Coleridge: Nationhood and the Limits of Collective Memory

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WHEN SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE MADE A SERIES of political addresses to the people of the English port city of Bristol, the Reign of Terror had ended only the year before.[1] By 1795, the excesses of the French Revolution had led even so radical a reformer as Coleridge to reconsider his support for it. But while events in France had eroded his faith in the revolution there, he remained optimistic that eventually political conditions in Europe would change for the better. "Let us not indulge our malignant passions under the mask of humanity," he told his audience. "Instead of railing with infuriate declamation against these excesses, we shall be more profitably employed in developing the sources of them. French freedom is the Beacon, which while it guides to Equality, should shew us the Dangers that throng the road."[2] True patriots, he claimed, must see through the particulars of history to understand the progress, made by fits and starts, toward a universal ideal of freedom.[3]

The French Revolution, which seemed to have erupted in order to lead humanity closer to the ideals of equality and liberty, had become sidetracked. But as Coleridge knew, all progress toward the universal had to be made through the agency of particular peoples with the full baggage of their national history, culture, religion, language, and memory. Revolutionaries, then, are always subject to the competing claims of the universal and the particular. In time, though, Coleridge himself would build upon this dichotomy to embrace a more sophisticated idea of what the foundation of a nation ought to be. And yet, it is through Coleridge's philosophical insight into the dynamic relationship between the universal and the particular that we may begin to understand his position on what would later come to be called "collective memory."

Throughout his life, Coleridge was preoccupied with the meaning of nationhood. Two questions particularly concerned him: how were nations constituted, and what bound them together over the course of time? In his mind, the answers were related, and in his investigation, he naturally considered what role a people's historical sense of themselves, or collective memory, played.

The thesis of this paper is that Coleridge was among the first intellectuals to discuss the dangers of relying too much on collective memory as a basis of nationhood. Coleridge believed that belonging to a nation was an indispensable part of one's personal identity, but he also thought that relying on memory restricted the nation to preexisting notions and limited to too great a degree who might become a citizen thereof. He preferred building the nation on *Ideas*, which, he argues, are not abstracted from any form of remembrance but exist as a power to shape the future. *Ideas,* says Coleridge, are formed from a knowledge of the ultimate aim of a state or form and are therefore antecedent

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[1] John Colmer, *Coleridge: Critic of Society* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1959), 9.
[2] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Conciones ad Populum, 1795* (Oxford, U.K.: Woodstock Books, 1992), 8-9.
[3] Ibid. 20-21, 49.

to the things in which they are realized.

While it is worthwhile purely in terms of intellectual history to understand Coleridge's position on "collective memory," his philosophical stance toward memory itself, which forms the basis of his objections, brings some fresh insight to current scholarly discussion about the uses and misuses of collective memory. This paper, therefore, connects Coleridge's hierarchy of memories, conceptions, and ideas as he discussed them in *The Constitution of the Church and State* (1830) to his notion of the higher and lower forms of imagination, including memory, as he defines them in *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

Coleridge died in 1834, so it may seem odd to discuss his criticism of a phenomenon, collective memory, that had not yet been given a formal identity. But Coleridge lived during a time when Romantic nationalism was sweeping Europe, and collective memory, in the form of national self-consciousness, was a key ingredient in nation-building. Collective memory, in the broad sense it has acquired among social scientists, now encompasses all of the ways people remember the past—history, monuments, museums, memoir, myth, landscape, and living memory.[4] But though the term is of recent coinage, the phenomenon has existed as long as there have been social groups. Coleridge, who studied nationalism at its modern birth, was surely aware of its existence and remarks on elements of it throughout his writings.[5]

Coleridge believed education is the chief means through which people become part of a nation. His particular scheme would leave the education of the young in the hands of a National Church, the role of which would not be so much religious as educational.[6] Like Rousseau, Coleridge believed the educational system should inculcate citizens with patriotism and virtue.[7] But while he is realistic enough to understand that not everyone is suited to be a philosopher, Coleridge is not as pessimistic as Rousseau about the intellectual abilities of people generally (C&S 54, 69). For this reason, Coleridge asserts that the opportunity for intellectual development ought to be open to all. The educational duties of the National Church, therefore, extended beyond mere civilization (the inculcation of morality and patriotism, obedience and citizenship) to the cultivation of each individual's intellectual faculties.

