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Coleridge's Dramatic Imagination

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IN THE FEW YEARS before Coleridge began his poetic career there had been a steadily growing interest in the drama, accompanied by the setting up of theatres in major cities and the activities of touring companies who went round smaller provincial centres where they might stay for a night or two. Just how much of this impinged on Coleridge during his childhood is very hard to say. There is no record of his having visited theatres during his time at Christ's Hospital; when he went to Cambridge he wrote a poem for his friend Francis Wrangham addressed to a young actress named Ann Brunton and another to her sister Eliza, also an actress--neither of them to be confused with another actress, Elizabeth Brunton, later Mrs Yates. (Although the sisters, who normally played in Ipswich, may have visited Cambridge in October 1793,² they probably did not play there, since the Vice-Chancellor was able to control dramatic presentations, a right which he often exercised). Coleridge evidently knew something of the theatre, as may be seen both by the speed with which, as I mentioned above, he produced a piece on the fall of Robespierre immediately after hearing of his fate in 1794 and by the composing of his first drama, *Osorio*, with its ingenious stage-directions; but the first point at which we know firmly of his being in contact with persons directly concerned with drama was at his meeting with Mary Robinson—also known as 'Perdita' through her liaison with the Prince Regent.

As soon as one turns to Mary Robinson, however, one is aware of wider contemporary ambitions. Having established herself as an actress of considerable ability, she also wished to establish herself not only as a novelist but as a poet. Whether through personal contact or through knowing his work, she soon came to know Coleridge, who, after his return from Germany, exchanged poetry with her, each addressing the other in appreciative terms.

As soon as one turns to the theatre, however, one becomes aware of a shift in the culture of the time by which the literary arts had become more intertwined with one another. Thus novelists had become increasingly aware of the degree to which their story-telling could be enhanced by employing arts learned from the stage. Elizabeth Inchbald, one of the prime practitioners, is said by a modern critic to have owed her ability to convey her understanding of human feelings to her experience of prevailing conventions of expression in the theatre.³ One can find a good example of this aspect of her skill by looking at a snatch from a scene where the hero, Sandford, breaks the news to an assemblage of women including Miss Fenton that Miss Fenton's betrothed husband is to act as second to Dorriforth, who has gone to fight a duel with Lord Frederick over a supposed insult to Miss Milner:

¹ John Beer was recovering from an illness at the time, so this, the first draft of his paper, was read by Peter Larkin.

² It was in the autumn of 1794 that Coleridge met them: see CL I 110.

³ See Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford 1976) p. 79.

'Murder!' exclaimed all the ladies...
 Mrs Horton exclaimed, 'If Mr Dorriforth dies, he dies a martyr.'
 Miss Woodley cried with fervour, 'Heaven forbid!'
 Miss Fenton cried, 'Dear me!'
 While Miss Milner, without uttering one word, sunk speechless to the floor.⁴

With the device of this simple exchange Mrs Inchbald is able to establish both the open feelings of the first two ladies and the strange lack of passion in the third; while the voiceless gesture of the last, Miss Milner, leads one to suspect what has not till then been at all evident, that her feelings are more deeply involved than those of any of the others. This is indeed the case; and as the plot unfolds the reason for her deep reserve also becomes evident: as the ward of Dorriforth, placed under his protection by her father before he died, she has found herself falling deeply in love with him, yet debarred from ever giving any sign of her feelings by her awareness that as a Roman Catholic priest he has taken a vow of celibacy which she cannot possibly suggest his breaking.

