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# *Outness*

It was observed in the preceding chapter that it can be inaccurate and misleading to adduce Coleridge's thought as an example of "organicism." This is certainly so if by "organic" is meant a structural principle only to be found in the vegetable and higher kingdoms of nature. But it may also be the case, and it usually is, even when the word is taken in the wider sense of a structural principle underlying the world as a whole. Professor M. H. Abrams, for instance, defines organicism as "the philosophy whose major categories are derived metaphorically from the attributes of living and growing things" [1] and describes it later as "implicitly asserting that all the universe is like some one element in that universe." [2] It is, for him, one of those "metaphors of mind," whose "mutations" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries he has traced so ably in an earlier chapter.

But this is not at all what Coleridge's organicism meant to Coleridge, or for that matter Schelling's to Schelling; and yet neither of these two men would appear to have been incapable of distinguishing a metaphorical from a literal statement, that is, from a statement that is figurative only because and to the extent that *all* language is figurative. "Metaphor of mind" signifies an extra-mental process described because it is separate from, but analogous to, a mental one, which latter it may therefore lead us to apprehend. Now not only is this not what Coleridge himself thought he was giving us in his psychology and his critical theory; it is what he spent a substantial part of his time and energy explaining that he was *not* giving us. The greater part, for instance, of Chapter XII of the *Biographia Literaria* consists of a laborious endeavour to make it clear to the reader that, in speaking on the one hand of nature and on the other of what he terms the "act of consciousness," he is not depicting process B in terms of process A, but is describing one single homogeneous process. It seems odd to overlook[3] these efforts

altogether and find it, as Professor Abrams does, "astonishing how much of Coleridge's critical writing is couched in terms that are metaphorical for art and literal for a plant."

If Coleridge is to be understood, we must first be able, at least for the purpose of argument, to treat his concept of nature, not as a picturesque metaphor for his concept of mind, but as an integral component of his concept of mind. That of course does not signify that he saw mind as emergent from nature by evolutionary development, or as one part of a whole which is nature. This last is the erroneous assumption that underlies Walter Pater's complaint,[4] that his theory of creative imagination involves determinism. A fairly pardonable error, since Coleridge's nature is as much determined as any biologist's. What he seeks to show in the *Theory of Life* and elsewhere is, that it is determined by other laws in addition to those of mechanical causality, and further that those laws cannot be grasped unless through the seminal concept of polarity. But it is still determinate.

> Whatever is comprised in the chain and mechanism of cause and effect, of course necessitated, and having its necessity in some other thing, antecedent or concurrent—this is said to be natural; and the aggregate and system of all such things is NATURE. It is therefore a contradiction in terms to include in this the free-will, of which the verbal definition is—that which originates an act or state of being.[5]

By and large, up to the point to which it was followed in the previous chapter Coleridge's concept of nature could just possibly be interpreted as one variant of the familiar, if hazy, notion of a "life force" or Shavian "evolutionary appetite" at its work of producing, first, solid but inanimate matter, then life, then animal sentience and finally *homo sapiens.* Why then is his concept of "life," as *natura naturans,* at all stages, so important not only to Coleridge himself but also (as the length of that chapter must have suggested) for the proper understanding of what Coleridge thought, and thought not only about nature but about pretty well everything else?

There are many passages in his prose writings to which we could go for an answer to this question, but we will choose one from the *Friend,* where he points out that

> the productive power, or *vis naturans,* which in the sensible world, or *natura naturata,* is what we mean by the word, nature, when we speak

> of the same as an agent, is essentially one (that is, of one kind) with the intelligence, which is in the human mind above nature.[6]

Moreover the conviction that this is so is, he maintains, one that is *ultimately* ineradicable from the mind of a self-conscious being; for

> so universally has this conviction leavened the very substance of all discourse, that there is no language on earth in which a man can abjure it as a prejudice, without employing terms and conjunctions that suppose its reality, with a feeling very different from that which accompanies a figurative or metaphorical use of words.

