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Coleridge and the Conservative Imagination
(Mercer University Press, 2003)

by Alan P. R. Gregory

The provocative title of this book reflects a trend in Romantic studies. In 1992 John Beer commented that a large number of recent books contained the word 'imagination' in the title, yet that few of these were really about imagination: the word 'seemed often to be there to make the actual subject look more attractive.'¹ Since then, however, the New Historicism of the '90s continued the work begun by the Deconstruction of the '80s, attacking Romantic concepts of imagination as conservative in the worst sense. The word 'imagination' (in Romantic studies at least) has therefore featured decreasingly in the titles of critical works, or been used negatively in books such as Forrest Pyle's *The Ideology of Imagination* (California: Stanford UP, 1995). The basic claim of the 'ideology' approach is that Romantic writers invoke imagination to efface material realities and deny the need for social change; and Coleridge has been presented as a prime culprit. Now that this New Historicist perspective has been challenged, however,² the way is open for more sympathetic approaches such as Gregory's in this very stimulating study.

Gregory (associate professor of Church History at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, Austin) begins from the 1795 *Lectures* but mainly concentrates on Coleridge's later prose: the 1818 *Friend*, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, *Lay Sermons*, a portion of the *Opus Maximum*, and *On the Constitution of Church and State*. The detailed and balanced exposition of these texts, with generous quotations, makes this book an ideal introduction for inexperienced or perplexed readers of the later Coleridge. (This despite some presentational hitches: poor proofreading and sometimes overly long footnotes.) Gregory does full justice to the complex intertwining of Coleridge's theological and political thought. At the same time he advances a nuanced argument, attentive to what Seamus Perry has termed Coleridge's 'double-mindedness'.

The nuance appears in the title phrase 'conservative imagination', which can be construed both positively and negatively. Positively, Gregory indicates that imagination is intrinsic to a potentially valuable conservatism, and vice-versa. Conservatism, he explains, began with Burke's response to the French Revolution.³ Burke wrote that reverence for traditional structures of government is achieved through *imagination*, which is capable of imparting dignity to high office and hence quelling the urge for a sudden revolution (22).

¹ John Beer, 'Is the Romantic Imagination our Imagination?', in Deirdre Coleman and Peter Otto (eds.), *Imagining Romanticism* (Australia, 1992), 25-48, p. 25.

² See e.g. Seamus Perry, 'Coleridge, the Return to Nature, and the New Anti-Romanticism: An Essay in Polemic', *Romanticism on the Net* 4 (November 1996, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/antrom.html>).

³ Though *OED*'s first record of the word 'conservative' in a political sense is as late as 1830.

Though Coleridge objects to Burke's unqualified celebration of the French monarchy, he too conceives of imagination as a conservative faculty in that its activity of 'fusing' creates continuity between present and past experience, both personal and social. The conservative imagination inclines, then, to treasure rather than rupture inherited values. Coleridge does not, however, advocate merely the preservation of institutions: rather his doctrine of Ideas enables his emphasis on the need for constant evolution towards a perfect form of government, which will never in practice be achieved. Thus Coleridge's conservatism, far from complacent or purely reactionary, is restless: in Gregory's neatly paradoxical phrase a 'dynamic conservatism' (114).⁴ Another of Gregory's useful formulations is that Coleridge's conservatism is anti-reductionist—directed against extremes and favouring 'the balance of the mind' (ch. 4).

On the other hand, more negatively, Gregory suggests that Coleridge has a 'conservative imagination' in the sense that he conservatively 'stifles' the potentially radical implications of his theory of imagination (esp. 179-195). The topic of education is a key example. Based on his philosophical conviction that 'hope'—resulting in 'reflection and stirrings of mind, with all their restlessness'—is intrinsic to the human imagination, Coleridge seems to favour universal education for all classes: education which educes the mental powers, as opposed to catechistical instruction which constrains them (187). Yet he qualifies this view so heavily as to disable it, insisting that the means of education should vary 'according to the sphere in which the individuals to be educated are likely to act and become useful' (188; *SM* 40). In other words, despite Coleridge's radical perception that the desire of the poor and ill-educated to improve their situation should be kindled, he insists nervously that they should know their place, in the interest of social stability.

