

Cognitive Process, Commanding Genius, and Comparative Literature

Angela Esterhammer

(Coleridge Bulletin, New Series No 16, Winter 2000, pp. 56-62)

In Chapter 2 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge seeks to debunk a widespread belief about the ‘supposed irritability of men of Genius.’ In the process, he relates this theme to the three topics mentioned in the title of my paper: first, the conception of ideas in the mind; second, the type of character that Coleridge terms a ‘commanding genius’; third, through long footnotes, he alludes to his own practice as a lecturer on comparative literature. By taking a somewhat eccentric path between these themes, I hope to explore some questions that I believe underlie them all: namely, how are mental concepts formed; how is authority constructed; and what is the relation of script to performance?

Coleridge’s mature theory of mental process, as represented in the *Biographia* and in the *Logic*, distinguishes two stages in the processing of ideas. First, the understanding synthesizes two or more intuitions; then the reasoning faculty performs an act of judgement, ruling on whether the understanding’s synthesis does or does not have existence in reality. In the *Logic*, Coleridge stresses that the primary mental act that joins a subject with a predicate, thereby creating a *possible* concept, does not yet affirm the *real existence* of that concept. Recognizing a concept’s correspondence to reality is a two-stage process, for the understanding has ‘a twofold character’ by which ‘it gives *and* it attributes substance’ (L 239; italics added). The first of these stages, which Coleridge calls the ‘essential act’ of the understanding, is an act of positing: the mind must endow a phenomenon with *logical essence* before the question of its *real existence* can be entered on at all. Some concepts will only ever have the synthetic unity they are given by the mind, for real existence in the world cannot be attributed to them. ‘It may well be that the subject has no existence but in the mind,’ as in the case of propositions like ‘Cerberus is three-headed’ (L 79). Yet even a three-headed hell-hound, conceived by the mind, is endowed with a certain kind of reality, because ‘the act by which the mind combines the three heads... , that is and must be real.’ Coleridge’s epistemological analysis has significant implications for theories of the imagination and literary production; for, as he suggests, if the concepts formed by the primary act of the understanding do not exist in the real world, perhaps they still exist in the mode of dreams, or of fiction. Whatever is synthesized by the mind is as real as the mind itself.

The problem of negotiating between ideas and reality arises in a somewhat different form in Chapter 2 of the *Biographia*. Coleridge’s consideration of the ‘supposed irritability of men of Genius’ leads him immediately to a distinction

between ‘absolute *Genius*’ and ‘*commanding* genius.’ Absolute geniuses—poets, for instance—‘rest content between thought and

[57]

reality, as it were in an intermundium.’ The political or military commanders whom Coleridge calls commanding geniuses, though, ‘must impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality’ (BL I: 32). Only at first glance, I would like to suggest, is this a proof of the tyranny or the intransigence of the commanding genius. In the context of Coleridge’s epistemology, the practice of commanding geniuses is structurally parallel to the two-stage process of synthesizing intuitions and then testing their viability in the real world—the normal cognitive process, according to Coleridge. The main apparent difference is that the ideas of the commanding genius are on a grander scale, and his need to validate them through reflection or response from the external world is correspondingly magnified. One might even regard the commanding genius as an especially needy individual, whose ideas and authority are only validated through interaction with an other outside the self.

As Julie Carlson has recently noted, the practice of the commanding genius is best examined via Coleridge’s dramas, particularly his translation of Schiller’s *Wallenstein*, from which he probably derived the term in the first place, and his last play, *Zapolya*, which he was preparing for the theatre in 1815, at the same time that he was preparing *Biographia Literaria* for the press. Both these dramas thematize issues of legitimacy and legitimation, as they show commanding geniuses attempting to impress their preconceptions on the world without, and receive back affirmations of them. They show, in other words, the commanding genius engaging in negotiations to establish his power and confirm his very identity, in contrast to other characters, who allow written orders or preordained scripts to determine their behaviour.

In the two plays from Schiller’s *Wallenstein* trilogy that Coleridge translated in 1800, the central conflict is enacted between General Octavio Piccolomini and his commander-in-chief, Wallenstein. Wallenstein, here, is the *commanding genius*, while his antagonist Octavio Piccolomini is really a stand-in for the Holy Roman Emperor; as he protests to his son Max Piccolomini, ‘I but perform my orders; the Emperor/ Prescribes my conduct to me’ (*Piccolomini* III i 216-17, in Coleridge’s *Complete Poetical Works*). In fact, the Emperor’s ‘prescribed conduct’ is contained within a written ‘patent’ that an imperial envoy hands Octavio in the first act of *The Piccolomini*. It is up to Octavio to decide when and how to enforce this writ, that, by authority of the imperial seal, condemns Wallenstein and assigns the loyal Octavio to supreme command over the imperial forces. In the final act, Octavio begins to use the power of this paper—the power of the Emperor’s ‘hand and seal’ (V iv 32)—to win over the generals formerly

loyal to Wallenstein, thus setting the stage for the murder of the commander-in-chief in the sequel, which Coleridge translated as *The Death of Wallenstein*.

