Frederick Denison Maurice, Disciple and Interpreter of Coleridge: 'Constancy to an Ideal Object'

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THE supposedly 'new and more vital interpretation' of Coleridge's poetry made possible by the light of *Aids to Reflection* (1825) and Coleridge's later theological writings is not new.[1] It is the method by which Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72) and the Coleridgeans interpreted the poet-philosopher more than a century ago. Guided by Julius Hare (1795–1855), Maurice at twenty-three emerged as a disciple and interpreter of Coleridge, and his 'radiating influence' at Cambridge 'was only second in importance to the Oxford Movement itself'.[2] It is scarcely too much to claim for him that, in applying Coleridge's ideas to literature, theology, and society throughout a long career as a liberal and literary theologian, Maurice not only kept Coleridge alive during the Victorian age, but kept him so, whole and entire.

It is therefore lamentable to read that 'there are two Coleridge's to be considered', that the second, 'the inspired table-talker, the speculative thinker, the religious and political philosopher' — the Highgate Coleridge — was the choice of his Victorian admirers; and to hear a more recent critic announce that the Coleridgeans 'disastrously severed' Coleridge's philosophy and theology from his poetry and thus 'dismembered' the essential unity of his thought.[3]

The view is perhaps credible. It seems to be strengthened by Coleridge himself, the bulk of whose work as philosophical

[1] 'Stephen Prickett: Coleridge and Wordsworth . . .', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2, October 1970, p. 1129.

[2] Graham Hough, 'Coleridge and the Victorians', *The English Mind*, ed. H. S. Davies and G. Watson (1964), p. 183.

[3] Stephen Prickett, *Coleridge and Wordsworth*, 1970, p. 3, Compare Hough, p. 177.

speculation is, fittingly enough, in prose rather than poetry. That Hare and Maurice were clergymen writing theology instead of poetry supports the argument, and they may inadvertantly have drawn some Victorians, who were nothing if not theological, away from the poetry. Such a view ignores the speculative prose that preceded the poetry, however, as well as that which ran concurrently with it, both of which flowed into the total literary stream of Coleridge's later work.

A bridge between the Romantics and the Victorians, the Coleridgeans naturally knew more of the older than of the younger man, but this does not mean that they divided him. The dichotomy suggested by recent critics ignores the fact that theology is the foundation of Coleridge's thought and that, whatever ideas he expressed and in whatever form he expressed them, he began and ended with man and his relation to God. As Professor William Walsh, quoting Henry James, has put it, 'Everything he did, however fine or however gross, had a reference to . . . "an order of goodness and power greater than any this world by itself can show, which is understood as the religious spirit" '.[1] His disciples never abandoned the premiss. On their behalf, too, though none of the Coleridgeans can rank with Coleridge, *The Poetical Works* of Richard Monckton Milnes (1809–85) testify to an interest in poetry, while his *Life of Keats* (1848) first placed Keats among the great English poets; and Maurice was the guiding light of Charles Kingsley (1819–75) and George MacDonald (1824–1905).

The essential Coleridge began with man as a creature of Reason and Reason he designated as Being; human being, like life itself, was the gift of the Supreme Being, or the Supreme Reason. For him, too, man's earthly life was but a continual yearning for a re-unification with the Infinite, his Home. Life therefore became an aspirational process of the human subject striving towards a reconciliation with the Ideal Object, the constancy of his aspiration being no other than an active practice in the ways of God.

As Being was reflected in human being, so Absolute Will was reflected in him also. By acting in accord with the Spirit, the human being expressed his will in emulating 'the only-begotten

[1] *Coleridge The Work and the Relevance*, 1967, p. 24.

Logos (Word, Idea, Supreme Mind . . .'). Coleridge, who began with man, began also with God and, working his way out of Unitarianism, he came to see God as essentially a three-fold Being, and the bed-rock of his thought, alike in poetry as in prose.[1] Though he preached a set of Unitarian sermons at Shrewsbury in 1798, the Trinitarian concept of God permeates *The Ancient Mariner* and is the foundation of his famous distinctions, that between Reason and Understanding, and that between Imagination and Fancy, both of which he and Wordsworth discussed during their *annus mirabilis*.

