Kilve Study Weekend, September 2008: Coleridge's Religious Imagination

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IT WAS RAINING in Kilve as the Friends of Coleridge gathered to transform the Somerset County Education Centre into a literary asylum once again. However, the rain was counterbalanced by the prospect of enjoying the company of so many familiar, genial and incisive spirits. As usual, we also could also anticipate a superb series of lectures, this year on the theme of Coleridge's religious imagination.

On Friday evening, after luggage had been safely bestowed and everyone had been fed and watered, we settled down to enjoy Cecilia Powell's wonderful and wonderfully illustrated lecture entitled "The Sun is God—or is it?" Cecilia presented us with a rich account of Turner's artistic development: beginning with a boyhood sketch of a church his father had proudly displayed in his barber's shop, and then, by way of his history painting and depiction of Biblical scenes, we arrived at the compelling fire of his 1846 painting "The Angel Standing in the Sun". Turner repeatedly depicted human figures dwarfed by far-reaching landscapes or made minute by vast, frequently ecclesiastical structures. Yet always these scenes were illuminated and articulated by brilliant shafts of light. Turner, in his work, had refined his own tribute to Rembrandt. So that instead of throwing 'a mysterious light over the meanest objects', he had thrown it over the most sublime. Cecilia's lecture proved a stimulating illustration of what a 'religious imagination' might be.

David Fairer delivered the first lecture of Saturday morning: 'Religious Amusings—some Eighteenth Century Contexts'. David suggested that Coleridge's religious verse had two opposing tendencies: in one, evident in "Religious Musings", too much divinity crowded out the voice of his humanity; the other, finer inclination is to be found in 'Effusion XXXV'. In this mode, Coleridge achieved a delicate record of moments when the human touches the spirit. This advocacy of the tender 'Frost at Midnight' Coleridge was marvellously contextualised by a revision of his debt to Locke and, especially, to Newton. Our attention was drawn to Thomson's belief, inspired by Locke's theory of knowledge, that the senses are part of our spiritual receptiveness, to Newton's conception of ether as that which holds life together and allows gravity to pass through emptiness, and to Addison's reflection that the microscope revealed a 'sublime of minuteness'. These thoughts proved surprisingly 'companionable' guides to the touching details of sense, and the wonderfully momentary shifts of attention in Coleridge's poem.

Mary Wedd's 'Reading Coleridge's "Human Life" and "My Baptismal Birthday" ' emphasised a different tension in Coleridge's religious verse: the conflict between Natural religion, 'the thinking disease', and Revealed religion. Mary strikingly juxtaposed her close readings of her two chosen poems. The first poem, Mary suggested, offers a meditation on man as the creation of 'an absent-minded fidget'; whilst the second testifies to Coleridge's hopeful faith in

the Book of Revelation's assurance: '… God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes'. Mary's elucidation of Coleridge's concerns combined precise observation—for instance, that the adjective contradicts the noun in the phrase 'phantom purposes' –, with a generous recognition of the fearful terrors of Coleridge's self-pitying sense of isolation, and with a happy Elian digression about STC's irresponsible marginal annotation of his friends' books.

On Saturday evening, John Powell Ward's 'Weave a circle round him thrice' offered 'Three Takes on "Kubla Khan" '. These three readings proved notably distinct but provokingly complementary. The first invited us to consider "Kubla Khan" as divinely dictated, whose, in Blake's words, 'authors are in eternity'. The second turned on a three part distinction between dreams, the memory of a dream, and the report of a dream; Coleridge's poem reflects the qualities of remembering a dream as its conditional 'Could I's' give way to powerfully compressed succeeding phrases. Here, John invited us to consider a contrast between the declamatory style of the Old Testament and of Islamic devotional writing, and the 'tending' style of Christian writing inspired by the New Testament. 'Kubla Khan' evinces the declamatory style, whilst the Conversation poems, with their tenderness and intertwined tendencies of thought, illustrate the latter, reflective style. John's third reading offered R.S. Thomas's 'A Person from Porlock' as a companion piece to Coleridge's poem in order to dwell on the painful and troubling notion of a moment of inspiration being lost through interruption.

