Presence and Distance:
Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the
Meaning of Modernity

Ronald C. Wendling

I N HIS *STUDIES IN POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY* (1868) THE LITERARY
scholar John Campbell Shairp (1819–85; *ODNB*) respectfully
chided Carlyle for scoffing at the Coleridge of Highgate:
"[W]as it well done, O great Thomas! . . . to jeer at the old
man's enfeebled gait, and caricature the tones of his voice?"
(139).[1] While admitting that Coleridge's circuitous talk left
him open to Carlyle's charge of evading the practical demands
of a changing society, Shairp insisted that a "rush and throng
of human interests" filled Coleridge's meandering abstractions
and that these had a "vital bearing" on important truths "of
politics, morality, or religion" (175). I do not intend to justify
this contention, though it is supported by Coleridge's lifetime
of literary engagement with the urgent issues of his day. I seek
instead to relate his belief in the reality of the ideal to this
concern with the practical.

Coleridge at once valued and questioned the confidence in
empirical investigation that came into its own during the eigh-
teenth century, a worldview that prevailed in the West until the
advent of postmodernism, and one that remains widely asso-
ciated with "modernity."[2] I argue here that his philosophical
idealism, though in conflict with his empiricism, left more room
for the latter than is generally acknowledged.[3] The modern
Western tendency to reason from common sense and external
data, as opposed to inherited assumptions or supposed first
principles, developed in a post-medieval context of diminishing

identification with social roles and the values that support them. This distancing has had many benefits (xii, 1–2). It has sanctioned questioning of what had been naively accepted as objectively and universally true, intervening in nature (whether by developing it or by protesting that development), and reforming social patterns, especially those insensitive to human diversity. But this critical detachment afflicts even as it advances us, as David Kolb has pointed out. Nature notoriously eludes the models we make of it and mortality defies our strategies for keeping nature at bay. We know that our efforts to control the world are limited, but such knowledge tends to intensify those efforts, not to relax them. We realize that our projects for improvement are limited by social and economic conditions, but we interpret that limitation more as a constraint on our individuality than an opportunity for connection with similarly dependent selves. Our laments over such failures of community, furthermore, do not so much mitigate as exemplify them (xii, 1–2).

We remain as distant from ourselves, meanwhile, as from our roles, especially when the forces that motivated old choices fail to energize new ones. This situation, summed up in words like "alienation," "fragmentation" and ennui, makes continuity and certainty difficult.[4] We may experience our distance from our former selves not as a gap that flexibility can bridge but a breaking off of what we now are from what we once were. Centering moments that might have prompted self-revision instead demand endless self-reinvention so that we need not merely to construct new ideas and values, but to keep reconstructing them. If our distance from nature and society allows us to manipulate them, our distance from ourselves transforms even our own development into an object of control. The ideas and values at the base of our past decisions must be re-engineered along with the selves that made those decisions. When life is habitually conducted in this way, the contents of choice begin to appear less important than the fact of it, and our freedom is increasingly emptied of content. The central feature of our individuality becomes not what we choose, but that we choose (Kolb 3). We are free, certainly, but for nothing especially substantive. It is not surprising that so hollow a freedom should meet resistance from non-Western cultures like Islam that have a more fixed sense of the purposes of life.[5]

Of course distanced selfhood is not uniquely a phenomenon of the modern West. The building and organizing of ancient cities involved a perspective on nature sufficient to develop it and on society to bureaucratize it, while philosophy and religion (Stoicism and Christianity, for example) have long sought ways to master human passions. The ancient and medieval worlds had their own technologies, including the management of the self. Nor does the distanced self exist equally in all modern individuals. Some find a more intimate relation to their environments and themselves through attachments to religious or artistic communities or to their ethnic pasts (Kolb 5). We must use the term "modernity" carefully, therefore, so as not to suggest too sharp a distinction of the alienated modern self from the more embedded individual of the premodern world.

The very currency of that term, however, indicates our consciousness of a break (frequently considered to have begun in the late Middle Ages or early Renaissance) from our cultural predecessors.[6] Kolb borrows Peter Berger's distinction between honor and dignity to clarify that awareness (7–8). Premodern individuals tended to find honor—a public ratification of their identities—in their institutional roles and the clothing that represented them. Their regalia gave them meaning within a theoretically justified social hierarchy. By contrast, the modern self regards its social roles more as masks to be successively discarded in a search for personal authenticity. We do not grow into our liveries, like apprentice craftsmen, but out of them, uncovering as we go the ideological mystifications that supported them. The modern ideal of individuality is not the clothed social functionary, but the critical, de-institutionalized self, stripped of social pretenses, whose dignity resides in this very nakedness (*Homeless Mind* 90–91, 213). The decreasingly affiliated self tends to find what it seeks—the autonomy, but also the solitude, in which critical distance logically ends.