Signatures and seals—marks of authority that endure over time and space, even in the absence of the authorizing subject—therefore play a decisive role in the *Wallenstein* dramas. Wallenstein himself, however, is definitively

[58]

characterized as the man who ‘never gives his hand-writing’ (*Piccolomini* I x 62)—never commits his plans to writing, never uses his signature as a guarantee of authority. Instead, throughout the plays we see evidence and hear testimony of his talent as a negotiator. He uses his ‘creative word’ to raise troops, creating ex nihilo an army for the Emperor (*Death* II i 19). He wins his fellows with ‘splendid promises’ (*Piccolomini* III i 125), with gifts, by paying their debts, with persuasion, with an uncanny memory for names and faces (‘I forget no one with whom I have exchanged words’ [*Death* II iii 15-16]), by saying the right thing at the right time and always knowing what is appropriate to the occasion. Excellent examples are his ability to maintain Max’s loyalty throughout most of *The Piccolomini*, and his masterful exchange with Max’s regiment, the Pappenheimers, in *The Death of Wallenstein*. Wallenstein’s own authority is granted by the spoken word, by the ‘covenant’ he has made with the emperor (*Death* II iii 60), and his sphere of command is even defined by linguistic nationalism, for he has been granted absolute control over the imperial troops wherever German is spoken as the native tongue (*Piccolomini* I xii 212-14). While relying on his oral skills and refusing to commit himself to writing, Wallenstein also insists, in *The Piccolomini*, that his generals sign a paper pledging themselves to him unconditionally. Once he has this in his possession, he believes, he will be able to use it, if not to maintain their loyalty by the authority of the pledge itself, then by using the signed paper to blackmail them, since it is evidence of treason against the Emperor. Wallenstein, in short, is the commanding genius *as performer*, using the written texts of others as props but maintaining his own role by improvising the right words for the occasion, albeit according to carefully meditated schemes. As an awe-struck Max Piccolomini puts it, Wallenstein performs his leadership ‘according to the present being,’ not in line with dead books or ordinances (*Piccolomini* I iv 51-60).

Yet in the Wallenstein plays, written ordinances and prepared scripts ultimately win the day. The last scene of *The Death of Wallenstein*, after the murder of Wallenstein and his remaining followers, is a tableau that finally realizes the Emperor’s command as contained in the original imperial patent. The authority now granted, on the basis of this writ, to Octavio Piccolomini, is immediately confirmed by another written text, a letter Octavio receives under imperial seal that freezes him into an astonished posture of command by addressing him for the first time as ‘Prince Piccolomini.’

Despite the lapse of fifteen years between them, the *Wallenstein* translation and Coleridge’s play *Zapolya* show striking similarities in detail as well as in overall

structure. A series of minor echoes and repeated details suggests that *Wallenstein* was in Coleridge's mind as he worked on his last drama, filling in minor images and phrases: there is, for instance, an assassin named Pestalutz in both plays, and the speeches of General Kiuprili sometimes echo those of Wallenstein (cf. *Death* II iii 100-17 and *Zapolya* Pt.1, 150-64; *Piccolomini* I viii 29-39 and *Zapolya* II i 137-41). Yet these similarities also set off the major changes Coleridge makes in the configuration of protagonists and antagonists,

[59]

and in his representation of the commanding genius. The character of Wallenstein is reincarnated in *Zapolya*'s usurping king Emerick, who is likewise possessed of the 'commanding spirit' (*Piccolomini* I iv 31-32; *Zapolya* Pt.1, 324-25). In Part 1 of *Zapolya*, there is again a general, Raab Kiuprili, who bears an official writ and strives to win legitimation for it. Kiuprili displays a letter from the dying King Andreas, recalling Kiuprili from his military post and appointing him co-regent and co-guardian of the infant heir to the throne, along with the widowed Queen Zapolya and the king's brother Emerick. But in this drama, in contrast to the Emperor's written patent in *Wallenstein*, legitimation of the late king's written will is never achieved. Instead, Emerick takes over Wallenstein's role of performer and commanding genius. He wins followers by making 'sworn promises' to the soldiers, giving them gifts, and paying their debts (Pt.1, 33). In the course of Part 1, he manages to take control of the state after his brother's suspicious death by manipulating a series of speech-situations. When, for instance, Kiuprili calls on him to plead his claim to the throne—meaning in a public, judicial context—Emerick instead sends his attendants offstage so that he can 'plead his claim' in a private negotiation with Kiuprili, in which he would exchange his 'pledge' for Kiuprili's 'assent' (Pt.1, 326).

