

*British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1983

## THE AESTHETICS OF LOVE IN COLERIDGE

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### I

DURING THOSE formative years in the first decade of the nineteenth century when Coleridge was working out the main distinctions of his theory of imagination he was also experiencing an extended and unrequited love for Sara Hutchinson. One of his notebook entries records the moment that his love began—how, on November 24th, 1799, standing up in front of the fire in the Hutchinsons' house, he 'pressed Sara's hand a long time behind her back, and then, then for the first time, love pricked me with its light arrow, poisoned alas! and hopeless' (N 1575).<sup>1</sup> Being an acute psychologist and self-observer, Coleridge does not fail to question closely the nature of his passion for Sara over the next ten years that it possesses him in its full intensity. He examines the nature of love, its philosophical implications as well as its cognitive and affective signs, in a series of frequent notebook entries—a contribution to the psychology of love whose full significance has yet to be properly assessed.<sup>2</sup>

Much is now known about the influences which helped to shape Coleridge's aesthetic theory—his reading of Lessing, Kant, Schelling, and the Schlegels in particular offered him a philosophical framework, besides several ideas and concepts which he adapted or—only too often—appropriated without due acknowledgement. This is now commonly known. What seems so far unappreciated is the effect on the shaping of his theory of this more pressing and personal source—his love for Sara. Coleridge developed ideas about the self that loves which cast much light on the self that creates art or responds to it. To examine the unity of thought and feeling which Coleridge's love taught him to find in the self is to return to the aesthetic theory with a clearer view of what Coleridge is claiming when he speaks of imagination, or of the role of symbols, or of the truths obtainable from art. (It may also help, incidentally, in dispersing a dogma about Coleridge which used to be widely believed—that he was the first New Critic.) The experience of love and the response to art, in Coleridge's account, both induce a greater self-knowledge but a knowledge in particular of the insufficiency of our conscious awareness. The signal benefit of both experiences is to alert us to modes of feeling within the self, of a continual and necessary development of the self beneath the

consciousness. Art and love enable us to begin recognizing and co-operating with this self within the self, to help make conscious what is unconscious.

Perhaps it was the suffering that Coleridge's love caused him which did most to develop such an understanding. His notebooks testify frequently to his grief at realizing that Sara was forever unattainable, or to the pain he feels simply at being absent from her. And yet such love brings insights of the highest value. In one of the few notes which directly relate love to the nature of art, Coleridge suggests both the type and form of knowledge to be found in poetry—a note which connects some of his key ideas in a way that cannot be found in his more formal writings on aesthetics. (I emend the note slightly to eliminate Coleridge's corrections.)

Love will vent his inmost and veriest Grievs in sweet and measured sounds . . . is it that—a divine Joy being its end it will not utter even its woes and weaknesses, sorrows & sicknesses, except in some form of pleasure? pleasure the shadow & sacramental Type of that Joy (which by union fit . . . et facit et creat et creatur) or is it rather, that its essence being a divine synthesis of highest reason—and vehementest Impulse, it must needs the soul in its two faculties, or perhaps of the two souls, vital power of Heat, & Light of Intellect—attract & combine with poesy, whose essence is passionate order. (N 3092)

Coleridge went on to use the ideas in this note of 1807 in the lectures of 1811–12 on Shakespeare and Milton, in the course of his remarks on love and the insufficiency of the self.

Who shall dare to stand alone, and vaunt himself, in himself, sufficient? In poetry it is the blending of passion with order that constitutes perfection: this is still more the case in morals, and more than all in the exclusive attachment of the sexes.<sup>3</sup>

While the lecture, as A. J. Harding points out, widens the scope of the note by adding to it Platonic ideas on the final cause of love,<sup>4</sup> it loses at the same time in psychological immediacy and connectedness. Similarly, in going on to define poetry in the *Biographia Literaria*,<sup>5</sup> Coleridge takes up the central role of pleasure but omits both the relation of pleasure to the intellect and its patterning after that Joy which is inherent in the self. These connections, and others of relevance to the poetic theory, can be found elaborated in Coleridge's writings on love. In this article I focus on two main features of these writings: Coleridge's intellectual grasp of the nature of the self, and the role he assigns to the feelings.