Coleridge, meanwhile, had been learning through his own writing. In 1794, as mentioned earlier, he had produced his response to the fall of Robespierre with remarkable speed, having it ready for the printer virtually overnight. He then resolved in the spring of 1797 to write something himself for the London stage. He may have received some encouragement from Wordsworth, who apparently frequented the theatre during his London sojourn, and may have learned a little stagecraft as he began to embark on his own enterprise of *The Borderers*. But however that may be, what is most worth remarking is that at the end of the century, the possibilities involved in exploring the effects of synaesthetic practice had begun to penetrate the theatre. This is most evident, perhaps in the third act of *Osorio*, where the possibilities of bringing together varied effects—those of music, speech and art, most notably—are explored. Music is heard throughout the opening scene, but most especially the effect of a simple lyric—an effect which Coleridge must have learned about from Shakespeare. There is even a stage-direction in which the use of particular sound as a musical effect is exploited:

[Here a strain of music is heard from behind the scenes, from an instrument of glass or steel—the harmonica or Celestina stop, or Clagget's metallic organ.]

This rather unexpectedly precise specification as to the kind of sound that was needed suggests that Coleridge was experimenting with the possibility of producing a hypnotic state in the audience. We know that he was deeply interested in the phenomenon of double consciousness in the audience that seemed necessary to explain the plausibility of dramatic effects. The phrase 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic

⁴ Ibid, p. 84, citing page 67 of the novel.

faith' is his well-known formula; and there are other instances of his interest in psychological phenomena during the years round 1798, notably the stanza in the first version of *The Ancient Mariner*:

Listen, O listen, thou Wedding-guest!
 "Marinere! thou hast thy will:
 'For that, which comes out of thine eye, doth make
 "My body and soul to be still." (PW I i 398)

For a time Coleridge was deeply interested in the possibilities of animal magnetism of all kinds, as one may see from his account of the effect of moonlight on nightingales in his poem of that name, or on the owls in 'Christabel'. The interest does not appear to have survived his trip to Germany, since Blumenbach, whose lectures he attended, was sceptical about the phenomenon of hypnotism in the first place, and when he revoked his cynicism twenty years later it was rather late for Coleridge to profit poetically; but the point that is particularly relevant to our present purposes is that Coleridge's state of mind during this brief period was sufficiently excited to stimulate the production of unusually dramatic turns in his poetry also. Consider the opening of *The Ancient Mariner*: there is no narrative preamble, simply

It is an ancyent Marinere,
 And he stoppeth one of three:
 "By thy long grey beard and thy glittering eye
 "Now wherefore stoppest me? (PW I i 372)

In a few words the scene is set; and it continues to be presented with similar economy, so that we learn not only the nature of the incident that is being recounted but more about the protagonists:

The bridegroom's doors are open'd wide
 "And I am next of kin;
 "The Guests are met, the Feast is set,—
 "May'st hear the merry din. (Ibid.)

Dramatic devices continue to characterize this poem: sudden incidents such as the coming of the spectre ship, or the device, in Parts Five and Six, of the Two Voices, who take an overview of events and can even interpret them to one another. And this gift of dramatic presentation is also to be found in the companion poem, 'Christabel', which opens with an immediate attempt to convey mystery:

'Tis the middle of night by the Castle Clock
 And the owls have awakened the crowing Cock;

Tu-whit!-Tu-whooh!
And hark, again! the crowing Cock,
How drowsily it crew.

(PW I i 483)

Once again there is an interest in animal magnetism—not only that of the owls responding to moonlight but the influence exercised over Christabel by Geraldine—and once again Coleridge's own powers of dramatic vividness seem to be stimulated to their full extent by this kind of speculation.

After the extraordinary efflorescence of this period, Coleridge never reached such peaks again. This does not mean that there are no dramatic touches from now on: one need think only of the Dejection Ode; nor does it mean that he lost interest in drama: on the contrary, there are the two volumes of *Wallenstein*, which are followed by pieces such as *The Triumph of Loyalty*, *Diadeste*, and, of course, *Zapolya*. But nothing in these works reminds us of the innovative touches that we find in the poems of the great period.