Although he cannily avoids a public arena in which he would have to win legitimation for his claims, Emerick nevertheless recognizes the ideological importance of appearing to have exactly this kind of support. 'I have commenced,' he announces, 'a reign to which the free voice of the nobles/ Hath called me' (Pt.1, 234-36). This declaration ushers in the final exchange in Part 1, which is effectively a debate about the basis of authority. Can it be founded on a written document, such as the late king's letter? If so, what are the proper conditions for the framing and witnessing of such a document? Is authority confirmed only by the free voice of the people? If so, who is included among 'the people'—only men who have fought for their country? Can the person who expects to be confirmed in authority by 'millions of men in council' legitimately be the same person who calls that council together? And so on.

After a fictional lapse of twenty years, the second part of *Zapolya* takes up these same questions and, in the end, finds a resolution. The supposed commoner Bethlen is revealed to be in reality the son of the deceased King Andreas. Once he is finally restored to his rightful name, family, title, and authority, Bethlen/Andreas

makes a point of stressing that his position has been confirmed by the assembly in the city of Temeswar, which, on being shown ‘undoubted proofs,’ has apparently voted unanimously (offstage) to depose Emerick (IV i 321-24). Still, Bethlen cautiously adds, his reign awaits ‘the awful sanction of convened Illyria’ (IV i 356-57). With these gestures toward the conditions of a constitutional monarchy, legitimation is located in a free vote of properly authorized citizens. However, at the same time, legitimacy is *enacted* for the play’s audience through a powerful coincidence of Bethlen’s proven valour, his mother Zapolya’s affectionate identification of

[60]

him, his miraculous ability to appear in the right place at the right time, and his final appearance, together with Zapolya, ‘in royal garments,’ by which they perform their identities as newly restored King and long-suffering Queen Mother.

Both the *Wallenstein* plays and *Zapolya* represent the commanding genius as a performer and negotiator, as one who fits words to the public or private speech-situation rather than relying, as his antagonists do, on the manuscript authority of documents. Is this behaviour, then, one realization of the description Coleridge offers in the *Biographia*, according to which these men ‘must impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness and individuality’? What the commanding genius appears to need most of all is *audience response*. There is, moreover, a significant shift toward the valorization of performance in *Zapolya*, where even the legitimate rulers appear to share Emerick’s, and Wallenstein’s, investment in performativity as a basis for legitimacy.

As Coleridge represents him in drama, at least, the character of the commanding genius highlights the construction of authority, and even of identity, through a process of interpersonal negotiation and public performance. This may help to account for Coleridge’s ambivalence and his frequent attraction toward this character. It might also be the basis for a further parallel between the behaviour of the commanding genius and Coleridge’s own practice as a critic and lecturer, invested as it is in drama, performance, speech, and audience response.

In a recent PMLA article entitled ‘Drama, Performativity, and Performance,’ W. B. Worthen has argued that performance theory needs to be reconceptualized in order to rid itself of the idea that theatrical performances are simply citations of a written play-text. ‘Performing,’ according to Worthen, ‘reconstitutes the text; it does not echo, give voice to, or translate the text’ (PMLA 113 [1998]:1097); thus, texts are ‘transformed by the performative environment of the theater into something else, a performance’ (1100). Performance is given its authority and meaning not by the words of a written text, but by the conventions and contingencies of the theatre—or, we might add, of other performance spaces such as the political arena or the lecture hall.