## II

The unity of intellect and feeling which Coleridge elevates into a poetic principle in the note of 1807—that 'synthesis of highest reason—and vehementest Impulse'—is one of the consistent themes of Coleridge's thinking.

It is declared to be the object of his metaphysics, one purpose of which is to enhance 'the Light of Love & of Conscience'. He aims 'to make the Reason spread Light over our Feelings, to make our Feelings diffuse vital Warmth thro' our Reason . . .' (N 1623). Imbued with his feelings for Sara, what does Coleridge's intellect tell him when he considers the self that loves?

First, he recognizes the unity of reason and feeling cannot exist only at the conscious level. In contemplating the nature of love, Coleridge frequently emphasizes the incompleteness of consciousness—in fact it becomes the dominant factor in his account of the self and the power of love. The perfection of love, he says, lies in the adding of inclination to duty; it does so by increasing the self's sense of reality but such a sense is available to consciousness only as an intuition:

All our Thoughts all that we abstract from our consciousness & so form the Phaenomenon Self is a Shadow, its whole Substance is the dim yet powerful sense that it is but a Shadow & ought to belong to a Substance/but this Substance can have no marks, no discriminating Characters . . . (N 3026)

Thus the reality of the self that love makes known to us is an unconscious one. Coleridge leaves it open whether love may not be the only cause of the self's greater sense of inner reality, since the note goes on to speak in general of moments when this is felt—it is 'deepliest felt during particular phaenomena with a consciousness that the phaenomenon is in us but *it* not in the phaenomenon, for which alone we yet value the phaenomenon . . .'. This account could therefore apply to aesthetic response, and be taken as a characterization of the limits of our consciousness regarding aesthetic phenomena. Such an interpretation is validated by Coleridge's use of the word *shadow* in the first note I quoted, where he speaks of pleasure as 'the shadow & sacramental Type of that Joy'; pleasure in this sense would be one of those phenomena of the shadow self which point to a deeper reality within.

Such experience indicates the progressive nature of the self—whether it is the pleasure given by a poem or the feeling of love, it gives us what Coleridge calls elsewhere a 'realizing intuition'.<sup>6</sup> This consciousness, he continues, 'constitutes the craving of True Love'. There is a strong sense of the self's incompleteness, and yet of a reality within the self to which the consciousness of the beloved acts as a symbol. Coleridge registers the intensity of his feelings for Sara in another note, of 1809: 'there is a something here,' he says; 'O No! not here! but deeper deeper far, & yet here too, which makes the other but its symbols—even as we see by the eyes yet know feel nothing of the eyes while we are seeing' (N 3520; original partly in cipher). This reality lying beneath the symbol constitutes the energy and direction of the self; love helps to motivate the substance

self without either pre-empting or consuming its energies. The highest feeling of love is eloquently described in this way by Coleridge: he talks of

that *willing* sense of the insufficingness of the *self* for itself, which predisposes a generous nature to see, in the total being of another, the supplement and completion of its own;—that quiet perpetual *seeking* which the presence of the beloved object modulates, not suspends, where the heart momentarily finds, and, finding, again seeks on . . .<sup>7</sup>

The later definition of imagination in terms of symbols—the combining of Reason and the Senses which ‘gives birth to a system of symbols . . . consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*’<sup>8</sup>—takes on a new depth and productivity when it is set beside these comments on the beloved as a symbol for truths within the self. In this light the conscious response to art can be seen as consubstantial with one’s own continuing processes of unconscious thought, which constitute the ‘substance’ self. The work of art modulates, but does not suspend, the seeking of the self; that is to say, the symbols which it presents mobilize and direct the energies of the self but do not suspend them in a purely contemplative aesthetic act.

