

Anthony John Harding

reads

Lectures 1818-1819 On the History of Philosophy

Edited by J. R. de J. Jackson

(Collected Coleridge Vol 8)

Philosophy is never more needed than in dangerous, conflict-ridden times, yet the very threat of conflict too often seems to justify setting philosophical discussion aside. ‘Action not words’; ‘those not with us are against us’; ‘we face a ruthless enemy’; ‘the survival of our civilisation is at stake’—the slogans are all too familiar. To speak for philosophy at such a time takes both insight and commitment. Reading these lectures, whatever other reactions one may have, one is left with a strong sense of the author’s passionate commitment to philosophy, his belief that philosophy matters, and matters most of all when people are in a state of anxiety and fear about the future.

It has to be recognised first that, as Owen Barfield points out, these are lectures on the *history* of philosophy, and not, strictly speaking, philosophical lectures. (Excerpts from Barfield’s draft introduction and notes are helpfully printed by Professor Jackson as ‘Appendix B.’) For this very reason, however, their chief purpose and preoccupation is to show the connection between philosophy and public life, between philosophy and culture, or what Coleridge preferred to call ‘cultivation,’ ‘the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our *humanity*’ (C&S 42-3). In the present context, the emphasis should certainly be on the word ‘harmonious.’ Lecture 11, for instance, argues that religion, divorced from philosophy, breeds superstition. Lecture 12, that materialist thought necessarily begins with pure hypothesis, and proceeds by a series of fictions. Lecture 5, that there is a telling homology between the supposed behaviour of atoms in eighteenth-century materialist science and the behaviour of individuals in the French *philosophes*’ concept of society. Lecture 7, that early Christianity, rather than fomenting wars and civil conflicts, exerted a calming, reconciling influence throughout the Roman Empire. I have paraphrased and condensed what Coleridge is recorded as saying, but I hope without distortion: interested readers should consult the text at I 240, I 306-07, II 466, II 523. These views are of course controversial, not to say deeply unfashionable; but surely no reflective person would say that they have no bearing on present-day concerns and anxieties.

Of equal interest, at least to students of the subject, are Coleridge’s often startling judgments on the historical development of philosophy: for instance, his conclusion that Socrates was not only guilty of vacillation, but failed ‘in his own logic’ (I 174, 176); that Pythagoras is chiefly significant as the first thinker to conceive of mind as an *act* (I 114); that all possible philosophical positions had already been developed in their essentials before the birth of Christ (I 326); and that the achievements of the Renaissance owed less to the revival of

classical literature than to the scholastic thinkers, since it was they who brought into the modern European languages the capacity of the classical languages for sustained argument, or what Coleridge elsewhere refers to as ‘sequency of the logic’ (I 467, 422; see also LL II 231).

It will be clear from what has already been said that we should not go to Coleridge for a neutral, balanced survey of ‘Western thought.’ Coleridge’s audience may have expected ‘Philosophy 101,’ a bland outline of the progress of philosophy, but as Professor Jackson dryly remarks, ‘as usual what he gave them was polemics rather than synthesis’ (I lxii). And he certainly did not present the story as one of continuous progress. Those who are inclined to criticise Coleridge for being tendentious at least have to concede that, unlike some historians, he did not conceal his agenda, his *parti pris*. The lectures aim at nothing less than persuading us that—contrary to the all-but-universal Enlightenment view—philosophy and religion should be allies, not enemies. For Coleridge, philosophy without religion is sterile, leading to solipsism and irresponsible cynicism; but religion without philosophy is credulous, prey to charlatanry and superstition. Coleridge was speaking to an English audience soon after the defeat of French forces at Waterloo, so it is hardly surprising that, thinking as he did about the French republic and the France of Bonaparte, he was keen to criticise the attempt to build a new society on the basis of a materialist philosophy. But the argument cuts the other way as well. ‘[I]f you would have a religion without a philosophy,’ Coleridge warns in Lecture 9, ‘then history will enable me to tell you what the result would be,’ referring particularly to a time when even intelligent men like Alcuin allowed their faith to override all desire to weigh and question. Given no practical language with which to govern moral feelings or connect faith with individual lives, mediaeval society resorted to the ‘worship of dead bones and relics’ (I 374, 375). Nor is it possible to *combine* religion with philosophy, as if religion could simply take over all philosophy’s functions. This the scholastics tried to do, and merely encouraged further forms of superstition.

Approaching the history of philosophy with such a conviction of the need for a balance of human powers and faculties necessarily leads Coleridge to interpret the development of philosophy differently from his chief source, Tennemann’s *Geschichte der Philosophie*. As Professor Jackson points out in his lucid and economical introduction, if one is content with the present state of philosophy, the history of philosophy becomes much less urgent, a merely ‘reassuring’ subject of study, whereas for those who feel that philosophy is in crisis, its history may hold the key to a salutary redirection of its energies (xliii). From the perspective Coleridge adopts, classical philosophy had the role of preparing for the advent of a new religious dispensation. In the negative sense, it ‘prepared for’ Christianity simply by reaching an impasse. After the era of Plato and the Academy, the Eleatics embraced an idealism that completely rejected the evidence of the senses: to them, ideas generated within the mind were everything. Democritus and other atomic materialists, on the other hand,

