Coleridge and the Idea of History

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Abstract:

Coleridge spoke in September 1831 of his wish' to make History scientific, and Science historical—to take from History its accidentality – and from Science its fatalism'. This self-description raises the question of Coleridge's status as a 'scientific historian'. Is Coleridge a prototype for R.G. Collingwood's definition of this mode of scientific study, of solving problems, not surveying periods, putting questions to 'the world of ideas 'which historical evidence 'creates in the present'? Is Coleridge, alternatively, the pattern of Collingwood's deluded 'pigeon-holer', arranging the past 'in a single scheme ' and bragging about 'raising history to the rank of a science'. Re-reading Coleridge with Collingwood and twenty-first century accounts of methodological idealism and of 'presence', I trace a distinct historical interest back through *Church and State* (1829), *The Friend* (1818) and *Biographia Literaria* (1817) to the 'Comparison 'essays of 1802.

Keywords: Burke; Coleridge; Collingwood; facts; interpretation; method; progress

I: Coleridge as historian

Was Coleridge a bad historian? John Stuart Mill, writing in 1840, famously thought otherwise. For Mill, Coleridge marked a period in the development of human culture: his contribution, 'a philosophy of society, in the only form in which it is yet possible, that of a philosophy of history'.[1] Propounding, from a position of post-revolutionary reverence for the miracle of social persistence over time, the 'antagonism' between the two great social interests of 'Permanence' and 'Progression', Coleridge marked a decisive move beyond what R.G. Collingwood in 1926 would call 'tendentious' history, towards something like T.S. Eliot's 'constitution of silence' enfolding all 'factions' 'in a

single party'.[2] Coleridge's analysis of an enduring and antagonistic dynamic in history had, thought Mill, released further insights into social forces such as education and loyalty specifically *as forces* – and not, for the first time, 'mere accidental advantages' of a particular political or religious view.[3]

A student of much recent scholarship might easily conclude, however, that Mill's view was eccentric or just plain wrong. Critics such as Jon Klancher, Christopher Parker, and Dahlia Porter have, in different ways, identified in Coleridge at best a mode of systems thinking that appears anomalous at any time, and ultimately shows the 'pain' or the collapse of any effort of rigorous historical thought. Klancher describes *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829) as possibly 'the Coleridge text that is the most deliberately unclear about its historical referents in a body of work filled with vague conjectures concerning the past'.[4] For Porter, meanwhile, the 'Essays on Method' in *The Friend* (1818) anticipate contemporary interest in earlier modern 'strategies for information management'.[5] But this Coleridge is far from the 'scientific' historian, as defined in Collingwood's *Idea of History* (1946). Such historians first think and so construe the evidence to 'create the past' with a 'purpose' – much as, in Coleridge's emblem for the imagination, the water insect makes progress by making its own motion a 'momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion'.[6] 'The historical past', writes Collingwood, incorporating the achievement of Michael Oakeshott, 'is the world of ideas which the present evidence creates in the present' (*IoH*, 154). Porter's Coleridge, however, has no such historical priority. He is instead a scholar crushed under the burden of the past, attempting vainly to seal 'the gap in induction' by piecing together excerpts treated as aphorisms, heaped-up piles of '*sententiae*' that 'signif[y] beyond [themselves] through the power of accumulated meaning'.[7] In his study of *The English Idea of History from Coleridge to Collingwood* (2000), meanwhile, Parker places

Coleridge as an historian in his title only to thoroughly disqualify him in the text. For all the 'pretensions' of his writings on 'Method', and for all his slight inklings of the insight of Collingwood and Hans-Georg Gadamer that 'sensory perception was not enough, and we must' first 'formulate ideas in the mind', Parker concludes that '[w]hat Coleridge had not done was to suggest an historical method': '[O]n the relationship between minds in the past, the historical evidence that they left about their own ideas, and our minds, he did not really have much to say'.[8]

But this is a travesty – a series of too-strong misreadings in otherwise invaluable books. Parker faults Coleridge for not being Collingwood – as if he has forgotten that Collingwood's great philosophical innovation was to grasp the historical past as wholly ideal, and *therefore* productive of progress. Collingwood saw that in history, as not in nature, what is superseded is not dead but enshrined in a 'living past, kept alive by the act of historical thinking itself': as 'Newton … lives in Einstein', and 'Greek mathematics … is actually the foundation of our own' (*IoH*, 334, 225). As Jan van der Dussen notes, progress is the keynote of Collingwood's thought, but not in an ideological or merely optimistic sense (*IoH*, xliii). In Collingwood's *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933), history is 'a form of human thought, subject to change, liable to error, capable of progress' – that progress which is only 'created by historical thinking', the lossless perpetuation of achieved solutions in answering questions that arise anew.[9] The best available resource for redeeming Coleridge from 'vague' pre-history may thus lie in the work of a second set of critics – including Jonathan Sachs, Michael John Kooy and Peter Cheyne – who have rallied to the defence of a consistent, if still anomalous, *philosophy of history*.