The Coleridgeans emulated Coleridge, not only in accepting the Trinity as the foundation of human being, but also in the application of his theology to aesthetics and criticism, politics and poetry. A clergyman, Hare had always been orthodox, and was so when Maurice came under his influence at Cambridge. Maurice, however, had to work his way to orthodoxy in the teeth of familial opposition, for his father was a Unitarian minister. Orthodoxy finally came during the early months of 1828 while he was writing a series of critical sketches of contemporary authors[2] in which, grounding his criticism on Coleridge's aesthetic principles, he clarified Coleridge to himself and, in the process, found his way into the church: *The Kingdom of Christ* (1838),[3] an apology inspired by Coleridge for unity in the universal church, was his most important work and one of the most influential writings of the century.

The Coleridgeans, like Coleridge, saw Imagination as Reason, and therefore took it for granted that philosophical theology in prose was necessary to poetry. In distinguishing Fancy from Imagination Coleridge grounded the distinction 'in nature' — by which he means both human nature and its essential connection with God. For him, Imagination was not only the 'prime Agent of all human Perception', but also 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM', while Fancy had to do with memory and phenomenal choice.[4] His distinction, therefore, is theological, but it nevertheless provides 'a theory of

[1] S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, I, 515 n.
[2] *The Athenaeum* (January–June 1828), now printed in book form: F. D. Maurice, *Sketches of Contemporary Authors*, 1828, ed. A. J. Hartley, 1970.
[3] References are to the second edition (1842), ed. Alec R. Vidler (2 vols, 1958).
[4] S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols, 1965), I, 202.

the fine arts' and Coleridge put it forward as a 'torch of guidance' both for the '*philosophical* critic' and 'the *poet*'.[1] Nor did he divide poetry from theology in *Aids to Reflection* (1825). 'In *philosophy* equally as in *poetry*', he wrote, 'it is the highest and most useful prerogative of genius to produce the strongest impressions of novelty, while it rescues admitted truths from the neglect caused by the very circumstances of their universal admission'. This was achieved by a meeting of 'extremes', the work of Reason. The result was 'impressions of novelty', or poetry.[2]

Neither Coleridge nor the Coleridgeans, then, separated poetry from theology. While we agree that to Coleridge we owe 'the impulse of every movement' in creative poetry and criticism between 1798 and 1834,[3] the tendency to divide the man persists, and we have remained monumentally indifferent alike to the perceptive views about him expressed by his disciples, and to their application of his thought, both to literature and to human affairs. Easily first among his interpreters, Maurice, however, transmitted Coleridge and his ideas to his Victorian literati.

At Cambridge, Maurice took his cue from Hare and, with his intellectual power, his gift for abstraction, and his reverence for religion, soon found himself at the centre of a group of young men who, for their high seriousness and zeal in reform, were dubbed apostles. Among others in their Apostles Club besides Monckton Milnes, were John Sterling, friend and follower of Maurice, Charles Whitmore, Henry Stebbing, and Arthur Hallam, the admired friend of Tennyson. Hare ranked Maurice's metaphysical powers 'among the greatest' he had known, and everyone concurred; and after meeting these Coleridgean apostles as adversaries in his Debating society, John Stuart Mill assessed Maurice's mind as 'decidedly superior' to Coleridge's own.[4] It was therefore a foregone conclusion that Maurice should be first among contemporary interpreters of Coleridge. Both Maurice and they, emulating Coleridge himself, took a middle

[1] *Biographia Literaria*, I, 62. The italics are mine.
[2] S. T. Coleridge, Introductory Aphorism I, *Aids to Reflection*, 1884, p. 1. Italics mine.
[3] George Saintsbury, *A Short History*, Papermac edition, 1962, p. 654.
[4] J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, with an introduction by C. V. Shields, 1967, p. 100; see also *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, ed. Colonel F. Maurice, 2 vols, 1884, I, 32.

way between philosophical radicalism and the conservative Oxford Movement.