Paradoxically, this modern conception of individuality has been remarkably advantageous to the societies it so distrusts. Its detached observations of nature have generated the beneficial advancements (in medicine, for instance) of modern science. Its suspicion of political establishments has exposed self-serving ideologies, promoted less oppressive forms of social organization

(like constitutional government), and increased institutional responsiveness to human needs. Disengaged perspectives of the self have likewise inspired the successes of psychotherapy. But the ills of modernity arise from the same self-distancing process as its benefits. We are less present to ourselves and each other than we might be, and we tend to regard contemplation, domesticity, friendship, and community less as values in themselves than as escapes from the relentless demand for personal and social improvement. Disinterested presence is close to a vice in a world that always has to be better (Kolb 8).

Exposing the "bad faith" or "false consciousness" involved in the performance of social roles also tends to remove the modern self from history.[7] Premodern individuals became parts of larger historical wholes through their institutions. Family, locale, and occupation connected people with others similarly situated in the present, past and future. These institutionalized roles defined their choices, to which philosophy and religion attached a significance that reverberated through nature and society into eternity. To perform one's role was to take one's place in an objective order logically prior to any human individual and discernible by a shared power of reason. "Bad faith" consisted not in maintaining roles no longer authentically one's own, as it does now, but in sacrificing those authorized historical givens to pursue individual predilections. It is a measure of our modernity that we find it difficult to imagine a world in which the ideal of individuality is to serve a rationally established hierarchy of social roles. Our ideal is precisely not to identify so completely with the current content of our choices that we close ourselves off from potentially more suitable ones. But this distance comes at a cost. Few of our historical affiliations determine our identities to the extent that we may not regularly contemplate changing them. We lack a stable conception of nature that can validate the historical context of our individuality. History is what we "move on" from in the elusive search for a rootless autonomy with ever diminishing content (Kolb 8–9).[8]

Understanding and Imagination in Coleridge

Coleridge saw in this distanced modern self the product of a Western empirical tradition that originated in Aristotle, took

hold in Locke and Hume, and prevailed in the Enlightenment.[9] According to this tradition, we filter the world through conceptions that order and explain it. These constructs assemble the multiple intuitions of sensation into a mental space in which we arrange, compare and control them. Such distancing of immediately perceived objects is the work of the power of mind that Coleridge called "understanding."[10] He followed Kant in valuing it as a regulatory function without which we could have no sequential experience of the world at all.[11] Coleridge did not challenge the understanding itself, which is partly an unconscious process common to us all. What he did deplore was the philosophical elevation of understanding in its more conscious forms over the intuitive and unifying powers of the mind that belong to imagination and Reason.

According to Coleridge, understanding does its regulatory work through language. To name something is to identify a characteristic it has in common with a class of things already known. When we say we "understand," we mean that we acknowledge what that naming has done—namely, convert an appearance or impression into an object—something with a reality "standing under it," a "substance" that makes it knowable (*Collected Works: Aids to Reflection*, 229–30). Understanding supposes, as Coleridge says, this "something . . . *understood*." A knowable substance is not necessarily external to the mind, since understanding may make objects of "its own acts or forms" when, for example, it develops a science of "formal Logic." But Coleridge's primary concern is with the "materials of *substantial* knowledge," which derive from direct sensory perceptions (*Collected Works*: *The Friend* 1: 156). The senses generally provide the content that understanding either unconsciously processes or deliberately orients toward "some particular project," like "whether it would be better to plant a particular spot of ground with larch, or with Scotch fir, or with oak in preference to either" (*The Friend* 1: 158). Such conscious manipulation of sensed objects to a desired end is the most characteristic activity of Coleridge's understanding.[12] It works by guiding observation of particulars toward a goal served by abstraction from them.