Such a defence begins, however, from a position of considerable disciplinary disadvantage. The radical historiographers of the *Wild on Collective* launched their

2018 manifesto against the disciplinary neglect of philosophy of history and the marginalization of any 'theory' not already neatly operationalized.[10] So long as the field of professional history is constructed and surveilled by a still-positivist and unquestioningly realist neo-antiquarian 'guild', they urge, it must remain at best only superficially decolonized.[11] But with such efforts to reconfigure historical studies, Coleridge and British idealist traditions of history are ready, if perhaps unlooked-for, allies. Much of the *Wild on* manifesto reads like a rewriting of Collingwood, and a call for a re-connection of the 'half life' of such historiographical 'itineraries', in Peter Fritzsche's phrase.[12] The Collingwoodian note is unsurprising inasmuch as one of the collective, Ethan Kleinberg, is a leading critic of the new 'presence theory', which 'attempts to understand, or at least convey, the ways that the past is literally with us in the present in significant and material ways'.[13] But as Jonas Ahlskog suggests, 'presence' does everything that Collingwood does, except, ironically, the important thing – which is to face up to the question of how history can actually be 'with us', or how and where it can actually exist *within* the present that it has become.[14] Thus, Ian Baucom, working between Walter Benjamin and Giovanni Arrighi, describes the 'constellation' between 'what has been' and the 'now', 'in which the past returns … in expanded form', as 'present time finds stored and accumulated within itself a nonsynchronous array of past times'.[15]

'Time' may be an ally or an enemy. But the clear consequence of thinking in terms of what *it* 'finds' rather than what *we* 'create' is, as W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and philosophical sci-fi from H.P. Lovecraft to Denis Villeneuve amply show, 'notions of … seething … time, whose merest mention is paralysing'.[16] As Collingwood replied to Michael Oakeshott, philosopher of the 'fixed, finished and independent past', such a defence of history is dead on arrival.[17] It has

surrendered at the outset the humanistic freedom – or what Collingwood's twenty-first century interpreter Giuseppina D'Oro calls the 'space of reasons' and 'historical agency' – that the intellectual separation out of nature actually *means*:

> Oakeshott states a dilemma: the object of historical thought is either present or past: the historian thinks of it as past, but that [says Oakeshott] is where he is wrong; that is in fact the philosophical error which makes him an historian; it is really present. … The explosion of this error … should result in the simple disappearance of history as a mode of experience. But it does not… Oakeshott supposes that there is no third alternative … a living past, a past which, because it was thought and not mere natural event, can be re-enacted in the present and in that re-enactment known as past. If this third alternative could be accepted, we should get the result that history is not based on a philosophical error … [or just] a mode of experience, but an integral part of experience itself. (*IoH*, 157-8)[18]

Thus, as D'Oro, Karim Dharamsi and Stephen Leach suggested in another manifesto of 2018, '[t]here has … never been a better time to revisit Collingwood'.[19] Collingwood's intellectual affiliation to Coleridge has proved difficult to establish, beyond the influence of his father, W.G. Collingwood (1854-1932), who was first pupil and then secretary to John Ruskin.[20] But in the style of Collingwood himself, my interest here is not so much in natural-historical afterlives as in re-encountering Coleridge with Collingwood as historical interpreter. What Vasso Kindi calls Collingwood's 'particular and … concrete' way with facts and ideas is an ideal foil for the '*practical* way of saying' in Coleridge.[21] This is a 'way' that – as suggested by the context of that phrase in *Church and State*, in Coleridge's first attempt to account for

the 'pre-supposed' quality of the ancient constitution, 'antecedent' to any law – is as concretely historical as it is idealist.[22]

For a recuperation of the historiographical Coleridge, then, Cheyne's 2019 approach to his philosophy of 'ideas actualized in history' seems full of promise. Cheyne's Coleridge being actually *more* of an idealist than Kant or Hegel, he defines a history open to varieties of evidence held in common experience as well as in elite archives. Instead of tracing the 'necessary and exhaustive unfolding of divinity', the Coleridgean 'dynamic' operates 'from the other direction, as humans aim for perfection yet inevitably fail'.[23] The 'line of evolution' reveals a general tendency only – in Coleridge's words, with Cheyne's emphasis – '*as if* a power, greater, and better, than the men themselves, had intended it for them'.[24] This saving 'as if' provides for 'the reality of the British constitution' as subsisting neither in Burkean prescription nor in philosophically radical calculation, but irradiated from in among 'an interconnected group of first-order ideas', 'given in conscience and moral sense'.[25]

But in Coleridge's actual writings, this part infallible part 'fumbling' constitution is nowhere to be found.[26] Coleridge's Constitution is rather, in the terms of his post-Wordsworthian rewriting of the 'old Puritan Poet' (George Withers), a 'yet auguster Thing' – before which the vaunted 'Omnipotence of Parliament' dwindles into a 'strutting phrase' (*CC&S*, 101, 97-8). The unlimited power of Parliament can extend at furthest, says Coleridge, to decisions of constitutionality by 'our Courts of Law', and *never* 'to the Nation, to England with all her venerable heir-looms, and with all her germs of reversionary wealth' (*CC&S*, 97-8). Less a product of *philosophy* than of what Collingwood termed 'history of history', the Constitution as 'itself … an idea' (*CC&S*, 18) approaches what the 'Essays on the Principles of Method' in the 1818 *Friend* call a '*central phænomenon*' in science, well-propounded with a 'compleating word': a law-

disclosing methodized physical observation straight out of Francis Bacon.[27] The Constitution is indeed matter of *certain* historical *fact*:

> [F]or little less than a century and a half Englishmen have collectively, and individually, lived and acted with fewer restraints on their free-agency, than the citizens of any known Republic, past or present. The fact is certain. It has been often boasted of, but never, I think, clearly explained. The solution of the phenomenon must, it is obvious, be sought for in the combination of circumstances, to which we owe the insular privilege of a self-evolving Constitution … that in both [pure democracy and monarchy] the Nation, or People, delegates its whole power. Nothing is left obscure, nothing suffered to remain in the Idea, unevolved and only acknowledged as an existing, yet indeterminable Right. (*CC&S*, 96-7)

There are both chauvinism and steady-state progressivism here. 'We' are *anywhere but* the place where '[e]xtremes meet' (*CC&S*, 96). But freedom and unfreedom do not cease to be historical problems because human actors can – to half-quote Amanda Gorman – *both* get stuck in merely inherited pride *and* emerge to find no reform enough.[28] It may also be necessary, in order quite to follow Coleridge here, to adopt a model of a 'fact' different from what 'our' common sense suggests. The liberty-poised constitution is evidently not a smaller or a larger globe of compact truth, processed in some sort of subject-object interchange, accumulating towards something else. Instead, the 'fact' of constitutional freedom seems more analogous to the emergent 'finding', at the end of a rigorous process of implication from evidence – and normally tracking back to an ultimate intention – which occurs before a criminal conviction comes to trial. And which it is the skill of the advocate not simply to present but to press towards a proof. Or as Coleridge put it in *The Friend* for 25 January, 1810,

quoting Bacon on the inward ‘wires’ of history revealed by ‘propounding’ a representative subject for a Life, right method involves not merely ‘heaping together a multitude of particulars’, but finding ‘Fact … in the light of some comprehensive Truth’ (*Friend*, ii. 285-6).

For Collingwood, similarly, facts are nothing like what we tend to think they are: not crude collections to no inherent purpose, not departures but arrivals. ‘[T]o determine facts far distant in space and time is not the essence of history but its climax’.[29] A fact in history, as Louis O. Mink explains it, is an eventual determination from a dovetailed series of answers to questions, moving by processes of inference from evidence initially construed as potentially correlative. This is a movement that never reaches any final resting point or ‘*terminus a quem*’, for the ‘future will include questions which cannot even be guessed at before their presuppositions emerge’.[30] It is rather a movement *back*, in understanding, towards an ‘absolute’ or given ground, an originary ‘constellation’ of cultural starting-posts, a ‘*terminus a quo*’.[31]

Historical knowledge thus has the structure of chiasmus. But this is not the same chiasmus that animates James Chandler’s *England in 1819* (1998) – as defined after Coleridge’s own remarks of 1812 on how the ‘puzzled librarian’ must sometimes ‘commit an anachronism in order to avoid an anatopism’.[32] In context, Coleridge is not here participating in the development of new ‘ethnographic’ techniques for offsetting chronology against geography to produce ‘the age of the spirit of the age’. On the contrary, he is suggesting the ‘dwarfis[m]’ of a solely tape-measured approach among his contemporaries.[33] The puzzlement of the librarian comes in handling the achievement of (presumably) seventeenth-century antiquarianism – ‘provincial, municipal, and monastic histories’ – which the ‘new species of history’ guts of all its illustrative ‘apposite quotations … whatever’, and grades according to a scheme of

progressive utility 'commenc[ing] with a numeration table' (*Shorter Works and Fragments*, ii. 324-6). The antiquaries' 'tall tomes and huge' need to be placed anachronistically under an earlier period – presumably back among 'monastic histories' in the naïve sense. This is because they can in every sense 'find no associates in size at a less distance than two centuries' (*Shorter Works and Fragments*, ii. 326). The antiquarian enterprise is thus displaced from its own period and also distanced from contemporary works, because *history as a topos* is something that 'historians' of the past two centuries have been skilled indeed in illustrating and numerating, but with which continuity has been radically lost.

This latent claim for an enlightenment loss of history is explicit in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960). Here historical knowledge involves chiasmus, but it is the chiasmus of critical distance *and* – what the geo-chronological view almost entirely leaves out – of continuity:

> Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The [interpretative] task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why … historical [interpretation projects a] horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. [But recognizing itself as] only something superimposed upon continuing tradition … it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again … [so] that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded.[34]

On such an account, Coleridge's new historical contemporaries with their tabulated quotations fall far short of 'historical consciousness' proper. And on Collingwood's related but even more radical view, the geo-chronological method – then or now – hardly rises to the description of history at all. As Ahlskog explains it, Collingwood's difference from Gadamer – who ultimately shares the sense of 'unbridgeable gap between subject and object' that drives contemporary theorists of 'presence' out of *thought* entirely – is that on his view 'the presence of the past, in the form of identity of thoughts' is just 'a necessary presupposition of history'. '[W]ithout it understanding and knowledge' – our everyday assumption that 'we can re-think the same thoughts that other people's actions express' – 'would not be possible'.[35] Rather than thinking 'that there is something wrong with understanding as such – whatever that could mean', Collingwood's radical move is to assume no 'gap … to begin with'.[36] History as such is 'concerned with thoughts alone' (*IoH*, 217). Thoughts which, as D'Oro argues, we must conceive as 'stand[ing] outside time' precisely to the extent that we hold knowledge to be possible beyond ever-decreasing trivia – 'specific gravity' more than 'Archimedes … in the bath' – and to the extent that immediate sensations being coined in some sort of shareable 'occult substance' is a speculation we prefer to avoid.[37] History on this account has no naturalistic faders to draw, but is fully ideal in the present and unbound to time or space. In a far more rigorous and enabling chiasmus, Collingwood's 'scientific' historian holds that *there is no past*, and that *nothing but historical evidence exists* (*IoH*, 155-6). This is the freedom and humility of Coleridge at the feet of Wordsworth – busy rearranging 'the archives of mankind' with his 'lay / More than historic' – as he finally rises to find himself in prayer.[38] To put a new point on my opening question, then, is such an 'idea of history' not just 'latent' but actually (in the terminology of *Church and State*) 'awake' and 'operative' in Coleridge?[39]