Part of the mission of the National Church would be to civilize the population, with means not far different from those the German nationalists proposed. It would be up to the National Church, says Coleridge, "to preserve the stores, to guard the treasures, of past civilization, and thus to bind the

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[4] Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 106.

[5] Although he did not term it such, Coleridge was certainly aware that collective memory was an important component of any nation's sense of itself. In 1798, he spent ten months in Germany, at a time when the Germans were busily constructing a new national self-consciousness—or collective memory—for the *volk* through cultural and historical studies. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (New York: Viking, 1989), 204-205, 221, 227, 234.

[6] John Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought: Property, Morality, and the Limits of Traditional Discourse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 148.

[7] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *First and Second Discourses,* 45; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer, vol. 10 in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 54. Hereafter abbreviated as C&S.

present with the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future" (C&S 43-44). In short, the National Church would be the repository and propagator of collective memory. [8]

But the intertwined needs of the individual and the nation required more. "Civilization is itself but a mixed good," Coleridge declares, "if not far more a corrupting influence . . . where this civilization is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity" (C&S 42-43). These faculties include understanding, reason, and imagination—all of which are necessary to the citizen of a *free* state.[9] This two-fold system of education—civilizing (passing on the legacy of collective memory) and cultivating (developing the individual faculties) would allow the National Church to achieve its "proper object," namely, "civilization with freedom" (C&S 54).

Coleridge, who had studied the philosophies of Rousseau, Herder, and Fichte, and who had examined closely the events of the French Revolution, was no doubt conscious of the growing nationalistic bent of German thought.[10] The national self-consciousness the German intellectuals hoped to create was little more than a species of collective memory made out of whatever materials were at hand. Where materials were lacking, writers, musicians, and artists could supply them fresh. The more the art seemed to point back to a heroic past, the better it contributed to a sense of German unity created through collective memory.[11]

For Coleridge, though, memory of any kind was an insufficient foundation for a nation. In part, this is because he believed memory to be a function of one of the lower faculties of the human imagination. Something of Coleridge's attitude toward memory can be found in his advice to poets to "trust more to your imagination than your memory."[12] If the imposition of one's own memory on the imagination must be guarded against, one ought to be doubly wary of any kind of collective memory. For Coleridge, collective memory imposes a double obstacle on the free imagination of the individual, not only

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[8] Nigel Leask asserts that by 1815, Coleridge had become incorrigibly elitist and relegated freeholders, mechanics, and laborers to the base of an authoritarian pyramid at the top of which would be the university-trained clerisy. But this would depend on how one views the role of the clerisy. If it is merely to propagandize—or to "civilize" in Coleridge's parlance—then Leask's point is made. But Coleridge explicitly states that the role of the clerisy is also to "cultivate" or develop, to the extent possible, each individual's faculties—reason, understanding, and imagination. Coleridge makes no exclusion based on social class as to who might benefit from cultivation, though he recognizes that relatively few might have the motivation to take advantage of such an education. It would seem that Coleridge's goal here is to use the clerisy to spread education as widely as possible without debasing it. One goal of this education is also to develop the powers of critical analysis as widely as possible, at least among those who are open to it. In this way, society may be constantly reformed and avoid the perpetuation of a status quo that benefits only a few elites. See Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1988), 61, 143-44; C&S 44, 48, 74, 87-88; Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought,* 13-15. For problems of maintaining a clerisy free from political interest, see Michael John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller, and Aesthetic Education* (Houndsmills, U.K.: Palgrave, 2002), 171-73.

[9] For further discussion of Coleridge's idea of cultivation, see Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought,* 98.

[10] For Coleridge's study of Fichte and Herder see George Whalley's editorial notes in Coleridge, *Marginalia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980-2001), 2:594-95, 1048-49, and also Leask, *The Politics of Imagination,* 79-80 and Cranston, *The Romantic Movement,* 22-27.

[11] Leask, *The Politics of Imagination,* 79-80; Cranston, *The Romantic Movement,* 22-27.

[12] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk,* ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 1:194.

of the perception of the actual objects or events remembered, but also of a symbolic interpretation of those objects and events that is not the individual's own. In his estimation, the direct apprehension of the natural universe with as little mediation as possible is vital to the creation of the self. The creation of the self is, in turn, a function of the imagination.

It is in *Biographia Literaria*, published at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, that Coleridge makes his famous tripartite division of the imagination into primary and secondary imagination and what he calls "fancy." This division is hierarchical, ranging from the highest form, or secondary imagination, to the lowest, fancy.