He goes on to draw the distinction, referred to in the previous chapter, between teleology as planning and teleology, or goal-directedness, as denoting that relation between a whole and its parts which is intrinsic to all organic structures, where, in the mere act of contemplating them as wholes, "whether as integral parts or as a system, we assume an intention as the initiative of which the end is the correlative." In other words, "without assigning to nature as nature, a conscious purpose," we yet "distinguish her agency from a blind and lifeless mechanism."[7] And we not only do so, but we cannot help doing so.

The productive power, then, which *in* nature acts *as* nature, is nevertheless "essentially one (that is, of one kind) with the intelligence, which is in the human mind above nature." This is where Coleridge's concept of nature, and of evolution, differs so sharply from the one we are accustomed to that its usual fate with his commentators is to be ignored. For, after all, how can it be so? How can the life-force operative out there in nature—how can *any* "force"—be of one kind with the intelligence in the human mind?

One rather schematic way of delineating his answer to this question would be as follows. We have three distinct concepts, three undoubted realities, which we can distinguish, though we cannot normally divide them from one another: (1) *Natura naturata,* (2) *Natura naturans* or "life," and (3) Intelligence or mind. Of these, 1 is, by definition, sensuous, while 2 and 3 are, by definition, supersensuous. But it is also the case that 1 and 2 are one indivisible whole, the entire operation of *natura naturans* being to produce and sustain *natura naturata.* Now in the same way it is the case that intelligence and *natura naturans* are one indivisible whole. One may concentrate on *that* unity—and that way lies whatever is to be said about poetic or creative imagination, which

was to have been the fundamental topic of the unwritten Chapter XIII, and *is* the topic of what there is of it. But if A is one with B and B is one with C, it follows that A is one with C. Alternatively therefore one may eliminate B from one's reflections and concentrate on the unity of C and A, that is, the unity of intelligence with *natura naturata* or with nature as *natura naturata,* that is, with sensuous nature—with the phenomenal world. And that way lies epistemology or, in Coleridge's vocabulary, "transcendental philosophy"; and therewith the philosophic imagination, which is the fundamental topic of Chapter XII.[8]

Now to speak at all of the unity of intelligence and nature is of course flatly to contradict Descartes. Accordingly, if one intends to do so, it must be made very clear at the outset that one differs from Descartes. Coleridge does make this very clear indeed. In particular, he makes it clear in the *Biographia Literaria,* both in Chapter VIII (apart from the critique of Hartley, the first of its philosophical chapters) and again, as we have seen, in the opening paragraph of Chapter XIII.[9] But there is another and a more formidable difficulty. The dualism of mind and matter, of the mental and the phenomenal, which Descartes netted in his philosophical formula, is not just an abstruse philosophical theorem, difficult to grasp. It is everyman's everyday experience. It is "common sense." At least it was so in Coleridge's day and, with some slight modifications, it is so still. You may call this otherness of things from ourselves, made palpable to our senses by their "outness" in space, "Cartesianism," if you wish, and it is historically not altogether incorrect to do so. But it is also—well, it is obvious. Indeed it is, for most people, almost what the word *obvious* means. Seeing is believing. In characterising Coleridge's concept of the relation between subject and object as the *pons asinorum* of his system, as we did in Chapter 1 (page 13, above), it was by no means intended to suggest that all who shy upon that bridge are asses.

Chapter XII of the *Biographia Literaria,* which is one of the only two really long chapters in the book, bears the somewhat crotchety title: "A Chapter of requests and premonitions concerning the perusal or omission of the chapter that follows." When the reader recalls that the chapter that follows was, in effect, never written and consists, as it stands, of only about six pages;[10] and when, moreover, he finds that Chapter XII itself does *not* consist of requests and premonitions but, in the main, of closely knit and by no means easy philosophical argument, his reaction may be one of pardonable irritation. As to that . . . Cole-

ridge was Coleridge. We must take him as we find him, if we are to take him at all. Unfortunately, in practice, the reader is apt to take the "requests and premonitions" as applicable, not to Chapter XIII, but to Chapter XII itself and, after a few pages of perusal, to opt for omission.

