

Preface to *Poesie et Psychanalyse: two papers on Keats and Coleridge* by Arthur Hyatt Williams

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These are two classic papers of historical importance, dating from the 1960's, before literature became a standard topic in psychoanalytic writing. Subsequently there has been an ever-increasing interest in the contribution of the English poets to the study of psychology and of psychoanalytic investigation. Arthur Hyatt Williams was, I believe, the first in his professional circle to have taken up Bion's invitation to consider the poets as 'writing seriously', and to investigate what this really meant. As always with psychoanalytic papers, these are written in the style of case studies rather than as literary appreciation; yet they distinctively convey the natural empathy with poetry, and the deep love of these two poets (particularly Keats) that propelled, almost compelled, their author to pursue further his longstanding interest and to commit it to writing. It is appropriate that these two papers should now be published together since they are particularly well-matched in terms of the relation between the poets, the ballad style of the poems discussed, and the underlying psychological themes.

Like all enduring works of art 'La Belle Dame' and 'The Ancient Mariner' are infinitely interpretable, but Williams, from the Kleinian vertex, concentrates on those infant-mother aspects within the poetic mind which were hitherto not readily discernible, and on the overall shape of the struggle to overcome persecutory or paranoid anxieties ('death') through establishing a trusting dependence on the maternal object. The shape of such a primal experience is one which the ballad form, with its simplicity and sense of inevitability, can expertly capture. Indeed the traditional ballad form had been rediscovered towards the end of the eighteenth century and had come to be regarded with a new serious significance, a fitting vehicle for universal themes such as those discussed here. Williams, illuminating his account with such biographical material as is available, comments on the ballads from a therapeutic standpoint as tales of infantile violation and remorse, accompanied by spiritual starvation and the renewed flow of inspiration, in an eternal pattern of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Additionally, in the Coleridge paper, he uses his clinical experience from working with murderers and with drug-addicts to extend the universality of our understanding of the struggle entailed in renewing internal contact in the face of the negativity of the murderer within. And in the Keats paper, he uses

his medical experience to enhance our appreciation of the imagery and states of mind associated with pulmonary tuberculosis, whose total significance is otherwise liable to escape us owing to the current rarity of the disease that in Keats's day ravaged society.

Since the papers essentially speak for themselves, I shall introduce them by means of a few words about the literary relationship between the authors discussed.

When Bion referred to the English Romantic poets as being 'the first psychoanalysts', it was undoubtedly Keats and Coleridge who were uppermost in his mind. Coleridge wrote:

A great poet must be, implicitly if not explicitly, a profound metaphysician. He may not have it in logical coherence, but he must have it by *tact*. For all sounds and forms of human nature he must have the ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent desert, the eye of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an enemy upon the leaves that strew the forest, the touch of a blind man feeling the face of a darling child. (letter to William Sotheby, July 1802)

In fact Keats and Coleridge were remarkable in their explicit as well as their implicit metaphysics, and in their mode of poetic discovery, although they differed from each other in that Keats was a true vocational poet, utterly committed to poetry, whereas Coleridge was a poetic thinker, teacher, philosopher and preacher, and indeed a writer of much poetic prose; but in terms of actual poetry, few of his works have the inspired flow or popular appeal of the 'Mariner'. (His own excuse was that he felt overshadowed by the awesome talent of his friend Wordsworth.) There are however many accounts of the musical quality of his voice, of his talk flowing like a river, and of the arresting nature of his expressive gaze, which led to contemporaries frequently comparing him to his own Mariner with his never-ending sea-story. Coleridge does literally seem to have been able to hold his audience 'spellbound', whether in private colloquy or in the lecture halls which were for most of his life the setting for his extempore meditations. He was indeed a wandering preacher, compelled to seek his audience and tell 'his' story, which was really a story about the essential qualities and capabilities of common humanity. 'His mind was clothed with wings', said Hazlitt. His river of talk did not have the egotistical quality which one might assume, but seems to have been dependent on his perception of empathy with his listeners; if he sensed any loss of interest 'it was curious to see how his voice died away at once' (said John Wilson). His 'talk' was in fact a type of self-communion, from which his listeners might benefit if they wished.

The only personal encounter between Keats (aged 24) and Coleridge (aged 46) took place during the 'beautiful spring' described by Williams in the Keats paper. They chanced to meet on Hampstead Heath at Kenwood and walked through the Vale of Health, together with one of Keats's old tutors from medical school. Keats does not appear to have been unreservedly enthralled by Coleridge's talk in quite the same way that most people were; somewhat bemused, he wrote for his brother and sister in law in America an account of Coleridge's conversation during their walk:

In those two miles he broached a thousand things – let me see if I can give you a list – Nightingales, Poetry – on poetical sensation – metaphysics – different genera and species of dreams – nightmare – a dream accompanied by a sense of touch – single and double touch – a dream related – first and second consciousness – monsters – the Kraken – mermaids – Southey believes in them – Southey's belief too much diluted – a ghost story – 'Good morning' – I heard his voice as he came toward me – I heard it as he moved away – I had heard it all the interval – if it may be called so. He was civil enough to ask me to call on him at Highgate. (letter of April 11 1819 to George and Georgiana Keats)