As he explains, primary imagination allows the individual to repeat to a degree God's initial act of creation. It is, he says, "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." Primary imagination perceives sense-data emanating from the exterior world, which is God's creation, and then forms images of this world as "repetitions" in the mind (BL I 202 Shawcross). It is important, though, to note that primary imagination, even as it is discussed rather cryptically in the *Biographia,* is not simple perception but rather perception as modified by rational analysis, which together form a faculty of mind Coleridge calls the "understanding." The ideas of mind developed as a result of the conjunction of sense-perception and rational analysis are *conceptions,* which are more accurate and usable notions of the physical world than simple perception can provide, as Coleridge no doubt learned from Descartes. Coleridge also differentiates between understanding and "Reason." As he explains in an essay in *The Friend* (1818), "Whatever is conscious *Self*-knowledge is Reason; and in this sense it may be safely defined the organ of the Super-sensuous; even as the Understanding, wherever it does not possess or use the Reason, as another and inward eye, may be defined the conception of the Sensuous, or the faculty by which we generalize and arrange the phaenomena of perception: that faculty, the functions of which contain the rules and constitute the possibility of outward Experience."[13] "Understanding," in Coleridge's parlance, is close to what most philosophers define as "reason," or rational analysis using logic and experience. In this way, individuals, employing primary imagination, can draw conclusions about their world and, by developing general conceptions, come to some understanding of it. By contrast, "Reason," as Coleridge defines it, is a universally human faculty that allows people to possess "essential truths" of a spiritual or intellectual nature.[14]

It should not be overlooked that the process by which we obtain accurate information about the external world requires us to repeat in the finite mind the creative activity of the infinite "I AM." As Graham Davidson points out, this adds an important spiritual dimension to the primary imagination. The

[13] See Coleridge, "Essay V" in *The Friend,* ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 1:154-161. Hereafter cited as F. See also Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Statesman's Manual, App. C in *Lay Sermons,* ed. R. J. White (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 59-63.

[14] David P. Calleo, *Coleridge and the Idea of the Modern State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), 38; Graham Davidson, *Coleridge's Career* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 158.

very process of apprehending the external world prompts each human being to come to the realization that some unseen creative power exists. Although Coleridge does not elucidate this in the *Biographia,* he maintained in his notebooks and other writings that it is this sense of the existence of a creative power in the universe which sets each human being above the rest of nature spiritually and intellectually and, as Davidson argues, this knowledge constitutes each individual's humanity. It also triggers the faculty of "Reason," an internal sense that allows the individual to connect to spiritual truths, which Coleridge understands as the God within us.[15]

Secondary imagination, as Coleridge defines it, is "identical with the primary in the kind of its operation," but differs in degree and mode. While primary imagination helps us to understand what actually exists, secondary allows us to shape ourselves and the world. This higher level of imagination dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates perceptions so that they might be reordered, redefined, and recombined. When the process of dissolution proves impossible, this level of imagination "struggles to idealize and to unify" its perceptions of reality. Using secondary imagination, individuals, through a process of self-conscious willing, create their own identities and also, by a process of imaginatively ordering their perceptions of the external world through the subjective lens of the mind, create meaning for themselves and for the world at large (BL I 202 Shawcross).

The primary and secondary imagination are living powers that begin to provide meaning for individuals as they apprehend themselves and the exterior world. By contrast, objects and events—once they are perceived—are, for Coleridge, "essentially fixed and dead." It is this fixity, or "pastness," that differentiates fancy and memory from primary and secondary imagination. Coleridge describes fancy, which is the lowest type of imagination, as "a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space." While the fancy can be blended with and modified by choice or selection, it is essentially limited. As Coleridge explains, fancy "has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites" (BL I 202 Shawcross).

It may be difficult to see the distinction between memory and primary imagination in the latter's role of providing information about the external world. Each is concerned with drawing images or sense-data into the mind. The difference is that primary imagination is concerned with *producing* fresh and direct sense-data drawn into the mind through perception and modified by the understanding. This provides the vital link between the whole of external reality and the mind of the individual. Memory, by contrast, is concerned with *reproducing* images or other sense-data from past perceptions. For this reason, says Coleridge, (BL I 202 Shawcross), fancy and memory generally are shackled to dead objects and events. Memory is the most limited of all because, unlike fancy, it remains tethered to the order of time and space.