It is very unwise to do so; for odd as it may be, this is the place where, more than anywhere else, the dynamic philosophy is brought together in epitome. It is impossible to master the chapter without becoming substantially seised of what Coleridge thought. But that is difficult and is likely to be attempted by comparatively few. If it were otherwise, there would be the less need for such a book as this.

In *form* Chapter XII may be said to consist of four main divisions; first, an opening one, which contains the "requests and premonitions" including the important maxim stated at the outset: *until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding;* but which also contains a great deal more, inadequately marshalled, matter of importance; secondly, a discussion of the "outness" of phenomena; thirdly, ten numbered "Theses" containing, very closely packed, the philosophical statement of Coleridge's position; and lastly a final section in which he again grows eloquently discursive over the difficulties of the task he has set himself and, in particular, "the obstacles which an English metaphysician has to encounter."

In *substance* the chapter may perhaps best be seen as consisting of two interwoven threads, one of them being this obvious outness of the material world, and the other the existential consequences of reflecting on it. A detailed exposition of the whole would be out of place, since the intention is that its content should be allowed to transpire from this book taken as a whole. But because the second of the four sections, into which we have ventured to divide it, is particularly relevant at this point, and is moreover in our view crucial to the issue of validity, it will be well to describe that part of the chapter in some detail and to summarise its argument. He points, then, to the presence in every human mind of two absolute convictions, or certainties, neither of which requires demonstrating, and both of which are in fact indemonstrable, because they are the twin constituents of human consciousness itself. Perhaps we may call them "awarenesses." The first is the awareness "that there exist things without us," [11] in other words, naïve realism, not as doctrine but as common experience and common sense. The second is the awareness that I am perceiving the things.

Coleridge calls them both, to start with, "original and innate preju-

dices" and the reason for his choice of the noun transpires, as he proceeds to show the respect in which they differ from one another. It is this. The former "prejudice," while it inevitably remains, or returns, *as experience,* nevertheless disappears upon reflection, *as doctrine.* For the mind, the solid world of familiar "objects" dissolves upon analysis. This is a fact that is borne out by the whole history of philosophy and science. But the second "prejudice" does not so dissolve. That which is doing the analysing remains aware that it is doing it, however far the analysis has been carried. Even if it ends by purporting to deny that it is doing it, the very act of denial affirms the contrary.[12] This awareness, this certainty, therefore, "cannot so properly be entitled a prejudice";[13] for this one remains a certainty "equally for the scientific reason of the philosopher as for the common sense of mankind at large." [13]

There is only one conclusion, Coleridge continues, which can be drawn from these premises; only one solution of

> the apparent contradiction, that the former position, namely, the existence of things without us, which from its nature cannot be immediately certain, should be received as blindly and as independently of all grounds as the existence of our own being,

and that is "the supposition that the former is unconsciously involved in the latter."

It is essential at this point that we should realise *all* that this conclusion means. It acknowledges not only that

> but for the confidence which we place in the assertions of our reason and our conscience, we could have no certainty of the reality and actual outness of the material world.[14]

It acknowledges further, that the certainty *is* the outness; that the outness, as he goes on to say at the point where we interrupted the penultimate quotation, "is not only coherent but identical, and one and the same thing with our own immediate self consciousness." [15]

It should not be difficult to grasp that this is something quite different from the substitution of idealism for realism; but Coleridge, aware that it would be so misinterpreted, expends a paragraph pointing out that it is not only *not* that, but is its opposite. It is the substitution of actual realism for a bastard and *soi-disant* realism, which is in fact a

form of idealism in disguise.[16] The outness of the material world is not explained away by, it is built into *this* realism. It is therefore, says Coleridge, "the truest and most binding realism." With the sophisticated realism of both philosophy and science, and we may add of psychology, he contrasts, in the following passage, his own "true and original realism":[17]