refused to believe in anything not grounded in observation of outward objects. In the meantime, the intuition of Pythagoras that the mind must be conceived as an *act* was left essentially undeveloped until Kant—a point that is not to be found in Tennemann. Something more than the Greek schools took cognisance of what was needed to bring the evidence of the senses and the inner powers of the mind together. For Coleridge, this ‘something more’ was of course revelation. In a more positive sense, however, classical philosophy had also shown—through Plato’s ability to convey a ‘thirst for something not attained’—that even the most carefully-wrought philosophical investigations of virtue, honour, justice, and such values could not completely answer human need. This made him ‘the prophet and the preparer for the new world to which his writings and still more his spirit had led’ (I 183). Coleridge even claims that Plato had some knowledge, derived from the ‘barbarous nations’ (meaning the Hebrew-speaking peoples), of the doctrine that the Creator of this world must be distinct from his works, an idea unknown to the rest of the ancient world (I 127). Contrary to the received view of most people of his time, Coleridge argues that though it did oppose certain ‘corrupt’ philosophical schools, early Christianity was not intolerant of genuine philosophy.

With many thoughtful people now concluding that post-structuralism was always going to lead, sooner or later, to an impasse, and other philosophical traditions such as logical positivism, pragmatism, and dialectical materialism also facing serious obstacles to their advancement, there may be a renewed willingness to allow broader ethical and even religious issues, once considered philosophically unproductive, back into philosophical debate. In such a climate, Coleridge’s lectures should hold renewed interest for the present generation of philosophers. This edition will serve their needs well, and for Coleridgeans it offers a timely opportunity to rediscover the richness and urgency of the lectures.

For the text of the lectures, we have to rely on a number of different sources, the most important of which is the ‘Frere Manuscript.’ J. H. Frere employed a shorthand writer to record Coleridge’s words as faithfully as possible (though he left no record of Lectures 1 and 14). A transcript in longhand was then made by three copyists. This transcript, which came into the possession of J. H. Green and after his death was passed on to Derwent Coleridge and then to his son, E. H. Coleridge, was rediscovered by Kathleen Coburn in the 1930s¹ It is now at Victoria College Library in Toronto (VCL

¹ Coburn says in her ‘Introduction’ that the Frere manuscript passed to Derwent and then to E. H. Coleridge; but by the 1930s its whereabouts were unknown. The Reverend G. H. B. Coleridge suggested to her that it may have been lost in the ‘ill-fated trunk that in 1895 left London and never reached Torquay’. Then she continues—with considerable tact, I think—‘However, lurking at the back of a cupboard in his library, it eventually came to light.’ KC’s inimitable sense of humour comes across in that sly phrase as if the MS were an escaped gerbil or pet mouse. (S. T. Coleridge, *The Philosophical Lectures*, ed. Kathleen Coburn [London: Pilot Press, 1949], 14–15). So, we know that the Frere manuscript was found in the home of G. H. B. Coleridge—in a cupboard—but not exactly *when* it was found. The implication is however that it was not found until the late 1930s or even the 1940s, since she says, ‘In the 1930’s the first attempts to find it were unsuccessful’ (14).

MS BT 23). The shorthand writer clearly had difficulty with unfamiliar names and terms, and some longer passages (usually where Coleridge is reading from a book or manuscript) are simply omitted, a blank being left in the transcript, but in many cases the deficiencies in the transcript can be made good by referring to Notebook 25. There is also relevant material in Notebook 18 and in other manuscripts in the British Library (particularly MS Egerton 2801). Finally, there are contemporary newspaper accounts of the lectures, which summarize their contents and occasionally comment on the lecturer's style, organisation, and clarity of delivery.

For all the lectures except the first and last, Professor Jackson presents a 'diplomatic' text based on the Frere transcript, differing in many details from the text printed by Kathleen Coburn in 1949, but nearly always easily readable and like most *Collected Coleridge* volumes generously annotated. For those who want to consult an exact transcript of the record produced by Frere's copyists, with original punctuation and without omissions supplied from other sources, the whole of MS BT 23 is printed as 'Appendix A.' Coleridge's own preparatory notes from Notebook 25 (which he appears to have taken into the lecture hall with him), Notebook 18, and the Egerton and other British Library manuscripts, are printed after the version from the Frere manuscript (except, as noted, for Lectures 1 and 14, where the British Library manuscripts provide the copy-text). These are followed by the available newspaper reports. Where a reading in the Frere manuscript is clear, but puzzling, Jackson's textual notes usually propose an alternative. For instance, when Coleridge is reported as having said of St Teresa that she exemplifies 'the whole class of those who from real piety opposed the revolution,' Jackson suggests that the Frere MS 'revolution' may have been a mishearing of 'Reformation' (II 463).

