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reads
Coleridge and Communication
(Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015)
By Florian Bissig

READERS OF *THE COLERIDGE BULLETIN* KNOW ALL TOO WELL that standing at the receiving end of Coleridge's communications requires an especially active mode of interpretation. Signals get crossed, and lines of transmission blur. The message modulates over time, and the play of competing, oft-revised utterances over a vast corpus raises questions of authority and priority. Unilateral pronouncements vie against the ideal of reciprocal exchange. The messenger critiques the medium, or mediation more generally. Central preoccupations are buried—by happenstance or design—in anecdotes and digressions. In *Coleridge and Communication*, Florian Bissig surveys these productive difficulties in charting the possibilities and pitfalls inherent in Coleridge's ideal of communication. As he puts it, Coleridge was 'obsessed' with communication—'with sounding out its possibilities, with enhancing and controlling it, and with performing the fantasy of its accomplishment' (3).

In this judicious study, all roads inevitably lead to questions of communication. Within an admittedly all-encompassing conceptual territory, Bissig has a knack for elucidating the broad stakes in seemingly insignificant moments. Take, for example, his riff on Coleridge's own anecdote about his 1796 'campaign' to drum up subscribers for *The Watchman.* After reluctantly agreeing to smoke a pipe with several Birmingham tradesmen or, as he put it, 'illuminati,' Coleridge was hobbled by an unexpected 'giddiness' that left him in a veritable swoon at precisely the wrong moment:

> For here and thus I lay, my face like a wall that is white-washing, *deathy* pale and with the cold drops of perspiration running down it from my forehead, while one after another there dropt in the different gentlemen, who had been invited to meet, and spend the evening with me, to the number of from fifteen to twenty. As the poison of tobacco acts but a short time, I at length awoke from insensibility, and looked around on the party, my eyes dazzled by the candles which had been lighted in the interim. By way of relieving my embarrassment one of the gentlemen began the conversation, with "*Have you seen a paper to day, Mr. Coleridge*" Sir! (I replied, rubbing my eyes) "I am far from convinced, that a Christian is permitted to read either newspapers or any other works of merely political and temporary interest." This remark so ludicrously inapposite to, or rather, incongruous with, the purpose, for which I was known to have visited Birmingham… produced an

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> involuntary and general burst of laughter; and seldom indeed have I passed so many delightful hours, as I enjoyed in that room from the moment of that laugh to an early hour the next morning. (BL I 183)

The anecdote is a relatively minor example in Bissig's study, but it illuminates several of his overarching concerns. On the surface of it, verbal communication breaks down—Coleridge sends the wrong message, but this failure sets the stage for the convivial evening that follows. Latent in the anecdote is a glimpse of Coleridge's celebration of an ideal mode of communication, one in which 'the primacy and independence of human spirit' triumphs over 'verbal utterance' (1). As Bissig puts it at outset of the book, Coleridge's idealized communication must be taken in its extended sense, 'reinterpreted, not as "inter-(subjective) communication", but as "communion"' (1). But Coleridge's uninhibited condemnation of newspapers also captures the flux of his own positions and self-presentations. His tobacco-induced dismissal reflects his own earlier skepticism about daily print and the reading public just as surely as it works against his present promotional purpose. As Bissig puts it, 'Coleridge was not talking nonsense because of his dizziness, but rather speaking authentically, because he was off his guard. He thus reveals his ambivalence and reservations about the very medium which he is promoting' (71). Of course, the whole episode is also colored by the retrospective self-positioning of the *Biographia Literaria*, a text that Bissig describes as strategically invested in cultivating 'a new scope for journalism' (62).

In putting anecdote before summary, perhaps I have created a discursive blunder of my own, but the communicative equivocality on display in Coleridge's recollection points to the wide-ranging purview of the book. Bissig is unapologetic about the scope of the project, and for good reason. As he puts it, 'Coleridge theorises, explores, and exploits communication along the whole range of the spectrum between one-sided impartation, one the one hand, and two-sided intercommunication, on the other, while the ideal of an intimate community that does not need any transmission whatsoever appears to be always lurking' (6). The sweeping ambit of Coleridge's own interest in communication puts one in mind of Wordsworth's first account of his plan for *The Recluse:* 'Indeed I know not anything which will not come within the scope of my plan.' Bissig usefully delimits this vast field by focusing on four particular sites of enquiry: Coleridge's 'conversation poems,' *Biographia Literaria*, his three-volume rendition of *The Friend*, and the many records and traces of Coleridge's career as an 'eminent conversationalist' (158).

Chapter One argues that the conversation poems Coleridge wrote between 1795 and 1798 negotiate a series of questions and reflections that would preoccupy S.T.C. for the rest of his life—and in Bissig's terms, 'most of these pertain to the field of communication.' But here again, he takes communication in its broadest and most exalted sense. It entails not merely the transmission of information, but a more holistic sharing of thought and

feeling—the fact of a connection that fuses discrepant communities. Ranging from 'The Eolian Harp' to 'Fears in Solitude', Bissig's readings are associative and meandering rather than polemical. Working inductively from textual nuance, 'psychobiographical background,' and intertexutal connections, he advances two broad claims (11). First, taken as a whole, the conversation poems evince Coleridge's broad interest in the shifting and sometimes paradoxical connection between a 'down-to-earth domestic community' and a broader, large-scale 'cosmic community' (30, 32). Second, and perhaps more unexpectedly, Bissig argues that Martin Heidegger's analysis of 'the speaking of the poem, the purely spoken' applies to the conversation poems with 'remarkable precision' (25-6).