In the course of this argument Gregory makes two striking proposals. First, that the theory of imagination is always central to Coleridge's philosophical psychology. This is contentious, since the discussion of imagination breaks off with notorious caprice in *Biographia Literaria* (I 300) and is never resumed in subsequent works.⁵ Critics have therefore tended to link Coleridge's apparent abandonment of imagination with his decreasing engagement with (English) poetry post-*Biographia*. Gregory's reading, if not totally persuasive, does counterbalance this orthodox view. He contends that the theory of imagination embraces both art and theology, citing Coleridge's comparison of poetry with religion, as two activities that engage the *whole* mind (176f.). To gloss the elliptical definition of imagination in *Biographia* Gregory points out a Notebook entry (*CN* III 4066; cf. *SM* 69f.) which introduces the theological language of 'symbol'. On this basis Gregory advances his own definition: 'The imagination, then, operating in the various fields of human

⁴ James D. Boulger's helpful discussion uses the same phrase: *Coleridge as Religious Thinker* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 189.

⁵ The editor considers this a questionable statement: see *CN* IV 4692, written about 1820.

knowledge, is that cognitive ability to grasp the ontological relations that constitute the possibility of symbols' (56). Again: 'Imagination is the condition for cognitive participation in a sacramental universe' (59). The Primary Imagination, which Gregory describes as 'perception irradiated by reason', constitutes the human status as the image of God (64, citing *SM* 18-19). The Secondary Imagination is the agent of activities, including poetry but also including religion, which strive to overcome that tyranny of the Understanding and Fancy resulting from our *fallen* state (69). It is a symbolic mode of perceiving the world, discerning the invisible beyond the visible. Gregory notes that the language Coleridge uses to describe the Secondary Imagination—it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate'—reappears in the theological context of (especially) *The Statesman's Manual* (104). Thus the concept of imagination remains central to Coleridge's religious discourse, even though the word itself quite mysteriously disappears from his vocabulary. Gregory explains Coleridge's discarding of the word as an effort to distance himself from the pantheism of Schelling, whose writing on imagination he had plagiarised in *Biographia* (224-5). True though this must be as far as it goes, there nevertheless remains much to investigate both as to Coleridge's dissatisfaction with Schelling and his sudden silence about imagination, which are not necessarily one and the same phenomenon.⁶ A remark of 1829, however, supports Gregory's inclusive thesis: 'It is wonderful, how closely Reason and Imagination are connected, and Religion the union of the two' (F I 203n.).

Related to this, the second major proposal of this book is that Coleridge's political theories are (at their best) consistently rooted in theology. This is shown in Gregory's insightful discussion of the Appendix to *Church & State*. Like the appendices to *The Statesman's Manual*, he notes, this Appendix opens up the primarily political arguments of the main text into matters of psychology and epistemology. The doctrine of Ideas elaborated in the Appendix, in Gregory's view a 'reconfiguration' rather than an abandonment of the theory of imagination (233), is connected with the discussions of Divine Ideas in the *Opus Maximum*. To summarise briefly: Coleridge proposes that the National Church should act as counterbalance to the necessary but dehumanising activity of commerce, a notion that springs from his belief in the moral basis of all human relations; and this in turn is rooted in his Trinitarianism as expounded in the *Opus*. The first Person of the Trinity is identified with Will, which is for Coleridge logically prior to Being, identified as the second Person. (The third Person, or Holy Spirit, is 'the act in which the Father and the Son are One...the Copula by which both are one and the Copula one with them', *Opus* 209-10.) This metaphysical primacy of Will imparts to man the imperative to align his finite Will with the divine Will, i.e. to obey Reason. Coleridge writes: 'As the identity or coinherence of the absolute

⁶ For Coleridge's relationship to the phases of Schelling's thought, see Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), esp. 65-87.

will and the reason is the peculiar character of God; so is the *synthesis* of the individual will and the common reason, by the subordination of the former to the latter, the only possible likeness or image of [God], and therefore the required character of man' ('Essay on Faith', quoted 254). It is the task of the Church to promote in each individual this ideal—which will remain, however, an ideal to be perpetually striven for and never fulfilled. This doctrine of Ideas, writes Gregory, 'opens up an element of utopian pressure within the conservative imagination, a pressure to be applied to present political conditions' (262).