The 'Editor's Introduction'—a long one at 110 pages—is a masterpiece of careful explanation and summary. One would not wish it shorter: it provides an informative guide through the fourteen lectures, as well as sections dealing with the circumstances surrounding the scheduling of the series, the limitations of scholarly sources available to Coleridge, logistical problems such as the lecture hall being in a rather disreputable neighbourhood, and so on. An experienced and tactful Coleridge editor, Jackson is clearly anxious that readers should give Coleridge a fair hearing, and can sometimes seem excessively anxious to present Coleridge the lecturer in a favourable light. When in Lecture 3 Coleridge departs from his announced topic (Socrates, the Sophists, and Socrates' disciples) to reopen the discussion of Pythagoras, already dealt with in Lecture 2—and then immediately digresses *again*, to talk about Xenophanes, Homer, and Hesiod—Jackson remarks that 'Coleridge has the lecturer's excuse of wishing to keep the connecting threads of his series fresh in his listeners' minds' and to '[lay] the groundwork' for later remarks about the place of the gods in Greek thought (lxxxvi). In Lecture 10, dealing with Scholasticism and the revival of classical learning, Coleridge introduces a number of biographical sketches of 'colourful characters,' a digression which,

as Jackson admits, rather obscures the direction of his argument, but he also suggests that ‘Coleridge’s audience may well have found it an agreeable relief to listen to’ (cxxi).

Even those readers who prefer to be more critical of Coleridge, however, are bound to acknowledge their indebtedness to Professor Jackson for his work; and indeed, all students of Coleridge and of the nineteenth century should be thankful that such a full record of these lectures (the most complete in existence for any of Coleridge’s public lectures) has survived, and that it has now been so meticulously re-edited.

Heidi Thomson

reads

Thomas Gray’s Journal of his Visit to the Lake District in October 1769

Edited by William Roberts

(Liverpool University Press, 2001)

Although the popularity of the Lake District amongst tourists and fell walkers dates back well into the eighteenth century, we tend to credit the high Romantics with discovering the place. William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were all such keen and hardy walkers, who considered both the activity and the location crucially beneficial to their physical and mental well being.² The physical prowess and exuberance associated with the Romantic exploration of the Lake District is most strikingly exemplified in Coleridge’s obsession with climbing and scaling peaks. His 1802 letter to Sara Hutchinson about his vertiginous descent from Scafell delights in the escape from the nightmarish possibility of being ‘cragfast’ and revels in the mental state associated with physical danger in stormy conditions.³ These detailed accounts of walks and climbs by Coleridge and the Wordsworths, so articulate about the thrill of the physical experience itself, so eloquent about the mental and spiritual effect of the landscape on the mind and memory, may have contributed to a rather unfair neglect of portrayals of the Lake District by their predecessors, who are sometimes considered as mere recorders of the picturesque, overly dependent on the framing, beautifying

² For more information on Romantic walking, see, for instance, Jeffrey C. Robinson’s excellent *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1989); Anne D. Wallace’s *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Robin Jarvis’ *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (London: MacMillan, 1997).

³ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs. 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-1971) ii: 842. For biographical accounts of the Scafell descent see Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Flamingo, 1999) 330-31, and John Worthen, *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001) 237-39.

Claude glass, and intent on capturing a picture rather than an experience.

Thomas Gray (who visited the Lake District when Wordsworth's mother was about three months pregnant with little William) has never compared well with the more robust Lake District poets. While they are perceived to be staunch and energetic, his reputation for effeminacy and finicky peevishness persists. While their poems proclaim with amazing candour feelings about relationships, his verse depicts a 'solitary fly' and expresses solitary anguish. They are active and exciting, he is passive and boring; they are outside braving the elements, he is tending pot plants in his college rooms. Yet Gray's journal of his two week trip to the Lake District in October 1769 was a first step away from picturesque descriptions of sights towards a more experience-based travel narrative. William Mason, who first published the account in 1775, warns the reader that

if he expects to find elaborate and nicely-turned periods in this narration, he will be greatly disappointed. When Mr. Gray described places, he aimed only to be exact, clear, and intelligible; to convey peculiar, not general ideas, and to paint by the eye, not the fancy. There have been many accounts of the Westmoreland and Cumberland lakes, both before and since this was written, and all of them better calculated to please readers, who are fond of what they call *fine writing*: yet those who can content themselves with an elegant simplicity of narrative, will, I flatter myself, find this to their taste; they will perceive it was written with a view, rather to inform than surprise; and, if they make it their companion when they take the same tour, it will enhance their opinion of its intrinsic excellence; in this way I tried it myself before I resolved to print it.⁴

More than two hundred years later William Roberts has made the journal his companion, and turned the experience into the first modern edition of Gray's journal.

William Roberts' edition of *Thomas Gray's Journal of his Visit to the Lake District in October 1769* highlights the more adventurous side of Gray's character; one of its explicit aims is indeed to correct the still prevalent stereotype of 'nervousness and old-maidishness' (36). To be sure, Gray's fortnight in the Lake District did not involve much winter mud-bashing or adrenalin-fuelled close encounters with rock faces. For one thing, unlike most other visitors past and present to the Lake District, he had the weather on his side for almost the whole two weeks, which no doubt contributed to his willingness to venture forth on foot: 'the soil is so thin & light, that no day has pass'd, in wh[ic]h I could not walk out with ease, & you know, I am no lover of dirt' (81), he confided to his friend Dr. Wharton. And, with a Claude glass in his pocket, walk he did, and far more than the average package tour traveller

⁴ *The Works of Thomas Gray, Esq.; Collated from the various editions. With Memoirs of his Life and Writings, by William Mason, M. A.* (London, 1827) 285-86.

does today—up to twelve or thirteen miles in a day as he did near Derwentwater and Castlerigg (65).

