sensation, is not a power acting but a material acted on. The method he adopts is perfectly consistent with what we have seen slowly emerging from his work from 1795 to 1820. So we find that from about the mid 1820s Coleridge begins to identify Nature in the passive sense, *natura naturata*, uninformed by an act of imagination, with the Devil, Hades, Hell, or Chaos. Thus in Notebook V he writes, 'Nature is Hades rendered intelligible by the energy, which combining therewith makes it no longer Hades.' (CN V 5931) And a little

earlier, he defined ‘the Manichean error’ as ‘antedating Nature—i.e. characterizing the *Base* or Ground-stuff under the name of that which began to exist only by the super-induction and combination of an antagonist Element...’ (CN V 5794) This indicates how Coleridge distinguished Nature itself from Nature as Hades. But two further questions arise: why did he think the ‘*Base* or Ground-stuff’ was evil, and what is the ‘antagonist element’ which renders Hades Nature and no longer evil? ⁷

The answer depends upon the relations between Nature and God, or how the finite is generated out of the infinite. There is one long entry in Volume V of the Notebooks (5813) which seems to contain the germ of his mature thinking. It starts with eight paragraphs outlining a scheme which bring us to ‘the Genesis of the Finite’, then twenty-two renumbered paragraphs dealing with that genesis, the fall, the dispensations of Christ, with the note ending ‘Two more steps & I shall have reached my Goal./– God grant me life & grace to add these tomorrow morning—Friday past midnight.—14 March.’ (1828) Next morning he added not two but four more paragraphs, and a couple of corollaries to boot. I am not going to inflict on you all the complexities of this note. What I hope to do is first demonstrate how Coleridge here connects Nature with evil, and then show that the sketch of his beliefs, which preface *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, his essay preliminary to a systematic study of the Bible, though earlier and briefer, is based upon a comparable insight and understanding.

The first three of the first eight entries are concerned with establishing the Trinity, beginning with God as act, the ‘superessential will’, not God as substance. Because this tri-unity is, as Coleridge puts it, ‘the all-containing’, contained therein, and this is the fourth paragraph, are ‘the Heavenly Host, the Eternal Ideas.’ If angels venerating God the Father on his throne is our standard image of the Heavenly Host, here Coleridge puts us right. Because we are still in the realm of the infinite, discrete or distinct beings not of the same order as the Trinity are not permissible. In Coleridge’s system we cannot separate the eternal ideas, in the form of the Logos, from the being of God. Perhaps the key point to remember is that Coleridge believed, firstly, that these ideas are the foundation of our humanity, and secondly that they are not derived from the generation of the finite. The fifth paragraph is clearly both the key to the whole process and the most difficult for Coleridge. We are following the Miltonic version of the *Genesis* story, which he is trying to demythologize and turn into a philosophy. Paragraph 5 runs in full:

Then come the Mysteries, to which I barely refer—namely the Eternal Possibility that should not become Actual.—one scanty filament of Light, that guides to, and is lost in the Darkness of the known but never to be understood Fact, the Actualization under

⁷ For a much fuller account of ‘Hades’ in Coleridge’s writings, see Anthony Harding, ‘Coleridge, the Afterlife, and the Meaning of “Hades” ’ in *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 14 (NS) Autumn 1999, pp.73-79, or the longer version printed in *Studies in Philology* 96 (1999) pp. 204-223

impossible Conditions—the

and so we run straight into ‘6 Apostasy’ and then ‘7 Chaos’, and thus, remembering we are still in the realm of the infinite, ‘8 The Divine Condescension—the Genesis of the Finite, and Time and Space.’

That ‘one scanty filament of Light’ seems a reference to Lucifer, or Satan, and I wonder whether Blake isn’t saying something of the same kind when he opens *The First Book of Urizen* with,

1. Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
 In Eternity. Unknown, unprolific,
 Self-closed, all-repelling. What demon
 Hath formed this abominable void,
 This soul-shuddering vacuum? Some said,
 ‘It is Urizen’. But unknown, abstracted,
 Brooding secret, the dark power hid.

The next eight paragraphs appear to be a commentary on the first eight: certainly the second number 8 deals with the genesis of the finite, and Coleridge describes this echoing the ecstatic language of the psalmist:

But here begins the great Moment. At this point I seem to hear the Voice crying in the Wilderness, to the Angels of the Fullness, Prepare the Way!—and then a second Voice, as with the summons of a Trumpet, calling to the Daughter of Chaos, and crying—Open wide, ye Doors! Let the Gates of Nature be thrown open—and the Lord of Glory shall come in.