Although the natural and historical environment of the individual is therefore the ordinary object of understanding, it cannot accomplish its projects without disengaging itself from

that context. Coleridge calls understanding the "unsensuous faculty of knowing" because its knowledge, though originating in sensed particulars, is not "sensuously presentable." It communicates through the discursive conceptions it abstracts from sensation, not through the intuitions of sensation itself.[13] This distancing of ourselves from the immediacy of our sense impressions enables us to criticize and amend them and has contributed to the progress of the West in ways Coleridge thought enormously valuable. It helped Greek philosophy emerge from mythology, Newtonian physics from Ptolemaic astronomy, and modern science from the non-experimental methodology of medieval metaphysics.[14]

Coleridge nevertheless opposed any preference for understanding over sensation that remains unaware of the comparative shallowness of understanding itself. What it gains in clarity, he says, it sacrifices in depth. Understanding is to sensation what adult rationality is to powerful feeling, self-possession to enthusiasm, and notion to idea. Like emotion, sensation has immediacy, but it also has what Coleridge calls a "plenitude," or presence to the world, from which understanding must withdraw for the sake of differentiating concepts carefully and applying them usefully (*Collected Works*, *Statesman's Manual* 69). Once again, Coleridge esteemed this reduction of the sensuous fullness of experience; indeed, he presents understanding as one of the two poles between which imagination oscillates. Imagination reconciles the intuitive receptivity of sensation with the managing power of understanding; it can conceptualize objects from a distance without ceasing to "be with" them (*Statesman's Manual* 69). Imagination integrates depth of perception into distinctness of conception.[15] It grasps the full reality of the world far more intimately than does the abstractly clear but distant understanding.

Coleridge's assertions that his was an age of understanding isolated from imagination and Reason anticipate Kolb's description of distanced selfhood as the core of modernity (*Statesman's Manual* 28–35). Understanding, which gives substance and conceptual clarity to appearances by naming them, produces a world ordered into objects: *natura naturata* (nature natured) in Coleridge's scholastic terminology (*Lectures 1818–19* 2: 593–94). But this objectifying of experience distances us

from the disordered "plenitude" of nature, ourselves, society and history, and therefore from "substance" in a deeper sense. Understanding mutes the presence of sensation to the abundance of experience and shuns the discursive imprecision of affectivity. It deals in "notions" that abstract from the outer forms of objects and individuals and societies what matters most about them: the animating principles shaping them from within—their *natura naturans* (nature naturing).[16]

Coleridge did not disdain this flattening of substances into lifeless surfaces because the routine necessities of life demand it. We could not clear wilderness, survive economically, or negotiate lives in society without some willingness to reduce our environment to a controllable resource. But privileging this necessary function of mind, as modernity does, isolates us from the unpredictable interior of the world: the "ideas" its material appearances do not wholly contain. Understanding is technological and bureaucratic in narrowing our attention to these manageable appearances. It avoids their inner substances because they could lead to a destabilizing "enthusiasm"—the "swallowing-up of self," as Coleridge defines that term, "in an object dearer than self, or in an idea more vivid" (*Statesman's Manual* 23). Enthusiasm threatens understanding's legitimate insistence that the self survive. But if the endearing idea of an appearance is in fact more substantial than its outward form, the self unable to surrender to some idea cannot live in any deep sense at all.[17] This death of spirit is Coleridge's version of Kolb's distanced modern individual: one who is incapable of the self-forgetful presence to the world accessible to imagination and Reason.

Coleridge considered the prudent self-interest characteristic of understanding necessary to a balanced mind. But he also believed that expediency, uncontested by imagination and Reason, displaces us from the essentials of our own experience. He saw in the prosperity of post-Napoleonic Britain a busy "ant-hill" of such virtual personalities, neutralizing each other's contradictory interests within the larger interests of the nation (*Statesman's Manual* 21–22). As much as Coleridge respected the social structures that supported this swarm of industry, their numbing effects on post-Enlightenment consciousness appalled him. In his view, the organization of modernized

societies originated in the efforts of understanding to cope with the disorder in nature, the self, other people, and history by reducing it to discursive notions that make it manageable. But this reduction demands that the objects of understanding be drained of the life or dynamic ideas shaping them from within. The world, as understanding envisions it, is thus solidi-fied and static (*natura naturata*), devoid of any unpredictable inward energies (*natura naturans*) that might draw us into a destabilizing enthusiasm. It is hardly surprising that ennui should afflict life in so contracted a universe.

