Coleridge's Healing Thought

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IT IS MY GOOD FORTUNE THAT MY OWN INTRODUCTION to Coleridge came by way of Owen Barfield, who was a family friend. During a game of correspondence chess when I was an undergraduate, he offered wise and patient answers to the drip-drip-drip of my naive questions about the Sage of Highgate. *What Coleridge Thought* fell into my hands at that ripe moment. Barfield's book helped to shape not merely my thoughts about Coleridge's thought, but my experience and enjoyment of the act of thinking itself; in this way, it also helped to shape my most inward sense of myself. I think it is fair to say that without Barfield I would not have found my way to Coleridge, that my understanding of both Coleridge and myself was moulded by him, and that for me Coleridge's relevance is bound up with that of Barfield.

I mention this important event in my life because for me it relates to the issue of Coleridge's relevance, or its absence. Initially, my energy flagged before this dispiriting question. Relevant as opposed to what? It was difficult not to sense an unintended trap. Barfield's etymological approach and his focus on the act of thinking—and his attention to Coleridge's interest in thinking and etymology—helped me to an answer. What, after all, does it mean to be relevant? Borrowed from French, 'relevance' begins its life in the 16th century as a technical term in Scottish law meaning legally sufficient or adequate. It implies a dispute; its presence suggests accusation or defence, some contested ground. Perhaps that is why, for me at least, a hint of defensiveness shadows the topic of Coleridge's relevance, a felt need to show Coleridge's practical applicability or liability—what problems does he solve, what pressing contemporary questions does he answer; or, in what ways is he more blind than ourselves, in what ways is he ripe for our condescension? How, in short, can we laud him for fitting our own convictions, eschew him for lying outside of them, or decry his passage into apostasy when he moves from the one to the other?

A more hopeful and profound meaning of 'relevance' lies in its Latin ancestor, *relevare*, which means to lighten, ease or refresh. This suggests a different story. Relevance is not measured by whether something is adequate to us, or is a tool in a dispute, but acknowledges that something afflicts us, that some dark weight irritates and oppresses us, from which we wittingly or unwittingly seek relief in the relevant. More speculatively, we might also say that relevance suggests revelation, a lifting of the curtain that separates us from some important insight, or of the dark matter that weighs us down like the leaden cloaks of the hypocrites in Dante's *Inferno*. To be relevant in this sense means not only to relieve but to reveal. We may not even know that we are encumbered, that there is anything essential from which we are eclipsed. My own view is that our era of ubiquitous polarization is making us unwell, not only in political discourse, where it is most obvious, but in the academy and the wider culture alike. To take a random example, in the most recent issue of

PMLA—the official journal of the Modern Language Association and so as squarely at the center of American academia as anything—every essay has a political focus: 'Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*—Forty Years On,' 'Lawino in the Library: Anthropology, Modernity, and the Profession of African Literature,' 'Pound's *Four Pages*: 'Literary Camoflage' and Postwar Anonymous Propaganda,' 'Time, Sovereignty, and Refugee Writing,' '*Afrisc Meowle:* Exploring Race in the Old English *Exodus*,' and "The True and Only Bones of Columbus': Relics, Archives, and Reversed Scenarios of Discovery.' It is no slight on these essays, which I have chosen because they are recent, that their narrow focus suggests a consensus; absent from them is an explicit recognition that the foundations of one's own thinking—political or otherwise, if there is an otherwise—are up for review. As a rule, the critique of ideology directs itself outward.

Coleridge himself encouraged his readers to critique their own thinking down to the foundations, and to dig up the myriad unconsidered forms of unsustainable polarization, whether metaphysical, epistemological, political, etc., that lie hidden therein. My interest in Coleridge has less to do with whether he can be enlisted on this or that side of some issue, than it does with how the flexible method of thinking that he developed helps to counteract the abstract, sclerotic rigidity of thought and language that has made professional academic writing increasingly, well, irrelevant, to the interests and concerns of those like myself who spend most of their time outside of the academy. It also extends beyond the narrowness of contemporary critical methodology to all forms of dualistic polarization, in which Northrop Frye would undoubtedly have found a parody of genuine polarity, that is always threefold, as Barfield noted in *What Coleridge Thought*.