This is a rather wonderful combination of John the Baptist preparing for the coming of Christ, and Psalm 24. Images of the Incarnation are co-ordinated with images of the Creation, as Coleridge makes clear in the rather calmer commentary on his spontaneous hymn. ‘The Word, the Ideas of the Logos, descending into Chaos, or Hades, ‘exert an informant Power,’ but the distinction between the finite and the infinite is retained because these Ideas ‘cannot communicate their endurance to Nature [considered as] Hylè as the Negative Factor, and the Matter receptive of the form. This is still *the Dust*, the Indistinction, and subsists in a perpetual Flux.’

The finite is thus generated out of the apostasy, out of the fall. Yet the matter of the fall remains ‘*the Dust*, the Indistinction’, and cannot itself be regenerated to belong to the infinite. For us sense impressions are analogous to the dust and indistinction out of which the imagination, the antagonist element, informed by the ideas of our humanity, create our perceptions of nature. So the act by which God creates Nature out of Chaos, the act by which we reduce the chaos of sense perception to an order revelatory of God’s presence, and, as I hope to show in a moment, the act by which we induce a

real and not a phantom self in the base or ground stuff of our human nature, are all of a kind, a shining down of the light into the darkness which 'comprehendeth it not'.

THE BIBLE

In 1820 Coleridge began writing *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, as a preface to his reading of the Bible. It is itself prefaced by various notes, the most significant of which is his 'system of *credenda*'. It contains five stages or classes. The first class he designates '*stasis*', and it asserts the existence of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, as undivided, unconfounded, co-eternal; this class matches the first three paragraphs of the 1828 note. His second class he describes as 'The Eternal *Possibilities*'—which is a plural of the phrase used in 1828—'the Actuality of which hath not its origin in God'; and this class he calls '*apostasis*' or '*Chaos Spirituale*', thus running together paragraphs 5, 6, and 7 of the later note.⁸ The third class he calls '*metastasis*'—change of state—part of which he describes as the 'Creation and Formation of the Heaven and Earth by the redemptive Word' and which is paragraph 8 in 1828. The fourth class he calls '*anastasis*', which means 'resurrection', and which deals largely with providential or historical Christianity.

These are four of the five classes, and I hope you have caught a glimpse of how closely these two schemes match. On completing these four classes, Coleridge pauses and comments: 'Here then we have four of the five Classes; and in all these the Sky of my Belief is serene, unclouded by a doubt... But...' he begins the next paragraph, and it is an awfully ominous 'but', 'there is a fifth.- there is a BOOK...' in capital letters. At this point I stopped reading, astonished. Why? Because I had tacitly assumed, despite warnings scattered all around me, that these preceding stages were derived *from* the Book. No, Coleridge was telling me, they are not. And thus I had one of those so-called and mis-called epiphanies. Suddenly, and you always think that this happens to other people, not yourself, one of those truths that had lain bed-ridden in the dormitory of my soul for so long, leapt out of bed, drew back the curtains and the rush of light told me—Coleridge is an idealist—ideas are the foundation of reality, and not derived from it. In the briefest of moments I re-discovered what it means to be an idealist.

Ideas are the foundation of reality; and reason is the fount of ideas. In its absolute form Reason, Kantian, Platonic Reason, is one with God, the resting place of absolute reality, and in us is the human form divine. Thus Coleridge believed that Reason could make up for any inadequacies in phenomenal reality, any failure of the historical or providential scheme of revelation. In the *Opus Maximum* he writes:

The fruits and attainments of the reason are at hand to compensate...

⁸ A note by Peter Larkin: Coleridge would reject any Schellingian suggestion of a struggle between good & evil within the Godhead. This is what he's parrying when he insists *Chaos Spirituale* does not originate in God himself.

for whatever diminution, either of the proofs or their influence on the mind, may be inherent in the nature of all historical testimony by the ravages or even the mere lapse of time. (OM 16)