Coleridge laments the casual disregard of the untamable ener-gies of life produced by this ascendancy of understanding during the post-Enlightenment period. Understanding has no language for these energies because the notional order it pursues depends on abstracting from them. When considered apart from imagi-nation and Reason, understanding takes its astounding modern successes in this endeavor (in converting natural resources to human use, for example, in bureaucratizing societies and, lately, in globalizing national economies) as evidence that its notions do not merely have a basis in reality but will in time eliminate its mysterious unpredictability. Understanding's already impres-sive capacity to manipulate the world will one day make it so transparent that no reality, even that of subjectivity, will escape the mind's explanatory power. Reality is coterminous, from this point of view, with the world that understanding solidifies into objects. To suppose ideas or principles continually forming these objects from within is, by this logic, to confuse concep-tually controllable energies with forces that have a substantial existence of their own. Philosophical idealism thus becomes little more than a naive reintroduction into the modern world of ancient animism or a medieval metaphysics of soul.

This modern faith in the power of mind to dominate the entirety of nature, the self, society, and history is itself naive, in Coleridge's view. He does not oppose conceiving of any of these realities as manageable objects; indeed, he insists that understanding must do so. But he affirms that they must also be envisioned as dynamic substances not wholly reducible to their usefulness. The human mind is, for Coleridge, creative through and through. Even understanding, while deriving its content from receptivity to sense impressions, constructs these

into objects controllable through conceptual discourse. The powers of mind that most manifest its creativity, however, are imagination and Reason. The imagination, in what Coleridge calls its "primary" way of acting, is nearly indistinguishable from consciousness itself (*Collected Works*: *Biographia Literaria* 1: 304n4). Like understanding, it organizes the world by continually re-representing it, but its discourse, unlike that of understanding, blends the affectivity of immediate perception into this organizing effort. Understanding happily sacrifices the intractable fullness of experience to explanatory mastery of it, whereas the "primary" imagination instinctively struggles toward disinterested presence to that fullness. The "secondary" imagination consciously intensifies that struggle (*Biographia Literaria* 1: 304). The world that understanding hardens into deployable objects (*natura naturata*) is what the secondary imagination "dissolves" into the "ideas" that infuse those objects with an agency and worth of their own (*natura naturans*). From this point of view, every reality has an independent, unpredictable interior approximating that of human individuality and commanding a similar reverence. That perspective may seem naively mythological and regressive to understanding, which focuses on usable surfaces, but what Coleridge found naive was just that obliviousness to the uncontrollable agencies in the world that the secondary imagination alone has the power to envision and express.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Coleridge's secondary imagination belongs to us all but finds its fullest expression in the language of artists. Poets for example, through their progressive revelation of the interiority of the world, make it more fully present both to themselves and their readers. Coleridge's own more familiar poems respect the empirical perspective of his modern audience even as they seek to widen it into that ancient mythological one, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a case in point (*Collected Works*: *Poetical Works* 1: 373–419).[18] The grey-bearded mariner persists in his intrusion on an affronted Wedding-Guest not by the force of his hand, but of his "glittering eye" and spellbinding tale ("The wedding-guest stood still, / And listens like a three years'

child: / The Mariner hath his will"). The wedding guest resists his own susceptibility to the mariner's power of imagination, and later fears it, because it threatens the power of understanding that characterizes his rational adulthood and that of the culture as a whole. By the end of *The Rime*, however, we turn with the wedding guest from such innocently contracted empiricism ("and now the Wedding-Guest / Turned from the bridegroom's door") to the sadness and wisdom of imagination. This conversion is not wholly "stunned," however, nor does it leave the wedding-guest lost in some world beyond that of the senses, for he turned "*like* one that hath been stunned, / and is of sense forlorn" (*Poetical Works* 1: 419, my emphasis), and likeness necessarily involves difference.