But if one of the striking features of the last decades in Coleridge's life is that he no longer experiments in his writing of long dramas as such, I would draw attention to the respects in which the dramatic instinct still asserts itself, particularly when he is writing privately in his notebooks, letters and occasional writings. In his marginal comments on particular books, for instance, he was sometimes prone to respond very directly to the author he was reading. When reading Martin Luther's *Table Talk*, for instance, he comes across Luther's comment that King David was justified in telling his son Solomon to punish Shimei after his death, in spite of the fact that he had earlier vowed to pardon him, on the grounds that the vow was valid only in David's lifetime. Coleridge writes 'O Luther! Luther! Ask your own heart! if this is not *Jesuit* morality.'⁵

In a similar vein he addresses Southey on two different occasions as 'O dear and honoured Southey'; on the second occasion his next marginal note begins, 'I feel and think as you do, Southey! How should it be otherwise? In this only I differ...'⁶

Anyone who chooses to read through the notebooks and letters with this in mind will I think come across many examples of this tendency. Coleridge is often regarded as the great monologist of his time, and so he must often have seemed to those who heard him discoursing and were unable to get a word in edgeways; yet as soon as he sets pen to paper one is impressed by his extraordinary ability to project himself into the viewpoints of other people. This is equally true of his autobiographical writings, where he is often intent on viewing himself from the outside as well as the inside, and on being able to see the humorous results that may be produced. A good example is the anecdote he tells concerning his visit to Birmingham as part of his campaign to sell his periodical *The Watchman* and his falling asleep there as a result of smoking:

⁵ M III 768

⁶ M V 154.

... As the poison of tobacco acts but for a short time, I at length awoke from insensibility, and looked round on the party, my eyes dazzled by the candles which had been lighted in the interim. By way of relieving my embarrassment one of the gentlemen began the conversation, with "Have you seen a paper to-day, Mr. Coleridge?"

"Sir!" I replied, rubbing my eyes, "I am far from convinced, that a Christian is permitted to read either newspapers or any other works of merely political and temporary interest." This remark, so ludicrously inapposite to, or rather, incongruous with, the purpose, for which I was known to have visited Birmingham, and to assist me in which they were all then met, produced an involuntary and general burst of laughter; and seldom indeed have I passed so many delightful hours, as I enjoyed in that room from the moment of that laugh till an early hour the next morning.⁷

Coleridge was always attracted to such dramatic incidents, and was not above embroidering his recollections for the sake of dramatic effect on occasion, but I think he was always in two minds concerning the propriety of the dramatic—just as Jane Austen enjoyed play-reading with her relations and producing dramatic effects in her own novels, but was apparently on the side of Fanny Price when she disapproved of the theatricals in *Mansfield Park*.

During Coleridge's own lifetime moral attitudes to the drama were changing, in fact, so that actors themselves, who were sometimes regarded as disreputable according to the old Puritan modes of conduct were steadily gaining a place in respectable society. I do not know how often Coleridge was able to visit the theatres once he had settled in Highgate, but among his acquaintances there were the family of Charles Mathews, the comedian, with whom he spent many pleasant evenings. Charles's wife, Anne, left some interesting reminiscences of him, including her memory of the glass mirror that had been installed from ceiling to floor in their drawing-room, which was so large that Coleridge invariably on leaving the room tried to walk through it—so that someone always had to be posted ready to divert him from the attempt. It is she also who recalled the occasion when Coleridge had brought Charles Lamb to visit them in the hope that they would enjoy his conversation, only to find that Lamb proved to be in one of his most mischievous moods, so that Coleridge himself was driven to an unusual seriousness, if only as a kind of counterweight, recalling how he had been intended for the Church and had even on occasion occupied a Unitarian pulpit. At this point he turned to his friend to say 'Charles Lamb, I don't think you ever hear you preach?' to be met with the stammering reply, 'Coleridge, I ne-never heard you do anything else'.⁸

Another remark by Lamb is slightly less well known. One evening, it is reported, when Coleridge had consumed the whole time in talking of some

⁷ BL I 183

⁸ *Coleridge the Talker*, ed Armour and Howes, pp.300-01

“regenerated orthodoxy”, Leigh Hunt, who was one of the listeners, on leaving the house, expressed his surprise at the prodigality and intensity of his religious expressions. Lamb replied, “Ne-ne-never mind what Coleridge says; he’s full of fun.”⁹ He was, I think, expressing his sense that Coleridge was a whole drama in himself, so that you never quite knew what would come out next; but that there was also, running alongside this, a constant undercurrent of sermonizing, as if he felt that all drama ought to return to a single central theme, which was in its intensity essentially religious.