Not only will the ideas of reason fill in the gaps created, say, by lost documents, but should the texts themselves represent the process imperfectly or inadequately, then reason can repair their intention. Thus reason sits as the judge of history, the assessor of the Biblical scheme of revelation. That on the one hand. On the other, the ideas of reason are not self-evident. The images of sense may prime the pump of reason, and he devotes a whole chapter to this in the *Opus Maximum* (OM I iv) or, as he puts it in a note, though he would reject the notion that our mind at birth is a blank sheet of paper, he admits that ‘whatever characters may have been impressed on the sheet, are written in *Sympathetic Ink*, and need an exciting cause to render them apparent.’ (CN V 5530)

Reason, and history as a form of revelation, thus work hand in hand. Although he is willing to provide incisive definitions, such as ‘Religion is: Ideas contemplated as Facts’, Coleridge follows up this particular entry with a lengthy caveat which recognizes that ideas cannot constitute religion until they are incorporated into specific historical events. Thus the same note continues:

“There is a God” is a philosophic Dogma; but not of itself a Religion. But that God manifested himself to Abraham or Moses, and sent them to make known that he *made* the World and formed Man out of the Ground, and breathed into him a living Soul—this is Religion.’ (CN IV 5299)

And in another note, he treats facts rather like nature’s sense impressions, to be reunited with ideas in order to substantiate the revelation they offer:

Now this is my Aim - to bring back our faith & affections to the simplicity of the Gospel Facts, by restoring the facts of the Gospel to their union with the Ideas or Spiritual Truths therein embodied or thereby revealed. (CN IV 5421)

And this is why Coleridge’s reading of the Bible is so hugely engaged: on the one hand he realizes that not every event in the Bible will be established as fact, and on the other that a religion without a factual history is no religion.

On the first of November 1829, and when Coleridge dates an entry you can be fairly sure of its significance to him, he began reading *Genesis*, apparently intending a consecutive study of the books of the Old Testament. His first note comments on chapter one and the first three verses of chapter two, and opens with these words: ‘In whatever point of view I contemplate this venerable Relic of ancient Cosmogony... I find difficulties.’ If considered as a religious document, he thinks that verses 1 (‘In the beginning God created the

heaven and the earth' and verse 26 ('And God said, Let us make man in our image' going on to describe man's dominion over the rest of creation) 'seem to say all that Religion requires.' Trying to account for the story as it stands, Coleridge suggests that it may have been intended for the people, and 'addressed to the Senses and grounded in the *Appearances* of Things'; but if so, why is 'the Vegetable creation [verse 11] anterior to the *Sun...*' [verse 14] This looks to him like a 'Physiogy' or scheme for the generation of nature; but if so, what is the function of verses 6 to 8, 'so obviously built on the popular fancy of the Earth floating, like a square Garment (hence the 4 *Corners* of the Earth) on an Ocean, and the sky being an Arch of blue Stone or Sapphire?' The questions multiply without solution, and Coleridge appears to retire from the fray with the Parthian shot, 'This seems addressed to Men in the Childhood of Thought.' But he hasn't quite given up: a new paragraph, another idea:

To make this Cosmogony... a Morning Hymn... in which every Dawn *re*-creates the World to us, [as] it was created by God - only with pre-determined Epochs - First, all indistinction, darkness - then a Breeze - then Break of Light - then the distinction of Sky - then of Land and Water - then of Trees & Grass -/then the Sun rises - the animals next are seen and first the Birds - afterwards the Cattle - and lastly, Man the High Priest comes forth from his Cottage - this is beautiful! But, I fear, far too refined and sentimental, to be received as sound interpretation. (CN V 6124)

And so the note closes, the poet in Coleridge more satisfied than what he elsewhere calls the 'historico-critical *intellective*' reader. (CN V 6241)

What I hope this extract illustrates is that the mood in which Coleridge reads the Bible is very much the mood in which we might take it up. There is an attention to the status of the text: Who does it address? What purpose does it serve? In what context was it written? And in the next note, Is it a genuine document? A variety of possible answers are provided, the value of each rationally assessed. Coleridge's method is more or less our method, even if certain events, possible for him, such as a universal flood, are no longer possibilities for us. There are other features of his reading that should also help to make us feel at ease with his commentary: he is, for instance, quite prepared to admit that he doesn't understand. He is puzzled, for example, by the episode in which Jacob wrestles with God, remarking that 'I have as yet had no Light given to me... The symbolic Import, & the immediate purpose, are alike hidden from me... The whole passage is a perfect episode—a sort of parenthesis in the narrative.' (CN V 6198)

ON THE FALL, DEATH AND RESURRECTION

In fact what to make of Genesis continues to puzzle Coleridge, and a few notes later he has another stab at it, identifying his idea of the Fall in the

process. He considers the first chapter

‘a scheme of Geogony, containing the facts and truths of Science adapted to the language of Appearances... It is throughout literal—and gives the *physical* Creation/ then from v. 4 of C. II comes the *Moral* Creation—the formation of the *Humanity*... with the moral cause, the spiritual process of the Fall, the *Centaurization* of Man,—and that the whole is symbolic or allegorical.’

