'All-shaped shadows': Imagining Coleridge in Beijing

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WALKER PERCY WROTE OF HIS FAITH:

> When it is asked just so, straight out: 'Why are you a Catholic?' I usually reply, 'What else is there?'[1]

It would be unusual for one, when it is asked just so, straight out: 'Why are you a Coleridgean?' to respond—without caveat—'*What else is there?*' We might expect a semi-ironic (or even completely *un*ironic) reply of this sort from a Shakespearean or a Danteist. And fair enough: we tend to speak of the scope of their poetry in totalizing terms. But while Coleridge's genius may reach the heights of Shakespeare and Dante, his work and life are essentially characterized (some would say 'marred') by a significant degree of fragmentation, of obfuscation; even failure. Nevertheless, here I am. I know 'what else there is'; yet I remain with Coleridge.

One of the most confounding and compelling aspects of Coleridge's legacy is that readers are drawn to him in spite of—sometimes *because* of—his inability to translate his imaginative powers into the Shakespearean scope they seem to promise. T. S. Eliot, who hails Coleridge in superlative terms as the 'greatest intellectual force of his time', can be found (often in the very same breath) couching Coleridge's merits in the sorry context of his 'metaphysical sleep', his 'ill-regulated' and 'slothful' life.[2] The simplest—but certainly least helpful—strategy for dealing with this critical ambivalence is to reduce Coleridge to the trope of a 'failed genius', to a poet or poet-philosopher we must accept only in spite of his difficulty. The paradigms I find most persuasive—the ones that inspire my own scholarship—represent ways of understanding Coleridge's intractability not as a thing to shy away from, but as a constitutive element of his genius, especially his philosophical genius. To that end, I have come to love Coleridge through scholars who construe Coleridge's difficulty, as Mill famously says in a parallel context, as 'part of the problem to be solved', as 'one of the phenomena to be accounted for'.[3]

Over the past few years of PhD work at Cambridge, I have repeatedly returned to two compelling attempts—in Owen Barfield and Geoffrey Hill—to wrestle with Coleridge's intractability. Barfield, Coleridge's staunchest (if most idiosyncratic) apologist, deals with Coleridge's ostensible 'failures' by appealing to a broader philosophical vision. His occasional 'incoherence of expression', Barfield assures us, 'arose from the coherence of what he wanted to express'.[4] Geoffrey Hill, throughout his entire career but especially in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', takes Barfield's claim one step further. For Hill,

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[1] Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Noonday, 1992), 307.
[2] T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, 9 vols, eds. John Haffenden and Valerie Eliot, Vol. 7, *1934-1935* (London: Faber, 2017), 83.
[3] John Stuart Mill, 'Coleridge' (1838).
[4] Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age: Essays on the Creative Imagination*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Barfield Press, 2012), 204.

Coleridge's incoherence is not merely something draped over some *other thing* he wants to express. Rather, his incoherence *is* the thing expressed. For Hill (following Kathleen Coburn), the remarkable fact about Coleridge—our necessary starting point when reading him—is that such a 'habitually self-pitying man was able to bring his own broken life and aspirations into the focus of meditation'.[5] This paradigm shift is subtle but extraordinary. For most readers (in some cases to the extreme), Coleridge's 'brokenness' is a contingent embarrassment for which one must offer some degree of apology. But for Barfield, and for Hill especially, Coleridge's occasional 'incoherence' (which Hill understands in the light of Original Sin) is the *answer*: it is the very thing Coleridge teaches us about ourselves, and about our poetry. We are all Prufrock; we are all Coleridge. Our art is always in some sense a failure to communicate; our poetry only the contortion of words into 'the substance of imagination radically perjured'.[6]

But this all puts too pessimistic a cast on things. Barfield and Hill emphasize the brokenness of Coleridge's life and work only in order to accentuate the corresponding wonder of the fact that Coleridge's poetry—or any poetry, any act of the imagination—can come to be (and be appreciated) *at all*. Language, despite its tendency to falter and fail us, nevertheless contains or is undergirded by something that bridges, however tenuously, the wide gulf between consciousnesses. It is this very 'holding-togetherness' in Coleridge that leads Barfield and Hill to identify an explicitly theological *logos* as the basic principle of meaning which underlies all Coleridge's philosophical and poetic thought.

Were this a longer essay, I might consider some excellent recent work on Hill's philosophical uses of Coleridge, particularly Matthew Sperling's *Visionary Philology, Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words* (2014) and Alex Wylie's *Geoffrey Hill's Later Work: Radiance of Apprehension* (2019). But for our immediate purposes, I want only to relate, briefly, my own entry point to the strange, Barfieldian-Hillian mode of Coleridge interpretation. The circumstances of my 'conversion' to Coleridge, to a way of thinking that places the imagination at the centre of both philosophical and theological thinking, is something that has emerged across engagements in the last decade with the work of Kathleen Coburn, Nathan Scott, Douglas Hedley (my excellent supervisor), Donald MacKinnon, Rowan Williams, Sam Hazo, and many others, including my fellow contributors in this issue. But my first experience with Coleridge of the 'felt change of consciousness' of Barfield or the 'focus of meditation' of Hill occurred in the queue for toilets at a bar in the Wudaokou neighbourhood of Beijing.