Roberts' book consists of an introduction to the life and personality of Thomas Gray and a conclusion on the discovery of the Lake District, with the bulk in the middle a transcription of Gray's account of his fifteen days in the Lake District, each day followed by Roberts' commentary in which he aims 'not merely to footnote the text with explanations, but more widely to engage with issues about how we appreciate and conserve wild scenery, challenged by the thinking and experience of a former age' (7). The text itself consists of a combination of two sources, neither of which provides a complete account of Gray's trip. The first one is the two Murray notebooks, which start in the middle of the entry on 5 October; the second one are the four letters destined for Thomas Wharton who was to have been Gray's travelling companions if an asthma attack had not compelled him to withdraw. Roberts' editorial choice has been to present a combined text, consisting initially of the letters up to where the Murray notebooks begin, and after that giving preference to the notebooks. He justifies his choice in favour of a more journal based edition:

Toynbee and Whibley also used a combined text but they gave the preference to the text in the letters to a further point (in the middle of the entry of 9th October) and only used the Murray notebooks for the transcribed letter, which began at that point. Their aim was to give the most authentic text for the letters. My aim is to give the most authentic text for the journal and there is no doubt that the Murray notebooks are nearer to Gray's original intentions. (9)

Even when relying on the text of the letters, Roberts admits to having 'set the text out as a journal, because this is how it originally was, rather than as letters, omitting non-journal material' (9). The idea of supposed original intention underlying Roberts' editorial choice is rather shaky. After all, Gray's 'original intentions', if we can ever know those, included a series of letters to Wharton as well.

Personally I would have preferred a more scholarly edition, with better notes and more precise numbering system, a more detailed index, and a variorum apparatus for the Toynbee and Whibley edition of the *Correspondence* and Mason's 1775 text, which would not have added that much to the size of the volume.⁵ Considering how verbose Roberts gets on occasion, I see no reason why he 'deliberately tried to avoid the full weight of academic textual apparatus' (148). Mason's version in his 1775 *Works* which included *Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, is not all that different from Roberts', bar the initial references to the wind directions and the telling omission of a few personal details such as Gray's fall on day three. The letters in the Toynbee and

⁵ Minor irritations include no entry for Mason in the index; a reference to p. 69 for Coleridge where there is no mention of him; note 19 is supposed to refer to Latin quotations on p. 19, but I could not see any; Ann Radcliffe's account of her ascent of Skiddaw is included in the text (73-75), but there is no source indication.

Whibley edition of Gray's *Correspondence* include of course the solicitous asides to Wharton, some of which, such as the recipe for perch, Roberts includes in his edition anyway. The 'tailpieces', little snippets from a range of sources, could easily have been omitted in favour of more substantial notes.

Roberts' main object is to make the text of Gray's tour more widely available. This no-frills paperback is the kind of book you could easily stuff in your backpack, to read Gray's entry and Roberts' comparative comment against the location it describes. The main attraction of this edition is the passionate case for a less timorous Gray, substantiated by Roberts' own active engagement with the location. William Roberts is no armchair traveller, and neither is he what I would call a 'biography traveller' whose journeys are restricted to meticulously retracing the footsteps of his biographical subject without necessarily sharing or even taking much interest in the activities of the subject. Judging from references to past experiences, including climbing in the Himalayas, Roberts is obviously a keen and experienced hiker who knows the area inside out, someone far more of Coleridge's than Gray's calibre in actual physical stamina, but also remarkably sympathetic to Gray whom he thinks of, rather generously, as 'a thoroughly likeable and pleasant man, with whom it would have been a pleasure to walk through the Lake District' (11). Roberts' intimate knowledge of the terrain makes him eminently qualified to speculate on the potential vulnerability of the eighteenth-century walker. Based on a list of 'expenses' for a projected 1767 trip (31), Roberts conjectures what Gray might have been wearing on his walks: woollen breeches, stockings, waistcoat, a full length great coat, leather shoes 'fastened with a buckle, but not affording much protection to the ankles' (37) and fustian gaiters. However well equipped, Gray would have felt a lot more exposed to the elements than today's hikers with Gore-tex jackets and cell phones. A close affinity for the location is apparent in Roberts' sensitivity to the changing delineations of a landscape we like to think of as permanent: 'my pursuit of Gray soon revealed that the countryside which he was looking at was quite different from the one I was looking at, even though the viewpoint might be the same. So many things have altered. Trees have been planted or have grown taller or have been felled, roads have altered their routes, lakes have been flooded or changed their water-levels, streams have altered their courses, walls have been built, the very air is less clear' (35). And occasionally a nuclear power station looms in the background. Most striking of course is the impact of heavy traffic on Roberts' experience, compared with Gray's era of turnpikes when road design aimed to connect villages rather than by-pass them: 'there are few experiences on any road worse than descending Stainmoor at a speed forced on one by a huge and heavy lorry close on one's tail, with blinding lights flashing into one's eyes, in the dark or in high wind or heavy rain' (28).