> For wherein does the realism of mankind properly consist? In the assertion that there exists a something without them, what, or how, or where they know not, which occasions the objects of their perceptions? Oh no! This is neither connatural nor universal. It is what a few have taught and learned in the schools, and which the many repeat without asking themselves concerning their own meaning. The realism common to all mankind is far older and lies infinitely deeper than this hypothetical explanation of the origin of our perceptions, and explanation skimmed from the mere surface of the mechanical philosophy. It is the table itself, which the man of common sense believes himself to see, not the phantom of a table, from which he may argumentatively deduce the reality of a table, which he does not see. If to destroy the reality of all, that we actually behold, be idealism, what can be more egregiously so, than the system of modern metaphysics, which banishes us to a land of shadows, surrounds us with apparitions, and distinguishes truth from illusion only by the majority of those who dream the same dream. "I asserted that the world was mad", exclaimed poor Lee, "and the world said, that I was mad, and confound them, they outvoted me".

On another occasion Coleridge gave precise and gnomic expression to the existential bearing of his first "prejudice," when he wrote: "the sense of outwardness as a sense of reality, is a law of our nature, and no conclusion of our judgment." [18] And it was of course his view that the cardinal error of Descartes lay in attempting to show that it was *both* a law of our nature *and* a conclusion of our judgment. The law of our nature is that by which

> in every act of conscious perception, we at once identify our being with that of the world without us, and yet place ourselves in contra-distinction to that world,[19]

and we acknowledge, in obeying it, that the existence of things without us is "one and the same thing with our own immediate self consciousness." It follows that

> of all we see, hear, feel and touch the substance is and must be in ourselves; and therefore there is no alternative between the dreary (and thank heaven! almost impossible) belief that every thing around us is but a phantom, or that the life which is in us is in them likewise . . .[20]

Now, in stating his conclusion concerning the relation between the two "original and innate prejudices," it will be recalled that Coleridge does not merely put it that "the former is involved in the latter"; he writes: "the former is *unconsciously* involved in the latter." In other words, although the outness of phenomena is a law of our nature, we are not conscious of it *as* law. We are merely conscious of their outness. The first prejudice may properly be called a "prejudice" because it dissolves on analysis. It ceases to be a prejudice only when we become conscious of it as a law; when we transcend it, not by a sophisticated and unreal realism of appearances-of-things *versus* things themselves, but by that *actual* realism, which understands and accepts the law. In doing so, we become aware that reality, although it is indeed real, is also appearance; and that appearance, although it is indeed appearance, is also reality. We emerge from what was essentially a sleeping relation with phenomena into a waking one; and it was this awakening, into which, paradoxically, the unhappy opium addict was mainly concerned to rouse his contemporaries and posterity, confident that, once that has been effected, the fact that nature is essentially one with the intelligence in us, will no longer seem a wild and incredible speculation, or a pathetic fallacy, but will become a self-evident fact.

It must have become sufficiently apparent that the distinction between *man* and *nature,* as Coleridge drew it, is by no means one with that other important distinction, with which it is so commonly equated, between a psychosomatic organism enclosed within its own cuticle on the one hand and, on the other, the rest of the world outside that bit of space. But, even when that is clear, there still remains his distinction between *subject* and *object.* And it has to be realised that this is not *merely* co-extensive even with his own, less crass, distinction between man and nature. Not every object is a natural object. *Anything* we think about becomes, by definition, "object" and, since it is a fact that we can think even about thinking, we know experientially that mind is a subject which can become its own object—though, unlike natural objects, it is then "an object of which itself is the sole percipient."[21] This first-hand knowledge we ought not simply to jettison, when we go on

to place our interpretation on all that we observe in nature and in life.

