

## Coleridge, Freud, and the Authority of Origins

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EVER SINCE THE ATTACKS ON SIGMUND FREUD AND psychoanalysis began in the mid-1980s, Freud's presence in literary criticism has been muted. And yet one of his sharpest critics, Frederick Crews, notes that Freud will continue to repay study, if not as the equivalent of a Copernicus or a Darwin, then at least as a leader of the "modern assault on sexual hypocrisy, altruism, and supernatural belief" (*Skeptical Engagements* 86).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, but Freud's staying power has more to do with a quality he shared with Coleridge. As Thomas McFarland has pointed out, Coleridge's thinking was not primarily individualistic. For him, the relations between persons were at the core of human existence, and in this respect he anticipated an orientation that, for all its differences from Freud's, was also characteristic of Freud.<sup>2</sup>

Coleridge undertook his investigations of the mother/child relationship in the *Opus Maximum* and elsewhere to find philosophical underpinnings for his Trinitarian Christianity, not to look for scientific evidence of an Oedipus complex or any of the variations that modern psychoanalysis explores in relation to that theory.<sup>3</sup> "Logically," McFarland writes, Coleridge's reflections on mother and child proceed from "the

<sup>1</sup> For a selection of readings belonging to the effort to demythologize Freud see Crews's edition *Unauthorized Freud*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Opus Maximum* cxxxix, cxli–lii

<sup>3</sup> See Neil Vickers, 163–64, for a careful and admirably succinct summary of Coleridge's relation to Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition.

authority of origins: to find what a human is, one should begin at the beginning and ask what is the situation at birth" (*Opus Maximum* cxxx). But what Coleridge and Freud both imagine to be there at the beginning anticipates what they wish to be there at the end. Their findings are implicit, in other words, in their primary intellectual commitments.

This is as true of Freud bashers and Freud apostles as it is of Coleridge and Freud themselves. Crews started out as an apostle in a widely praised 1966 study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Sins of the Fathers*. He then gradually disengaged himself from Freud while still remaining an admirer, and finally broke with him altogether in a 1993 essay entitled "The Unknown Freud." Aided by many scholars who preceded him, Crews eventually concluded that the founder of psychoanalysis, while professing allegiance to the same "rational-empirical ethos" that Crews himself held dear, had in fact constructed a "seductively mythical alternative to it" (*Memory Wars* 8). Freud was essentially a visionary rhetorician. He was in the words of Crews, no mean rhetorician himself, an "endlessly calculating artist casting himself as the hero of a multivolume fictional opus that is part epic, part detective story, and part satire on human self-interestedness and animality" (*Memory Wars* 12).

The Freudian historian Peter Gay represents a more Coleridgean point of view. Freud's central position, he argues, is that "every human is continuously, inextricably involved with others" (*Freud for Historians* 147-48). From the empirical perspective of Crews, this reading of Freud appears a commonplace as easily attributable "to Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, or Nietzsche—if not indeed to Jesus and Saint Paul—as to Freud" (*Memory Wars* 295). Crews accuses Freud, along with the entire psychoanalytical movement he modeled, of explaining symptoms with preconceived theories about their origins rather than relying on experimental studies based on behavioral data. The analyst only seems to listen to the free associations of his patients. Instead he scans them for what he wants to find there and calls such predetermined conclusions scientific discoveries. For Crews, then, the so-called science that began with Freud and continues either with or without dependence on his theories is in fact a pseudoscience—a myth whose tenets neither have nor can be empirically verified. It does

not seem to occur to Crews that rejecting as mythical whatever is not experimentally provable is itself a preconception. Gay does indeed place himself in a tradition of interpreting Freud that asserts the inextricably interpersonal nature of the human being, but until this contention is scientifically established, it remains for Crews utterly unoriginal.

Gay's own prior allegiance, as deeply held as that of Crews, is to write history from an inter-subjective perspective, albeit one that is deeply informed by "the pressure of the material" (*Pleasure Wars* 236). This effort to combine Freudian theory with extensive fact-finding appears in Gay's five volume reinterpretation of the Victorian bourgeoisie as more than just "philistines who loved money and hated art" (*Pleasure Wars* 241). The bourgeoisie may have been the "most narrow minded, most reactionary, most self-centered Victorians," Gay discovers, but they had the same "mixed motives" and "anxiety before the new" that we all have. His work exemplifies the fresh point of view that becomes possible when, as Gay puts it, one tries to "rise above melodrama to the far subtler drama that is history" by treating stereotyped historical figures with what he calls a "psychoanalytical charity" that does justice to their complexity (*Pleasure Wars* 237).