Gregory contrasts Coleridge's moral principles with the utilitarianism of William Paley (1743-1805), an influential moralist and constant target of Coleridge's (and others') polemic. Gregory provides a full account of Paley's ethics, which can be summed up in his definition of the difference between prudence and duty: 'The difference, and the only difference, is this; that, in the one case we consider what we shall gain or lose in the present world; in the other case we consider what also we shall gain or lose in the world to come' (quoted 202). Coleridge, on the contrary, desynonymized duty as a categorical imperative from prudence as contingent on such considerations of personal gain and loss. Whereas Paley reduces morality to the calculation of relative pleasure and pain, Coleridge sees it as essential to the whole person, and by extension the whole society.

In this respect and in several others Gregory persuasively presents Coleridge as critiquing 'reductionism': through his concept of imagination Coleridge finds a place for all aspects of human experience in his religious vision. Yet the doubleness of the notion of 'conservative imagination' again comes into play, as Gregory acknowledges that Coleridge is frequently guilty of his own 'methodological reductionism' (218). This tends to consist in the vicious circle of oversimplifying historical patterns by fitting them into a governing 'Idea' which Coleridge supposes to detect in them; neglecting economic forces in history (84); or forcing certain groups into dubious juxtaposition on the basis of his favourite motto 'extremes meet'. For instance he oddly identifies Unitarianism and Quakerism as opposite extremes representing a general religious malaise, and to suit his rhetorical purpose condemns Quaker piety without offering evidence (169-173).

Occasionally in his criticism of this kind of Coleridgean 'reductionism' Gregory seems to me to be applying modern standards to early nineteenth century scholarship. Thus he notes the bold anachronism of the method of the *Philosophical Lectures*: in order to posit the unifying 'Idea' of philosophy Coleridge indulged in 'the anachronistic conformation of ancient philosophy to contemporary controversial needs' (118). He made the ancients seem relevant to the moderns by ascribing to them post-Cartesian debates about the relationship between 'subject' and 'object' (76), while presenting himself as a contemporary Plato (92). Yet this was a fairly normal polemical procedure at the time. As Coleridge himself noted, Tennemann, from whose history he

drew much of his lecture material, attacks Schelling via a negative presentation of Plotinus' *Schwärmerei* (excessive enthusiasm).⁷ A similar example would be Franz Berg's condemnation of Schelling as essentially identical with Plotinus in his assertion of an 'Absolute': Berg prefers Plato who apparently avoided this excess.⁸ In adopting such anachronistic modes of argument Coleridge was, as Walter Pater observed, struggling against the ultimately unstoppable 'relative spirit' of nineteenth-century historical research.⁹

If Gregory criticises Coleridge too strongly in this respect, it may be due to a lack of context. As he notes, Coleridge's economic theories were very advanced given the state of contemporary knowledge (148); and I think the same might be said of his presentation of the shape of philosophical history. Unsatisfactory though much of Coleridge's conservative rhetoric now inevitably seems, it was sufficiently progressive to inspire a significant minority until long after his death, not least encouraging a new generation of 'Coleridgeans' such as J. C. Hare and F. D. Maurice in their own historical projects.¹⁰ And Gregory's exposition does bring out that inspirational quality, especially in the notion of imagination as uniting poetic, religious and historical experience. Will *Coleridge and the Conservative Imagination* begin a new trend for books with 'Coleridge' and 'Imagination' in the same title?

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⁷ CM V 750f; Wilhelm Gottlieb von Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie* (Leipzig, 1798-1819) VI, 43f. Cf. CL IV 874.

⁸ Berg, *Sextus oder über die absolute Erkenntniss von Schelling: Ein Gespräch* (Würzburg, 1804), esp. 74-5.

⁹ Pater, 'Coleridge', in *Appreciations* (London, 1889).

¹⁰ Cf. Tod E. Jones, *The Broad Church: A Biography of a Movement* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003).