　　The wedding guest we meet at the beginning of *The Rime* prefigures the educable empiricism Coleridge would later identify with the unenlarged understanding of his age. Except when roused by his reluctant fascination with the mariner ("And thou art long, and lank, and brown, / As is the ribbed sea-sand"), the wedding guest speaks a prosaic language that categorizes his unwelcome guest as crazy ("Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!") and diabolic ("God save thee, ancient Mariner! / From the fiends, that plague thee thus!").[19] Similarly distancing is his interrogative stance toward the mariner ("Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?" "Why look'st thou so?"), which keeps the wedding-guest from questioning the sufficiency of his social calendar (*Poetical Works* 1: 373, 379, 391). Resisting interruption and yet enchanted by it, he inhospitably fixes on the mariner's exterior, clinging to the external bearings that the mariner represents himself and his shipmates, at the beginning of their journey, as delighted to abandon ("Merrily did we drop / Below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the light house top"). Viewed from the perspective of the sobering narrative that follows, however, the mariner's adventuresome indifference to landmarks is in part bravado—the inverse of the wedding guest's equally innocent dependence on them. For in shooting the albatross the ancient mariner would display a contrary will to fixity more than equal to the wedding guest's and, in confessing that act and its consequences, would awaken the wedding-guest to the continuing possibility of an older, less distanced relation to the world.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner concerns the aversion of the age of understanding to the language of imagination and the organicism it supposes. The mariner can locate only a few as compelled as the wedding-guest to hear him out—a metaphorical statement, perhaps, of Coleridge's doubt that his poem would shake many readers out of their empirical assumptions. The wedding guest could not have risen "a sadder and a wiser man" at the end of the *Rime* had he not finally allowed his resistant understanding to be overpowered by the mariner's story, much as the mariner had let his understanding be defeated by his experience. Not everyone has, however, that capacity. These breakdowns in the mind's ordering power are agonizing, as Coleridge indicates by making the mariner incapable of retelling his "ghastly" tale without the periodic return of the convulsive tic preceding his first confession of it (*Poetical Works* 1: 417). Each collapse opens up dimensions of experience and a possibility of linguistically representing them that disrupt self-containment. The mariner's shooting of the albatross remains so burningly alive in him that only continual narrative re-confrontation with it for a somewhat susceptible reader can stave off its devastating consequences, and then only while the narrative lasts.

What was it in the killing that kept the mariner in this life-in-death cycle of freedom from his act and subjection to it? The killing is an act of understanding that Coleridge represents in the language of imagination. The incantatory, ritualistic "power of speech" he gives the mariner is that of a premodern, mythological sensibility and therefore "strange" to a modern audience (*Poetical Works* 1: 417). His words evoke ("call up") his experience, and in keeping with Coleridge's later definitions of the imagination, make it present to the wedding guest (and us) in its logically contradictory fullness. The language of the mariner "dissolves" the fixed objects of understanding into humanized agencies, as when he infuses his own "tyrannous and strong" will into the "storm-blast" and his own need for survival and friendship ("food and play") into the albatross (*Poetical Works* 1: 375, 379). When he shot the bird, the mariner denied it this dynamic interior, this life of its own. He froze its motion, expelled it from human company into an object world, and so legitimized its complete subjection to his individual will. The act treated the albatross as understanding treats the

world. Like understanding, which unconsciously consolidates chaotic impressions into objects and consciously reduces them to their usable surfaces, the shooting was at once unreasoned and deliberate, motiveless and calculated. It originated in a necessity to order and manage experience in itself beneficial. But the mariner did more than just distance the energy that erupted into his and his shipmates' world in the form of the bird; he tried to place it entirely at his own disposal—manage it entirely. He exercised a more malign form of the inhospitality the wedding guest was to show him. Both tried to force a disruptive, animating agency (*natura naturans*) back into an object world they could control (*natura naturata*).

Coleridge's Latin epigraph and prose gloss represent such agencies as resident spirits "with unknown tasks" (*munera*), and they include both the avenging polar spirit and his "fellow daemons" (the "voices" of Part 6).[20] The inhospitality of modern sensibilities to this mythologizing is itself the subject of the *Rime*. The spirits stand for the interior energies that substantiate every being, resist understanding's efforts to negate them, and keep the world irreducible to its uses. After heading "merrily" southward, mariner and crew speed toward an icy territory of the mind hostile to those energies. That polar region represents not any actual modern individual, in whom understanding necessarily acts inseparably from imagination and Reason, but the impossibly detached understanding within the modern individual—what Kolb calls "pure modernity." Setting out in that direction promises all the adventurous freedom from former constraints (kirk, hill, light house top) still associated, despite postmodern skepticism, with the advancement of empirical knowledge.

That promise ends with the mariner's shooting of the albatross, however—his reduction of its whole existence to an exterior form and arrogant assumption of sole control over it. By defying his own and his shipmates' enjoyment of the bird's company, and of the ice split that accompanies its presence, the mariner denies it any context in natural or human history, any life independent of his. He tyrannically subjects the albatross, as the modern self tends to subject the world, to the authority of individual choice. The self that exercises this kind of freedom is not much interested in its objects except as opportunities to

demonstrate its own power. But this "freedom" leaves it falsely divinized and alone, with no standard for the disposition of the world beyond its own will.