For readers deep into the *Notebooks*, the combination of 'Coleridge' and 'toilets' in a single sentence may be enough to suggest where this is going. For context: in 2016, I moved from South Bend, Indiana, to Beijing, China. I was

[5] Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 14.

[6] Geoffrey Hill, 'How ill white hairs become a fool and jester', inaugural Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture, University of Oxford, 30 Nov 2010.

studying for a master's in philosophy and religion at Peking University, focusing on the vast (and shockingly understudied) influence of British and German Romanticism on a group of young poets in 1980s Beijing, particularly Hai Zi (1964-1989). Though one of the most popular modern poets in the language, I only first encountered Hai Zi's poems in English translation through the 2010 work of Dan Murphy, who is purported to have discovered Hai Zi's verses as graffiti in a Wudaokou bar bathroom stall.

So, as I stood outside the bar toilets in 2016—not impossibly at the very same bar—I related this curious bathroom-graffiti translation history to a Chinese classmate. The anecdote excited him tremendously. He knew Hai Zi, of course; but nothing of the lavatory myth. He quoted from memory the final stanza of '*Mian chao dahai, chunnuan hua kai*' ('Facing the Sea with Spring Blossoms'), Hai Zi's most famous poem. And then, recalling my Romantic interests, he made some joke about a fanciful image of Coleridge urinating in a bar like this one. I stared at him blankly.

I remember my friend's pupils almost exploding, apprehending in an instant what my confusion meant: that I had not yet read what was surely his (and what would surely become my own) favorite entry from the *Notebooks*. A bit of googling (or baidu-ing, rather), and before us was the entry for December 1803, around Christmas:

> What a beautiful Thing Urine is, in a Pot, brown yellow, transpicuous, the Image, diamond shaped of the Candle in it, especially, as it now appeared, I having emptied the Snuffers into it, & the snuff floating about, & painting all-shaped shadows on the Bottom.[7]

My friend was ecstatic, relishing in the unexpected gift of being able to point a card-carrying admirer of Coleridge to a canonical text that I should have—but did not yet—know.

We walked back to the west gate of Peking University talking exclusively of Coleridge's toilet. I remember agreeing (in no very sophisticated or coherent terms) that there was something infinitely balanced about the punctuation and word order; that there was 'definitely something Platonic going on' with the Candle-Snuff-Image trinity—and so on. But the thing that struck us most in the passage was the sense it imparted of an imagination strained to its limits, grasping after the 'living power' required to perform the basic imaginative act of what Barfield would call 'figuration': the coalescing of reality into form, of 'all-shaped shadows' into images perceived. The remarkable thing was that the imaginative act was described within the passage ('painting all-shaped shadows') just as it was effected.

[7] While this may initially seem a strange passage to cite in reverential language, there is evidence of widespread appreciation for this passage across Coleridge scholarship. Seamus Perry uses it to introduce his edition of selections from the *Notebooks*. Adam Roberts praises and points out a series of implied Latin puns on *urina/urna/uro* at play. Kenneth Rexroth calls it (without further elaboration) 'Zen of a sort'. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Seamus Perry (ed.), *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), x, 39; Adam Robert, 'Coleridge, Urinator', *Samuel Taylor Bloggeridge* 24 September 2015; and Kenneth Rexroth, 'Coleridge and Zen?' in *With Eye and Ear* (Freiburg: Herder & Herder, 1970).

There is another entry, from 27 November 1799, which distils very nearly the same idea. It shows the imagination in the very process of straining (against what Hill calls its 'brokenness') to participate in and 'half-create' the forms it beholds:

> Soon after this I saw Starlings in vast Flights, borne along like smoke, mist—like a body unindued with voluntary Power /—now it shaped itself into a circular area, inclined—now they formed a Square—now a Globe—now from complete orb into an Ellipse—then oblongated into a Balloon with the Car suspended, now a concave Semicircle; still expanding, or contracting, thinning or condensing, now glimmering and shivering, now thickening, deepening, blackening![8]

Geoffrey Hill, in the final lines of Poem 4 of *Expostulations on the Volcano*, alludes to and identifies in this passage the workings of the '*esemplastic / Power*' of Coleridge's imagination.[9] It evinces a mutually participatory relationship—Barfield would call it a relationship of 'polarity'—with the world. According to this view, the form of the birds is neither something inherent in the object nor superimposed by the subject: the form exists irreducibly in the dynamic relationship between the two. But the form is nonetheless real, just as Barfield says of metaphor in another context:

> A metaphor is not the same as the meaning of the individual words; it's something between two meanings. And it can only be apprehended by the imagination, and not the logical brain. But it's not unreal for that reason.[10]

There is much to be said here about the relationships between poet and nature and between poet and text. Readers interested in a full philosophical digression on these matters might consult Barfield's influential theories of 'polarity', 'tri-unity', and 'separative projection' in *What Coleridge Thought*. When my friend and I discussed the urine passage, however, none of these relationships occurred to us as important. The crucial relationship was that of me, as reader, to my fellow reader—my friend. The key issue at stake was the following. While neither my friend nor I could paraphrase the meaning we glimpsed from Coleridge, we nevertheless had faith—a genuine faith in poetry, as Michael Hurley would argue—that there is enough in common between our unbridgeable selves that we can nevertheless point in the direction of the ineffable and say, *'That way?'* and *'Yes, that way'*. We both acknowledge the 'brokenness' of language. And yet, following Coleridge, we trust that something can be accomplished in spite of—*because of*—this brokenness.

The last thing I want to say is that the version of Coleridge I have gestured towards here—what Harold Bloom denigrates as the 'logocentric' Coleridge—is

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[8] Coleridge, *Notebooks*, 39.

[9] In Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems, 1952-2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 634.

[10] Barfield, *Barfield Reader*, xxxii.

not one universally familiar or accepted. It is, by any account, a Coleridge that exists less in the 18th and 19th centuries than the 20th. The nature of Coleridge's reception history (as James Vigus's and Jane Wright's 2008 *Coleridge's Afterlives* does a good job of framing) is such that a majority of his writing (especially the *Notebooks*) only came to be accessible or appreciated over the course of the last few generations. This fact, coupled with the fundamental difficulty of Coleridge as a thinker, has meant that Coleridge's legacy has engendered claims as polarizing as to suggest he is either principally a theologian—one of the greatest of his century—or else not a theologian at all (and the same as applied to his poetical and philosophical powers).

I trace a bit of this tension (the 'pendulum' of Coleridge scholarship, as Barfield calls it) in my review of Jeffrey Barbeau's much-needed volume, *The Cambridge Companion to Romanticism and Religion* (2021) in the previous *Bulletin* issue (CB 59). But I recycle here one citation from that review in which Edward Bostetter laments the 'wayward progress of [Coleridge's] posthumous reputation' in the 20th century, which is

> accompanied by generalizations so extravagant that even his warmest friends have difficulty explaining them… younger critics throw his name around with such abandon… increasingly the name is being associated with principles that the man never entertained.[11]

This accusation, comical as it is biting, is a good take-off point for my own scholarship on Coleridge. Writing as a theologian, I am ultimately as interested in what Coleridge thought as what he has been *made* to think; the ways in which he has been read as well as 'misread'. People like Bostetter are more strictly concerned with a synchronic vision of Coleridge's thought. But Coleridge's breadth and intractability has meant that his ideas have been creatively appropriated in such various ways as to generate several dozen *Coleridges* over the last century.

Reflecting on these 'Coleridges' on his 250th birthday, I want to conclude by emphasizing especially the version of Coleridge that has been so successful in guiding our recent thinking about metaphysics and imagination—precisely the Coleridge I found in the bar in Beijing. This is a version of Coleridge that is extremely influential but not yet fully appreciated. In *The Edge of Words*, Rowan Williams credits this Coleridge (via works like Douglas Hedley's *Living Forms of the Imagination*) with inciting a paradigm shift in recent theological history towards a recovery of the imagination in our thinking about our relationship to the world. Williams narrativizes this recovery in Coleridgean terms:

> [T]he Coleridgean intuition that imagination is therefore a matter of central theological importance is brought back into focus: the fact that the world ceaselessly prompts new configurations may be a brute fact about experience, or it may point us to an apprehension of

[11] Edward Bostetter,'The Sad Ghost of Coleridge', review of *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination*, by James V. Baker, *Prairie Schooner* 33, no. 2 (1959): 187–90, 187-8.

> unconditioned act, a fundamental energy in response to which all finite agency or movement is constituted as the flow of searching for ('desiring', if we want another anthropomorphism) self-renewing, self-diversifying form.[12]

This is a Coleridge, as Williams says in another context, who is a modern prophet of the 'revelatory dimension of imagination', one who sees art 'as claiming to have something to say about the fundamental nature of being-in-the-world'.[13] This 'self-renewing, self-diversifying form' describes just what my friend and I had found and had grasped after in Beijing: 'all-shaped shadows' coalescing into form. This is a Coleridge who strains after and hopes for what Hill calls the 'action of grace' in poetry; the 'shaping spirit of imagination'.

STC at 32
George Dance (1746-1831); pencil on paper; 21 March 1804; (8 x 6 in.)
The Wordsworth Trust; MP cat. 8

[12] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 124.
[13] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2006), x.