Chapter Two jumps forward twenty years to assess Coleridge's attempt in the *Biographia Literaria* to articulate the proper bounds of 'the communicative relationship between the poet and his audience' (57). Focusing particularly on chapter 10—a lengthy account that blends '*anecdotes of the author's literary life'* with '*Advice to young authors respecting publication*' (BL I 168)—Bissig resists the poet's own (occasional) tendency to draw a line in the sand separating his poetry from his supposedly 'unambitious journalistic work' (62). Approaching the *Biographia* as a strategic performance, a text meant to solidify an authorial self-image, Bissig emphasizes two of its overriding concerns. On the one hand, Coleridge—self-conscious about the shape of his career—works to align himself with universal, 'supra-temporal, permanent matters' instead of the contemporaneous, the political, and the merely personal (66). At the same time, he also endeavors to carve out 'a new scope for journalism,' one whose grounding in fixed principles might separate it from the mundane realm of facts, allegiances, and events (62). In Bissig's terms, this heightened form of periodical publication 'releases journalism from its contradictory juxtaposition with poetry'—an insight pursued in this chapter's thoughtful 'excursus on Coleridge's newspaper poetry' (100, 79).

Turning from questions of authorship to audience, Bissig's next chapter—perhaps his most intriguing and original—takes up Coleridge's three-volume edition of *The Friend*. For Bissig, *The Friend's* unabashed pedagogical impetus presents a special kind of communicative challenge. On the one hand, its various essays consistently suggest that 'the reader must attain knowledge for himself' (120). At the same time, Coleridge worries that such readerly self-empowerment cannot be advanced by communicative ease or authorial capitulation. In fact, Coleridge often seems reluctant 'to abdicate a steep hierarchy in authority between author and reader' (115). For Bissig, this reluctance emerges most forcefully in Coleridge's deliberately obscure style and structure—a self-conscious difficulty designed to bring 'the reader to the limits of his hermeneutic abilities' (135). For Bissig, this mode of communicative instruction becomes itself a manifestation of the sublime. In sustained analysis of 'The Fable of the Madning Rain' and *Essays on the Principles of Method*, Bissig describes the various ways in which Coleridge transforms 'the communication of truth into the communication of method' (157).

In the book's final chapter, Bissig takes up Coleridge's reputation as an eminent conversationalist, a notorious talker at once enchanting and exasperating. He starts with a rather lengthy survey of various recollections of Coleridge as a conversationalist and lecturer. Lively accounts by Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Crabb Robinson, Carlyle, and Emerson all get an airing here. For Bissig, each of these interlocutors was aware of what Coleridge knew all too well: his 'conversazioni' all too easily turned into what he called '*One*versazioni' (177). This familiar insight is followed by a pleasantly counter-intuitive argument. For Bissig, textual traces of Coleridge's talkative mode emerge most clearly not in the posthumously-produced *Table Talk* that claims to record his conversation, but in digressive prose works like *The Friend* and the *Biographia.* The rhetoric of these texts exhibits qualities that Coleridge's contemporaries noticed in his oral performance—i.e., a tendency 'to digress, to meander, and to continue for great lengths of time' (187). Finally, Bissig links Coleridge's reputation as a talker to the *Ancient Mariner* and other supernatural poems that "negotiate the performativity of language" (201).

By the end of *Coleridge and Communication*, Bissig's thorough analysis makes it more or less impossible to take issue with his central claim. The promise of real communication stretches across Coleridge's expansive corpus, and his interest intersects with communication in so many of its various dimensions—'as transmission of truth, as impulse to participation, and as foundation for community' (206). But was such an investment ever really in doubt? Bissig's book does not ultimately reshape our sense of Coleridge as a communicator, but it stands as a worthy reminder of what we already know. I certainly appreciated the reminder, as well as the fresh glimpse of Coleridge afforded by taking communication as an 'integrated viewpoint' (206). But it seems important to note that the sense of communication here is a relatively literary one: it focuses primarily on questions of authorship, modes of publication, and literary reception. Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong each make a compelling cameo appearance in Bissig's analysis, but communications studies and media theory is largely sidelined in this project. Bissig notices how the reception or significance of a poem changes as it moves from a manuscript or oral performance to a book or a newspaper, but he does not, for example, think about how communication 'technology' impacts cognitive reception. This is less a shortcoming than a prompt for further thought. After all, Bissig's Coleridge already seems modern in so many ways. Curious about the equivocality of communication—its latent promises, as well as its inevitable failures—Coleridge pursued its utopian possibilities without losing sight of its practical realities. This bifurcated and strikingly Coleridgean approach to communication might be as necessary in 2017 as it was 1817.