### III

The difficulty which Coleridge often has in expressing his idea of the nature of love, the broken phrases, odd syntax, and corrections to be encountered in the *Notebooks*, suggest a quality of thought beyond what could be made explicit. Coleridge complains of this difficulty, as he records his sense of unworthiness for Sara in his notebook: ‘Beloved!’ he says, ‘. . . what are Words but air? & impulses of air? O who has deeply felt, deeply, deeply! & not fretted & grown impatient at the inadequacy <of Words to Feeling,> . . .’ (N 2998). Ideas may be present to us in the form of feelings, which are beyond expression: Coleridge characterized what he meant by *Idea* by observing that ideas ‘may indeed be suggested and awakened, but cannot, like the images of sense and the conceptions of the understanding, be adequately *expressed* by words’.<sup>9</sup> The sense of the substance self which Coleridge’s experience of love gave him is such an idea; it led Coleridge to emphasize the importance of feelings—those that he termed obscure, or indefinite feelings. In *The Friend*, for instance, Coleridge developed the view that deep feelings should belong only to the living, moral concerns of the self; to attach such feelings to material objects is to degrade the self—we should ‘reserve the deep feelings which belong, as by a natural right to those obscure ideas that are necessary to the moral perfection of the human being . . .’.<sup>10</sup> The virtue of love, he says elsewhere, is that it associates ‘a large proportion of all our obscure feelings with a real form’.<sup>11</sup> For Coleridge, the obscure feelings rightly interpreted, are the progressive part of the self, its route into the unconscious. In a

remarkable note of 1818, speaking of the intuitive power in thought, and how unconscious thought is felt to be in advance of conscious, he says that in the human heart, 'Cause contains effect'—an effect which manifests itself to consciousness as an instinct or feeling, as of something missing :

yet the Cause goes before in order and in time/when we understand this, we shall understand the intellectual & moral Instincts as they must in part possess (for how can mere Vacuum *impel*?) but in part possess—i.e. they must possess unconsciously, and consciously miss ['yearn for']—The former the materia—the *feeling*—the latter the form, the idea. (N 4438)

Thus the feelings of love, rightly interpreted, are an instinct for the moral development of the self, which can take place only in unison with the beloved—the self discovering itself. The lover, says Coleridge, 'worships in his Beloved that final consummation <of itself which is> produced in his own soul by the action of the Soul of the Beloved upon it . . .' (N 2540).

Art, as the note quoted earlier states, may result from such feeling—even the griefs of love point to 'a divine Joy' (N 3092). The term *Joy* has a special significance for Coleridge—it is the result of just such an interchange involving the self as characterizes love, and is therefore a sign of self-discovery. In 'Dejection: An Ode', Joy arises in communion with nature only if the self can give of itself:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone does Nature live.

Similarly, love is described (in N 2540) as the action of the lover's soul 'upon the Soul of his Beloved/till each contemplates the Soul of the other as involving his own, both in its givings and its receivings . . .'.

The work of art speaks to the 'substance' self, therefore; if the feelings it arouses are of the 'obscure' kind—and Coleridge's claim that poetry 'gives most pleasure when only generally & not perfectly understood' (N 383) is relevant to this point—then the work is speaking to that in us which is incomplete, to our progressive moral instincts. What the effect of art might be on our unconscious powers of thought is described in a note of 1804, which makes as explicit as such a matter could be, how the response to art, as with Joy and the course of love, is essentially a question of giving in order to receive: poetry, says Coleridge, is

a rationalized dream dealing . . . to manifold Forms our own Feelings, that never perhaps were attached by us consciously to our own personal Selves . . . O there are Truths below the Surface in the subject of Sympathy, & how we *become* that which we understandly behold & hear, having, how much God perhaps only knows, created part even of the Form. (N 2086)

The work of art is, in other words, inextricably linked with, and dependent on, our own unconscious patterns of thought and feeling; it is not an independently existing or autonomous whole. As Rilke puts it, the effect of works of art is not measurable: 'Their influence is so much dissolved in memory and experience and so interwoven therewith that it does not allow of individual representation'.<sup>12</sup> The form of the work of art, Coleridge is saying, is created from the feelings and sympathies of the 'substance' self; response to the work is a disposition or attitude of the self which, being involved in the progressive thought of the self, must be held to be unbounded, never complete. Consciousness does not possess the power to exhaust wholly the meaning of a given work of art.