It is perhaps obvious by now that I am drawn to the addicted, afflicted Coleridge who developed a uniquely radical way of thinking, more than to the politically radical, but otherwise relatively conventional, young Unitarian. This is why the decade from 1815-1825 has been of particular interest to me. During these years, Coleridge performed a searching critique of his own thinking. He had already refuted to his own satisfaction the spectrum of mechanico-materialist philosophies as well as the Cartesian and post-Cartesian varieties of dualism; more than this, he had shown the deep structural identity of Lockean and Cartesian philosophies, despite their surface opposition. During this intellectually turbulent decade, though, Coleridge also faced the dissolution of his own most cherished form of post-Kantian idealism. His inability to carry out the deduction of the imagination in Chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria* was of great importance to him personally, and perhaps remains significant for us because it was due not to the rushed circumstances of the book's composition, or to flawed arguments that might be repaired at leisure, but to limitations inherent to the Kantian and post-Kantian method of transcendental argumentation upon which Coleridge relied.

If this were all, it might not mean so much, but Coleridge followed his diagnosis of the fundamental methodological error of 'all the doctors of the

Absolute' (*CN* 3, 4442) with the simultaneous discovery of the hermeneutic that he describes in the 'Essays on Method' (1818). In a letter that offers his son Derwent a brief tutorial on logic, Coleridge said that 'in point of value [the 'Essays'] … outweigh all my other works' (*CL* 4, 885). Coleridge recognized that the 'Essays' were a pivotal event for him not because they finally allowed him to join the doctors of the Absolute, or gave him permission to retreat into religious dogma, but because they put forward a limitless, poetic method of inquiry that folds in the methods, the fundamental cognitive modes, of both the empiricists and the idealists; the modes, in short, that are paradigmatic for our time and that form what William Blake might call the 'rough basement' of all the oppositions that block our progress. In short, they move beyond the reductive polarization of thinking to its proper contrariety (to use another of Blake's concepts that harmonizes well with Coleridge), its threefold and productive polarity. The idealism and deductive argumentation of Spinoza and Schelling, though it claims to be all-encompassing, forms the 'relations of law' that are but one third of this closed but limitless methodological circuit. Plato remains the ideal idealist because he resists dogmatic system-building, his 'true system of philosophy' instead being 'the science of Method, and the grounds and conditions of the science of method' (*F* 1, 487).

Method *is* the goal, not the means to arrive at whatever we imagine the end to be. At the opposite pole, Mrs. Quickly-like empiricists, distracted by each passing sensation, respond to the promptings of the inward querist who is irritated into conscious thought by some anomalous phenomenon that requires explanation. Relations of the fine arts lie between these poles; they raise seemingly inexplicable sensations into the universal by intuiting the 'leading thought' and 'progressing transition' that are necessary to inquiry at all. At the same time, they bring the universal 'principle of unity with progression' (*F* 1, 476) to the messy particulars that resist coherence. Coleridge's poetic philosopher is neither a materialist nor an idealist, neither a skeptic nor a rationalist, neither a liberal nor a conservative, but a *tertium aliquid* that includes and harmonizes these dualities without fixing them into place. Coleridge's concrete universals—relations of the fine arts—refuse total absorption into the 'relations of law' that are the equivalent of Hegel's principle that the real is the rational. This threefold, poetic method defines the true system of philosophy as the progressive but unending inquiry into its own foundations. (I am aware that this picture of Coleridge's development is unusual, but I think it is right. If it is wrong, I nevertheless follow the fruitful advice of Dmitri Shostakovich to his student Sofia Gubaidulina: you must continue on your mistaken path.)