(CN V 6129)

Coleridge discriminates between what may be taken literally and what symbolically; and it is certainly characteristic that he reads many events in both Testaments, particularly the miracles, symbolically. *Genesis*, at this point, is open to such a reading because God warns Adam, before the birth of Eve, that should he eat of the tree of Good and Evil, ‘thou shalt surely die.’ (Genesis II 17) Of course, in the event, Adam and Eve do not die, or at least not as the immediate consequence of their act. Coleridge treads cautiously at this point. Whereas he is willing to say ‘I seem myself to understand’ of the rest of Chapter III, of ‘the precise import of the Tree of Knowledge... and of the several Particulars appertaining thereto... I have at present only a *gleam*.’ His gleams are revealed in the next paragraph:

The Death of the Man is not [considered as] the extinction of all Being in him; but a Descent into a lower Being—a demersion and suffocation of his proper Humanity—the loss of the Divine Idea, the Image of God, which constituted it. (CN V 6134)

Centaurization is Coleridge’s characterization of this ‘demersion and suffocation’. Elsewhere, Coleridge takes Noah’s drunken nakedness (Gen. IX 21-24) as a type or rehearsal of the fall, and commenting on this, he underlines his first phrase, ‘*Gazed on the Nakedness*’:

Gazed on the Nakedness of the Humanity prostrated in the trance of inebriating Nature (Bacchus, Passion, Lust)—displayed and made merriment and festive worship with the lingam [phallus] –/and so became *disguised*—or degenerate.’ (CN V 5506)

These notes indicate how Coleridge’s saw the fall manifested in our being, and all suggest that human life is not a life if lived only according to the impulses of ‘inebriating Nature’. But he is careful not to assert what might otherwise become a simple soul and body division. The pleasures of nature are properly ours if they are not sought for their own sake. Thus in a note on *Genesis* II 25—‘And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed’, Coleridge writes,

It requires much delicacy to explain and set forth the moral truth, the *sense* & beauty of this... The mere *sensations* that accompany *Lust*, may exist, yet *Love* alone be the object of consciousness. It is only when these sensations are... desired for themselves, that Lust obtains a Being. It is no longer clothed and hidden in a loftier Nature, and taken up into the Humanity—but by the very act of making itself naked comes to know its nakedness and to be ashamed...

(CN V 6133)

Throughout Coleridge's work, the Fall is presented in this way, the will of unenlightened nature creating what he calls the false or phantom self, allowing mere nature to obtain a being. Thus the grounding of ourselves in nature, or as he puts it 'in the Tree [of knowledge considered as] the central essence... of the creaturely Ground created *implicitly* in the Ground, and formed out of the Ground' is a removing of ourselves from the 'Absolute, the Groundless, the eternal Ground of All Being.' (CN V 6134)

As one might expect, the sense that Hell, and consequently the Resurrection, are moral and spiritual conditions, not material facts, runs through Coleridge's writings. Indeed he finds the impoverished spiritual state of the contemporary Church represented in its very literal understanding of the resurrection. 'The way, the Life, and the *Resurrection*', he writes, underlining 'Resurrection', and then comments,

Oh what a poor fraction of the import of this last term do those Divines content themselves, who think of the Resurgence out of Hades as a mere Rising again from the Sexton's Grave—from the Church-yard./ And alas! alas! that "*those Divines*" should be all but all—999 in every 1,000! (CN V 5814 f.38v)

And if we remember the ex-Bishop of Durham's objection to the fundamentalist view of the Resurrection as 'a conjuring trick with bones' we can see how little the Church has really moved forwards in the 170 years or so since Coleridge made these remarks. The true sense of the resurrection, the scriptural sense he believed, was, 'To act creatively, to beget a new creature, a new Spirit, in the Soul... capable of communion and of final union (n.b. not indistinction) with the Son of God, the divine Humanity, so as to reveal his spiritual omnipresence... entire in each believer...' (CN V 5814 f.40 & v)