This hierarchy of the imagination pertains to individuals, not to any

[15] Davidson, *Coleridge's Career,* 157-58; 170-71; F 1:156-159; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks,* ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973) 3:3787. Hereafter referred to as CN.

collective, which makes sense philosophically because only individuals, strictly speaking, have imagination and memory. Still, imagination and memory link the individual to the nation. The question then becomes: what is the relationship between the individual and the nation? For Coleridge, the individual was analogous to a *particle* within *the whole* of the nation. But as he explains, "Not only is the Whole greater than a Part; but where it is a Whole, and not a mere All or Aggregate, it makes each part what it is" (C&S 65 n. 5). And this whole or "Universal" appears in each individual, in the same way the Sun shining on a dewy lawn appears "in the whole countless multitude of Drops, entire in each—" (CN V 6292).

Coleridge accepts the principle of Locke that people form the political apparatus of the state in order to protect private property but also Rousseau's notion that the nation in its totality satisfies not only economic and security needs but also moral and psychological ones. In the last instance, Coleridge essentially agrees with Herder, that an individual can only come to true self-consciousness within a nation. This is because each individual must define the self and create a personal identity in contradistinction to others.[16]

But this "I," shaped as it is in part by the identification of "otherness," is also created through an acceptance of a kind of "sameness," which is achieved by an identification with the nation as a whole. Human beings exist as material objects in the physical world. They, therefore, participate in and cannot separate themselves from the world of particulars. The self cannot be understood apart from the elements that 'bething' it, as Coleridge remarks.[17] For this reason, there is no "cosmopolitan" self. Every individual is constrained by time and space—and by a socially constructed memory—as a participant in the material world. Nevertheless, human beings, through the exercise of the higher forms of imagination and "Reason," can also discern and come to understand universal principles which apply to all human beings and, through secondary imagination, can form new ideas about how to reshape society and themselves.[18] These ideas, as projections of what might be, Coleridge defines as "powers" (C&S 13 n. 1). For Coleridge, then, it seems that the individual and the nation ought to exist in a symbiotic and dynamic relationship very similar to the relationship between the individual and nature. In other words, the nation is necessary to the development of individual self-consciousness and identity, but the self-created individual is also necessary for the creation and maintenance of the state.

One of the difficulties of dealing with Coleridge's philosophy is that he was never able to complete an overall synthesis of it. Because it is fragmentary, putting the pieces together risks creating somewhat more cohesion than may actually exist in his writing or may have existed in his mind. Nevertheless, analysis reveals a correlation between his taxonomy of the imagination as he

16 Calleo, *Coleridge and the Idea of the Modern State*, 82.

17 Ibid., 83; CN III 4109.

18 It seems that these "ideas" as projections of what might be in the future are distinct from, though informed by, the ideas apprehended by Reason, which exist spiritually and intellectually within each individual's mind.

discusses it in *Biographia Literaria* and his categorization of thought into memories, conceptions, and ideas in *The Constitution of the Church and State,* in spite of the fact that he does not really mention imagination at all in the latter work.

Naturally, memories are stored sense-data from past experiences. As we have already seen, these may be recalled realistically by ordinary memory or through the faculty of fancy, which allows images and other remembered perceptions to filter through the mind through the law of free association, essentially unmooring memory from time and space. Memory of either sort is by definition tied directly to objects or events that existed or occurred in the past and is therefore bound to "fixities and definites."[19]

In order to move beyond the dead past, one must begin to abstract certain principles from the particulars of memory and history. Coleridge refers to these principles as "conceptions," which are abstracted from a particular state, form, or mode. This abstraction seems to be a function of the primary imagination. Primary imagination permits direct perception of the external world and employs the understanding to provide analysis of these perceptions, so that the individual might understand or *conceive of* the world as it exists in the present and thereby gain awareness of his or her place within it. "A conception," says Coleridge, "consists in a conscious act of the understanding, bringing any given object or impression into the same class with any number of other objects, or impressions, by means of some character or characters common to them all" (C&S 12-13).

Ideas, in Coleridge's scheme, are of a higher character than memory or conceptions. As he explains, "An Idea is a POWER that constitutes its own Reality—and is in the order of Thought, necessarily antecedent to the Things, in which it is, more or less adequately, realized—while a Conception is necessarily posterior" (C&S 13 n. 1). Because they are antecedent to the existence of the things in which they are realized, *ideas* cannot be "abstracted from any particular state, form, or mode," nor can they be "generalized from any number or succession of such forms or modes." For Coleridge, *ideas* are formed from a knowledge of the ultimate aim of a state or form (C&S 12).