Perhaps it is already obvious that I consider Coleridge to be enduringly relevant, in the medicinal rather than the legal sense, not because he has some special thought that will bring peace to the body politic, but because he points out that it is our way of thinking itself that causes our trouble, and that we are occluded from recognizing this because our habitual way of thinking is itself the dark cloak that covers our eyes. In an era when we are plagued by seemingly inescapable polarization and our own thoughts are increasingly

indistinguishable from reaction formations, Coleridge demonstrates the need and the method to incorporate polarity as a living, poetic principle into our intellectual and politico-cultural life by softening and unifying the polarizing tendencies of theory and law with the 'both-and' aesthetic concepts of the fine arts.

Coleridge demonstrates this method time and again in the intellectual laboratory of his notebooks. For example, an 1819 entry begins with the curious deduction that 'Either our spiritual Instincts have their correspondent Objects as well as the animal Instinct, or it is the in the Holiesty Temple Place of the noblest Temple, the Heart of Man, that Nature tells her first *Lie*' (*CN* 3, 4438). This recalls the declaration in the *Biographia*, in a passage devoted to the 'philosophic imagination,' that 'all the organs of sense are framed for a corresponding world of sense; and we have it. All the organs of spirit are framed for a correspondent world of spirit: though the latter organs are not developed in all alike. But they exist in all, and their first appearance discloses itself in the moral being' (*BL* 1, 241-242). The notebook passage, by comparison, is more tentative, paradoxical, and nuanced. It continues:

> Ideas as anticipations are intellectual Instincts—the Future is their Object, even as Sound to the Ear—the Distant is necessary to give the Direction, the Missing, the Desiderium, the Impulse,—Cause contains effect—and the effect must be ejusdem generis—yet the Cause goes before in order and in time/when we understand this, we shall understand the intellectual & moral Instincts.

At the back of this reflection is an irritating doubt, an anomalous experience: ideas arise unprompted in us. We are always first aware of them not in the act of production, but as products. What to make of this? Coleridge's 'leading thought' as he explores the question is a double metaphor: intellect is an instinct; its home is the human heart, which is a holy temple. That is not proven or even claimed, but noted as a feature of 'spiritual instinct.' Coleridge's supposition—C S Peirce, whose thought has much in common with Coleridge's, would call it an 'abduction'—is that ideas, which are the immediate products of this 'instinct,' are inherently pre-conscious and prospective 'anticipations.' (We will see below how they relate to will.) They are inextricable from causality, which brings them under the umbrella of 'relations of theory,' but the causality is atemporal, the effect contained in the cause, which is a property of 'relations of law.'

Facilitating the traffic between these relations are alogical poetic concepts; for example, that ideas are silent sounds. (I am reminded of the complex metaphor favoured by Yeats and Pound at Stone Cottage, that to perceive beauty is to hear incense). They are potent with desire, impulse, the 'missing,' and so on. There are gestures towards system and transcendental deduction: 'were not man unearthly, unworldly, and above Time, how could he utter the words earthly, worldly, temporal.' It seems that a necessary condition to grasp the concept 'temporal' is that we inhabit eternity, but Coleridge quickly adds

that the deduction of eternity hinges on the insight that the words earthly, worldly, and temporal 'derive their meaning from their opposite,' which also implies the opposite: unless we were worldly, we could not grasp the heavenly that is 'above Time.' The result of Coleridge's musing is neither a closed idealist system nor an anti-idealist scepticism, but the softening of what might become polarized or thoughtless into a nuanced, flexible, self-aware, non-reductive, open-ended inquiry, catalysed by 'poetic logic,' into the spiritual and the worldly alike.

To tentatively posit 'intellectual & moral instincts' is to ask: what does it mean to stand in relation to another human being? What kind of thinking is relevant to *that*? In the passage about 'spiritual organs' in the *Biographia*, Coleridge refers to our 'moral being' as the first sign of their existence, and in the notebook entry he implies that our 'spiritual instincts' are homologous with our 'intellectual and moral instincts.' This was no accidental association. In the years following the 'Essays on Method,' especially in *Aids to Reflection* and *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge developed a robust moral philosophy that might be relevant today. For example, in an important passage in the *Aids* Coleridge shifts and complicates the opposition of 'conscience' and 'feeling' he had been considering to the amount of 'consciousness' in 'thoughts and words' versus 'impulses and general actions:'