The word 'omnipresence' alerted me to possible comparisons between this kind of creative act, and that which permits Nature to be a form of God's revelation in Coleridge's earlier poetry. There, a creative act of the believing mind informs the images of nature so as to make them symbols of God's presence—they otherwise remaining 'a mere blank' as they would to the atheist. Here, the creative act informs our own nature and lifts it out of Hades or Chaos into a symbol of God's spiritual presence in our humanity. This is the essence of the Resurrection. Thus in this life, the 'Principium

Individualitatis’, Coleridge’s alternative to ‘soul’, ‘is to be continually loosening itself from its ground in Hades or Nature and transferring itself to a new ground in Christ.’ (CN V 6034 f.27) This process, of resurrection, the journey out of Hell, must, he reckons, appear senseless ‘for those who mean by the Body nothing more than the Carcase.’ Thus referring to St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, (III v.10-11) verses which countenance more than a mere physical resurrection, Coleridge writes that he can understand those verses ‘in no other way than that our Lord’s Death consisted in the final entire detachment and deradication of the human Principium Individualitatis from the *Ground* (Hades, Nature) and its transplantation into the Substance (or divine ground) of the Logos.’ (CN V 6054)

But occasionally, such is Coleridge’s determination to see all mention of Death or Hades in the Bible as of this spiritual or metaphysical order that he finds it very difficult to deal with statements that suppose death ends all modes of consciousness. Thus he has a real struggle with verse 5 of the VIth Psalm, ‘For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?’ It’s a short Psalm, and clear in its import—a petitionary prayer for God ‘to confuse and confound’, immediately, the Psalmist’s enemies. It does not look to another life. But Coleridge cannot read it in this material, and perhaps historical, light:

I see but one rational conclusion, viz. that the Psalmist was praying for a deliverance from that state of merely *potential* Being, into which on the dissolution of it’s bodily organ... the Soul must necessarily fall—and in which but by a divine Awakening, but by a resurrection into another Body, the Soul must remain.’ (CN V 6328)

That looks like a forced reading to me, and I find it hard to agree with Coleridge in his conclusion.

This is all the more surprising when we consider that more than two years earlier, Coleridge had addressed what he called, in the title or header of his note, ‘The Great Problem.’ This is ‘the Absence or *all but* the entire absence - of passages that directly and perceptively assert the survival of human Consciousness after the dissolution of the Sensible Body...’ (CN V 5732 f.75) Coleridge’s solution to this problem, outlined in the same, note depends upon his perception that the Jewish Dispensation was directed solely to the Jews as a nation, and not to Jews as individuals. The concept of a singular and providential national history, however difficult for us, is central to Coleridge’s understanding of the Bible:

To the Jewish *Nation*, the Body Politic of the Twelve Tribes was the Law delivered, to the Jewish People, and to the Jewish Colony, on the Euphrates & then on the Jordan, were the Prophecies addressed - and in the Temple, to the Nation congregated, were the Psalms chaunted.’

Coleridge's point is that the Law, the Prophecies and the Psalms were not addressed to the the people as individuals but as members of the nation. But as he goes on to say, 'States and Nations have only an Immortality by succession as a possible Hope!' It is perhaps worth recognizing that immortality by succession, even if it seems a rather second order form of immortality to post-romantics, is a characteristic human hope, often expressed less in respect of the nation, more in respect of the family—to which, for instance, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and the Long Galleries of many a country house bear testimony. And interestingly it is through the sense of the nation as a family that Coleridge develops his idea. For he believes that 'conditional Promises of an Immortality of this kind, by Children's Children in secula seculorum, and a Throne established forever, an Everlasting David... abound in the Hebrew Scriptures.' (CN V 5732)

Coleridge is rather excited by this discovery, by 'the tendency of every difficulty seen, acknowledged, and inquired into, in the love of Truth, to lead to its own removal at the same time that it elicits some new Light...' because, as he explains later in the same note, he feels it can be applied to the visible Church:

But what has been said of a NATION, a Body Politic, a People, holds equally good of a visible CHURCH -The Catholic Church is capable of no other Immortality than that of the Holy Nation - Say rather, it can only imitate & shadow out Immortality by Perpetuity of Succession...'