II. Historical foresight and the problem of Coleridge and Burke

I have been arguing to this point that contemporary debates about historical presence have implications for Coleridge. Instead of relegating him to a sort of disciplinary prehistory, as Parker suggested, reading Coleridge with Collingwood may be a way of reconnecting historiographical resources, and for literary history in particular. In *The Idea of History*, Collingwood described three types of historians. There were those able to do 'scissors-and-paste'. There were those capable of inventing systems of 'pigeon-holes' for such accumulations of data. And there were some with the power to convert evidence into facts and (pace Francis Bacon) put *history* to the question (*IoH*, 257-64, 269-70). These last were Collingwood's 'Scientific historians', recognizable as such by studying what Lord Acton called 'problems, not periods'; by a style of thinking in which '[q]uestion and evidence … are correlative'; and by a 'way' of inferential argument rising to proofs as conclusive 'as a demonstration in mathematics' (*IoH*, 281, 262). First thinking and so *creating* his evidence, Collingwood's 'scientific historian' follows ideas towards facts in the same way as Coleridge's man of Method works from a '*leading thought*' or 'mental initiative' towards the propounding of a philosophical idea or scientific law (*Friend*, i. 455, 488-89). It is the mark of pseudo-science, Collingwood suggests, to delimit in advance what can count as evidence. On the other hand, 'in scientific history … everything in the world is potential evidence for any subject whatever':

> [E]very time the historian asks a question, he asks it because he thinks he can answer it: that is to say, he has already in his mind a preliminary and tentative idea of the evidence he will be able to use. Not a definite idea about potential evidence, but an indefinite

> idea about actual evidence… You can't collect your evidence before you begin thinking. (*IoH*, 280-81)

Concerned that history as a 'really new', 'special and autonomous form of thought' was in danger of becoming a victim of its own success – claims for 'the historicity of all things', resolving 'all knowledge into historical knowledge', effectively cancelling the distinction from nature (*IoH*, 209-10) – Collingwood thus sought to invest the historian with the full prestige and rigor of scientific method. Francis Bacon's epigram on the interrogation of nature and John Locke's proposal for a science of mind following 'historical, plain method' were both partly unwitting expressions of 'the true theory of historical method' (*IoH*, 269, 209). And if the activity of the 'Scientific historian' was decisively separated from the archaic 'parlour game' of 'scissors-and-paste' – which as an activity of collecting statements on events and topics could justify opinions but never yield proofs – it was even more to be distinguished from the 'pigeon-holing enterprise' of inductive pattern-tracing from which it more immediately sprang (*IoH*, 279, 254-5, 261-3). This was because while in fact it was only a 'superficial' advance upon 'scissors-and-paste', 'historical' only in changing 'authorities' for 'sources', the so-called critical history ran on directly into the hopeful 'delusion' of 'arranging the whole of history in a single scheme', and into talk of 'raising history to the rank of a science' (*IoH*, 269, 264-5). Proceeding upon a false analogy with Baconian science, such historians proceeded by extrapolating from 'the patterns discernible in the facts already collected' back 'into the remote past, about which there was very little information', and forward 'into the future, about which there was none' (*IoH*, 265). And thus the historian with just an initial leverage upon 'scissors-and-paste' arrived too soon at a spurious sense of his own autonomy and possible prophetic power (*IoH*, 265). In this midwinter spring of 'scientific history',

Collingwood located the 'philosophy of history' associated with Kant and Hegel and then Marx: gifted historical thinkers nevertheless 'thwarted and baffled' by working amid the 'dissolution' of 'scissors-and-paste', but when the 'Baconian revolution' had not yet taken place (*IoH*, 264, 260, 269).

And what, then, of Coleridge? Repeated references in his writings to 'prophecy' and a prospective view suggest a pigeon-holer of the first – or lowest – order. '[A]ll true insight is foresight', Coleridge suggests in 1829 in *Church and State* (*CC&S*, 66). 'I wish', he suggests in September 1831, 'to connect by a moral copula Natural History with Political History – or in other words, to make History scientific, and Science historical—to take from History its accidentality – and from Science its fatalism'.[40] This sounds promising in some ways for a distinct, and distinctly Collingwoodian, historical interest. But the accompanying claim to thus 'reduce all knowledges into harmony' rouses suspicion. And the claim seems more a repetition of the passage in *The Friend* in which the historian is not a scientist but a 'Musician', who by recalling and 'embodying the Spirit of some melody that had gone before, anticipates and seems trying to overtake something that is to come, and … has reached the summit of his art, when having thus modified the Present by the Past, he at the same time weds the Past *in* the Present to some prepared and corresponsive Future' (*Friend*, ii. 111). It would be easy to thematize this as just the magic, emotion and amusement of Collingwood's 'jaded scissors-and-paste man' (*IoH*, 265-6). But before convicting Coleridge of predicting the future – Collingwood's 'unforgivable sin which forever banishes the sinner from the company of genuine historians' – witness should also be taken from Coleridge speaking specifically about history as present re-enactment of thoughts and actions past.[41] Laying the groundwork for his discussion of Plato and Francis Bacon in the 'Essays on the Principles of Method' in the 1818 *Friend*, Coleridge outlines a long history of

misreadings of Bacon, and specifically misinterpretations arising from efforts to connect his abstract engagements in philosophy to 'his fundamental principles, as established in his Novum Organum':