The conclusion, 'The Discovery of the Lake District,' is a concise, general, but useful account of Gray's context, focusing primarily on Gray's immediate predecessors and lesser known contemporaries (John Dalton, John Brown,

Arthur Young, William Hutchinson, and others).⁶ I wish that this section had been the Introduction, because the weakest section of the book is the opening section on 'The Life and Personality of Thomas Gray'. Roberts goes over much trodden ground, mostly irrelevant for a reading of the *Journal*, and squeezes Gray's 'character' into small soundbite sections ('His Isolation,' 'His Need to Travel') which are not sufficiently developed to make a real point. And sometimes they could have made a real contribution to our understanding of Gray's travels: the warm friendship with Dr Wharton, for instance, so palpable throughout the *Correspondence*, which led Gray to choose Wharton as his travelling companion, could have been explored a bit more.

The burning issue of much recent work on Gray, his sexuality, also turns up here, probably entirely unnecessarily since his Lake District account never touches upon personal relationships of any kind.⁷ I suspect that Roberts' efforts to deny Gray's homosexuality have something to do with his desire to exonerate Gray of 'old-maid-ism' (20). For Roberts, homosexuality stills seems to belong in the realm of Freudian pathology:

Gray's passionate friendships with West and Bonstetten, common enough in a sexually divided society, are homosocial certainly but not physically homosexual in any sense that we now recognize. Not only does it not help to think of Gray as struggling with unrealized or unpermitted homosexuality, it can lead us astray. If there is an explanation available to us now, it may be that we should think of him as imprisoned by the psychological aftermath of a traumatic childhood. (22)

What would any of us really know about what Gray 'physically' got up to in his intimate relationships with Walpole, West, or Bonstetten? Roberts' zeal in asserting Gray's manliness is at times excessive, as when he turns Gray's interest in cooking into an issue as well: 'Some writers on Gray paint a picture of him effeminately breakfasting on apricot marmalade. It becomes a different picture when you realize that he probably made his own marmalade and cooked many of his own meals: it may or may not be manly to be interested in cookery but it does show strong individuality' (84).

Much care went into selecting the appropriate illustrations, not to mention obtaining permission for reproductions from so many various sources (148). The engravings by Joseph Farington are supplemented by others, such as Turner's beautiful picture of the treacherous Lancaster Sands (108) and James Ward's impressive rendering of Gordale Scar (120). The map is from Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes* (1780). Roberts' excellent choices deserved better at

⁶ In his introduction to *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes. The Fifth Edition (1835)* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), Ernest de Sélincourt refers to the 'immense output of books destined to guide the path of the willing pilgrim' (xi), and provides a detailed list in the footnotes of pp. xi-xii.

⁷ Recent books which address this issue include Robert F. Gleckner's *Gray Agonistes: Thomas Gray and Masculine Friendship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997) and Robert L. Mack, *Thomas Gray: A Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). For the most exhaustive bibliography of Gray scholarship, see <<http://www.thomasgray.org/index.shtml>>.

the hands of Liverpool University Press. The map is barely readable; the picture quality poor. Visual presentation does matter in travel accounts.⁸ For those of us with internet access there is always the option of going online to get an idea of what a place might look like. Even Dalemian, for instance, has its own website with some good photographs of the house and garden (including flash news about what is in bloom!).

The sense of nostalgia which pervades Roberts' project is both endearing and irritating. He confesses in the Preface to 'an underlying anxiety, in my part of the book, that we have lost the awe and the magic that Gray found, and a belief (that is part hope) that it is still there to be retrieved, if you know where to look' (7). In his dialogue with Gray, Roberts usually dwells, often finely so, on the then/ now contrast: Gray's famous reference to Keswick as the Vale of Elysium 'in all its verdure, the sun then playing on the bosom of the lake, & lighting up all the mountains with its lustre' (39) becomes Roberts' 'Now the Vale of Elysium has a supermarket and housing estates and sodium street lights and untold tourist amenities' (41). At times Roberts' nostalgia is expressed in rather pompous disapproval of other tourists' presence and presumed ignorance of Gray. A typical example is the visit to Malham Cove:

I have never, ever, seen so many people in open countryside—a continuous stream of people walking up from the village to the Cove: a group of foreign school-children chattering noisily, a band of professional ramblers in the latest outdoor equipment, a family discussing the characterization in 'Lord of the Rings', a group of scruffy climbers with clusters of slings, nuts, ropes, various stout mothers trying to stop toddlers disappearing down the grikes, the cracks in the limestone pavement. I doubt whether any natural phenomenon can withstand that kind of attack and still make any kind of aesthetic impact. No-one, I may add, in either inn in the village, not even at the Lister Arms, where Gray probably dined, had heard of Thomas Gray or of the visiting painters (124).

Roberts here is not so very different from that other champion of the Lake District who invoked Gray in one of his letters to the *Morning Post* on the Kendal and Windermere Railway in the 1840s:

'Were the Poet [Gray] now living, how would he have lamented the probable intrusion of a railway with its scarifications, its intersections, its noisy machinery, its smoke, and its swarms of pleasure-hunters, most of them thinking that they do not fly fast enough through the country which they have come to see. Even a broad highway may in

⁸ Consider, for instance, Carol Kyros Walker's splendid photographic accounts *Walking North With Keats* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992) and *Breaking Away: Coleridge in Scotland* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002). Another example is Penelope Hughes-Hallett's lavishly illustrated *Home at Grasmere: The Wordsworths and the Lakes* (London: Collins and Brown, 1993). For a clear map of Gray's tour, see Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, eds. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*. With Corrections and Additions by H. W. Starr. 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) iii:1102-1103.

some places greatly impair the characteristic beauty of the country, as will be readily acknowledged by those who remember what the Lake of Grasmere was before the new road that runs along its eastern margin had been constructed.⁹

Those were the days.