It was this quality in Coleridge, I think, which made him so attached to the poetry of George Herbert—a taste which he was surprised to find was not shared by Lamb, who preferred the quaintnesses of Quarles. He found in Herbert’s writing examples of what might be termed ‘devotional drama’. A letter of 21 February 1825 containing an early version of ‘Work without Hope’ characterized the verses there as ‘Strain in the manner of G. HERBERT...’¹⁰, though he cannot have been meant to suggest more than a ‘manner’, for it was part of his valuation of the earlier poet that he had never given way to the dejection suggested in this poem. In an intimate letter to Lady Beaumont of the following year he made it clear that what he drew from Herbert was an answer to a sense in himself of being torn between the ‘chaos & lawless productivity’ of his own ‘still-perishing yet imperishable nature’ and his constant ‘self-contempt’. The ‘chaos & lawless productivity’ was just that element which prompted his instinct to dramatization, his ‘self-contempt’ came out of the religious quality that distrusted that side of himself. But, as he explained to Lady Beaumont, Herbert offered him a means of reconciling those opposing sides to himself through a kind of devout dramatization. The poem he sent her with this letter was the one entitled ‘Dialogue’ in which the Soul protests its unworthiness, to be met by counter statements by the ‘Saviour’ about the work which he has undertaken – so overwhelming that eventually the soul can only break into the dialogue with a final

.....

Ah! no more: thou break’st my heart.

One finds this use of dialogue also in one of Herbert’s best-known poems, the one entitled ‘Love’:

LOVE bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.
 But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack’d any thing.

⁹ Barry Cornwall, memoir (cf Leigh Hunt’s own account in his memoir)

¹⁰ CL V 415

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
 Love said, you shall be he.
 I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
 I cannot look on thee.
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
 And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
 My deare, then I will serve.
 You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

In one of Coleridge's late notebooks, he wrote of his difficulties in praying:

Poor—embarrassed—sick—unpatronized, unread—/But (replied the soft consoling Friend) *innocent*. I felt only as one that recoils—& sinful dust and ashes that I am—groaning under self-reproached inproaches !—I innocent? Be thankful still! (repeated the same so sweet Voice) you are an *innocent* man—Again I draw back but as a little child from a *kind* Stranger, but without letting go of the Stranger's hand/— “You have the child-like Heart.—Ah but even in boyhood there was a cold hollow spot, an aching in that heart, when I said my prayers—that prevented my entire union with God—that I could not *give up*, or that would not give *me* up—as if a snake had wreathed around my heart, and at this one spot its Mouth touched at & inbreathed a weak incapability of willing it away—/—Never did I more sadly & sinkingly prostrate myself in sense of my worthlessness—and yet, after all, it was a *comfort* to me—/My innocency was a comfort—a something, for which that was the name, there were which I would *not* resign for Wealth—Strength—Health—Reputation—Glory—/—Hence I learnt—that a sinful Being may *have* an innocence/ I learnt, that the Skirt of Christ is nearer to a Man than his own Skin! For that *spot* in my heart even my (remaining &) unleavened Self—all else the Love of Christ in and thro' Christ's Love of me!¹¹

The existence of a passage such as this shows how much Coleridge had learned from George Herbert about the possibility of combining the widely-ranging dramatic and the single-minded devotional within himself and so attempting to resolve some of the deepest contradictions in his own nature.

¹¹ CN IV 5275