

Kilve Study Weekend, September 2007

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THE MELLOW LATE SUMMER SUNSHINE which bathed Kilve Court on Friday afternoon gave promise of a rewarding weekend with the Friends of Coleridge mining the riches of Coleridge's *Notebooks*. And our expectations were more than fulfilled with a particularly stimulating programme of talks combined with refreshing local walks most appropriate for a study of such an energetic personality as Coleridge who gained much of his inspiration from walking the surrounding hills.

After renewing acquaintance with past visitors to the event, or making new ones at the bar, we continued discussion over the evening meal. This was followed by selected readings from Coleridge's notebooks with lively musical interludes from Peter Christie. The readings supplied a kaleidoscope of brilliant impressions and speculations reflecting the writer's curious and passionate engagement with life in all its variety, whether the imaginative insight of a child's observations, the invisible power behind the patterning of flocking birds at sunset, or the way that even the contents of a chamber pot could be refracted through the lens of the imagination. Not everyone was convinced by the last, however!

After a pre-breakfast walk to the sea for those who hadn't spent too long in the bar the previous night!, we resumed the journey into Coleridge's mind with an opening lecture from Paul Cheshire: 'From Infant's Soul to Black Book: Coleridge's *Notebook 21*', which provided a valuable structural overview of the notebooks. With analytical precision and slick presentational skills, Paul demonstrated the need to return to the facsimile originals of Coleridge's texts to fully appreciate the non-chronological organisation and concurrent usage of many of the volumes which might seem to defy modern scholarly attempts to systematise them. A closer study of specific entries in the 21 volume, with their corrections and deletions, reminded us that they were part of a dynamic, self-corrective - and maybe partly corroborative- process.

The following talk by Josie Dixon: 'The Mind's Eye: Vision and Experience in Coleridge's *Notebooks*' explored the visionary dimension of Coleridge's preoccupation with the mobile and fluid effects of light and water, and its implicit acknowledgement of their evanescence. With reference to specific examples, Josie demonstrated the writer's desire to capture this changeability within the limited resources of simile and allusion, and in a chronological perspective suggested the emotional distance implied in later entries' attempts to intellectually rationalise the spontaneous creative insight. Josie convincingly argued that this cerebral ordering reflected Coleridge's desire to synthesise the part and the whole, symbol and reality, vision and experience, and perhaps to philosophically frame and systematise his initial fragmented impressions with, as Josie suggested, a consequent loss of immediacy and conviction. In some post lecture discussion, this idea was applied illuminatingly to the method of the artist Constable, with his careful

distinction between preliminary sketches and finished works .

After lunch, we were able to take full advantage of superb afternoon weather in an extended walk along part of the recently opened Coleridge Way which took us through ancient woods and combes, with some careful, health and safety-conscious shepherding along the unavoidable brief stretch of road! After a welcome cider refreshment stop at The Valiant Soldier inn, followed by a convivial evening meal back at Kilve, Seamus Perry, inspired both by his intimate knowledge of his subject, and possibly also by the lively curiosity of his little daughter Hester, who accompanied her parents to the weekend conference, gave a sensitive and accessible appraisal of Coleridge's poetic method in his lecture on 'Coleridge's Noteworthiness.' He suggested that the receptivity to experience evident in the most memorable journal entries involves rediscovering a child-like, primal capacity for wonder and delight with the humility and inevitable vulnerability of that response. This led to a fascinating discussion of the relationship of irony to this innocent perception. With comparative reference to extracts from the journal of 18th century naturalist Gilbert White, Seamus made the crucial distinction between observing with a naturalist's minutely objective precision, and noticing with the imaginative and emotional engagement of the poet .

Sunday's early morning walk was enriched with lots of newly aware noticings of heather and sea colours, contours and qualities of light, as well a surreptitious nose around the secluded, evocative Alfoxden Park. We just needed our notebooks with us and felt that a collective recording of noticings over the weekend might have been a fruitful creative exercise!

After breakfast we had the pleasure of an illuminating, fresh perspective on the genres of notebook and journal writing by Pamela Woof in her lecture on 'The Uses of Notebooks', with specific reference to the mutually supportive work and relationship of Coleridge, Dorothy and Wordsworth. With her intimate knowledge of Dorothy's diaries, Pamela was able to supply some fascinating insight into the collaborative nature and domestic context of the journals and notebooks, identifying the way the writers shared, borrowed and extended each other's ideas as well as the limited resources of such precious materials as paper and ink. Pamela reminded us of the need to acknowledge the domestic context of these writings in which a mislaid – possibly stolen-umbrella could arguably assume as much significance as a sublime mountain prospect!

After lunch, with the help of techno assistant and fellow researcher Paul Cheshire, Graham Davidson produced an astute and passionate appraisal of the erotic in Coleridge's journal entries in his talk: 'Springs, Fountains and Volcanoes: Coleridge's Erotic Pulse', persuasively demonstrating, with close reference to specific entries, how, despite cultural inhibition and some self censorship, symbolic motifs and more explicit references expressed the more sensual desires and hopes which were the source of much of Coleridge's creative energy and genius. The watery metaphor of wells and fountains central

to Graham's talk was used to graphically illustrate the subconscious origins of the sensuous imagination while suggesting their potentially threatening relationship to the chasms of *Kubla Khan*. We could appreciate the intertextuality of some of Coleridge's notebook entries when Graham demonstrated how some details echoed or erotically reinterpreted lines from his poems. However, I feel that a female interpretation of Coleridge's erotic pulse and its relationship to actual women and physical relationships could also provide some interesting further discussion of this topic!

The weekend concluded with a visit to Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey and for six of the company a conversational walk back to Kilve for a late cream tea and final goodbyes. Having renewed their acquaintance with Coleridge, everyone seemed to feel both intellectually and physically refreshed and left enthusiastically anticipating next year's meeting of the Friends of Coleridge.