Through Coleridge, Hare deepened his awareness of mans' dual nature as well as the inevitability of his relationship with God. From him, too, he learned the fundamental nature of language as an organ of communication belonging only to man. He left an indelible impression on the minds of Maurice and Sterling that their understanding of *Antigone* lay in the words. By way of Coleridge, too, Hare was convinced that in a derivative language like English into which they were translating *Antigone*, etymology was vital, and that 'more knowledge [might] be conveyed by the history of a *word*, than by the history of a campaign'.[1] Under him the young men miraculously discovered 'the divine intuitions of the poet'. Because Sophocles had experienced his poem *imaginatively*, it diffused 'a tone and spirit of unity' that drew them, as readers, from 'particulars to universals'. They saw that the ideals set forth in his poem were influencing them, as they must have moulded students who had themselves been contemporaries of Sophocles. Hare also applied these principles in teaching them poetry of the 'classical and romantic schools', including that of Coleridge.

Maurice stressed the fact that he and Sterling had never heard Hare allude to theology. He had taught them poetry, he had taught them language; but he had never instructed them in theology. Yet to his lectures Maurice attributed 'the most permanent aspects of his character' as well as the way in which, later on, he approached every subject, whether 'natural, human, [or] divine'. Hare had conveyed fundamental truths because theology was fundamental to poetry and equally fundamental to language. For him as an interpreter of Coleridge, as for Coleridge preceding, and Maurice following him, philosophy and theology were necessary to the fabric of a poem while the mediating language in which that poem existed became a vital relationship between poet and reader, so that the reader might see the poet's aims and ideals and, above all, might see the poem as a unified symbol of thought.[2]

[1] *Aids to Reflection*, p. 5 n.

[2] *Life of Maurice*, I, 53–5, for the references to Maurice in the three paragraphs above.

Pursuing Hare's example, the industrious Maurice devoured Coleridge's works and found them wholly congenial. He learned that he and Coleridge shared biographical data. Both had begun with Unitarianism, from which both ultimately turned away to embrace a Trinitarian concept of God. The writings of the older man strikingly reflected what the younger was experiencing as he read, since Coleridge, Maurice discovered, 'could believe in nothing until he could believe in God', and since, only in a knowledge of Him could he know 'what he himself was'.[1] At Cambridge and ten years younger, he, Maurice, was feeling precisely what Coleridge had felt:

> Sense of past Youth, and Manhood come in vain,
> And Genius given, and Knowledge won in vain;
> And all which [he] had culled in wood-walks wild,
> And all which patient toil had reared, . . .
> . . . — but flowers
> Strewed on [his] corse . . .[2]

Coleridge's dejection about his own accomplishments by comparing them with Wordsworth's completed poem on the growth of his own mind was more justifiable than such a feeling in the earnest undergraduate, but Coleridge's struggle towards an apprehension of his Ideal Object put the eager Maurice on the road to the same Ideal.

Possessing a mind not unlike Coleridge's, Maurice shared more with the poet. Hare had found him 'so shy that it was almost impossible to know him', while John Stuart Mill felt that he 'wasted' much of his intellectual power because of his 'timidity of conscience'. Though Maurice later came into collision with his ecclesiastical superiors over the doctrine of eternal punishment, there was a 'sensitiveness of temperament'[3] about him which, though differing from Coleridge's weak will, nevertheless bore an analogy with it; and while his timid feelings probably 'wasted' his intellectual power, they undoubtedly sharpened his insight into Coleridge, the man, and intensified his appreciation of him.