David Vallins

reads

Romantic Consciousness: Blake to Mary Shelley

and

Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath

by John Beer

(both books, Palgrave 2003)

John Beer's *Romantic Consciousness and Post-Romantic Consciousness* are further important contributions to a genre of criticism which he has perhaps done more than any other recent critic to develop—namely the study of Romanticism as a distinctive form of intellectual and creative consciousness rather than as primarily the phase of literary history within which that form of consciousness most vigorously flourished, and hence also of the diverse expressions of Romanticism in other periods than the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Many recent critics, of course, have sought to define Romanticism primarily as a reaction against the historical conditions of the latter period, whose distinctiveness thus lies in the unusual vigour or persistence with which it seeks to separate consciousness from its determining conditions. Such a view, however, should not preclude us from recognizing the prevalence of 'Romantic' ideas, attitudes and emotions in other periods and environments than those of Europe around 1800, nor the extent to which Romantic authors and their successors express perceptions, emotions, and intellectual dilemmas which are also notably expressed by authors of earlier periods. Beer, indeed, helps us to understand Romanticism not only as the historically-determined culmination of a recurrent tendency in creative consciousness, but also as a continually-emerging and exploratory response to the changing experience of successive periods, in which the need for a belief in the human as fundamentally uncircumscribed by the material, and the inherently meditative quest to comprehend the relation of consciousness to an origin regarded as similarly elusive, repeatedly emerge in response to diverse cultural and material circumstances acting to negate or restrict these forms of

⁹ Appendix II to *William Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes*, 162-163.

consciousness or belief. One of the most striking examples of this reaction explored by Beer, indeed, is that of the mid-nineteenth-century spiritualism which sought to overcome those doubts as to the credibility of an afterlife which had arisen from the advances of scientific understanding—advances which, in the words of one of the leading nineteenth-century advocates of spiritualist research, F.W.H. Myers—were leading to ‘an agnosticism growing yearly more hopeless’ (*Post-Romantic Consciousness*, p. 53). As Beer shows, interest in ‘the possibility of freedom from the intellectual prison-house of mechanized thinking’ which spiritualist investigations seemed to offer (*ibid.*, p. 46) was by no means limited to the gullible or eccentric: the philosophers William James and Henry Sidgwick were among those who took great interest in the research conducted by, among others, the classicist Myers (formerly a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge), and the psychologist Edmund Gurney, whose membership of the Cambridge Apostles, Beer suggests, particularly exposed him to the influence of Coleridgean thought—a point I will return to later (*ibid.*, pp. 46-9). Sidgwick’s response to Myers’s suggestion that ‘observable phenomena’ such as ghosts or spirits might provide ‘some valid knowledge... as to a World Unseen’ (*ibid.*, p. 48), indeed, vividly illustrates not only the seriousness with which many Victorian intellectuals regarded such investigations, but also a distinctive confidence in the power of empirical research to resolve metaphysical questions. Twenty years later, William James—a future President of the Society for Psychical Research co-founded by Myers—wrote that though he could not explain the source of a certain medium’s apparent knowledge of the afterlife, ‘from admitting the fact of such knowledge I can see no escape’, and that regarding the topic of ghosts, ‘I cannot carry with me the irreversibly negative bias of the “rigorously scientific” mind, with its presumption as to what the true order of nature ought to be’ (*ibid.*, p. 82). Such widespread academic interest in merging the empirical with the spiritual, Beer suggests, is an example of what happens when science appears to threaten the possibility of faith in the transcendence or eternity of spirit, and thus illustrates a similar—though in a sense more vigorous and contested—challenge to the ‘prison-house’ of a conventionalized materialism to that expressed by Wordsworth’s earlier ‘intimations’ of immortality (*ibid.*, p. 47).

Both the Victorian search for scientific ‘evidence’ of the transcendence and eternity of spirit, and earlier, Romantic or Neoplatonic, speculations on and evocations of such an idea, however, are shown by Beer to originate in a fundamental dilemma of metaphysical inquiry which also underlies many of Coleridge’s reflections—namely, the impossibility of objectifying or defining the origin of consciousness, whether this be conceived in terms of God or in terms of the individual ‘self’. The act of thinking or perceiving, that is, cannot itself be simultaneously conceived or reflected on, and hence (Coleridge argued) any judgement or belief is ultimately dependent on our faith in the indemonstrable continuity or unity of the individual consciousness—a faith