The supernatural agents of the *Rime*, especially the polar spirit that the gloss associates with Platonism, educate the mariner to the innocence of this decontextualizing freedom (*Poetical Works* 1: 371). The polar spirit drives both crew and mariner northward toward a warmer, more life-sustaining climate of the mind where the world may be imagined or mythologized as well as understood. Unable to see the inhospitable, self-deifying tendencies of their own minds in the mariner's killing of the albatross, the crewmen "would fain throw the whole guilt" of the act on him, and they suffer the spiritual death attendant on that complacent, righteous scapegoating (*Poetical Works* 1: 383). Unlike the wedding guest, who at length lets the mariner's story take possession of him, the crew continues to resist the polar spirit's "task," which is to compel recognition of the murderous isolation of understanding from imagination and Reason that characterizes the purely modern mind. The "life" in the life-in-death fate of the mariner is his capacity for that awareness and for retelling its history to receptive listeners like the wedding guest. Mythologizing his crime frees the mariner and is meant to help free both the wedding guest and, through him, Coleridge's readers from the distancing selfhood the crime represents.

The signal of this freedom in the mariner is his mythologizing "power of speech," which does more than project his feelings onto the landscape. It also sorts his contrived from his actual feelings and so gives him a presence to experience inaccessible to reductive understanding. Life-in-Death begins this restorative "work" on the mariner through his guilt over the death of his shipmates (*Poetical Works* 1: 389). The mariner reads his lonely self-disgust and sense of disintegration into the "slimy" sea creatures, the "rotting" sea and ship deck, and the "wicked whisper" of heaven that dries up his effort to pray (*Poetical Works* 1: 391). His own decay appears to him to afflict everything that lives except, ironically, the corpses of the supposedly innocent crew. As the mariner tries to impose his interior stagnation on the landscape, however, activities within that landscape resist the effort. The stars sojourn and yet

remain domesticated in the sky, while the "happy" watersnakes rear and coil in the sea with an unnamable beauty all their own. Contradictorily, both forms of life simultaneously move through, and repose in, their habitats. The wholly uncontrived upsurge of love in which the mariner blesses the watersnakes affirms his own similarly autonomous yet embedded relation to the world. An individual, and therefore separate from his natural, social, and historical context, he is nevertheless part of it. It is the element of his free activity, its given condition, and "appointed rest" (*Poetical Works* 1: 393–94).

The mariner may use his understanding to manipulate that context to his own purposes; indeed, to survive productively in the world, from Coleridge's point of view, he must and should do so. But nature, society, and history also contain autonomous interior energies not as subject to his dominion as his treatment of the albatross assumed. When the albatross falls from his neck, the mariner does not just acknowledge this unpredictable, analogously human life in his habitat; he welcomes it as instinctively as the watersnakes display it. No longer so commandingly self-contained, he becomes for the moment unselfconsciously enthusiastic—responsive to the ideas in things. This premodern impulse to mythologize the world does not uproot the mariner's modern habit of objectifying it. But it does initiate his movement toward a warmer, less distanced kind of selfhood where the natural and institutional surroundings of his native country (the hill, the kirk, the light-house top) can recontextualize his freedom and imbue his storytelling with power and purpose.

Reason and Presence in Coleridge

Reason in Coleridge is present to its immaterial objects as immediately as sensation is to its multiple impressions of the external world. It is the eye of the spirit contemplating the supersensuous as directly as the physical eye beholds the sensuous (*The Friend* 155–56). But Coleridge's Reason is anything but mystical. He does follow Greek and Christian philosophical traditions that place something like a developing human spirit within external forms (Dupré 16–17). He also identifies spirit, or Reason in the mind, with those dynamic

external energies—in the mariner's coiling watersnakes, for example. A Reason or Logos that is in the world diversely manifests, and may speak to, our Reason.[21] The goings-on of nature, society and history may all become variants of Scripture in this Platonizing Christianity in so far as the Word being spoken in them may elicit an answering word from us. But since this interpretive Reason is so readily deceived in Coleridge's practical version of Platonic Christianity, its knowledge is genuine only when it functions in concert with the empirical understanding.[22]