> At all events, it will be no easy task to reconcile many passages … if we attach to the words the meaning which they *may* bear, or even, in some instances, the meaning which might appear to us, in the present age, more obvious; instead of the sense in which they were employed by the professors, whose false premises and barren methods Bacon was at that time controverting. And this historical interpretation is rendered the more necessary by his fondness for point and antithesis in his style, where we must often disturb the sound in order to arrive at the sense. (*Friend*, i. 487)

Here, contained in a particular wrestle with words and meanings, is precisely what Parker accused Coleridge of failing to produce, an account of a method of 'historical interpretation'. Some of the most egregious misrepresentations of Coleridge and history appear to stem from overlooking the differences between 'Method' in the 1818 book version of *The Friend* (1818) and what Coleridge called the 'topsy-turvied' version published in the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*.[42] But even a reader without the 1818 text of 'Method' but with access to *Biographia Literaria*, or to one of the various editions of *Essays on His Own Times*, could have known better. For the 'historical interpretation' that prefaces the true version of 'Method' is apparently a further development of an ingenious chiasmus of 'names' and 'circumstances' that Coleridge had already developed in his *Morning Post* essays of 1802 – and which he had indeed claimed as such, and as pivotal, in his story of a writing life.

In *Biographia Literaria*, chapter ten, Coleridge turns to a very specific historical problem. How can his own historical writings have advanced, rather than just repeated,

the 'no discoveries in morality' prescriptivist view of Edmund Burke?[43] The proposition contradicts itself. But equally, how could such a student *not* have profited from having Burke's example before him? In the near-contemporary 'Essays on Method' in *The Friend*, Burke serves as the prototypical example of the man of true scientific method, in whose discourse 'each integral part, or … sentence' contains the '*surview'* of the whole (*Friend*, i. 449; *BL*, ii. 58). In the context of his own intellectual history, though, did the fact that there had been a Burke, and an apparent power of true prophecy active in the world – did this go to confirm or deny that Coleridge himself had seen, and perhaps helped in making, history move? Coleridge's framing of the question is specific:

> Whence gained [Burke] this superiority of foresight? Whence arose the striking *difference*, and in most instances even the discrepancy between the grounds assigned by *him*, and by those who voted *with* him, on the same questions? How are we to explain the notorious fact, that the speeches and writings of EDMUND BURKE are more interesting at the present day, than they were found at the time of their first publication; while those of his illustrious confederates are either forgotten, or exist only to furnish proofs, that the same conclusion, which one man had deduced scientifically, *may* be brought out by another in consequence of errors that luckily chanced to neutralize each other [?] (*BL*, i. 191)

If the question is specific, it is nevertheless far from clear that Coleridge can satisfactorily proceed towards an answer; that he has an idea, indefinite or otherwise, of evidence correlative to the problem. The invocation of 'foresight' raises the unhistorical alarm. And the questioning of Burke as a figure who proves history possible is already so multiply refracted as to seem simply inextricable, or just a matter of opinion and

taste. In *The Friend* (1809-10), Burke had provided the epigraph to the second number, described as an ‘oracle’ for Coleridge’s own handling of political system and party spirit (*Friend*, ii. 21-2). In number six, Coleridge had advanced his own equal or superior attention to principles, referring Burke’s relative failure to make ‘Converts … during his life time’ to a ‘perpetual System of Compromise’, of his own philosophic ‘knowledge of History and the Laws of Spirit … with the mere Men of Business’ (*Friend*, ii. 123-4). And in the next part of the discussion in the *Biographia*, Coleridge seems to compound the problem by referring to a new edition of *The Friend* – to be ‘shortly published, for I can scarcely say republished’ – with materials on ‘the sources and effects of jacobinism and the connection of certain forms of political economy with jacobinical despotism’ (*BL*, i. 218). He thus rests the whole matter of his relation to Burke ultimately on ‘numerous articles furnished by me to the Morning Post and Courier’, at fifteen years’ remove and with all of those refractions in between. The note proved inaccurate, as Coleridge’s editors point out: ‘The revised 3-vol *Friend* did not include this “small selection”, though C used bits of his essays without identifying them as such’ (*BL*, i. 218n). There is also undoubtedly some ‘egotism’ in play, as Coleridge recounting this part of his career runs through ‘circumstance[s]’ that suggest the *Morning Post* articles had in some sense ‘*produced*’ the termination of the Peace of Amiens and the enduring personal ‘resentment’ of Napoleon (*BL*, i. 219, 215-17).