which is closely analogous to belief in God. This analogy between the incomprehensibility of the self and that of God, however, is closely connected in Coleridge with the widespread Neoplatonic idea—also hinted at, as Beer points out, in several of the Epistles of St. Paul—of ‘the existence of an element of the divine in human beings’ (*Romantic Consciousness*, p. 8), or at least of a greater similarity or connection than merely that of their indefinability. As Beer summarizes the issue: ‘Orthodox and heterodox alike face the same problem: that of a God who is hidden, and therefore as elusive as some of the elements in their own unconscious’ (*ibid.*, p. 8). The connection made by several thinkers in this period between the obscurity of the act of thinking or perceiving, and that of the ‘unconscious’, Beer suggests, was partly due to the widespread contemporary interest in the phenomena of hypnotism or ‘animal magnetism’, since ‘If... one could pass so fully between states of consciousness—to the extent that while in one state one had no awareness of what one did or thought in the other, a basic area of possible dissociation in the psyche was suggested, which might throw a flood of light on related questions’ (*ibid.*, p. 22). Animal magnetism thus helped to undermine confidence in the Cartesian cogito, highlighting the possibility of a division between ‘reasoning’ and ‘Being’ in which the obscurer phenomena of intuition and the subconscious increasingly became the central focus of analogies between the human and the divine (*ibid.*, pp. 3-4). For De Quincey, Beer suggests, opium dreams similarly provided a ‘touchstone... by which to question the conventional orderings’ of time and space, albeit only ambiguously ‘marking access to a truer reality than that apprehended by normal sense-experience’ (*ibid.*, 104). For Keats, on the other hand, ‘The awareness... of the restricted scope’ of intuitive consciousness ‘when tied to its human condition’ is associated with a ‘longing for a different sort of draught... an elixir which would actually liberate his primary self’ into an enduring apprehension of transcendent realities (*ibid.*, 64).

Though the meaning of the term ‘unconscious’ in Schelling and Coleridge is radically different from its post-Freudian meaning, therefore, the dualism of rational and intuitive in the former context, Beer argues, has important connections with the dualism of conscious and unconscious which increasingly replaces it in the preoccupations of later 19th- and 20th-century thinkers (*Post-Romantic Consciousness*, p. x). As Beer summarizes this relation:

an important legacy of Romantic work has been to indicate a difference between states of conscious ratiocination (of a kind that might be replicated by a computer) and states of what I have found it convenient to term Being (which cannot). These are commonly revealed in subconscious activity; they may even be on occasion unavailable to verbal consciousnesses of any kind, calling for other means if they are to find representation.

(*ibid.*, p. 8)

Hence the central and connecting focus of Beer's two volumes is ultimately the unrepresentableness, or inexplicableness, of certain ideas or intuitions, and primarily of the activity of thinking or perceiving (on the one hand), and (on the other hand) of God—"the sole self-comprehending Being", in Coleridge's words, or the implicit basis and guarantor of all knowledge. His use of the term 'Being' to refer to the unrepresentable pole of the analogous dualisms described above is connected by Beer with that of the recent thinker Antonio Damasio, whose critique of Descartes resumes this Romantic questioning of the power of intellect or understanding. An important paradox emerges, however, in Beer's discussion of Coleridge's description of 'Primary Imagination' as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'—namely that though the unconscious process which gives rise to perception and precedes ratiocination may be divine in its origin, as well as analogous to the divine in its unrepresentableness, the critical investigation and dialectical reflection which rises above everyday perception is persistently valorized by Coleridge over that primary intuition or perception which he describes as 'repeating' divine creation (*Romantic Consciousness*, pp. 22-3). In other words, Coleridge in fact persistently celebrates that ratiocination which seeks to push back the boundaries of the comprehensible, and the apparent contradiction between celebrating the unconscious or intuitive, and seeking the utmost rational comprehension, is only resolved by the Schellingian concept of an infinite upward progression, in which both 'unconscious' and 'conscious' production are expressions of a single creative force or process.

A similar point is made in Beer's response to Damasio's apparent identification of emotion, rather than reason, with the idea of Being. 'Being', Beer comments, 'should be thought of as distinguishable from both the levels of consciousness concerned, levels which are constantly fusing and intermingling with Being, yet which differ fundamentally in their own natures, the one being best described as primarily biochemical, the other as bioelectrical' (*ibid.*, 4). This striking distinction—and at the same time connection—of the intuitive and rational sides of the mind from (and to) the larger idea of 'Being' highlights the persistent elusiveness of the latter, or its capacity to resist the diverse forms of definition which successive generations have sought to impose on it, yet at the same time to inhabit or to animate the conscious and the personal. A similar sense of the elusive presence of transcendent Being both within the individual and as the origin or substratum of the perceptual world, Beer argues, is fundamental to Blake's conception of 'Poetic Genius', according to which

all human beings are, at least potentially, informed by the universal principle of Humanity, the Eternal Man. The task of the artist is to awake this underlying "Being" from his sleep. The essence of his powers is to be found not in the rational mind, measuring the infinite distances of the universe until its habit of categorization brings him to despair, but in his own genius, which, being in itself fountainous,

responds to fountainous energies wherever they reveal themselves, whether in the fires of the sun or in the activities of other living beings. (*ibid.*, pp. 18-19)

Similarly, Wordsworth repeatedly associates ‘imagination’ with ‘the sense of God, or whatsoe’er is dim/ Or vast in its own being’ (*ibid.*, pp. 40-1), perhaps placing still greater emphasis than Coleridge on the unconscious or intuitive as distinct from that falling-back into sublime contemplation of the infinite which, in the latter’s writings, so often follows or results from the pursuit of ratiocination to its limits, in a pattern analogous to the Kantian aesthetic tourist’s inability to comprehend the size of the (physical) mountain before him. Wordsworth’s frequent difficulty in separating ‘the sense of Wordsworth’ from ‘the sense of the divine’, indeed, highlights the potential for too concrete or personalized an analogy between ‘the essence of the divine’ and ‘the equally incomprehensible essence in every creature’ (*ibid.*, p. 43)—a danger which, it might be argued, Coleridge’s focus on the limits of ratiocination is more effective in avoiding. On the other hand, Coleridge’s notebook-comment that ‘Man exists... in how much only to God—how much lies *below* his own Consciousness’ (*ibid.*, p. 43), highlights the extent to which the metaphysical issues regarding consciousness discussed above can seem to intermingle with issues of individual psychology, even if not with Freudian visions of an unconscious governed by the ‘repressed’ (*Post-Romantic Consciousness*, p.85).