But all this is only another, more technical, way of stating the *conclusion* arrived at from the discussion of outness, which we endeavoured to summarise first. Although the intelligence in us is "essentially one, that is, of one kind," with *natura naturans,* yet it is not simply another name for *natura naturans;* for it is also true that intelligence "is in the human mind above nature." [22] While therefore we can say, of the two awarenesses, that we know that the former (outness) is unconsciously involved in the latter (I am),[23] we cannot also say we know the latter is involved in the former. On the contrary, we know it is not. The proposition of "involvement" is reversible between a subject and "its own" objects; but not between a subject and natural objects, not between man and nature. Nature is always a "becoming." A subject that can become its own object is our immediate experience; natural objects are our immediate experience; but of *an object that can become its own subject* (which is the alternative "theory of life" to Coleridge's) we have no experience. Nor could we ever have.[24] If we choose to suppose it, we do so at our own risk; which is the risk of erecting an ever more elaborate inverted pyramid of judgments upon that very outness, which itself disappears in the light of judgment.[25]

What then, in these terms of subject and object, is the basis of Coleridge's own theory of life? "*Life* is a subject with an inherent tendency to produce an object, wherein and whereby to *find* itself . . ." [26]

We only understand the "tendency to individuate," on which life is based throughout, when we see it as this potentially self-conscious subject, operant, as the agent of process, at every stage of the process; from the origin of matter itself, through the evolution of matter into vegetable life, of vegetable life into sentience, and of animal instinct into understanding. Of that process—the process wherethrough life "becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself" [27]—outness, as the law of self-conscious nature, is the end product; but it is difficult so to regard it, while we remain obsessed with outness as it is for merely somnolent experience. Therefore it seemed best to reserve the conclusion of the *Theory of Life* until the conclusion of the present chapter. The tendency "at once to individuate and to connect, to detach, but so as either to retain or to reproduce attachment" could only culminate in one way; only in a combination of "the most perfect detachment with the greatest possible union"; only in "things without us" at the one pole and "us," self-conscious, at the other; yet with the two so

related that the one extreme is "identical and one and the same thing" with the other.

> The class of Vermes deposits a calcareous stuff, as if it had torn loose from the earth a piece of the gross mass which it must still drag about with it. In the insect class this residuum has refined itself. In the fishes and amphibia it is driven back or inward, the organic power begins to be intuitive, and sensibility appears. In the birds the bones have become hollow; while, with apparent proportional recess, but, in truth, by the excitement of the opposite pole, their exterior presents an actual vegetation. The bones of the mammalia are filled up, and their coverings have become more simple. Man possesses the most perfect osseous structure, the least and most insignificant covering. The whole force of organic power has attained an inward and centripetal direction. He has the whole world in counterpoint to him, but he contains an entire world within himself. Now, for the first time at the apex of the living pyramid, it is Man and Nature, but Man himself is a syllepsis, a compendium of Nature—the Microcosm! Naked and helpless cometh man into the world. Such has been the complaint from eldest time; but we complain of our chief privilege, our ornament, and the connate mark of our sovereignty. *Porphyrigeniti sumus!* [28] In Man the centripetal and individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself concentred and individualized—he is a revelation of Nature! Henceforward he is referred to himself, delivered up to his own charge; and he who stands the most on himself, and stands the firmest, is the truest, because the most individual, Man. In social and political life this acme is inter-dependence; in moral life it is independence; in intellectual life it is genius.[29]

We are so minded today that it is difficult for us to envisage anything as real, unless we can also see it as having gradually evolved to be what it is. It is clear from the *Theory of Life* that, although he did not consider this the most important thing about it, Coleridge did in fact hold that the relation between nature and the human mind, as we have it, is one that has gradually evolved to be what it is today. It is hoped therefore that the approach we have adopted, by way of that Essay, may, for some readers at least, have helped to make his "subject" and "object" something more than the brain-cracking conundrum too many literary men appear to have found them in the past.