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reads

Platonic Coleridge

(Legenda 2009 – Studies in Comparative Literature 15)

by James Vigus

RECEIVING *Platonic Coleridge* shortly after Anya Taylor's equally excellent *Erotic Coleridge*, I was reminded of a conversation long ago with an elderly liberal theologian in my college. In reply to a suggestion from me he observed, 'There's always another side to Coleridge, isn't there!' In recent times, various of his human elements have been explored: Anya Taylor's picture of him as husband and lover followed Molly Lefebure's sympathetic portrayal of Sara Coleridge and her trials; now James Vigus explores the constant fascination with Plato that runs through his career, and which prompted many to think of both men in similar terms. Looking back to their meetings in Rome in 1805, Washington Allston said, '... when I recall some of our walks under the pines of the Villa Borghese, I am almost tempted to dream that I have once listened to Plato in the groves of the Academy.'

Vigus's first point offers a salutary corrective to more sweeping generalizations about his Platonism. If we accept the testimony of Lamb and others, Coleridge should be more accurately described, in his early years at least, as 'Neoplatonic Coleridge'. After a century's neglect of Plato in the older universities, Thomas Taylor's brief translation from Plotinus had appeared while Coleridge was still at Christ's Hospital—presumably to be snapped up by the young enthusiast. When he went up to Jesus College in Cambridge, expecting in due time to be ordained, his interest as a budding clergyman would have been to see how such philosophers could be roped in to account for the Christian Trinity, an assertion of belief in which was still required from all members of his College. So the young Coleridge was likely to be absorbed by defences such as Cudworth's *True Intellectual System*—at least until he was drawn into the kind of controversy initiated by William Frend's prosecution for heresy, starting him on a course that led to his brief career as a Unitarian preacher and then to his interest in the writings of Benedict Spinoza.

Up to his early years in Cambridge, Anglicanism and the comfortable tradition of the Cambridge Platonists had no doubt offered a progressive outlook for a future cleric, enlarged, if anything, by the possibility of taking on board Plotinus, and even Spinoza. The visit to Germany, however, changed everything. Contact with the backwash of the French Revolution made him aware that on the Continent the main battle was between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism, the chief alternative being, of course, downright atheism.

In the aftermath of the German visit, Coleridge was left with a dilemma. When he perceived the flaws in David Hartley's associationism his early devotion had given way to Berkeleyanism, which delivered him back into the

world of Plato. Yet the most cogent among German thinkers would have led him on, through Spinoza, to the sphere of Immanuel Kant—who refused to align himself with Plato. Faced with this intellectual impasse Coleridge evidently decided that a full study of Plato was called for—which involved among other things deciding between the most important of the dialogues. Despite its attractiveness, the *Symposium* contained passages condoning homosexuality which could not be accepted in the puritanical atmosphere of university study; even Shelley was unwilling to include them in his translation.

Since the shape of the book is determined by the question of Platonism, the contours of Coleridge's own development are somewhat obscured. In his own terms, the Plato whom Coleridge had airily described in the 1795 Lectures as 'the wild-minded Disciple of Socrates who hid Truth in a dazzle of fantastic allegory', and was 'dark with excess of Brightness'¹ was followed by a transition to Spinoza, in line with the concern with Nature that accompanied his early dealings with Wordsworth. But he returned prominently after the German adventure, accompanying Coleridge's aroused interest in Immanuel Kant. Here the situation became particularly complicated, since the unmistakable intellectual power exerted by Kant was that of a man who in earlier years had shown enough partiality for the French Revolution for his fellow countrymen to view him with suspicion. And even when he offered the answer to Locke and Hume that was called for by the age, so far from acceding to cultivation of Plato, he regarded himself as anti-Platonic.

The nub of the issue was the exact status of the Ideas, valued by both men. Plato's winning account of these must immediately gain Coleridge's allegiance. Kant, on the other hand, could not bear what he felt to be Plato's mystical language, insisting rather that the Ideas were not constitutive, as Plato seemed to be making them, but regulative. Coleridge always felt that this insistence of Kant's masked, esoterically, an adherence to the quality of the Ideas which he could not, for prudential reasons, announce publicly, since to do so would leave him vulnerable to his patron, who would find charges of atheism laid against his protégée.

Coleridge himself, meanwhile, not only rejected any charge of atheism but could not even envisage how it could possibly be true. Any such notion would, in fact, also have driven a wedge between poetry and philosophy—a conclusion that some devotees of Plato regarded as necessarily to be drawn from the Dialogues.