The first lecture of Sunday morning was Gregory Leadbetter's 'Transnatural Coleridge'. Greg delivered a remarkable commentary on a notebook entry from October 1812. Coleridge's entry was a meditation on the 'sacred shame of a fond affection'—most likely for Dorothy Wordsworth—which had prompted him, in his imagination to transgress upon 'the freewill and rightful secrecy of a fellow spirit' with a 'sudden second sight of some hidden Vice'. This process of thought Coleridge associated with 'something Transnatural', and Greg's talk illuminated with admirable and enviable lucidity. 'Transnatural', we learned, is a Latinate synonym for 'metaphysical' and it was the word E.H.Coleridge used to describe second part of 'Christabel', having described the first part as 'supernatural'. Its force derives from its ability to work for Coleridge as a cipher of a bewildering complex of profound ideas, ancient narratives and powerful inner states: artistic inspiration, sexual guilt, Prometheus, the Fall of Adam and Eve, the power of human agency to transcend both the individual will and the mechanistic process of cause and effect … . This was a lecture, as John Powell Ward observed afterwards, in which there were so many fascinating ideas that one often missed a later one having become so engrossed in contemplating the significance and implications of something said earlier.

Sunday's second and the weekend's final lecture was Kenneth Boyd's 'Coleridge: medical research and metaphysical imagination'. Taking as his text Coleridge's letter to J.H. Green of 29th March 1832, Kenneth proceeded to

offer a consideration of Coleridge's sustained attempts to understand himself through his own illness. Coleridge, we learned, is likely to have been the most informed layman of his day about medical science. Significantly, the two competing medical theories that he would have been versed in—that of the humoralists and the Brunonians—would both have given him grounds for believing that his use of opium was potentially medically sound. Moreover, the two foremost medical researchers of Coleridge's life with their markedly contrasting assumptions about the nature of ill heath would have encouraged in his lifelong quest to synthesise his spiritual with his physical self-understanding. Erasmus Darwin held that disease had a somatic cause, whilst Beddoes took a mentalist approach. Hence, Coleridge's coinage of the term 'psycho-somatic' can be seen as his attempt to combine these divergent approaches; furthermore, the ambiguous nature of Coleridge's suffering in the 'Pains of Sleep'—whether it is primarily the result of gout or of mental distress—points to his refusal to accept that his discomfort had an exclusively mental or physical cause. Fascinating as this was, the most splendid part of the lecture was its final consideration of the implications of Coleridge's thought for medical ethics. Coleridge's insistence that 'Life itself is not a thing, but an act and a process' may be taken as a reminder that suffering has its 'I am' as well as its 'it is'; in other words, the ethical, one might say the Coleridgean, treatment of illness needs to take the felt experience of the patient into account, as well as the material state of the patient's body. The theological corollary of this principle was brought into focus with Kenneth's consideration of the phrase 'suffered in God'; God, in his nature shares and contains our suffering, he does not capriciously and indifferently visit it upon us.

The weekend, of course, was more than discursive knowledge. We enjoyed the wonderful hospitality and catering of Kilve Court and its staff. There were two intrepid early morning walks to the seashore, and on Saturday afternoon there was a 'Dorothy Wordsworth walk' in honour of Pamela Woof's lecture of last year. This began with a visit to the soon to be restored Alfoxden House and we were able to confirm the truth of Dorothy's observation that it has a 'very excellent garden, well stocked with vegetables and fruit'. We then set off from Holford Green and visited the 'dell' with is waterfall before following the old coach road up Longstone Hill. The rain held off for most of our excursion and some felt the temporary clemency of the weather was our reward for having spoken so much of God on Saturday morning.