But these points of refraction and difficulty are, in fact, so many indices of *reliability* in Coleridge’s handling of his historical problem. *The Friend* having been ‘printed rather than published’, the question of his own progression beyond Burke will be decided not by reference to reworked materials there, but by reference to the *Morning Post* essays as written and received in 1800-1802 (see *BL*, i. 175, 184). Having established the context as his having ‘undertake[n] the literary and political department

in the Morning Post' from the time of his return from Germany, and so perhaps 'wasted, the prime and manhood of my intellect' (*BL*, i. 214-15), Coleridge then tells the story forwards. I quote the three main items in his account together:

> In Mr. Burke's writings indeed the germs of almost all political truths may be found. But I dare assume to myself the merit of having first explicitly defined and analyzed the nature of Jacobinism; and that in distinguishing the jacobin from the republican, the democrat, and the mere demagogue, I … rescued the word from remaining a mere term of abuse … (*BL*, i. 217)

> On every great occurance I endeavoured to discover in past history the event, that most nearly resembled it. I procured, wherever it was possible, *the contemporary historians, memorialists, and pamphleteers. Then fairly subtracting the points of difference from those of likeness, as the balance favored the former or the latter, I conjectured that the result would be the same or different*. [And] … I feel myself authorized to affirm, by the effect produced on many intelligent men, that were the dates wanting … the essays [might seem to have] been written within the last twelve months. (*BL*, i. 218; my emphasis)

> I have mentioned [this] from the full persuasion that, *armed with the two-fold knowledge of history and the human mind, a man will scarcely err in his judgement concerning the sum total of any future national event, if he have been able to procure the original documents of the past together with authentic accounts of the present, and if he have a philosophic tact for what is truly important in facts*, and in most instances therefore for such facts as the DIGNITY OF HISTORY has excluded from the volumes of our modern compilers, by the courtesy of the age entitled historians. (*BL*, i. 219; my emphasis)

I have room here only to gesture with italics at some of the more suggestive comments. But as a solution to the problem of 'Coleridge and Burke', of how progress in history is possible, Coleridge's overall statement is clear. He has done it, and left a record that it needs only 'balance' and 'tact' to reenact. The end of the chapter thus offers, as a fact of lived experience, a solution to the second part of the initial statement of the problem of the 'foresight' of Burke. '[P]hilosophic tact for what is truly important in facts' is cognate with what the 'Essays on Method' call the 'leading thought' from apprehension of 'an anomaly of some sort', which overleaps induction with the straight-forward propounding of an idea or law.[44] In this way, Coleridge and Burke and history becomes not just a matter of opinion or conceit but the development of a richly implicated fact:

> [The] difference [is not due] to deficiency of talent on the part of Burke's friends, or of experience, or of historical knowledge. The satisfactory solution is, that Edmund Burke possessed and had sedulously sharpened that eye, which sees all things, actions, and events, in relation to the *laws* that determine their existence and circumscribe their possibility. He referred habitually to *principles*. He was a *scientific* statesman; and therefore a *seer*. For every *principle* contains in itself the germs of a prophecy; and as the prophetic power is the essential privilege of science, so the fulfilment of its oracles supplies the outward and (to men in general) the *only* test of its claim to the title. … [T]he essays and leading paragraphs of our [newly-principled] journals are so many remembrances of Edmund Burke. (*BL*, i. 192)

Not only does this continual reenactment of Burke prove history possible, but – as Collingwood later argued – the identity of problem-solving history with 'history of history' suggests that it is, now and in future, a form of thought that is actively

necessary. '[A]s it becomes clearer that past fact as such and in its entirety cannot be known', and

> that the only past we can know or need know is the past that has preserved recognizable traces in the present, so people must come to see more and more that all history is really history of history, that in stating what we take to be past facts we are really only and always recounting and summarizing our own and other people's investigations concerning the past. … This does not mean … shirking the whole problem [by merely describing opinions, but saying] *I*, having diligently studied their views and all other evidence, *think it was thus*. Here the history of history culminates where it ought to culminate, in the present. (*IoH*, 408-9)

This is history as a discipline not just capable of pleading relevance but constitutive of the perspective of the present itself. Wrapped up in Coleridge's highly specified claim to such an idea of history, however, is something of more worth as a testable historical fact. That is, the *Morning Post* essays of 1802 demonstrate an effective method not – as the phrasing only fleetingly suggests – of predicting future events, but rather of investigating present problems, as they will continuingly arise. The question to answer now becomes, do the essays actually achieve anything like this? Is anything like the Collingwoodian way of historical understanding – beyond both the 'unbridgeable gap' of hermeneutics and the paralysis of 'presence' – available here?

III. Chiastic History

'[I]t is some little at least in favour of mankind', Coleridge wrote in late 1802, in his second historical 'Comparison' essay in *The Morning Post*, 'that there has pre-existed a state of things similar to the present state of France':

> We have the example, and warning experience of Rome, familiar to us from our school-days; and we would fain hope, that facts do not accumulate altogether to no purpose – that experience will not be always like the lights in the stern of the vessel, illumining the tract only which we have already passed over …[45]

Coming at almost the exact mid-point of the second of three essays, this passage is a turning point for Coleridge as historiographer, suggesting a way to determine whether he really practiced anything like Collingwood's problem solving history, or was mainly just accumulating aphorisms. The image of the 'lights in the stern' was certainly one of Coleridge's favourites: repeated in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), in both the 1808/9 and 1818 version of *The Friend*, and stated in the famous version beginning 'If men could learn from history' in Coleridge's 'Table Talk' for 17 December 1831.[46] And having in his first essay 'instituted' an 'examination' and produced evidence for a 'real and strict' parallel between the governments of France in 1802 and of Rome in the first century BCE, this is the point at which Coleridge reverses the lens.