In Maurice as in Coleridge, then, the man was both *whole* and *human*. He began with a self, a self-consciousness, which manifested itself in Reason as Conscience. A key-word in the writings

[1] *Sketches*, Appendix A, p. 132.
[2] S. T. Coleridge, *To William Wordsworth*.
[3] J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 99; *Life of Maurice*, I, 53.

of both men, Conscience determined conduct and, because of his Will to act upon his Conscience, a man was a moral being.[1] A Personality, his actions resulted in feelings and experiences, and these, thanks to the gift of language, might be recorded. 'The most perfect mind' that could belong to a man was that of the poet, whose task it was 'to interpret those universal truths' which could exist only in his poetry. 'Verse-artisans', however, were not always poets, for they only were poets who, like the prophets of old, were 'in communion with the Spirit of God', and were his willing 'ministers'.[2]

In his criticism, Coleridge had always made Wordsworth the man and Wordsworth the poet *one man*[3] and, in recognizing his debt to Coleridge, Maurice not only put the poetry first, but he referred it to Coleridge as a human being. He liked Coleridge's poetry because he saw 'many veins and fibres' in it that connected the poet with his poetry and, in reading it, he read the history of the poet's mental growth just as, in *The Prelude*, he was eventually to read the history of Wordsworth's mind. And though Coleridge had experienced much 'inward suffering' by sharing in the feelings of those around him, Maurice saw that, by his recording of those experiences, he had created poetry of universal import, and thus spoke of every man in every age. For Maurice, Coleridge was no mere 'verse-artisan', but a minister of God and in communion with His Spirit.

For Maurice, too, the prose, like the poetry, also stressed character. The title-page of *Aids to Reflection*, for example, affirmed that the 'reflections' were to aid in the formation of a 'manly character', so that this work, Maurice found, diverted him from 'mere worldly and external morality' to that stemming from Conscience; and since every man has a Conscience, he was led to conclude that the peasant, like the poet, could see the truth for himself. Maurice declared himself especially obliged to this book because, in it, he saw the author struggling with a will as recalcitrant as his own. *The Friend*, like the poetry, taught him 'the facts of history' by showing him Coleridge, a reasoning man, availing himself of past experiences in order to shape his future to

[1] F. D. Maurice, *The Conscience*, 1868, a series of lectures on casuistry.
[2] *Sketches*, p. 111.
[3] Richard Harter Fogle, *The Idea of Coleridge Criticism*, 1962, pp. 76–7.

moral ends. *Biographia Literaria* showed him the same humble man groping his way, again like Maurice himself, to a solution, not only of his personal problems, but to those of society as well. As a guide to authorship, this work also taught him that beauty was 'neither accidental nor artificial', but that it verily existed 'in nature and in the heart of man' and, above all, in ineluctably 'binding' relationships, both 'human and divine'.

Lay Sermons, *The Statesman's Manual*, and *On the Constitution of Church and State* carried him beyond man, the individual Conscience, to society, a Collective Conscience. With their social bias, these works contributed greatly to Maurice's ecumenical theme in *The Kingdom of Christ*, the second edition of which he dedicated in 1842 to Coleridge's son, Derwent.[1] This gave him an opportunity to acknowledge his debt and to state as his primary aim the transmission of Coleridge to his Victorian contemporaries, so that they might the more readily cope with their own problems now that Coleridge was no longer among them. Above all, it enabled him to admonish Victorians to study Coleridge whole, to insist that his thought was one and indivisible: Coleridge had worked outward from his own centre, from the yearning within his own breast, towards an Ideal Object for which his earthly pilgrimage had been an unceasing and poetic aspiration.

When Maurice left Cambridge, steeped in Coleridge but uncertain about his future, he and Sterling joined the staff of the new *Athenaeum*. During the first six months of the periodical's existence, they and other interested Apostles supplied the copy, which Maurice edited with the help of Henry Stebbing. Sterling seems to have spent more time at Highgate with Coleridge than in writing copy;[2] while Maurice, who never actually met him, applied his ideas and methods to his critical Sketches, which included personalities as diversified as Shelley, Maria Edgeworth, and James Mill. Appearing at intervals in the weekly issues between January and June 1828, each sketch was complete in itself, but Maurice deliberately undershored each and unified all of them with Coleridge. Beneath his leisurely and conversational style lay the bed-rock of Coleridge's speculative thought,

[1] The source of Maurice's comments on Coleridge's writings. See also *Sketches*, pp. 139–49.

