

Confessions of a Neurotic Delegate: Coleridge Conference 2010

Alan Gregory

I LIKE TO LURK. Lurking comes very naturally and I had perfected the technique of “sidling,” essential for all serious lurkers, by the time I was three years old. This is the only respect in which I regard myself as a prodigy. Shoulders hunched, head-down, I spread sideways, like a fungus, along the nearest wall to the door. I was not a popular child. Lurking has its benefits: eavesdropping on happier lives; an intense fellow-feeling with wall-paper. The perils probably outweigh them, though. A friend was arrested for lurking in a supermarket, with intent to purchase discounted fruit. The charge was “inappropriate shopping,” apparently a crime in Surrey. More ghastly still, the lurker risks calamity on the tar-baby of those burdened, like a certain Mariner, with “things that must be said.” Whereas other party-goers avoid this, though I have no idea how, the lurker slips into the vortex of that one individual in the corner, whose arduous experience of a recent hemorrhoidal operation demands urgent and graphic retelling. This brings me, by contrast, I am glad to say, to the 2010 Coleridge Conference. This is the only environment I know in which lurking is habitually misunderstood as a perfectly reasonable request for a conversation about poetry or God. Lurker’s bliss, no less, the “point of indifference” between sidling and society.

The 2010 conference gave fair attention to Sara Coleridge, her reading of *Aids to Reflection*, her construction of Coleridge’s “genius,” even her “unbuttoned moments.” Sara probably regarded lurkers as she did Wilberforce on holy baptism: “Soapy,” and “Sly.” Nevertheless, she shared, with all true lurkers, the root affliction of “nervousness,” the subject of a dialogue she completed in 1834. The piece urges an alert self-care, porous to common and medical wisdom but always determined to follow one’s own counsel and experience under this mysterious suffering. Our conference also examined STC’s troubled mind: the unresolved grief permeating “Christabel” and, in later years, the poetic consolations of a “bereft heart” and the blessings of seeming paralysis and “non-productivity;” as with the daughter, there were anxieties about illness, too, in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” and over the relationship of poetic genius and tranquility of mind. Sara’s dialogue, of course, has the most enervating bodily collapse in mind. I may say, though, I came close last July. Groping in my room, the first night, thinking how Gilray and Cruikshank had artistically mugged John Thelwall, I found that my room was situated in a tree. Branches were wriggling through the window and toward my bed. I switched on the light but it burst into flames. Cosmically speaking, I think this was ironic, since my bed was so swampy with green and fetid damp, that tails of blue-white marsh gas ran along the sheets. I awoke with a bad back and covered in wild vine. Fortunately, and this speaks to the diligence and preparedness of our organizers, the ubiquitous Graham Davidson changed my room. The experience, however, was, need I say it, deeply scarring.

Since she considers hypochondriacs close neighbors to the truly mad, Sara is wary of them. This was exceptionally worrying to me, though becoming hypochondriacal about one's hypochondria does have a certain neurotic elegance. As in previous years, I was struck by the slightly dispiriting vigor at the Coleridge Conference: a constant scene of buzzing health tries the nerves. Consider for instance, a statistical demonstration that Coleridge was not responsible for the "Boosey Faustus." As one of the editors was present, I expected a long Lear-like O,O,O,O! followed by a tearful assault on the podium. None of it, he merely thanked the speaker and drew exactly the opposite conclusion from precisely the same evidence. You don't get much more healthy-minded than that. Later, he introduced us to an off-stage Coleridgean Werewolf.

Regarding food, I am glad to have a complaint that is not purely internal. For us neurotic types, as Sara points out, diet is—well—an issue. The best that can be said about the food at Cannington is that it kept itself within a modest range of colors. Brown was popular. The convenience of a house taste made vegetables, pasta, chicken, and lemon meringue pie pretty well interchangeable. My guess is that most folk compensated during evening trips to the pub. I can only surmise, since here, too, my deficits in companionability are spectacular. Not only do I shuffle haplessly in front of bars, sometimes for hours, before the staff notice that I am in the way, but also—a social fatality—I don't drink alcohol. This makes me socially viable on the lines of Savonarola during an orgy.