Understanding, on the other hand, "may exist without Reason" (*The Friend* 156). Conceptual domination of the world may proceed with no conversational presence to the Logos within it. Although it contracts the world into static, discrete particulars, understanding also orders these observed particulars beneficially, and Coleridge so respected its solid, if distant, hold on the world that he made the credibility of Reason depend upon it: "Reason cannot exist without Understanding," he asserts, "nor does it or can it manifest itself but in and through the understanding" (*The Friend* 156). Reason, which is our power to unify and prescribe, seeks the One in the many, the absolute principles or laws in contingent appearances (*Statesman's Manual* 59–60). Coleridge was enough of a skeptical empiricist to realize, however, that ideas of unity and law are too easily claimed to be wholly trusted to intuition. Uncorrected by conceptual understanding, Reason's comprehensive and legislative instincts become "mere visionariness" of intellect, he says, laziness or rigidity in morals, cosmopolitanism without country, and universal benevolence unaffected by anyone in particular. He saw this mercilessly disengaged idealism in the willingness of Jacobinism to sacrifice developed institutions to abstract nature, social bonds to individual rights (*Statesman's Manual* 63–64). We see it today in ideologically motivated campaigns of terror. Modernity itself, it seems, is cyclically caught between an ever-expanding culture of understanding and successive idealisms falsely promising to dissociate us from that culture. Reason is right to seek organic connections in a world that understanding disassembles into machinelike parts, but dangerously wrong to replace that static world with its own supposedly vital but equally repressive and insubstantial alternatives. Coleridge's vision of Reason as a

pervasive, enlivening presence within understanding maps a sensible way out of this destructive modern cycle.

Coleridge quarreled not with empirical understanding itself, we have seen, but with modernity's idolizing separation of it from imagination and Reason. Even in the 1790s, when empiricism influenced him most, he retained the Platonism that had attracted him at school. He thought it our prerogative to make the world as manageable and suitable to our purposes as we can. But he also thought that imagination and Reason may make us present to a world more substantive than the one provided by understanding—a world with an agency of its own that is sensed in childhood, that adult rationality can neither access nor manage, and that it therefore finds threatening. The Logos in nature, society and history is irreducible to use and asks to be honored simply because it exists. Reality has a depth in Coleridge, then, that neither his mariner nor the mariner's shipmates could recognize in the albatross. As vigorously as Coleridge contested empiricism's negation of this depth, however, he envisioned no return to some preceding era of presence. Presence and distance were to him internal, alternating opposites that resist simplification into ancient and modern, rural and urban, communal and solitary, or embedded and free. On the contrary, he insisted that the gulf understanding places between us and the world, and between us and ourselves, not only produces good but helps to correct the delusions of Reason.

Saint Joseph's University

Notes

1. Principal of the United College, St. Andrews, J. C. Shairp was in 1877 elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Among his more notable publications was *Culture and Religion* (1870).

2. According to Louis K. Dupré, common conceptions of modernity consist principally in the treatment of "rational objectivity, moral tolerance and individual choice as cultural absolutes" and in the equation of "progress with technological advances" (1).

3. J. S. Mill's setting of Coleridgean idealism over against Benthamite utilitarianism in nineteenth-century thought may have been responsible for this underestimation of the empiricist in Coleridge. See Boulger (86) and Hedley (294), however, on the legitimacy of rational understanding in Coleridge and the ways in which he remained "a product of the Enlightenment."

4. Like "modernity," the word "alienation" is differently defined in different contexts. Marx blamed the Judeaeo-Christian idea that man and nature are "alienated" from God for modern man's self-subordination through work to the similarly alien god of money and criticized Hegel for continuing this tradition. While for Marx (39, 155, 200–06), communism could bring about a "*definitive* resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, . . . man and man, . . . objectification and self-affirmation," Coleridge thought these dualities inherent in the human condition. His best poetry represents his own painful experience of them, and a major point of his religious philosophy is to show that they are remediable only to a degree. See Perry's impressive study of Coleridge's insistence on duality.

5. The modern West has become so secularized that it finds the religious intensity of the Islamic world almost incomprehensible. Islam is not just "a matter of faith and practice" in many Muslim countries, however, but "an identity and a loyalty—for many an identity and a loyalty that transcends all others" (Lewis 17). See also Esposito 158.

6. Scholars have increasingly tended to date the rise of the modern worldview prior to either the Enlightenment or the Renaissance. Galgan (3, 14) sees medieval civilization itself as a battleground between reversion to the classical past and an adaptation to technological changes that anticipated the modern world. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) emerges from this analysis (15–20) as the philosophical "herald" of modernity. More recently, Dupré (39–41) has assigned a similar role to William of Ockham (1280–ca. 1349) and his nominalist followers.