Of the visible church we expect no more, as it has 'for it's object the gradual extension of the *Opportunity*... [for] inward irradiation.' Curiously, in respect what he would say about Psalm 6, Coleridge celebrates this fact by quoting Psalm 88, verses 10 and 11, in which he sees 'the beauty and full applicability of the expostulations of the Psalmist', who asks the rhetorical questions, 'Can the Dead arise and praise thee? Wilt thou shew thy wonders to the Dead? Shall thy loving-kindness be declared in the Grave? or thy faithfulness in the Destruction?...' Coleridge sums up this long note with, 'This, if the freshness of the Meditation have not misled my Judgement, is a satisfactory and true solution of the Problem—' and significantly he signs off with a date—'Friday, 17 [18] Jan^y 1828.'

The question, to which I have no answer, is that given there seems no material difference between Psalm 6's 'in the grave who shall give thee thanks?' and Psalm 88's 'Shall thy loving-kindness be declared in the grave?' what caused Coleridge to raise the problem again over 2 years later, apparently forgetting his previous solution?

I have given most of my attention so far to Coleridge's discovery of the outworkings of certain key ideas in the Bible, and at times the idea, the hope, can lead to a reading difficult to reconcile with the evidence we have before us. But where ideas central to his belief are not in question, where the narrative or

story is uppermost in his consciousness, Coleridge is a patient, generous and sensitive reader. Just one example, from *Genesis* 45 v.24: Joseph is sending his brothers home, to their father and his. The verse is this: ‘So he sent his brethren away, and they departed, and he said unto them, See that ye fall not out by the way.’ Coleridge comments:

There is something so truly natural in this gentle reproach, implied rather than expressed... Not till they were leaving—when he saw them all together, with the presents they had received, & and then could not [but] recall the fact of their having sold him into Slavery, from Jealousy and lust of Lucre, that borrowed from some actual tho’ slight apprehension of their quarreling under the influence of the same passions a pretext for, and at the same instant a *diversion* of, the involuntary feeling or resentment—this is the Drama of the Heart—

(CN V 6233)

And this is Coleridge at his best. Behind a verse we might pass over without reflection, he sees the inherent tension in the apparently resolved relationship between Joseph and his brothers. He understands how a person of fundamental good will might deal with feelings of resentment. And we might wonder just how close this was to the drama of his own heart. The youngest and beloved son of his father’s old age, a whole host of older brothers who may have concurred, almost immediately upon his father’s death, with his being sold into the educational slavery of Christ’s Hospital, his undoubted genius raising him into a significant figure in the life of the nation—there are sufficient parallels between Coleridge and Joseph for us to understand why he might have been sensitive to the motions of Joseph’s heart and mind.

Coleridge completed his reading of *Genesis* sometime in the winter of 1829–30, and writing a note on the occasion, gave it the title, ‘Sundry General Remarks and Reflections on a studious Re-perusal of the Book of Genesis.’ What is noticeable about this two page entry is Coleridge’s reversion to the establishment of ideas in *Genesis*; no attention at all is given to *Genesis* as a story or as a form of history—both of which Coleridge has commented on in his notes.

Thus he first draws our attention to the fact that *Genesis* ‘begins with an *Act*, a revelation of a *Will*—’ which is fair enough, we might say, but then Coleridge gets into his philosophic stride, ‘yea, and of a Will in it’s own form! of *the Will*—of an Absolute Identity antecedent in order of Thought, to the Unity of Personal Being.—of the Absolute Will, as the Ground and eternal Antecedent of all Being...’ and that is just the beginning of a note which confines itself to the first verse of the first chapter. (CN V 6239)

Finding the right balance between the text and its interpretation is clearly a question raised by his treatment of the Bible’s opening verse. Other hermeneutic traditions, such as the Midrash, certainly allow much time and space to be devoted to very small sections of the Bible, and I had just drafted

this part of the paper when a friend of mine told me that she had been to a retreat in Scotland where the whole week was devoted to the first seven verses of *Genesis*, so the weight of interpretation that Coleridge piles onto those ten words is certainly not unexampled. And there is no hint in Coleridge's notes that he himself thinks that he might be reading too much into the text; indeed later in the same note, he feels that 'this first Verse might with great propriety have been detached and presented as the First Chapter' - having said which he then begins his philosophical disquisitions afresh.

However, although we might think the main question is whether the Bible supports the philosophical insights that he ascribes to it, Coleridge himself thinks that more important is the state of mind we bring to our reading. Nature, we have seen, remains a blank to those who do not bring to it a pious or a most believing mind. The same is pretty much true of the Bible—those who bring nothing to it can take nothing from it; and Coleridge is conscious that those who only bring scholarly skills to their reading bring only a little more than nothing:

O the difference, the unspeakable difference, between an historico-critical *intellective* Study of the Old Testament, and the *praying* of the same! I mean the perusal of it with a personal moral and religious Interest...

