Coleridge and Eliot: the Idea of History

Graham Davidson

ONE OF THE PECULIARITIES OF THE NOW SADLY DEFUNCT and outmoded Oxford English Literature syllabus in the 1970s, which most other universities then adopted, was that students had to spend at least one year, sometimes two, studying Anglo-Saxon. With neither an 'O' nor an 'A' level in English literature, but lucky enough to get into Royal Holloway College—for which I thank Martin Dodsworth—I became enamoured of the Anglo-Saxons. The reasons were various: in part because of the nature of their heroism—backs to the wall, knowing they would be defeated, they fought to the death, neither asking nor looking for quarter, as did Byrthnoth, at the age of 65, at the Battle of Maldon; partly because they had a readiness for action at all times, often for altruistic causes: a particular word, 'utfus' characterized that attitude, and I once named one of my motorcycles 'utfus'; partly because they imbued material objects with a strong and positive spiritual sense—swords of course, but also smaller things such as broaches and rings—an idea which Tolkien, a leading if not the leading Beowulf scholar at the time, subverted in *The Lord of the Rings*. And they had a stoic melancholy which looked both backwards to their pagan past, and forwards to their Christian future, whilst they struggled between the two, neither here nor there, as the Seafarer found himself alone on an ice-cold ocean. I once wrote a poem based on The Seafarer, which I thought a lot better than Pound's rather superficial translation. Unfortunately, no-one else agreed.

In an attempt to avoid the imposition of a job, I found an MA course in Medieval Studies at Leeds, and pursued my interest in the Anglo-Saxons. During my undergraduate studies, I had realized that most scholarly energy was spent in attempting to prove that it was either a pagan poem, or a Christian one, and that if you believed the one, you had little time for the other. At that time Margaret Goldsmith's allegorical interpretation held the stage, but I could not accept so thorough a Christianization of a pre-Christian tale. Nor could I accept that it was entirely pagan. I was stuck between the two, unable to decide, and working through the pros and cons was the substance of my thesis—'The Christianity of *Beowulf*'.

In the Anglo-Saxon mind, 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation' ('Gerontion') a new form of thought had invaded a traditional culture, and offered answers to unresolved questions that tradition had ceased to ask, having turned instead to the stoicism I so much admired. But out of that conflict, I believed, came the culture particular to the Anglo-Saxons. And I think there was a question working in my mind I was not really aware of—how could one characterize that particular quality of consciousness? The answer came upon me one morning, out of the blue, in the Leeds English Department, walking down the corridor to my tutor's room (the very patient Joyce Hill). 'Annunciation'—that was the word. It was an idea that struck the perfect balance between the new and the old, with Paulinus the priest

preaching to Edwin the pagan. I'm not sure now whether it arrived with a lower or an upper case 'a', but it gained the second very quickly, possibly because I was aware of Eliot's symbolic use of the word in the *Four Quartets*.

The Oxford syllabus assumed two principal things, that English literature was a whole, and that it was divided into periods, something Eliot also assumed. If some form of annunciation was the beginning, how could one characterize the rest? The tempting answer was of course Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. Although one might link the embedding or incarnation of Christianity with the quality of consciousness of the Middle Ages; and although in the 16th and 17th centuries there might be some analogy with crucifixion in the division of body and soul, the dissociation of sensibility consequent upon Cartesian thought, how could one possibly associate, say, Shakespeare's work with that word? And as Eliot only used the ideas of Annunciation and Incarnation to interpret rare moments of mystical experience, not as the organizing power of human or historical life, I abandoned what initially seemed—in Baldrick's words—rather a cunning plan.[1]

Coleridge

That is until, many years later, I came to Coleridge. Of the various things he said that reminded me of my forgotten scheme was his assertion that 'The sum of my Belief is, that nothing happened to Jesus, which in and thro' him must not happen to every elect Believer' (*CN* V 5979). The five stages listed above are a doctrinal resumé of Jesus's life, the history of his time on earth, and if Coleridge meant anything, he was presumably referring to key events of that kind. The task of a believer, then, is some mode of re-enactment, or an expectation that their life will follow a pattern set by Jesus—not a very comforting thought, despite his 'comfortable words'. But it is the task of an elect Christian believer, and so all the rest of us are left in limbo. However, to my mind there is a question as to what constitutes the belief of a believer. Does it have to be limited to a consciously held system? Clearly it did for Coleridge, but it seems to me that the term could be legitimately broadened, something I consider in a moment.