7. "Bad faith" in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Part 1, ch. 2 [47–70]) is a way of dignifying the avoidance of freedom. "False consciousness" (a term used by Engels but more particularly associated with the Marxism of Georg Lukács) means a gap between one's conscious and unconscious motives for thinking something true. That gap produces "ideologies"— theories advanced by a privileged class ostensibly to benefit society, but in fact to perpetuate its own interests (Eagleton, 12–13, 35).

8. Kolb here relies on Berger, Berger, and Kellner (*Homeless Mind* 91).

9. Aristotle's empiricism is not to be oversimplified into a denial that entities like justice exist, but only that they exist eternally and independently, as they did for Plato. Justice exists for Aristotle, but only

derivatively—that is, in so far as some substances are just (Barnes 82). Coleridge appears to me to have approximated this view in his conception of Aristotle's politics in *Collected Works*: *Lectures 1818–19* 1: 230–35). Following Tennemann, Coleridge generally interprets Aristotle as less anti-Platonic than the empiricists who came after him.

10. Understanding selects for attention one feature of the mind's total impression, which it then refers to a similar feature in its other impressions. This power of the mind to select or abstract from the wholeness of its experience distances the mind from that wholeness. The distanced understanding serves the important "purposes of worldly interest, private or public," says Coleridge, and the advancement of those purposes "has in the present age been pursued with an activity and a success beyond all former experience, and to an extent which equally demands my admiration and excites my wonder" (*Collected Works*: A*ids to Reflection* 224–25).

11. See, for example, *Collected Works*: *Lay Sermons*, where understanding functions to "supply the rules and constitute the possibility of EXPERIENCE" (59), and *Opus Maximum,* where it prevents the representative power of the mind from being "a delirium, a mere chaos and scudding cordage of shapes" (86–87). On the Kantian basis of what Coleridge meant by understanding, see Halmi, Magnuson and Modiano 362–63n2 and Coleridge, *Collected Works*: *Aids to Reflection* 215–16n32.

12. See *Collected Works: Logic*, where "the understanding has to do only with means, the reason with ends" (320), and *Opus Maximum*, where understanding adapts means to ends according to circumstances with no certainty as "to what ultimate purpose it should itself be directed" (122).

13. Coleridge everywhere emphasizes the "discursive" character of understanding, as in *Collected Works*: *Statesman's Manual* 69, *The Friend* 1: 156, *Aids to Reflection* 223, and *Logic* 249. Understanding sets a course for itself that its conceptions "run through."

14. See Coleridge's discussion of the disciples of Thales and the periods before and after the Restoration of Charles II (*Lectures 1818–19* 1: 61–64; 2: 469) and of the Ptolemaic and Newtonian systems in *Collected Works*: *Biographia Literaria* (see 1: 139). On Coleridge's interest in experimental science and in its capacity for relieving human distress, see Roe vii–viii, 10–14, and Vickers 155–74.

15. See also *Biographia Literaria*, where imagination "carries on the feeling of childhood into the powers of manhood" (1: 80–81), and later where it balances general and concrete, idea and image, the individual and the representative and "steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement" (2: 16–17).

16. On this important Coleridgean distinction see *Aids to Reflection* 558 and Wendling 57–58; 140–41.

17. Nor can it do anything "truly great" (1: 818), remarks Coleridge in *Collected Works, Marginalia*.

18. Every Coleridgean utterance is somehow recapitulated or anticipated in *The Rime*, as Perry (281) points out.

19. The wedding-guest's uncharacteristically poetic description of the Mariner was, according to Coleridge's note to the lines, contributed by Wordsworth (*Poetical Works I* 1: 391).

20. *Poetical Works* 1: 371, 403. "Tasks" is perhaps closer to the meaning of *munera* than "talents," the word used in the 1736 translation quoted in *Poetical Works* 1: 371n. Coleridge added the epigraph to the version of the poem published in 1817.

21. "From its beginning," says Dupré (23) "Western thought has assumed that reality possesses the manifest clarity of coherent discourse" and so began in a Word, an act of expression.

22. Or, as Coleridge argues in his *Logic*, there can be no "perceptions," or "intuitive knowledge . . . without the aid of conceptions" (226).

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