(CN V 6241)

And scattered through his notes and letters during the last fifteen years of his life are references to parts of the Bible he has read in the spirit of prayer; thus in a letter of 31 August 1826, which describes much physical suffering, he adds at the end, 'I have derived great comfort from praying the 71st. Psalm...' (CL VI 607) Earlier in the same year he felt it a 'duty of Love and Charity' to study the Apocalypse because rumours had reached him of his friend Edward Irving's 'Aberrations' in his treatment of the same book. Coleridge found that the rumours proved true. 'But', he says, 'these studies were against my inclinations and cravings. I needed Prayer for my Comfort: I needed unction and tenderness of heart for my Prayers: and this I could not hope to find from the thorns and brambles of critical disquisition.'

As we have seen, Coleridge's philosophy rested on the premise of an originating act of will, absolute or infinite in God, relative or finite in man and which acting on the Hades or Chaos of his natural self elevates him into his true humanity. So he defined prayer, which he believed the focus of religion, as 'the relation of a Will to a Will, the Will in each instance being of a Person to a Person...' (CN V 5566) Or, as he put it in an earlier note, 'The Personal in me is the ground and condition of Religion: and the Personal alone is the Object.' (CN V 5530 f.65v)

So we have a concatenation of terms essential to Coleridge's belief that prayer is the focus of religion: the absolute will meets the finite in the relation of a Person to a person, each of which is known through and constituted by

the ideas (and Coleridge's use of the definite article in these notes is not fortuitous). These ideas are not there to be passively observed as we observe phenomena, but evolved through an act of will; this is prayer, and is of a broad definition in which, for instance, Coleridge is happy to include meditation. (CN V 5566) And the ideas evolved are a power, and when, and however that power is known, Coleridge is sure of his faith and secure in his understanding of the Bible. The following note is dated '27 Octob' 1827 Ramsgate', and he is perhaps reacting against his own 'historico-critical *intellective*' reading:

Why do I ever suffer myself even for a moment to forget, that respecting all of Christianity... my Conscience & my reason are more than satisfied, and even my Understanding is convinced. When the Ideas rise up within me, as independent Growths of my Spirit, and I then turn to the Epistles of Paul and John and to the Gospel of the latter, these seem a Looking-glass to me in which I recognize the same truths as the reflected Images of my Ideas... Why should I trouble myself with questions about the precise character, purpose and source of the supposed Matthew's, of Mark's, or even of the less difficult Gospel of Luke? (CN V 5624)

That simple phrase, 'When the Ideas rise up within me' bespeaks, I think, the essential nature of Coleridge's enterprise. It ends on Highgate Hill, perhaps with a faint echo of its beginnings on the hills of Somerset, invoking the ground and unity of all being, in prayer or meditation, and seeking the 'Faith that inly feels.' But Coleridge's last note, written in the month he died, has a particularity we miss in his poetic meditations of the 1790s:

O Grace of God! if only a believing Mind could indeed be possessed by, and possess, the full Idea of the Reality of the Absolute Will, the Good!...if in short, the Idea, the Mystery of absolute Light save in the beams of which all else would struggle in the Mystery of hopeless Darkness & Contradiction, were present to him—O with what deep devotion of Delight, Awe and Thanksgiving would he read every sentence of [Chapters 13-17] of St. John's Gospel!! (CN V 6918)

Those chapters record Jesus' reflections, in his consciousness of the approaching passion, on who and what he is. Jesus is preparing to leave life, and Coleridge is willing in himself what he believed Jesus's death symbolised: '[the] final entire detachment and deradication of the human Principium Individualitatis from the *Ground* (Hades, Nature) and its transplantation into the Substance (or divine ground) of the Logos.' This last note is not the kind of prayer that we heard in *Light in August*, not a dependance on a sapless and dehydrated incantation, but an almost ruthless invocation of the absolute, the prayer of a man who was also willing to write this simple, rough, un-Tennysonian couplet: 'O! might Life *cease*, and selfless *Mind* /Whose Being is *Act*, alone remain behind!' By the end, Coleridge had outgrown life, and as

Charles Lamb said, 'hungered for eternity.'