Coleridge also believed that there is an inter-relation between personal experience and national histories, which he asserted followed a comparable course: 'Take from History its impertinences and it differs from the Pilgrim's Progress only in the coincidence of Proper Names with those of the particular Time and Place.' Christian is the pilgrim of course, and so the progress of a Christian life is, in Coleridge's opinion, also in some way the course of history. It is difficult to know what Coleridge means by 'impertinencies', but probably almost everything we now associate with the word 'history'. He said that of anyone, including Wordsworth, he had 'the faintest pleasure in things contingent and transitory', giving as his example a visit to Caenarvon Castle when he 'wished the Guide 50 miles off that was telling me, in this Chamber

[1] https://blackadderquotes.com/i-have-a-cunning-plan

the Black Prince was born / or whoever it was' (*CN* II 2066). But if Coleridge dismissed as insignificant such historical associations, he had no more respect for those who sought a coherent historical narrative by identifying the intentions of key players. That method he called 'grave ways of Lying, by which actions the most independent are linked together by psychological and conjectural copula' as exemplified in the works of Voltaire, Hume, and Gibbon. He much preferred 'the harmless conventional … machinery of the Historic Epos in our ancient Historians'. In sum he felt that 'But for Christ, Christianity, Christendom, as centres of convergence, I should utterly want the *historic* sense. Even as it is, I feel it very languid in all particular History'. (*CN* V 6711).

Coleridge was willing to push this idea to its limits. Reflecting on his reading of Deuteronomy in 1830, he jotted down his belief that Hebrew history and its fulfilment in Christ

> is the very Tap-root, and Trunk of the Moral and therefore of the physical & political *History* of the whole Planet—of all Human Progression /…I cannot conceive, that any thoughtful mind, not perverted and <rendered> insensate by sophistry, should withstand the evidence. (*CN* V 6282)

That's too much for most of us—'the whole Planet'?—and so we feel that the sophistry is Coleridge's. But he also asserted that

> the fundamental *Doctrines* of Christianity are *Ideas*, Truths having in themselves their own evidence…Truths that involve their *reality*, as Beings…that the Scheme is…true *historically*—the solution, the rationale, and the interpretative copula of the History of Mankind.[2]

Those doctrines are therefore secondary to, and substantiated by, the ideas that he claimed universal. What Coleridge means by 'ideas' is complex—but he doesn't mean concepts, he means powers or what he calls 'Beings'. If, and to us it is a very big if, ideas are universal, the substance of our humanity, then history is the narrative by which those doctrines are articulated—acted and re-enacted religion by religion, nation by nation, individual by individual. Philosophy, the study of ideas, was 'an essential part of the history of man, as if it were the striving of a single mind, under very different periods of its own growth and development' (*PL* 67). We are all one mind, as we are all one life.

Eliot

Eliot was even more forceful than Coleridge in his rejection of history interpreted through the motives of the main players. He felt that the result of that method was 'largely a mere chronicle without meaning'. Instead he asserted that 'The most successful attempt that has ever been made, perhaps the only attempt, to organise history… into an intelligible process has been the

[2] CC 233. See also *SM* 24: 'At the annunciation of *principles*, of *ideas*, the soul of man awakes, and starts up, as an exile in a far distant land at the unexpected sounds of his native language …'.

philosophy of Hegel, who wanted to see world history as the outworking of *Geist* or spirit'. (He had forgotten or didn't know about Giambattista Vico). That is obviously comparable to Coleridge's idea of history as 'the striving of a single mind, under very different periods of its own growth and development' (*PL* 67).

Eliot's conversion necessarily meant that he would see such a development, personal or historical, in Christian terms. In the *Four Quartets* only in *The Dry Salvages* does he use the words 'Annunciation' and 'Incarnation'. Annunciation occurs three times, all in section II, twice with a lower case, finally with an upper, and they appear to be progressive: 'the calamitous annunciation', 'the last annunciation' and 'the one Annunciation'. Each verse describes various aspects of the relentless progress of time—soundless wailing, withering flowers, failing pride—to which there is no end. Finally, 'Only the hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation' offers any glimpse of another and redemptive condition. But in the fifth and last section of the poem, Eliot is confident that in the Incarnation 'The past and the future / Are conquered, and reconciled.' Although all these are impersonal declarations, they have their origin in private experience, the moment in the rose garden, the moment in the draughty church at smokefall, moments in and out of time, moments when past and future are reconciled—moments of incarnation. There is a progress from annunciation to incarnation. As an elect believer he must have thought of his experience as in some way analogous to that of Jesus. He remembered having once been asked why he hadn't also used 'Crucifixion'. He didn't offer an answer, but nor did he think it a captious question.

And that would appear to be largely that. Apart from the 'backward look … towards the primitive terror' behind recorded history—the type of history he had to all intents dismissed—there is no mention of history until the last section of *Little Gidding*, the last of the *Quartets*. There Eliot declares that 'history is a pattern / Of timeless moments'. This is clearly a different kind of history, creating a pattern in historical time of moments outside time. To that point all the timeless moments have been moments of private experience, moments which realize the Incarnation, 'the gift half understood'. And yet here these moments have become public, national property—'A people without history / Is not redeemed from time', and 'History is now and England'.