[2] Hough, p. 183, who quotes from T. Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, 1851.

including such aspects as the nature of human being with its attributes of Conscience and Will, and morality as a fundamental part of behaviour; and the nature of language as a human instrument in the hands of various authors. The organic nature of mind, both in its own development and for its proclivities in the creative process, as Coleridge had expounded them, he also used. As for Maurice himself, he wrote with 'no feeling but the free love of truth' and therefore probed each author, assessing each in terms of his love of God, his reverence for man, and his devotion to art.[1]

As we have already seen, he found the distinction between Reason and Understanding to be fundamental as being 'laid in the foundations of the human mind'. Referring to it in a long footnote, he waxed encomiastic, acclaimed Coleridge as 'the first of living philosophers', and declared him to have been 'far less listened to than he [deserved]', insisting, finally, that his ideas were less German and more English than was generally supposed.[2] In as much as he refused, like Coleridge, to divide Coleridge's prose from his poetry, no more did he segregate prose writers from poets in his Sketches, since all, answering to the demands placed upon them by Coleridge, were to be judged as *poets*. Nor did Maurice lose sight of the fact that his authors were all historians since, in leaving records for posterity, they left transcripts of their time, the authenticity of which Maurice regularly assessed. Above all, however, stood his assessment of each author's feeling for man and for humanity: himself a whole man, each author was obliged to act upon the feelings of the whole man since, if he did not, he was, in Maurice's view, of little worth. 'The man of the highest genius' was he in whom there was 'most of the eternal and the universal', he declared, and went on to define that man in terms that, echoing Coleridge, were comparable with similar passages in Wordsworth's Prefaces and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. Coleridge had not divided theology from poetry because the poet was a man speaking to men, and Maurice reiterated this belief in a prelude for the Victorian age:

> The mind of the poet of the highest order is the most perfect mind that can belong to man. There is no intellectual power and no state of

[1] *Sketches*, pp. 5, 35, 125 n.
[2] *Sketches*, p. 102 n.

feeling which may not be the instrument of poetry, and in proportion as reason, reflection or sympathy is wanting, in the same degree is the poet restricted in his mastery over the resources of his art. The poet is the great interpreter of nature's mysteries, not by narrowing them into the grasp of the understanding, but by connecting each of them with the feeling which changes doubt to faith. His most gorgeous and varied painting is not displayed as an idle phantasmagoria, but there flows through all his scenes the clear and shining water which, as we wander for delight or rest for contemplation, perpetually reflects to us an image of our own being. He sympathises with all phenomena by his intuition of all principles; and his mind is a mirror which catches and images the whole scheme and working of the world. He comprehends all feelings, though he only cherishes the best; and even while he exhibits to us the frenzies or degradations of humanity, we are conscious of an ever-present divinity, elevating and hallowing the evil that surrounds it.[1]

Resurrected from the yellowed pages of the first issues of the *Athenaeum*, the Sketches are important. A gloss on Coleridge, they provide a direct and elucidating index to Maurice's borrowings from, and interpretations of, Coleridge. They also illustrate a method of practical criticism, comprehensive, but less vague and more efficient than an initial reading suggests. For those who find *Biographia Literaria* and *Aids to Reflection* diffuse, they help in sorting out Coleridge's ideas. Above all, however, they reveal the poet as a man and a prophet, who can no more sever himself from a *given* knowledge of God than either Isaiah or Ezekiel.[2]

That Maurice did not include an essay on Coleridge seems inexcusable until the extent to which Coleridge permeates all of them is noted. Nor, apparently, did Maurice analyse Coleridge's poetry as, for example, he explicated Thomas Moore's. He had no need to do so. *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* he called poems of 'pure imagination', believing Imagination to be Reason as well as that 'feeling which changes doubt to faith'. *Self-Knowledge*, on the other hand, is as frankly theological as Coleridge's prose statement on the same subject:

> Say, canst thou make thyself? — . . .
>
> . . .
>
> What is there in thee, Man, that can be known? —
>
> . . .
>
> Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God!