#### IV

Aesthetic unity was perhaps Coleridge's highest principle. While he inherited it from his philosophical predecessors, from Plotinus to Kant, his experience of love enabled him to know its potential in the self with an urgency that was both wonderful and terrifying. Coleridge saw that love gave a unity to his own thought and feeling: as he expressed it in 1802, 'Love to all the Passions & Faculties, as Music to all the varieties of Sound' (N 1229); but this was a radical and progressive unity, not a static unity for contemplation; it was the unity of a self inclined in one direction; 'My love of Sara', he says in 1810, 'is my whole Being wrapt up into one Desire, all the Hopes & Fears, Joys & Sorrows, all the Powers, Vigor, & Faculties of my Spirit abridged into <one> perpetual Inclination' (N 3996). When he came to account for the nature of art, Coleridge saw its effects similarly as a disposition of the whole self. As a unity of thought and feeling, 'a rationalized dream', poetry in us is the form taken by the giving and receiving self.

But the response to poetry involves the substance self, and must therefore bring the hidden purposes of that self into ascendancy by dislodging the normal ascendancy of conscious thought. Coleridge describes the effect of Wordsworth's poetry on him as a defamiliarizing of perception and the awakening of wonder—the poet combines 'the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar'.<sup>13</sup> By unsettling the interpretations of consciousness, poetry enables the substance self to find expression; as with love, poetry thus generates an increased 'sense of reality' (N 3026). This explains Coleridge's account of the genius in 'On Poesy or Art', who creates art by making 'the external internal, the internal external . . .'; there is, says Coleridge, 'in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius'.<sup>14</sup>

To create art is an act of Imagination, which simultaneously disperses the thought available to conscious thought into a new form, while giving

power and reality to the dispositions of the substance self. As Coleridge puts it succinctly in a note of 1811, Imagination is 'the fusing power, that fixing unfixes & while it melts & bedims the Image, still leaves in the Soul its living meaning—' (N 4066). Thus that unity of purpose found in the self that loves, in its one 'perpetual Inclination', is found again in the self that creates or responds to art. The poet, in Coleridge's famous account, 'brings the whole soul of man into activity . . .'.<sup>15</sup> To understand the progressive nature of the self that loves is also, finally, to identify it with the 'I AM' that lies at the centre of Coleridge's most important account of Imagination. Just as 'the eternal act of creation' of the I AM is repeated in the primary Imagination, so the same progressive substance self gives its form to the acts of the secondary, or aesthetic Imagination. This Imagination 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify'.<sup>16</sup> Love and poetic creation exhibit the same radical process—all the thoughts and feelings of the self, just as Coleridge found in loving Sara, are transformed and dedicated to a single purpose. Coleridge's experience of love thus enabled him to verify and give a new and powerful meaning to the principle of unity in aesthetics.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Original in Latin. This and subsequent references in brackets refer to S. T. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (1957–73).
- <sup>2</sup> Molly Lefebure's recent biography, for example, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (1974) disparages Coleridge's writings on love as wish-fulfilment and self-delusion.
- <sup>3</sup> *Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (1960), vol. II, 107.
- <sup>4</sup> A. J. Harding, *Coleridge and the Idea of Love* (1974), 96–7.
- <sup>5</sup> 'A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth . . .' *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (1958), vol. II, 10.
- <sup>6</sup> *Biographia*, vol. I, 173.
- <sup>7</sup> *Coleridge's Poems*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (1912), vol. I, 465.
- <sup>8</sup> *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (1972), 29.
- <sup>9</sup> *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. J. Colmer (1976), 165. For an interesting discussion of the aesthetic implications of this term, see T. J. Diffey, 'The Idea of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 17 (1977), 122–8.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke (1969), vol. I, 106.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (1956), vol. II, 768.
- <sup>12</sup> *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (1946), 130.
- <sup>13</sup> *Biographia*, Vol. I, 59.
- <sup>14</sup> *Biographia*, Vol. II, 258.
- <sup>15</sup> *Biographia*, Vol. II, 12.
- <sup>16</sup> *Biographia*, Vol. I, 202.