The first sentence of the first essay had suggested that solving this problem of history repeating would involve both chiasmus and anomaly. Coleridge's proposal of an obvious and factual parallel between the two republican governments folds back immediately upon a production of the evidence which alone will enable an ultimate determination of the content of the form:

> As human nature is the same in all ages, similar events will of course take place under similar circumstances; but sometimes names will run parallel, and produce the appearance of a similarity, which does not really exist. (*EOT*, i. 312)

The phrasing is calculated. 'Take place' cunningly materializes an inchoate sense of things happening in time as the 'critical' placing in tables or common-place-book sections of certain types or forms of events. The reference to a fixed 'human nature' seems calculated to disarm a reader who thinks in universals and of a static world in which exemplary history is simply possible. And there is a materialist sense of an up-heaping historical horizon, in unresolved tension with an idealist sense of the past as that 'which does not really exist'.

But while the very first sentence thus brilliantly announces a method – indeed, to overstate slightly, shows Collingwood's Baconian revolution taking place – Coleridge immediately reverts to a still-scissors-and-paste sense of dutiful attendance upon *magistra historia vitae* and primary regard to 'periods'. 'An examination, however, should always be instituted'; the relevant enquiry being 'to what period of the Roman history the present history of France assimilates itself' (*EOT*, i. 312). The question Coleridge raises at the mid-point of the second essay is, accordingly, whether the historical evidence of 'names' or particular political and institutional forms actually coheres overall with 'circumstances … both external and internal' (*EOT*, i. 323), in a way that would make the Napoleonic re-enactment of Roman policy not just a plausible figure but an established historical fact.

As the essay thus moves from description of the outside to questioning the inside of the parallel, Napoleon's closeness in 'the circumstance of *imitation*' actually becomes an index of his difference from the historical thinking of 'Caesar, Pompey, and their predecessors, act[ing] on the plans of Philip and Alexander' (*EOT*, i. 313). In the

process, the meaning of Rome also changes. Having been first evoked as *a* past, a parallel array of ‘names’, the ‘running’ of which serves the Napoleonic despotism by concealing the true content of the present, Rome thus returns to serial continuity. This is Rome as *the past*, long known and familiar, the ‘enlightener and civilizer of the world’, and necessarily alive within France just insofar as France was, and could not by executive fiat cease to be, an historical European society (*EOT*, i. 325-8). In *Church and State*, Coleridge will speak of Rome as still – or once more – ‘almost … what we mean by HISTORY’ (*CC&S*, 32-3). And in the ‘Comparison’ essays of 1802, France being only ‘*incrusted*’ with the forms of mere ‘political amalgamation’ that ‘were the very body and limbs of the Roman Empire’, the parallel only serves to reveal *in fact* the hollowness of all within (*EOT*, i. 325).

Napoleon’s government is (un)dead but France is alive. And it is this self-unsuspected constitutional weakness in Napoleonic France – the historical horizon not even yet ‘projected’ – rather than a ‘thrust’ to ‘exhaust’ grand narratives (Stephen Cheeke), or a vaccination of ‘temporalized’ modernity with antiquity’s ‘slow time’ (Jonathan Sachs), that produces Coleridge’s statement that the ‘military despotism of France’ will be short-lived.[47] Or rather, history misconstrued as time and events, is precisely the problem that Coleridge comes round to finding he has solved; discovering in the process his own grasp upon historical science as, in the words of D’Oro explaining Collingwood, the study of ‘actions, *not* the past’.[48] Modern antiquity – Roman France – is a problem or ‘name’ that solves itself, lacking by definition the resources for historical life, self-stranded from the culminating circumstances of the present.

Coleridge’s 1802 chiasmus of ‘names’ and ‘circumstances’ can thus be understood as a first form in which projection of a past horizon, transumed in the

present as history-of-history, delivers the 'scientific' view. It should be clear from what I have said that the specific phrasing on 'illumining … only' and on facts 'accumulating altogether' is especially ambiguous – or open, when read this way, to further historical horizons. 'Altogether' is the key 'presence' word here. Perhaps symptomatically, the quotation in Stephen Cheeke's bravura postmodern reading leaves it out.[49] And taken together with accumulation specifically 'to [a] purpose', and a possible paraphrase in terms of 'completely pointless facts', it seems clear that a 'Presence' reading also will not hold. As Collingwood suggested, history to a calculating machine would have no ancient or modern, and would be only flat and even time, a paralyzing universe 'in which things … having been created … stay created, and so the universe is constantly becoming fuller and fuller of facts' (*IoH*, 401).

But Coleridge's ship of history sails calmly on, lights well above the waterline, into the open dark.

Notes

[1] John Stuart Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge*, ed. F.R. Leavis (Cambridge, 1959), 129.

[2] See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford, 1994), 398 (abbreviated henceforth as *IoH*); Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge*, 127-32; and T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding '(1942).

[3] Mill, *On Bentham and Coleridge*, 121-30, 129.

[4] Jon Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge, 2013), 178.

[5] Dahlia Porter, *Science, Form, and the Problem of Induction in British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2018), 222.

[6] See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, *7* (2 vols, Princeton and London, 1983), i. 124 (abbreviated henceforth as *BL*); and *IoH*, 418.

[7] Porter, *Science, Form, and the Problem of Induction*, 224, 245.