But *Ideas*, as Coleridge describes them, seem to come in two forms—those that Reason discerns as preexisting in the mind and those that relate to the future, which might be called "projective ideas." The latter seem to be a product of the secondary imagination, through which individuals can create "a new whole" or "something not yet in existence."[20] Coleridge admits that these projective *ideas* cannot be created in a vacuum. It is to be the function of the secondary imagination to reshape them from the materials primary imagination and memory provide.[21] They would also be informed or shaped by essential

[19] Coleridge, unlike scholars of collective memory, sees memory as essentially static. It is very likely that Coleridge would dismiss the kinds of changing memories that scholars now study as not belonging to the category of memory at all. See Engell, *The Creative Imagination* 332-34; 340-42.

[20] James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, eds., "Introduction," *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:ciii.

[21] Ibid., lxxxi, xc; Coleridge, *Church and State*, 37.

truths, such as "Ideas of Being, Form, Life, the Reason, the Law of Conscience, Freedom, Immortality, God," that Coleridge says exist within each individual and which are discovered by the exercise of intuitive "Reason" (F 1:106).

Once the secondary imagination produces such an idea, as a projection of what might be, history finds its use. "In the unfolding and exposition of any idea," says Coleridge, "we naturally seek assistance and the means of illustration from the historical instance, in which it has been most nearly realized, or of which we possess the most exact and satisfactory records" (C&S 37). But it should be pointed out that the value of history, in Coleridge's mind, is not in its capacity to provide a collective memory for a particular people or nation but rather as a record of particulars from which reason can abstract universal principles. For the purposes of illustrating the worthiness of an *idea*, an appeal to the collective memory or history of one's own group may not prove most useful. For instance, in formulating his idea of the church and state for Great Britain, Coleridge claims to have found the best historical example not in English history but in the history of the ancient Hebrew Commonwealth. This is because, as Michael John Kooy has observed, "what set the nation Israel apart . . . was the consciousness of a moral ideal."[22]

To better understand how projective *ideas* are produced, a further analysis of the secondary imagination is necessary. For Coleridge, imagination is "the Laboratory, in which Thought elaborates Essence into Existence" (CN II 3158). And to effect this elaboration, the secondary imagination seems to bring together all of the faculties of the human mind—rationality, emotion, morality, and the subsidiary forms of imagination, including memory.

Although universal principles abstracted from history or memory might and probably must inform the imaginative production of *ideas*, the value of an *idea* has no connection to any remembered past. To illustrate this point, Coleridge refers to the idea of a social contract, the worth of which does not depend upon whether one ever existed in history or memory (C&S 14). Likewise, no conception of such a contract which one might abstract from existing social contracts can serve the interests of progression, since each generation creates laws or constitutions to serve its own particular interests at a particular time (C&S 15).

The chief reason Coleridge rejects collective memory as the fundamental basis for the nation seems to be, then, that it cannot provide convincing models for future progress. *Ideas*, though, which are always anterior to their realization in the world, can. But he also seems to maintain other objections to the use of history or memory as a basis for national unity. These are connected to his notions of the needs of a nation, which are permanence and progression. First, to rely on memory or history, which is a more formal type of memory, is to rely on the lowest form of imagination. It is to rely on a form in which the moral free will has little or no scope because its only "counters are fixities and

[22] Michael John Kooy, "Romanticism and Coleridge's Idea of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60 (Oct. 1999): 727.

definites." And second, to rely on a collectively shaped notion of the past is an imposition on the individual's freedom to experience and shape reality in his or her own way. This is to place the collective of the nation above the individual, which upsets the dynamic and necessary balance and tension between the two. Finally, to rely on memory or history is to base the nation on the particular—on objects and events in the physical world—the recollection of which is limited to the experience of a particular group. [23] In sum, collective memory may aid permanence but not progression. By contrast, as an expression of a nation's ultimate aim, an *idea*, while it remains essentially the same itself, is a projection toward the future—a power for progressive change.[24]

[23] On collective memory as the memory of a preexisting group, see Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper, 1980), 50-87.

[24] Morrow notes that by progression, Coleridge meant, at least as far as Britain was concerned, a transition from a government that governed with the people to a government by the people. See his *Coleridge's Political Thought,* 33-35.