Coleridge's American Disciple

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My first encounter with Coleridge was not what you'd expect. My professor held the *Biographia Literaria* in an outstretched arm—akin to Blake's *Laocoön*, posing somewhere between triumph and agony—and declared that he had read the entire work and deemed it unworthy of the praise that so many had heaped upon it. The double-volume could only faint-heartedly be recommended as a jumble of opium-induced, philosophical criticism. Kantian metaphysics had ruined Coleridge's poetics, so I was told, and what wasn't plagiarized from Schelling in the resultant philosophy was muddled at best. Perhaps he was more upbeat and encouraging than this in his overall comments, I'm really not sure anymore. Whatever else was said that day, I came away with the distinct impression that I'd be better off devoting my energy elsewhere.

Then, a few years later, something entirely unexpected occurred. I was now a student at Marquette University, reading one of those writers we implicitly hold in high esteem—the sort of scholar whose reputation precedes one's reading, making us uncommonly attentive to their wisdom and insight. Reading Claude Welch, former president of the American Academy of Religion, in this moment, changed my life, returning Coleridge unpredictably to my orbit. Or, perhaps, I might more accurately say that I found myself suddenly in the orbit of another, and I've never had a desire to escape Coleridge's gravitational pull since.

It's an embarrassingly simple line—I'm sure it won't have the same allure for my readers as it did for me on that fateful day—but when I read Claude Welch's startling claim that Coleridge 'was as important for British and American thought as were Schleiermacher and Hegel,' I was instantly hooked. How could it be that Coleridge—whom I'd only really known as a troubled, puzzling figure—was as significant for the history of modern theology and philosophy as Schleiermacher and Hegel? How could Claude Welch, one of the foremost intellectual historians of the nineteenth century at the time, think so highly of Coleridge that he would make such an astonishing claim?

And so, I did what any student would do when faced with such an enigma: I walked to the library and began to explore the stacks related to Coleridge. What I found there was an overwhelming amount of material: books of poetry and criticism, stacks of biographies and letters and personal notebooks, and monographs on topics as wide-ranging as politics, science, and education. More than any other subject, I found myself sifting through book after book of criticism related to Coleridge's philosophical theology. As I pulled volume after volume off the shelves, I felt myself enamored by a writer whose works exceeded my ability to fully comprehend, engaging in an open-ended search for meaning that required me to weigh each passage with diligent scrutiny. Eventually, I landed on one work that figured repeatedly in accounts of Coleridge's legacy: *Aids to Reflection*, which had only recently appeared in John

Beer's authoritative Bollingen edition. This work, the first complete book by Coleridge that I ever read, taught me about a scholar's vocation more than any other in my entire career.

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In September 1836 a small group of scholars gathered in the Cambridge, Massachusetts home of George Ripley to discuss new ideas about humanity, religion, and society. In the symposium were some of the brightest young minds of the day. In addition to several divinity students were writers whose works would soon fill the shelves of New England bookstores: the group included, among others, the Massachusetts essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Connecticut educational reformer Bronson Alcott, and the print activist Orestes Brownson, who had recently moved to the area from New York and New Hampshire. These and other attendees, though not all of one mind, shaped an entire generation of American intellectual life. They were, as John Duffy has dubbed them, Coleridge's first 'American disciples'.[1]

The Hedge Club, as they were sometimes called, provided the foundation for what we now know as New England Transcendentalism. In their earliest meetings, as they sought a way to address questions about God and the world, they held in their hands a book that had been stocked in seminaries from Cambridge to Andover: Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, which had recently appeared in a new edition by the Vermont scholar James Marsh. Against the tide of Lockean empiricism, the Transcendentalists recognized in the English philosopher something new and valuable that might stimulate fresh pathways for American readers. They gravitated to his aphoristic style and thought he offered a sort of English translation of the latest trends in German philosophy. Hedge looked back on these days and recalled that Coleridge's writing 'had created a ferment in the minds of some of the young clergy of that day. There was a promise in the air of a new intellectual life'.[2]

In a way, the Hedge Club was a decidedly North American version of what Coleridge coined 'the clerisy.' In his *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, he described this as 'the learned of all denominations;—the sages and professors of the law and jurisprudence; of medicine and physiology; of music; of military and civil architecture; of the physical sciences; with the mathematical as the common *organ* of the preceding; in short, all the so called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the Theological' (*C&S* 46). The Hedge Club had the makings of just such an assembly, seeking opportunities to nourish their community with new cultural possibilities.

James Marsh dared to hope for this when he first planned the first American edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1829), writing to Coleridge of the need

[1] John J. Duffy, ed., *Coleridge's American Disciples: The Selected Correspondence of James Marsh* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973).