In a famous letter of 28 February 1819, Coleridge describes his own lecturing style in terms that parallel Worthen's revisionary view of performance:

The day of the lecture, till the hour of commencement, I devote to the consideration, what of the mass before me is best fitted to answer the purposes of a lecture—*i.e.* to keep the audience awake and interested during the delivery, and to leave a *sting* behind—*i.e.* a disposition to study the subject anew, under the light of a new principle... I take far, far more pains than would go to the set composition of a lecture, both

[61]

by varied reading and by meditation; but for the words, illustrations, &c. I know almost as little as any one of my audience (*i.e.* those of any thing like the same education with myself) what they will be five minutes before the lecture begins. Such is *my way*, for such is *my nature*; and in attempting any other, I should only torment myself in order to disappoint my auditors—torment myself during the delivery, I mean; for in all other respects it would be a much shorter and easier task to deliver them from writing. (CL IV 924; cf. LL II 346-47)

R. A. Foakes, editing the literary lectures, qualifies this account by noting that, at least for his later lecture series, Coleridge would typically have a fairly detailed script for the introductory section of each talk, along with written indications as to illustrations, references, and further development. It is nevertheless significant that Coleridge perceives and represents his own practice as, not just highly spontaneous, but profoundly determined by the audience and the occasion. His letters also provide ample evidence of the effect the conditions of his lecture series—above all, the fact that he inevitably lectured in order to make money—had on his choice of subjects and approaches. Recent scholarship (particularly the work of Sarah Zimmerman) that is engaged in elucidating as far as possible the material circumstances of Coleridge's lectures, including the physical properties of the venues, the subscription and admission policies, and the class composition of the audiences, indicates one important direction in which the study of Coleridge's lectures as performances should go.

For now, I would like to conclude with a glance at Coleridge's often performed lecture on Cervantes—one of his and his audience's favourites, as multiple testimonies suggest, and a lecture that illustrates most of the performative practices I've alluded to here. The 1818 version of this lecture began with a comparison between Cervantes and Shakespeare—admittedly one that countless lecturers besides Coleridge have used, since the two writers famously died on the same day. For Coleridge, this coincidence leads to a comparison of the physiognomies of the two men, and from these two specific instances of facial features he draws a bilateral comparison of national 'characters of mind': the Spanish is acute, the

English reflective (LL II 159). Coleridge then focuses on the language of *Don Quixote*, its beauty, incisiveness, playfulness, and decorum. But despite the close attention to language, Coleridge ended his lecture by quoting and discussing a passage that doesn't appear in the novel at all. An anonymous correspondent for the *New Times* reported Coleridge's comments on the last words of Don Quixote, as a sentiment about pride and humility that is quite different from the Don's last words as they actually appear in Cervantes' text. Coleridge's lecture on the *Quixote* is apparently a performance, not only of his own lecture notes (in which no mention of the Don's last words appears), but also of the Spanish novel. In Cervantes' version, the dying Don Quixote admits his folly, repents, and recants his devotion to books of knight-errantry; in Coleridge's version,

[62]

he voices sentiments that seem oddly in tune with the expectations of an English, Protestant audience. It would be worthwhile to examine very carefully how conceptions of the English and Spanish characters, the significance of Cervantes as national poet, and the character of Don Quixote himself emerge from Coleridge's choice of reference points that appeal to a particular audience at a particular place and time—reference points such as a vivid comparison of Shakespeare's and Cervantes' faces, passages of the novel that lend themselves particularly well to recollection or recitation, and 'creative quotation' from the novel that seems oriented more toward the audience's ideological expectations than toward Cervantes' original text.

When Coleridge speaks on *Don Quixote* again in 1819, it also appears to him to validate his own theory of mental conception, as alluded to at the beginning of this paper. Coleridge now highlights Sancho Panza's 'story of the Goats' in Part 1, Chapter 20 of *Don Quixote*—a story that, like the novel itself, remains marvellously suspended between imagination and reality. This is a story that, though admittedly fictional, is nevertheless 'so true and authentic' that Sancho can swear on his oath that he was an eye-witness of it. It is also a story whose very continuity depends on the success of the narrative performance, so that when the listener, Don Quixote, fails to keep track of the 300 fictional goats as if they were real, the story abruptly ends. This episode becomes for Coleridge an 'admirable symbol' of the way the mind works—of, as he jots in his lecture notes, 'the dependence of all *copula* on the higher powers of the mind' (LL II 419). No records are extant to indicate how—or if—listeners understood this cryptic allusion, or even whether Coleridge actually used it in performing the lecture. But in the context of his philosophical writings it fits with his theory that conceptualizing reality is a cooperative effort of the mind's higher powers: the understanding, responsible for 'all *copula*' because it forges links between intuitions, and the reason, that determines existence in reality. The wit of Sancho's story of the goats apparently lies in the tension between the status of the story as a synthesis performed by the understanding—an imaginative construct that has no

existence in reality—and the conflicting requirement that the narrator and the listener treat the characters, and the goats, as if they were really existing beings. There is a dialectic here between conceptualization in the abstract, and actualization in a real, responsive, occasion-bound context—a recurring dialectic that somehow underlies Coleridge's epistemology, his characterization of the commanding genius, and his own practice as a public speaker.