[1] *Sketches*, p. 110.
[2] *Sketches*, Appendix C, p. 148.

This is part of the poem, whereas Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria*, 'We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM'.[1] As theology, by which Maurice, like Coleridge, meant not only the science which treats of God, but also that which treats of His relations with man, these two statements convey the same idea, the first, in poetry, the second, in prose, the 'verse-artisan' providing a choice. *Constancy to an Ideal Object* (1826), which conveys a similar idea, does so, unlike *Self-Knowledge*, with a poignancy so powerful as to make the poem a vital experience.

A conversation poem, *Constancy to an Ideal Object* strongly recalls *Frost at Midnight* (1798) and *Fears in Solitude* (1798). Maurice saw 'many veins and fibres' in it connecting it with Coleridge. The poet's home is a key image in all three poems: *Frost at Midnight* depicts him beside his own fire, the 'dear babe' Hartley 'cradled by [his] side'; *Fears in Solitude* discloses him on a hill marking 'the huge elms' sheltering Wordsworth's abode, but hiding his 'own lowly cottage', where his 'babe / And his babe's mother dwell in peace'; in *Constancy to an Ideal Object*, however, his home is non-existent, and were it indeed the 'peaceful'st cot', it could be no more than a 'becalmed bark' on 'an ocean waste and wide', himself without aim and purpose, because no 'ideal object' presides therein. The internal evidence suggests the desired object to be, not Sara Fricker, his wife, but Sara Hutchinson (Asra), the sister of Wordsworth's wife. Maurice would have known — through John Sterling, if no one else — the bitter story of Coleridge's life during the years between: frustrated by ill health, separated from his wife and family, estranged from Wordsworth, his friendship with Asra at an end: Coleridge's soliloquy in *Constancy* touches the feeling heart.

As the subject, Coleridge ponders yearningly on Asra, his object. The object of his soliloquy, however, is not so much Asra herself as the Asra of his thought. As she herself recedes, his thought grows proportionately more sharply idealized. The intellectualized Asra remains the 'virtuous' and the 'pure in heart', an 'idealized' object to which, in the eternity of thought, Coleridge may remain 'constant'. Further, in the process of

[1] *Biographia Literaria*, I, 186.

reconciliation, the particular becomes universal, for the idealized object quickly becomes 'embodied Good' and 'living Love'.

At this, the allegorical level, the 'ideal object' is also a symbol, which Coleridge characterized by 'a translucence of the special in the individual . . . of the eternal in and through the temporal'.[1] As Coleridge's ideal object, then, Asra is a mediating symbol between her own flesh-and-blood object-self, and Coleridge's conscious subject-self. As symbol, too, she transfers the relationship upward to the light of the eternal.

Quoting Dorothy Wordsworth, Miss Adair shows Coleridge's thought to be, like his love for Asra, 'no more than a fanciful dream'.[2] Indeed, in the words of the poem, she is that of which dreams are made: like Coleridge himself, she is a 'shadow'. She is a special kind of shadow, however. Hers is like that of the woodman, who,

> . . . wandering westward up the glen
> At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
> The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze,
> Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
> An image with a glory round its head.

The halo round the head of Asra's shadow suggests both 'embodied Good' and 'living Love', but also the noumemon of the Eternal. Though Asra, like the woodman, is unaware of the part she plays in the great scheme of things, Coleridge sees her as the mediator between his own Conscience and God, his 'Ideal Object' and his 'Home'. For, wrote he in theological prose, 'We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in God'.

A hauntingly beautiful poem, *Constancy to an Ideal Object* takes us straight to the heart of Coleridge's theology. That a modern critic invites us to take this way to Coleridge's poetry suggests that we are in the direct line of succession proceeding from Coleridge himself through Maurice and the Coleridgeans, who interpreted him for the Victorians, albeit as both a romantic poet and a theologian, as a whole Man among men.

[1] Prickett, p. 15, who quotes from Shedd's edition of *The Statesman's Manual*, 1853, I, 437.
[2] Patricia, M. Adair, *The Waking Dream*, 1967, p. 232.