[2] Frederick Henry Hedge, quoted in Peter Carafiol, *Transcendent Reason: James Marsh and the Forms of Romantic Thought* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, 1982), 99.

for an alternative to the dominant views of the times. The writings of Locke and Bacon were well known, but Scottish 'Common Sense' authors such as Dugald Stewart, George Campbell, and Thomas Brown had displaced even them in philosophy; meanwhile, Jonathan Edwards continued to be read by New Englanders and, to Marsh's surprise, even many of the Unitarians who otherwise rejected a deterministic Calvinism. Marsh thought *Aids to Reflection* could 'help to place the lovers of truth and righteousness on better philosophical grounds', and, in his 'Preliminary Essay', argued on behalf of Coleridge's philosophy of mind as an essential aspect of any right thinking in philosophy and theology.[3]

Not surprisingly, when writers such as Emerson and Brownson appealed to Coleridge, they appealed to his thought not slavishly but constructively. Indeed, Marsh had recommended as much in his essay. In Coleridge they discovered not a doctrine but a method—theorized in his essays on the subject in *The Friend* and put to practice in *Aids to Reflection*—a way to think about the world that allowed space for truth in a society driven mad by a stifling dogmatism. Coleridge's attentiveness to language, especially, equipped them with a way of reflecting on the inner life of the soul and beliefs about God in a region where religious ideas were more often clouded by controversy than critical reflection. Moreover, Coleridge allowed for doubt, 'if only you have the disposition to believe', but he always thought that such a venture would finally lead to truth. Coleridge's American disciples were so committed to this principle that they could approvingly affirm his belief that 'He, who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own Sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all' (*AR* 107).

One aphorism from his work appears more than any other: 'Christianity is not a Theory, or a Speculation; but a *Life*. Not a *Philosophy* of Life, but a Life and a living Process' (*AR* 202). Instead of proofs or empirical evidence for faith, we must appeal to Reason in the spirit of ancients such as Plotinus, Origen, and Augustine. Coleridge's distinction between Reason and Understanding called back to the Neoplatonic tradition, providing a language for interior knowledge of transcendent ideas while still recognizing the force of human intellection. Applied to divinity, variations of this motto soon became a watchword for the times, repeated (often unknowingly) by an entire generation of American writers. Inspired by Coleridge's philosophy of language and epistemology, his earliest readers fostered the cultural landscape of the young nation.

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As a student working in both English literature and religious studies, Coleridge's multi-disciplinarity always attracted me. I have an especially fond recollection of an incident in graduate school that sent me further down this

[3] Marsh, *Coleridge's American Disciples*, 80.

path. My supervisor recommended that I should speak at an historical conference in which he was active. I was already a member of the American Society of Church History, and they were scheduled to meet with the American Catholic Historical Association in San Francisco, California. While the joint sessions they planned at that meeting were not likely to attract many Coleridgeans, he was keen to see interdisciplinary work from the nineteenth century flourish at the conference. His encouragement sparked boldness in my effort to propose a panel.

Honestly, I'm still not sure why they accepted my invitation, but I'm glad they did. When I first emailed Douglas Hedley at Cambridge, I only knew him by his work on Coleridge's philosophy of religion in *Aids to Reflection*. He accepted my panel idea and encouraged me to reach out to another scholar whose work he thought my fit well: Nick Reid, then at the University of Otago in New Zealand. To my astonishment, Nick also agreed to the plan. How on earth, I thought, did I convince two scholars to travel from England and New Zealand for a religious history conference in San Francisco? All that was needed was a respondent, so I aimed for the stars and received a warm response from none other than Claude Welch, former president of Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

When I arrived at the venue, I was dressed as formally as any doctoral student about to enter the job market one can imagine: my best collared shirt, business tie, and an appropriately bookish blazer. Douglas and Nick soon arrived and greeted me kindly. Prof. Welch was last to show up, strolling in without even stopping by the registration table (he was already an emeritus professor, if I recall correctly).

I only remember a few things from our session. Attendance was respectable but still smaller than I'd hoped. My speaking slot was between Nick and Douglas, suitably avoiding the pressures of opening or closing the panel with my talk. I spoke clearly, but my nerves were so sufficiently elevated that my hand quaked when I reached for a glass of water. I pressed on and, when all was complete, my supervisor told me that I had done well.

But what I had not expected from this event is everything that followed that weekend. Immediately after our session, I offered the possibility of going out for a meal with my fellow panelists. Prof. Welch was already heading home, so it would be only the three of us. In truth, I thought we might meet later in the day, but they seemed more interested in leaving right away. I had planned to attend as many sessions as possible, but in that moment there was only one right choice to make: I cast aside my conference booklet and took the opportunity to connect.