[8] Christopher Parker, *The English Idea of History from Coleridge to Collingwood* (Aldershot and Brookfield, VT, 2000), 29.

[9] See Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, eds. James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro (Oxford, 2005), 180; and *IoH*, 326-34.

[10] See http://theoryrevolt.com (accessed 25 June 2021); theses I.9 and II.5.

[11] See http://theoryrevolt.com (accessed 25 June 2021); theses I.2, I.4, I.6; see also Crystal B. Lake, 'Antiquarianism as a Vital Historiography for the Twenty-First Century', *The Wordsworth Circle* 50.1 (2019), 74-89.

[12] Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 7.

[13] Ethan Kleinberg, 'Prologue', in Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg, eds., *Presence: philosophy, history, and cultural theory for the twenty-first century* (Ithaca, New York, 2013), 1.

[14] Jonas Ahlskog, 'R. G. Collingwood and the Presence of the Past', *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 11.3 (2017), 289-305.

[15] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C., 2005), 29.

[16] See W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (New York, 2001), and Eelco Runia's account of the novel's weirdly self-remembering past time as 'the opposite of a hermeneutic enterprise' (*Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation*, New York, 2014, 102). See also H.P. Lovecraft, *The Dreams in the Witch House, and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London, 2005), 335; and David H. Fleming and William Brown, 'Through a (First) Contact

Lens Darkly: Arrival, Unreal Time and Chthulucinema', *Film-Philosophy* 22.3 (2018), 340-363.

[17] See Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its modes* [1933] (Cambridge, 1990), 108.

[18] See also Giuseppina D'Oro, 'In Defence of a Humanistically Oriented Historiography: The Nature/Culture Distinction at the Time of the Anthropocene', in Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, ed. *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (London, 2021), 223-4, 234-6; and see the discussion in Ahlskog, 'R. G. Collingwood and the Presence of the Past', 293-5.

[19] See Karim Dharamsi, Giuseppina D'Oro and Stephen Leach, eds., *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology* (London, 2018), 1.

[20] See Philip Aherne, *The Coleridge Legacy: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Intellectual Legacy in Britain and America, 1834–1934* (London, 2018), 111-13; and Douglas Hedley, 'Imagination Amended: From Coleridge to Collingwood', in James Vigus and Jane Wright, eds. *Coleridge's Afterlives* (Basingstoke, 2008), 210-23.

[21] See Dharamsi et al, *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*, 9.

[22] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colmer, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 10* (Princeton and London, 1976), 30-31; abbreviated henceforth as *CC&S*.

[23] Peter Cheyne, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge on ideas actualized in history', *Intellectual History Review*, 29.3 (2019), 489-514; 504.

[24] Cheyne, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge on ideas actualized in history', 504.

[25] Cheyne, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge on ideas actualized in history', 504-5.

[26] Cheyne, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge on ideas actualized in history', 489.

[27] Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 4* (2 vols, Princeton and London, 1969), i. 474-5, 488-90; abbreviated henceforth as *Friend*.

[28] Amanda Gorman, 'The Hill We Climb', in *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country* (New York, 2021).

[29] Collingwood quoted in Parker, *The English Idea of History*, 172.

[30] Louis O. Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Bloomington, 1969), 141.

[31] Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic*, 141.

[32] James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago, 1998), 108.

[33] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, eds. H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 11* (2 vols, Princeton and London, 1995), ii. 324-6; henceforth abbreviated as *Shorter Works and Fragments*.

[34] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1960], rev. ed. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York, 1989), 305-6.

[35] Ahlskog, 'R. G. Collingwood and the Presence of the Past', 297-9.

[36] Ahlskog, 'R. G. Collingwood and the Presence of the Past', 299.

[37] See Giuseppina D'Oro, 'Collingwood on re-enactment and the identity of thought', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38.1 (2000), 87-101; 87; and see *IoH*, 222, 287.

[38] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'To William Wordsworth', in *Romanticism: an anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, 4th edition (Oxford, 2012), 706-8; ll. 50, 2-3, 119.

[39] See *CC&S*, 95, 103.

[40] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 14* (2 vols, Princeton and London, 1990), i. 249.

[41] Collingwood quoted in Parker, *The English Idea of History*, 172.

[42] See *Friend* I, lxxxiv.

[43] See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790], ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1987), 75.

[44] On the ‘anomaly’, see Jeffrey Hipolito, ‘Coleridge’s *Lectures 1818–1819: On The History of Philosophy*’, in Fred Burwick, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford, 2009), 257-8.

[45] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Essays on His Times in The Morning Post and The Courier*, ed. David V. Erdman, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 3* (3 vols, Princeton and London, 1978), i. 324; abbreviated henceforth as *EOT*.

[46] See *Friend*, ii. 106 and i. 179-80; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 6* (Princeton and London, 1972), 11-12; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 14* (2 vols. Princeton and London, 1990), i. 260.

[47] See Stephen Cheeke, ‘The Sword “Which eats into itself”: Romanticism, Napoleon, and the Roman Parallel’, *Romanticism* 10.2 (2004), 209-227; 212; and see Jonathan Sachs, *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2018), 144-57.

[48] Giuseppina D’Oro and James Connelly, ‘Collingwood, Scientism and Historicism’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 11.3 (2017), 275-288; 276.

[49] See Cheeke, ‘The Sword “Which eats into itself”’, 214.