The later phase of his Platonism was induced by his decision to give a series of Philosophical Lectures. Kathleen Coburn, to whom credit for the rediscovery of their transcripts is entirely due, also registered that in composing them Coleridge had made considerable use of W.G. Tennemann's *History of Philosophy* and faithfully worked out the relationship between source-book and text. If the publication caused less stir in scholarly circles than might have

¹ LPR (1795) 208.

been expected, this was partly due to the element of derivativeness thus acknowledged. Walter Jackson Bate, noting the unexpected failure in these lectures to deal with the German philosophy in which Coleridge had recently been immersing himself, thought that he might have been embarrassed at the number of debts he would need to acknowledge; even as enthusiastic a Coleridgean as Owen Barfield found a falling-off in the quality of the late lectures as opposed to the early ones; while for Norman Fruman they simply provided glaring instances of Coleridge's weakness for plagiarism. James Vigus, who records all this, points out that they are nevertheless a good deal more interesting than might be suggested by this bald account, since Coleridge was able to find in them an opportunity of taking issue with them as pure examples of the Kantianism that he distrusted. Far from being plagiarism, then, his lectures amounted to a running conflict with Tennemann. Moreover, having himself constantly criticized Kant from a Platonic viewpoint he could here do battle with the German's habit of reading Plato through a Kantian lens. His marginal comments on his predecessor therefore provided a further interesting supplement to the lectures themselves.

Vigus takes the issue further, in fact, not only reading these marginalia as forming, in addition, a dialogue with his chief disciple, J. H. Green, but maintaining that the manuscript of the *Opus Maximum*, bequeathed to Green in the hope that he would bring it to the fruition of a publishable volume, represents the final statement of his Platonism.

The *Opus Maximum* fragments remains an object of some doubt, nevertheless, largely because we know so little about how Coleridge himself finally regarded them—whether, as some contributors to Jeffrey Barbeau's collection of essays *Coleridge's Assertion of Religion* seem to think, they are to be read as contributing to the final account of his philosophical view or whether they simply mark successive attempts to find ways of approaching it.

On one point, Vigus's study makes an outstanding contribution. This is his assertion that work towards the *Opus Maximum* went hand in hand with his lasting feeling for the achievement of John Milton, so that the *Opus Maximum* could be seen as Coleridge's crowning contribution not only to English literature but also to the understanding of Plato. As against the commonly held view that Milton's growing refusal to give his poetry sensuous appeal vitiated his achievement, Vigus argues that the withdrawal from appeal to the senses in his poetic writing was of a piece with Plato's cultivation of an esoteric philosophy transcending the contradictions inherent in a mode of thinking based on sense-experience. In line with this, he notes (as the Princeton editors had failed to do) that the phrase 'with his garland and singing robes about him' is a quotation from Milton's *Reason of Church Government*.

The ultimate problem of Coleridge's thought however, and so of his Platonism, was to know whether in the last resort it should be thought of as a system. At one point Vigus quotes Schlegel's dictum in the *Athenaeum fragments*, 'It is equally deadly for the spirit to have a system, and to have no system. It

must indeed decide to have both.² Nevertheless, he appears to think that Coleridge's *Opus Maximum* manuscripts were all designed with the aim of elucidating Plato's esoteric philosophy, which Coleridge eventually identifies as concerned with the idea of Will, the origin of evil and the concept of the Trinity.

If this was indeed Coleridge's aim, it fulfilled Coleridge's ultimate goals in a very satisfying manner, since it helped to display Plato in full alignment with the truths of Christianity; yet if so it was also stultifying in precisely the way that Schiller feared, since, esoteric or not, it imposed a system.

For my own money, the virtue of Coleridge's ultimate philosophy lay elsewhere, in its embracing of life-processes in ways that he had long been exploring, particularly during his discussions with Wordsworth. In these terms the most valuable part of the book is to be found in the fourth chapter, which brings into play the discussions of Imagination in Books VI and VIII of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, where the Idea is seen to contain both 'distinct conception in itself' and a 'plenitude, which resists limitation or division':

Such is the origin of all great ideas on which [Plato] works. How the grand idea of the universe worked in him before it found utterance! In how many obscure and, as it were, oracular, sentences, in what strange symbols did it place itself!³

The achievement here consists in describing Coleridge's relation to the Ideas not only as product but as process. Like Wordsworth in *The Prelude* and himself in his own writings, there would be the sense both of growing and of flowering. For Wordsworth, in the Cave of Yordas, the observing entrant would eventually find everything 'exposed and lifeless as a written book'; he would then 'grieve at the remembrance of his loss'—regretting the vitality of the 'ferment quiet & sublime' that preceded it. For Coleridge, likewise, the true reader of life, as of Plato, will always be rediscovering its endlessness and promise, which 'still impels the soul to pursue'.

This philosophy of process, rather than product, characterizes the more profitable side of Plato; it is the reward of getting to know him that Vigus makes available in what are for me the best parts of this enlightening study.

² *Athenäum*sfragment No. 53.

³ *LHP* (1818-1819) I 194.