> The more consciousness in our Thoughts and Words, and the less in our Impulses and general Actions, the better and more healthful the state of both head and heart. As the Flowers from an Orange Tree in its time of blossoming, that burgeon forth, expand, fall and are momently replaced, such is the sequence of hourly and momently Charities in a pure and gracious soul. . . . The modern Fiction which depictures the son of Cytherea with a bandage round his eyes, is not without a spiritual meaning. There is a sweet and holy Blindness in Christian LOVE, even as there is a blindness in Life, yea and of Genius too in the moment of productive Energy. (*AR* 96-97)

'Consciousness' here holds an intermediate position between head and heart. By moving the opposition away from the tedious traditional conflict of logic and feeling, Coleridge moves the moral debate to aesthetic grounds. Kantian 'law' softens into 'thoughts and words,' which refers to their symbolizing function as 'the *Wheels* of intellect' (*AR* 7). This in turn yields to the image of a 'healthful' unity of 'heart and head' as a 'Christian LOVE' that is like 'Genius . . . in the moment of productive Energy' (*AR* 97). When symbolizing consciousness unifies head and heart, moral determination converges on aesthetic determination as the constitutive genius, the potent visionary blindness, of altruistic 'Christian LOVE.'

We are a long way from the static polarization of unreflective moral-political judgment here. We have still further we can go, though, to reach the *ne plus ultra* of Coleridge's thinking: the grounding of consciousness in conscience, of the self-aware 'I' in the prior and primordial encounter with a 'Thou.'

Because conscience is 'underived [and] unconditional' it is an open-ended Absolute, 'the root and precondition of all other consciousness' (*OM* 60). Coleridge explains the relation of 'I' to second and third person pronouns:

> the third pronoun '*he*,' '*it*,' etc. could never have been contradistinguished from the first 'I,' 'me,' etc. but by means of the second. There could be no '*He*' without a previous '*Thou,*' and I scarcely need add that without a '*Thou*' there could be no opposite, and of course no distinct or conscious sense of the term '*I,*' as far as consciousness is concerned, without a '*Thou'*. . . . If then there can be no '*He*' nor '*It*' without an '*I*,' and no '*I*' without a '*Thou*,' the solution of the problem must be sought for in the genesis or origination of the '*Thou*.' (*OM* 74-75).

Conscience precedes and underlies consciousness because all consciousness is of or for an 'I,' which does not appear before the pre-conscious approach of a 'Thou.' The first blossoming of the 'I,' on which all others depend, is this original revelation. An 'it' is a dead object, an other that is set against me as not me: in short, it belies unhealthy polarization, and the flattening of all relations to externality. 'Thou' is distinct from 'it' because, like the 'I,' it is non-empirical; consequently, 'Thou' and 'I' share what Coleridge in *The Statesman's Manual* calls the 'tautegorical' relation of sameness-and-difference that characterizes symbolic-poetic thinking. As the primordial relation (and awareness of this relation), it is the root of all other such experiences.

What emerges is a vision of the 'self' that shares with the empiricists the anti-essentialist view that the self builds itself from encounters with heterogeneous others, and with Kant a conviction that the self has a logical structure. Only, for Coleridge that logic is threefold, 'constructive,' and aligned with aesthetic judgment. Coleridge also agrees with Kant that in some ways the self is equivalent with the will, but because for Coleridge the will is both productive and receptive—in fact, is most receptive at the height of its activity—he cannot agree that it imposes universally binding moral laws on others. For Coleridge, the will is the 'idea,' considered as a force, that emerges along with consciousness in the aboriginal encounter of 'I' and 'Thou.' Rooted in his generous understanding of method as the unending inquiry by the self into its own foundations, this, finally, is what distinguishes Coleridge's healing thought from the polarized, and reductively politicized, judgment that is common today. The relevant moral law governing a given situation is the same as the unique and ungeneralizable approach of the Thou that constitutes me as an I. It is a primordial meeting in the heart's temple where I and Thou forever blossom into one another.