Gay is nevertheless far from being an uncritical ally of modern psychoanalysis, which he finds too narrowly focused on "the isolated patient, alone with himself, his unconscious, and his analyst" rather than on the social and cultural legacy that the patient "internalizes and makes his own" in the form of conscience, or, in the familiar Freudian term, the superego. By contrast Freud's own conception of the inner life of the individual, says Gay, involved "the Other" from the very start "as model, as object, as helper, and as adversary" (*Freud for Historians* 145-47). The child's awareness of otherness begins with the mother in both Coleridge and Freud. But whereas for Freud she is the first representative of an external society and culture that will govern the child's behavior from then on, in Coleridge she is the culmination of a developmental process within nature that carries the child from the level of instinct to the distinguishing feature of its humanity, namely consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See *Opus Maximum* 119-20.

When they do not ascend to the human, instincts such as appetite and rage have something non-utilitarian about them, according to Coleridge. For him, the animal possesses some rudimentary predisposition to consciousness that remains of little or no value to it unless it rises higher on the scale of life. The possibility of becoming human is “inlaid” in the instinctive, as Coleridge puts it, and is there “to meet and protect” the child in the form of the mother at the “first dawnings” of consciousness. The child responds to this greeting—this protective shield—because in Coleridge’s view nature has already built the awareness of otherness into its instincts. It feels the warmth of the mother’s breasts and learns to connect them with her face and the sustaining support of her arms. “A thousand tender kisses excite a finer life in its lips” (*Opus Maximum* 120–21), writes Coleridge, while its imitations of the mother’s smiles grow into its first efforts at language.

For Coleridge, therefore, the mother activates the potential for awareness of the other that is in the instincts of the child before birth, before the child learns the rudiments of speech and “years before” (*Opus Maximum* 121) it becomes conscious that it has a self of its own. Coleridge here places an early and ineradicable alterity into his conception of the origins of the human person that matches orthodox Christian descriptions of the divine persons of the Trinity (*Opus Maximum* cxxxi). He also places there an unreflective love for the mother and an implicit faith in her that gives the later, less tactile and more conscious forms of specifically religious love and faith an entirely natural beginning. The child reciprocates the mother’s touches by stretching its arms and legs toward her in search of a visible, all-encompassing warmth and tenderness it is already assured of, and “that which the mother is to her child,” writes Coleridge, “a someone unseen and yet ever present, is to all” (*Opus Maximum* 126). The mother is “all the World” for the child, he claims, an undifferentiated totality that roots in the child a sense of wholeness in the world in which no part is entirely self-subsisting. The foundations of Coleridge’s “Reason”—“the antecedent and indispensable condition of all its subsequent knowledge” (*Opus Maximum* 121)—are thus laid in the child prior to self consciousness, and for Coleridge this attribution of a sense of oneness in the world is more than

Christian rhetoric. Although impossible to prove empirically, it is a fact of human evolution that may be empirically grounded by patient observation of the mother/child relationship.

As strongly inlaid in Coleridge's child as its natural love, faith and awareness of a protective unity in the world is a primal religious doubt evidenced by its lack of assurance that the mother it clings to will always be there and that her touches will always be lovingly supportive. The growing child is afflicted with "a spectral terror," says Coleridge, "a sense of sinking," as if "the mother's knee had suddenly given way from under it," and this anxiety anticipates its later conscious sense of a fragmented universe in which the parts no longer subsist in any sustaining whole. The child doubts not only the mother's continuing support and protection but even its own ongoing presence in the world, as in the case of the three year old whom Coleridge claims to have heard crying out in panic: "I am not here, touch me, Mother, that I may be here!" (*Opus Maximum* 131–32). Uncertain even of its continuance in being, the child pleads for the return of what had once seemed to guarantee that existence.<sup>5</sup>

Coleridge uses this developmental moment to read the adult drama of religious belief and unbelief back into the progression toward consciousness, the distinguishing mark of our humanity. Similar to Freud, he recognizes in this development an ambivalence justifying McFarland's claim that Coleridge's conclusions approximate those of modern thought.<sup>6</sup> The child's pre-conscious assurance of its mother's support may be a harbinger of its later confidence in God, but the "clinging" to and "stretching" toward the mother that first manifest this trust imply a primal doubt about the security of its connection to the world. What Coleridge calls the child's "murmuring song for pleasure" resembles the onset of Freud's "pleasure principle" (*Opus Maximum* 121). The child

<sup>5</sup> Freud tells a remarkably similar story. A three-year old boy calls out to his aunt to talk to him because he is afraid of the dark. When she asks how that will help him since he cannot see anyhow, he insists that if she talks it will become lighter. Freud comments that because the boy's fear was not of the dark but of the missing person he loved, he could promise to calm down as soon as he was assured of her presence; see *Complete Introductory Lectures* 407.