As one might expect, I rarely consort with nature; besides, lurking in the open air is a very specialized business. Most Coleridgeans, however, flung themselves into no less than three opportunities for synchronized walking, and incidentally provided me with the joys of listening to travelers tales, held by glittering eyes and backed against a wall. The countryside around Cannington, other than being an exquisite delight, requires, I learned, an intrepidity akin to rafting the Zambezi. Some plunged into rivers, some were marooned on traffic islands, and some settled in hedgerows like spiders; the rest abandoned themselves to drink. One group fell to a spontaneous reenactment of the Somme, crawling under barbed-wire across a muddy field. Such, though, is the bonhomie of this conference, that all returned determined to have had a jolly good time. The one consistent and kindly element was the weather, perhaps in recognition of "the Romantic invention of climate." No "madning rain," thank God, only an excellent talk on Coleridge's fable.

Sara advises moderate exercise, tailored to stamina. She also notes, though not recommending, the efficaciousness, in certain cases of nervous derangement, of sudden and strenuous blows to the system. As a whole, the Coleridge Conference is a species of shock therapy. Fifty-six papers over six days, not to mention discussions, outings, meals, socializing, and, even, an ecumenical mass on some mornings, so early it felt a wee bit like last rites. Beyond the quantity, there was the range, rigor, and imagination of it all, a tribute both to the delegates and the extraordinariness of STC himself. Pretty

or not, it was surely bracing “to force together thoughts so all unlike each other.” We had poetic reflections, of course, on Conversation Poems, the late poetry, *Kublah Khan*, *Christabel*, and regarding introspection, dreams, children, frost, flames, fireflies, foster-mothers, homesickness, serpents, succubae, introspection, voices, and Wordsworths, even sea-sick Wordsworths; whilst Coleridgean fallout was investigated in Emerson, Bushnell, New England Transcendentalism, and Yeats; and the fellow-travelers and conversation partners considered included Kant, as always, Spinoza, Godwin, Johnson, Thelwall, Bacon, evolutionary theorists, and George Dyer. The political Coleridge, both pantisocratic and nationalist, appeared, and the critical, wrestling with genius, genial criticism, autobiography, verbal sketching, visual arts, and anonymity.

If you want a captive audience, try the nervously collapsed. Sara is exercised by issues of tact, how to be the object of so much concern and still resist, though without irritability, the goading physician, the contradicting counsels of urgent friends, the dogmatism of well-meaning hearsay. In the properly sympathetic environment, “Advisors of the Nervous,” remember their own trials or, at least, learn from previous visits to the bedside. Beyond the bedside, Coleridge conferences rank high among sympathetic environments. Thus, questions are taken seriously, including the trembling ones, and speakers can be confident about not getting the curved or barbed variety. This summer the ethics of tact and delicacy extended into the material itself: now we have the technology, should we reveal what Coleridge struck out; should we violate Wordsworth’s secrecy and attempt a quest of the historical Lucy?

Which brings me to theology, singled out in my bias as a theologian. Most theologians are either shy, nervous, lurking types, such as myself, or else spoiling for a fight, brim full of *odium theologicum*, longing for the days when monks stuck it to one another in a public disputation. In contrast, the conference is a very genial place for a turbulent subject. We or, at least, I luxuriated in trichotomous theology, Coleridge’s body and soul, Southey’s Church of England, as well as the *Opus Maximum*, complete or incomplete, and its relation to *Aids to Reflection* and to the Imagination. Not bad for a pensioned off old queen and no loss of metaphysical power in the discussions either, which, of course, you wouldn’t expect from folk who can take this conference’s rigors on the chin.

At the last breakfast, I was please to see, at last, signs of wilt. Even Nick Roe, indefatigable grandmaster, was getting the “haven’t-you-people-got-homes-to-go-to” look. A good few, though, were off to chase Wordsworth round the Lakes. Perhaps, though, that’s what Sara had in mind: “he who is stunned feels the second blow less keenly than that which stunned him.” All I could manage was a limp lean against the wall of Bridgwater station and catatonia all the way to Northumberland, at which point the cleaners removed me from the train.