Coleridge Study Weekend, September 2017

'Coleridge's Religious Imagination'

Peter Larkin

MALCOLM GUITE OPENED THE WEEKEND, DEDICATED to the memory of Shirley Watters, with a stirring address, closely argued but with an improvisatory feeling throughout. He presented the 'shaping spirit of imagination' as a 'living Power' freshly conceived in 'Frost at Midnight' but immediately reoffered to the sleeping babe as the intelligible and symbolic value of nature, so that even here we could already glimpse the core of the poet's later logosophia. The imaginative poem is the essential forerunner of rational reflection, in that imagination holds open a space into which we can grow (illustrated by Coleridge's famous image of the horned fly leaving room in its involucrum for antennae yet to come). By the time of 'Dejection: an Ode' there is a painful disjunction between sight and feeling, though this lament for the loss of the poet's 'shaping spirit' still takes place within a poem whose object is feeling. This polarity between illumination and despair, or possible regeneration, is already prefigured in *The Ancient Mariner* but its full theological realisation occurs in Malta in 1805, where Coleridge is entranced by the sight of the full moon, but finds himself in the midst of thought as well as feeling. He finds that external nature can prompt a new or forgotten truth in humanity's interior nature, in a vision of the divine logos, creator and evolver beyond the terms of polarity.

Genevieve Smart showed us how for Coleridge it is the phenomenon of pregnancy which is the most mysterious element in any system of creation and becoming, given that the liminality of the womb involves moving from one being to two beings. Birth is a transition which essentially involves suffering, just as the pains of death can herald a spiritual rebirth. While the mother holds the baby within existence through a shared subjectivity, an essential gap appears through which a new self can gaze ambivalently beyond the mother, and such a new whole is the first access to the mystery of divine life itself. At the origin of thought itself for Coleridge is how the mother looks beyond the baby towards God, but in so doing tears a hole through the emergent ego of the child. For Coleridge, Christ's own presence in the world is not just a birth but more like a primordial reshaping from within the ultimate itself. Genevieve ended by reminding us that if giving birth is the most radical act of the primary imagination, it is not narrowly gender-bound, as male poets and thinkers can also experience the pangs of a creative pregnancy, or the sheer emergence of language towards the logos, its proper offspring.

Kenneth Boyd posed the awkward question of whether Coleridge lost contact with the imagination altogether, or was it that the imagination lost interest in him? Pure metaphor failed to give sufficient scope for the varied feelings Coleridge needed to draw from his poetry, and he came to feel that the *Biographia* contained only fragments of truth compared to his later thought.

This involved a re-assessment of the role of imagination from within a complex of later preoccupations. In *The Statesman's Manual* understanding on its own leaves us with a clarity lacking depth, but imagination allows depth to penetrate this clearness, so that the resulting understanding can be more intuitive. The imagination evokes in us a deeper sense of what is ungraspable in the mysterious, by which we can attain intuitive clearness but should expect no simple expositional transparency. By the time of *Aids to Reflection*, there is a fear that excessive imaginative weavings might well provoke wild speculation or negative superstitions. The power of reflection tends to substitute for imagination in these later works, as Coleridge feels reflection guides us more directly towards the truths revealed in intuition. In the *Opus Maximum*, however, the pure imagination does have a share in completing the processes of understanding. Coleridge is on his guard against thought's tendency to reduce mystery to the status of a purely intellectual problem. Kenneth concluded his talk with some brilliant illustrations of how Coleridge might well have been fascinated by recent brain research which reveals the left and right hemispheres to be in complex interrelation: the left unpacks the intuitions of the right, but it then remains for the right to integrate intuition and knowledge into some sort of world view, which the left is unable to do alone. And Coleridge finally leaves us one succinct marginal jotting in which the religious simply becomes the union of imagination and reason.

Helen Boyles brought us closer to the sheer bodily actuality of Coleridge's spirituality. She related the contemporary Methodist understanding of 'Extraordinary Revelation', with its emphasis on accident and surprise rather than cerebration, to Coleridge's own notebook jottings where he records his sense of weather and elemental forces around him. What is religious is also liminal, so that border sensations like fear, wonder and faith animate bodily perception but also conjure up another dimension. Coleridge was always to feel his childhood visionary wisdom couldn't be contained within purely material experience, but it was his discovery of the Lakes which exposed him to new horizons of muscular exertion amid elevated and elevating landscapes, constantly alternating between serenity and turbulence. Effects of water and light gave visionary glimpses of an intuitive inter-connectedness not dependent on overt metaphoric construction, but rather opening to a fluent spirituality of innate cohesion. Such an active sense of vision and agency Coleridge found impossible to maintain, and an increasing sense of darker obstructions, inertia and nostalgia takes over, amid a wounding conviction that his earlier visionary appetite was being held back.

Is there a more ghostly fate for the imagination in Coleridge's later thought? Suzanne Webster convinced us that Coleridge's sense of where imagination was leading grew increasingly contested. Coleridge becomes more preoccupied with how to form the habit of religious feeling and insists holiness must have an ontological reality beyond the subjectivity of the believer. The proofs of God's existence essentially take place in time, as a quantum of history. Thinking needs to be directed towards the divine, Trinitarian personeity; if not,

philosophy remains content with a purely formal contemplation and never forms part of religious expression and dedication. Within all this, imagination remains multi-dimensional and therefore ambivalent. It can come to be associated with over-ingenuity and exaggeration leading to a false nostalgia or negative obsessiveness. Coleridge had no interest in art for art's sake but was drawn to the use of active symbols aiming towards interpreting the life of God within us. In that sense, the secondary imagination emerges as the higher faculty in that it recreates, and not just repeats, the divine act of creation by deploying its own irreducible act of will and assent from within its deliberate imaginative response.

As doesn't always happen, the Weekend was graced with fine, bright weather on the Saturday, so the visit to Hestercombe Gardens was much appreciated, while the walkers crossed the Quantock hills via Halsway Post, returning through Somerton Combe after having traversed Higher Hare Knap. The hills looked radiant in the early autumn light, and the pleasure was repeated for those who could linger on Sunday afternoon with a gentle walk up Paradise Combe. The evening before, we had enjoyed a poetry reading which reminded us the 'religious imagination' was by no means confined to the Romantics.

Given that this year was to be the last time I shall be planning and directing the Weekends, I was very touched by the extremely generous presentation that was made to me, and would like to thank all those involved, as well as special thanks to Maggie Roberts and David Rix for their invaluable support over a number of years. These Weekends remain essentially a legacy from Reggie and Shirley Watters, and with our new Director in place, Greg Leadbetter, they have a bright future ahead which I look forward to continuing to enjoy.