<sup>6</sup> See *Opus Maximum* cxxxii.

not only pleads for, but demands that the mother's gratifyingly supportive touch be carried on indefinitely.

Consciousness arrives for Coleridge when the child can say "me" as well as "I"—when it gains sufficient distance from itself, in other words, to understand that it exists in a community of selves toward each of whom it stands in some ego-limiting relation (*Opus Maximum* cxxxix).<sup>7</sup> The healthy development of the child as a specifically human person will depend on its success in negotiating its relationships to this widening circle of others, but that success can and will be tested by the threat those others pose to the absolute maternal support this whole humanizing process began with. Coleridge describes this constant reappearance of the infantile state in the developing person as a kind of fixation on its phantom self, or its own body as "the centre, the proper unity, of all else." Such continuing regression diverts the person from the attention to others that is the natural destination of human consciousness and gives rise to the isolated or "denaturalized" self who over-insists on the pleasures of receiving (*Opus Maximum* 124–25).

This anti-other orientation of the person twists the self into "the sole motive" of behavior and turns "outward objects" into means to be manipulated toward that end. Unchecked by the altereity that evolution has hardwired into it, the person acquires "a sort of unnatural outwardness" (*Opus Maximum* 125–26) and becomes more thing than person, more a passive object than a subject with a lively other-attentive center. This is why the mother of the three year old craving to be touched correctly greets his entreaty in the "half hushing and half chiding" (*Opus Maximum* 132) way that Coleridge so precisely describes. She recognizes, much to the child's temporary pain, that its greatest need now is to subordinate self-gratification to at least a degree of the independent agency distinctive of its humanity. In the person

<sup>7</sup> Coleridge and Freud both note the near identity, linguistically speaking, of consciousness and conscience, or as Coleridge constructs it, "Conscire, = scio me quasi alterum" (*Collected Letters* 4: 849). Freud asks "For what is 'conscience'? On the evidence of language it is related to that of which one is 'most certainly conscious.' Indeed, in some languages the words for 'conscience' and 'consciousness' can scarcely be distinguished" (*Totem and Taboo* 67–68).

of the hitherto absolutely supportive mother, Coleridge's child runs straight into Freud's "reality principle."

The mother, therefore, like all the others who will become important in the child's life, becomes an ambivalent figure, neither wholly indulging its pleasures nor wholly threatening them. Coleridge understands as well as Freud that the child growing into an ever fuller consciousness of the inter-subjectivity of its environment has to control its impulses for the sake of others just as assertive as itself, while continuing to gratify those needs that place "the human," in Coleridge's words, "in community with the plant and with the mere animal" (*Opus Maximum* 120). For Coleridge, the desired result of this interplay of conscience with instinct is not the crushing of instinct but the gradual humanizing of it, which he envisions as a gradual turning from the denatured phantom self that centers the whole world on itself to the developed potential for a non-utilitarian charity that, according to his presuppositions, nature places in us before our arrival in the world.

Despite his candor about the sexual manifestations of the pleasure principle, Freud finally had less regard for it than Coleridge. Broadening attention from our own needs and impulses to those of others was unquestionably central to Coleridge's vision of an inter-subjective world and to his conception of what it takes for us to develop in a specifically human way. But Coleridge was neither so communitarian nor so arrogant a thinker as to assume that we ever should or could leave the animal side of our nature behind. Instincts—to self defense and aggression, for example—must of course be managed if the socializing process is to be successful, but if yielded to wisely they may help us resist those forces in society and culture that seek to victimize and control us. Freud, on the other hand, looked forward to a "scientific" phase of culture that would eventually replace the animistic and religious ones. We would then maturely renounce the pleasure principle and at length be free of our infantile longings and fears. We would then find our objects entirely "in the outer world" (*Totem and Taboo* 90).

Most important, Coleridge differed from Freud in his conviction that no such renunciation is possible or desirable. He did not advocate casting aside primitive feelings in the name

of a disembodied abstraction called reason. As Trilling pointed out long ago, “somewhere in the child, somewhere in the adult, there is a hard, irreducible, stubborn core of biological *reason*, which culture cannot reach and which reserves the right, which sooner or later it will exercise, to judge the culture and resist and revise it” (qtd. in Gay, *Freud for Historians* 174–75).

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