A central issue explored in the latter part of *Post-Romantic Consciousness*, however, is whether the ‘Being’ which underlies consciousness should be regarded as a fixed essence either of the individual or of humanity in general, or whether—on the other hand—it should be regarded as something made anew in each act, thought, or choice of the individual. D.H. Lawrence’s conception of ‘blood-consciousness’ emerges as a high-water mark of the former position, clearly Romantic in its assertion of ‘powers existing beyond the reach of the limited consciousness fostered by the technological civilisation which he had come to loathe’, yet contrasting with Coleridge in the fixity of its vision of an instinctual essence as against a truth both discovered and fulfilled in the act of contemplation and inquiry (*ibid.*, 134-7, 140). Heidegger’s dictum that ‘Asking questions is the piety of thought’, as well as his vigorous critique of Freudianism’s confusion of Being with personality, thus seems closer to Coleridge’s position, despite the problematic eccentricity of his quest for ‘an early realization of Being at a national level’ (*ibid.*, 90, 87, 93). Furthest from the Freudian and Lawrentian models, among the twentieth-century thinkers examined by Beer, is Sartre, who ‘took issue constantly with the western intellectual tendency to predicate its philosophy on the assumption that human consciousness looked back to an essence, or essences, preceding all existence; his own, opposite, assumption being... that existence preceded essence’ (*ibid.*, 94). Sartre’s rejection of the form of ‘fixed’ being or essence proposed by Freud, Lawrence, or (to some extent) even Heidegger, however, paradoxically shares Coleridge’s forceful and consistent emphasis on the individual’s capacity to transcend, in each act of thought, all forms of stasis or definition (whether

material or conceptual), albeit that in Coleridge's case this transcendence is regarded as giving expression to a 'shaping power' which is merely suspended in the stasis of thought or imagination, and is thus connected with a more elusive and ultimately divine essence. Woolf's 'moments of being', on the other hand, emerge as more closely related to Wordsworthian forms of intuition, being accompanied by 'a sense of heightened reality', and repeatedly connecting past with present consciousness, yet resisting the forms of religious universalization of subjective Being which characterize Wordsworth and Coleridge (*ibid.*, pp. 110-14.). The final chapter explores the extent to which Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath exemplify these contrasting emphases on a 'firm, physically rooted identity' analogous to that evoked by Lawrence, and on 'the potentialities of a Being that identified itself most readily in motion' (*ibid.*, xi).

As noted earlier, however, a key factor in Beer's analysis of the dissemination or persistence of Romantic-subjectivist conceptions of Being in the post-Romantic era (and especially the Victorian period) is the enduring prevalence of Coleridgean ideas among the Cambridge Apostles—an influence whose effect, he argues, extended not only to Tennyson but also to Bloomsbury figures such as Roger Fry (*Romantic Consciousness*, 108, 110). As with the widespread Victorian interest in spiritualism noted earlier, Coleridge's emphasis on the superiority of Reason to Understanding 'as an organ for apprehending truth intuitively', Beer argues, was 'felt to be particularly timely in an age when respect for the doctrines of utilitarianism seemed to some to be undermining the nobility of human nature' (*ibid.*, 112). The well-known enthusiasm of the early Apostles, F.D. Maurice and John Sterling, for Coleridge's thought, Beer notes, seems to have extended to near-contemporaries such as A.H. Hallam, who—with Tennyson—joined the Apostles two years after Maurice and Sterling left Cambridge, at a time when 'Coleridge's was a name to be conjured with' (*ibid.*, 111-3, 107). As Beer points out, not only these factors, but also the undoubted prevalence of Coleridgean ideas and phrases in *In Memoriam* (for example) make the near absence of direct comments by Tennyson about Coleridge particularly surprising (*ibid.*, pp. 128-31, 107); and Beer subtly reconstructs the interaction of Tennyson's and Hallam's ideas with those of Coleridge and his more explicit followers, additionally suggesting that the Apostles' enduring fascination with questions of 'Being' or 'Reality' was to influence Woolf and other Bloomsbury authors through the agency not only of Fry, but also of Forster and other Apostles at the turn of the century (*ibid.*, 113-28, 132). Such a readiness to look beyond conventional literary-historical categories and explicit affiliations, highlighting verbal, intellectual, and historical connections between diverse authors and genres which have too often remained hidden by mere force of custom and habit, is one of the greatest merits of these two interconnected volumes. Others include the exceptional breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding which Beer brings to the task of unveiling the diverse ways in which successive generations have registered the relations of consciousness and being.

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