This is a sudden and puzzling transition. What is Eliot's idea of the relationship between personal experience and national history? As far as I know, neither in his major poetry nor in his prose does Eliot develop the idea of history hinted at in the *Quartets*. But personal experience is one thing—the work of ideas—and doctrinal commitment another. In respect of the latter, when asked to write a pageant play, *The Rock,* to raise money for London churches, he was forthright in his allegiance. Something happened 'that has never happened / before': the Incarnation

> … came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,
> A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a

> moment in time,
> A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning. (*Choruses* VII)

Conventional history and Eliot's idea of history are interrelated. The Incarnation was a historical event, 'bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a / moment in time', as well as 'an item of individual experience' as Eliot put it (*AP* I 906). If the Annunciation also bisected time, could he have extrapolated those two to include the final three, those five stages then becoming the timeless moments in time, creating a history which redeems the nation and redeems the individual? If so, then his idea of history is close to that of Coleridge.

But what kind of historical narrative might emerge? I don't think Eliot left us any clues, but Coleridge had a scheme, declaring that the 'Destruction of Jerusalem is the only subject remaining for an Epic Poem'. It was to have been structured around 'the completion of the prophecies', that is, the arrival and life of the Messiah or Christ. 'Who more convinced than I am … that the Law and Prophets speak throughout of Christ'. Coleridge conflates the Bible as a history with the Bible as a national literature—or in his mind, *the* national literature—'the very Tap-root, and Trunk of the Moral and therefore of the physical & political *History* of the whole Planet—of all Human Progression.' The epochs of Hebrew history were to inform the structure and progress of his epic.

He had chosen his narrative carefully. Jerusalem fell to the Romans in AD 70, after the death and disappearance of Jesus, after, in doctrinal terms, the Ascension. And Coleridge saw Jerusalem's fall as a kind of ascension, as a completion of life in time, 'the Type of the final close of the whole World of Time, i.e. of all *temporal* things' (*TT* 24 April 1832). And this he takes as the intention of Hebrew history: the contents of the Bible 'present to us the stream of time continuous as Life and a Symbol of Eternity, in as much the Past and the Future are virtually contained in the Present' (*CC* 245, *SM* 29-30). Or, as Eliot put it, 'Time past and time future / … / Point to one end, which is always present'—and that presence, at least for Coleridge, is eternity.

So far I have suggested that Coleridge and Eliot shared a metaphysic which derived from doctrines associated with the life of Jesus, and this metaphysic underpinned both their readings of individual experience and their understanding of history. But for Coleridge at least, these doctrines were ideas or powers at the very heart of our humanity, and therefore fundamental to our psychology. That is, one might expect them to appear in other forms and other ways, dissociated from any conceptualization as doctrines. I have sometimes wondered whether *The Prelude* can't be read in such a way—the discovery, the realization, the loss, the partial recovery, and finally, if not in the poem itself, then in the poet's life, a separation from the experience that questions the whole: the disciple of his own work left stranded on earth. Whether or not it can be read thus, *The Prelude* has a metaphysical structure, based on what

Coleridge and Wordsworth both called Reason, and which they believed was the ground of our humanity, common to all.

What has this got to do with the future of narrative poetry? If Coleridge, Wordsworth and Eliot discovered or recovered a lost power, then it remained a personal experience. Though it was their intention, they could not transform it into a narrative, some tale by Milton left unsung, a story which does not speak of self, but in which all selves are found. Wordsworth tried in *The Excursion*, and in such poems as Peter Bell, but each story was only himself writ large—and *The Excursion* is largely a discursion. The sense of spiritual confidence with which most of the Romantic poets wrote faded away with the Victorians, reflected in their narratives. Eliot partly recovered that confidence, which in the most general terms could be called 'belief', but though trying to do so in his plays, he too failed to get beyond the personal. It is my opinion that no great poetry, whether lyric and personal, or narrative and non-personal, can be written without that inner metaphysical confidence.

But a word of caution derived from a distinction made by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. For Marlow 'the meaning of an episode was not inside, like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale …'. If in this analogy the kernel is confidence or belief, that kernel neither shapes nor gives the story, the shell, its meaning. The meaning is, for Marlow, in the kind of misty halo that envelops nut and shell, sometimes 'made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine'. Co-incidentally—I presume—that is much like the work Coleridge attributes to the imagination, when the moonlight, 'diffused over a known and familiar landscape' (in this analogy the story) gives it 'a sudden charm'. Without the kernel the shell is hollow, and without the shell the nut cannot live. Yet the meaning is in neither the one nor the other, but derived from a power diffused over and through both. (This is also, in effect, Coleridge's definition of a symbol).

If that is how meaning happens, then The Fall of Jerusalem is not the only subject left for an epic, or long poem. It could be any story informed, consciously or subconsciously, by a kernel of belief, by a power that speaks to and of our humanity, as perhaps the only fully successful narrative poem of the Romantics, *The Ancient Mariner*, written in the ebullience of youth, can be seen to embody Coleridge's yet unworked out psychological and philosophical principles. But if you are not a believer in the broadest sense, in the very different ways that Hegel, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Eliot were believers, then life is a mere chronicle, strung out hopelessly to the last syllable of recorded time.