I suspect something like that weekend was happening when the Hedge Club met together so many years before. The three of us, drawn together from different continents and unique backgrounds, walked the streets of San Francisco talking and sharing, but the common text before us all that time was Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. And over the course of those days together, I learned not only about Coleridge but the state of the field, the conversations

surrounding his work, and the diverse network of scholars who labored to understand his writing. When Douglas mentioned the Coleridge Summer Conference, I thought the prospect of attending a weeklong conference nearly impossible. Douglas was insistent: 'You simply must,' he said.

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In August 2020, as the United States grappled with increasing political and cultural polarization, an opinion piece that mentioned Coleridge came to my attention. The essay by George Marlin appeared in the far-right media outlet *Newsmax* and bore an incendiary title: 'Leftist Tech Oligarchs: Destroying America's Middle Class'. At first, I wondered how a reference to Coleridge might end up in such an essay, but the answer soon came in a startling application of the 'clerisy' that laid blame for America's problems squarely on Coleridge's shoulders.

Marlin claimed that Coleridge's assertion of a national clerisy had created an oligarchy of power. These intellectuals dominate society as a 'global web of cultural creators, academia, the media, and even much of what remains of traditional religious institutions'. What's worse, Marlin asserted, the clerisy was now collaborating with 'the ultra-rich' in favor of 'progressive ideologies' that threaten to destroy 'intellectual diversity' and 'social mobility' in the United States and around the world.

The reference to Coleridge's clerisy—in such an anxiety-inducing essay, no less—reveals how easily his thought can be taken up for new (and sometimes nefarious) purposes in vastly different contexts. Despite Marlin's claims to the contrary, most Coleridge scholars think the clerisy describes a source of national cultivation, rooted in the classical ideal of the liberal arts and sciences, in which universal knowledge provides intellectual and spiritual nourishment that sustains and advances learning for the good of all members of the community. James Engell links the clerisy to the modern idea of the humanities, the creation of the National Trust, and the formation of 'ethically aware, conscientious citizens'.[4]

Marlin and Engell offer two radically different visions of Coleridge's clerisy. For one, the clerisy is an elitist body of insular academics who seek to dominate and control the nation. For the other, the clerisy names a wide range of representative members of the community tasked with the support and welfare of the whole. The distinction between the two makes all the difference.

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I made my first visit to the Coleridge Summer Conference twenty years ago. I had just completed my Ph.D. and, in line with my fascination with *Aids to Reflection*, most of my work focused on Coleridge's religious and philosophical thought. My knowledge of the field, apart from that auspicious meeting in San

[4] James Engell, "Coleridge's *Church and State*: A Reassessment of Culture, Clerisy, Catholicism, the Humanities, and a National Trust," *Wordsworth Circle* 52.1 (2021): 154.

Francisco, stemmed largely from a careful study of most every book and article related to Coleridge's theology and philosophy I could get my hands on.

When I arrived at the Bridgwater train station, my fear that I was only an outsider was quickly dispelled. Among the first I met was Murray Evans, who was writing on Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*. Soon I learned of others who waited with anticipation for the appearance of Coleridge's late notebooks and other writings in forthcoming critical editions. In time, I placed faces and names with the titles that I had read and studied with care over the course of years. Burwick. Modiano. Fulford. Davidson. Roe. Taylor. Harding. When I left my room at Cannington, I nearly ran into John Beer as he searched for his lodging, immediately next to mine. Awestruck, I could hardly speak in his presence and immediately called home from the parking lot to share my excitement.

Over and over again, I have found myself caught up with this new community. Intimate and familiar, yet critical and incisive, a remarkable connection has formed around Coleridge's life and work. We do not share the same beliefs, but Coleridge has inspired us all.

And with time and subsequent conferences, my own relationship to Coleridge and the Friends of Coleridge has changed. What began in an effort to understand the field has become a source of intellectual sustenance and, more importantly, friendship. Conference papers and Quantock walks, indeed, provide space to reflect on the latest interpretation of Coleridge's poetics, but as often I have heard the stories of family and friends. We have cherished moments of mutual illumination, mourned the death of colleagues, and lamented in times of distance. I find myself part of a community of the most ordinary people with extraordinary ideas about literature, philosophy, politics, and the world we inhabit. This society devoted to a celebrated author—this clerisy drawn from nations around the world—sits at round tables, seeking to understand a man who challenges us to develop as teachers, writers, and members of our respective communities.

And so it should come as no surprise that sometimes I look back fondly on a day at work and reflect on the time I have devoted to reading and writing about Coleridge's poetry and prose. Such a day, I think, has been a very good day indeed, for I am one of Coleridge's American disciples.

STC circa 46 to 49
Thomas Phillips (1770-1845); oil; 1818-21 (35 x 28 in.)
Wordsworth Trust; MP cat. 18.

STC at 61
Daniel Maclise (1806-70); pencil; 1833; (9 x 4 in.)
Victoria and Albert Museum; MP cat. 24