The poets shook hands and parted. (So great was Coleridge's self-absorption that he recalled the meeting as having lasted only a few minutes.) With his characteristically light touch Keats gives here a vivid indication of the nature of the topics continually agitating and coalescing in Coleridge's mind, and of the impact of his conversational teaching mode. For in that spring of 1819 noted for its innumerable nightingales, Keats - despite his bemusement - did find Coleridge a kind of nightingale, and during the next few weeks wrote not only the 'Belle Dame' but all his great Odes (apart from 'Autumn'), including the one in which the nightingale's throbbing song, though no longer audible, is imagined as potentially singing in the next valley-glades. He was the antithesis of the kind of listener who would make Coleridge's voice 'die away at once'. Coleridge responded to Keats's receptivity, and Keats continued to listen to his voice as it faded beyond the Vale of Health, transforming its content within his own poem.

Keats's own famous criterion of 'negative capability' also emerged from his thinking about Coleridge, albeit in a slightly critical way – he said, in effect, that Coleridge did not have enough of it. Nonetheless the concept itself is founded on Coleridge's own distinction in his *Biographia Literaria* between two types of 'men of genius' – the man of 'commanding genius' who projectively organizes other faculties or people, and the man of 'absolute genius' who introjects and assimilates experience in a more passive, less omnipotent way. This is the distinction which was taken up by Hazlitt and later, as mentioned by Williams, by critics such as Middleton Murry.

At the time of writing the respective ballads, the two poets were approximately the same age (24-25). They were both writing in the context of falling in love, or being pre-empted in it (for Coleridge had been coerced into marriage by his 'friends'). In both cases the fairy-demon figure who dominates their dream as both bride and mother may also be seen as the spirit of poetry itself, approaching the poet with fears, enticements and warnings relating to their vocation as poets. The sailors lying dead on the decks with accusing eye, and the knight-children dying on the cold hillside with haunted gaze, are siblings in the widest sense of the rest of humanity. They are, in Keats's phrase, the 'hungry generations'. In such a context, the most useful conceptual tool which has been added to the psychoanalytic equipment of 40 years ago is probably that of the aesthetic conflict, which helps to widen the significance of the 'demonic' quality of the poetic spirit beyond that of literal death or opium, so we can see the inherent ambiguity of its nature. In an epitaph that he wrote for

himself, Coleridge reversed the significance of his 'Nightmare Life-in-Death' muse in the story of the 'Mariner':

Stop, Christian passer-by! Stop, child of God,
And read with gentle breast. Beneath this sod
A poet lies, or that which once seem'd he.
O, lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.
That he who many a year with toil of breath
Found death in life, may here find life in death!

It is the poet's task to relinquish the delusion of omnipotence so that the 'demon Poesy' does not become catastrophic but instead can feed and rescue humanity from mental starvation. The poet can do this by virtue of *writing the poem*, for the inspired poem represents the dream as received in the counter-transference, that is, with its disturbing meaning already contained and its catastrophic implications ready to be digested. The process of finding a voice for humanity is a means of wresting life from death; and the voice exists in the particular words of that particular poem. Such is the nature of its immortality.

At the time of shaking hands with Keats on the Heath, Coleridge had been adopted into the household of Dr James Gillman who had helped him get his opium taking under control. He knew Keats was a poet but was not aware of the budding of the younger man's own poetic genius, and later, with hindsight, said he 'felt death in his hand'. In the same way perhaps we too, with hindsight, can lay excessive stress on the significance of Coleridge's opium taking. It has a technical and therapeutic interest but not, as it were, an immortal one: it ruined his life, at least in parts or for long periods, but did not ruin the life's work for which we now remember and value him. Perhaps it was his fate to have been more of a prophet for poetry than a poet in himself (as he lamented); but one result of this was that he brought Shakespeare into the lives of subsequent generations in a way that has undoubtedly revolutionized our cultural perceptions. The nightingale still sings in the valley beyond.

Coleridge's main fear in his later years was that he might be found with the 'stolen goods upon him' – namely, with his God-given talents unused or insufficiently well used. Similarly Keats's preoccupation, long before his final illness, was that he might die before his 'pen had gleaned his teeming brain'. This was separate from the horror of losing Fanny Brawne – a nightmare appertaining to his personal life. Williams writes of Keats's astonishing capacity to allow his own mind to be fed, even during his agonizing last months when he suffered from an 'almost complete absence of normal lung tissue':

Even until the end from time to time his old loving and lovable personality would appear in flashes like sunlight to illuminate and transcend his living death.

Keats described it himself as a 'posthumous existence', but he still received light from what he once termed the poetic 'realms of gold'. The nightmare of the unused or wasted talent seems to be a feature of the poetic mind. Yet Keats with his short life,

and Coleridge with his disturbed and tormented one, are unquestionably amongst the immortal pantheon of those whose names are not 'writ in water' but have found their own way of forming and guiding our spiritual lives. They are indeed, the first psychoanalysts.

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