

Florian Bissig

Coleridge and Communication

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Introduction

In his *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of S.T. Coleridge*, which was published two years after Coleridge's death, Thomas Allsop attributes the following statement to his late friend and mentor:

I believe that processes of thought might be carried on independent and apart from spoken or written language. I do not in the least doubt, that if language had been denied or withheld from man, or that he had not discovered and improved that mode of intercommunication, thought, as thought would have been a process more simple, more easy, and more perfect than at present, and would both have included and involved other and better means for its own manifestations, than any that exist now. (1: 84-85)

The declaration of the independence of thought from language is, of course, a difficult premise to accept for readers who have long assimilated the creeds of 20th-century philosophy of language. It helps to consider that "thought" is perhaps a careless expression meant to convey any activities, or even mere entities, that might be called mental or spiritual: that is, the entirety of intellectual faculties that are essentially human. What Coleridge has in mind with his assertion of the primacy and independence of human spirit over its verbal utterance is elucidated by his speculation on another imaginable evolution of mankind. He assumes that thought has been shaped by the practice of verbal communication, which is a contingent fact of the history of the human spirit, and that it has been shaped for the worse. Had this influence not happened, thought would have remained in a state more simple, easy and perfect. Thus, linguistic communication has made it more complex, difficult and imperfect. Had language not prevailed over the human spirit, thought would have found other modes of expression, which Coleridge outlines as "manifestations".

The notion of a manifestation that is not verbal seems beyond the imagination of us who have no other option but to communicate by the medium of language and who have even ourselves no access to ourselves but by this very medium. It might be argued that Coleridge could, less radically, have in mind merely a more simple, easy and perfect medium of communication. But that would only be a "mode of intercommunication" different from language in degree. Rigorously differing in kind and completely inviolate by language would be a manifestation of thought that is characterised by immediacy. An immediate manifestation of thought, however, appears as a contradiction in adjecto. Thought can perhaps become immediately manifest to itself, in reflection. But to propose a manifestation of thought to other minds strictly im-mediate, appears paradoxical. The idea of communication without a medium appears to defy the idea of communication itself. Except, perhaps, if the notion of communication were taken in an extended sense, reinterpreted, not as 'inter-(subjective) communication', but as 'communion' – as what could be perceived to be the motive and result of communication. I suggest that Coleridge envisions the idea of the consummation of communication as the effortless bliss of a primordial situation. Furthermore, the mode in which he pre-

sents it in the brief passage, as recorded by Allsop, is that of a ‘belief’. It is not a psychological, philosophical or otherwise systematic assumption, but something of the order of a believing vision. However, that Coleridge has struggled hard and sustainedly with the conditions of the possibility of communication and with speculations of a potentially immediate mode of communication – this is one of the most central points that I illustrate and evidence at length in the present enquiry. A second overtone which is to be noted is that of ‘manifestation’, which connects to the idea of revelation. From this perspective, the contrast between linguistic intercommunication and immediate manifestation could also be thought of as the contrast between the human mode of communication and the way in which a God gets in contact with mankind. God does not ‘communicate’ in the ordinary sense of the word, one could argue, but manifests himself to man, whose task it is to take part in God’s meaning in a manner which goes beyond the mere ‘receiving’ of a ‘message’. Along these lines it could be argued that Coleridge’s oxymoronic vision of immediate manifestation entails also a lamentation on the specifically human limitations of communication.

If one would yet try to deliberate the idea of an immediate mode of manifestation of human thought to other human minds, then it would appear that a communicative relationship must be claimed in which sender and receiver are conflated into one unit, which is transparent to itself and available for intuitive knowledge of itself, so as to vaguely evoke Aristotle’s God in *Metaphysics* Λ who contemplates his own contemplation (2: 267-69). Thus, Coleridge outlines a myth of a primordial state of integrity and the subsequent fall into a state of degeneration. The prelapsarian state is characterised by spirit being immediately manifest to spirit. Perhaps the manifest spirit or thought is palpable, as it were, by hand, which resonates in the word “manifest”: it is immediately and overtly present among the minds which are, consequently, to be thought of as dwelling in the wholeness of an intimate community, or even as one continuous cosmic unity. The sharing of the still easy, simple and whole thought is, thus, equally easy, simple and whole, as its subsistence is overt and participative. Or, perhaps the manifestation of thought in a pre-linguistic community adumbrates ways unimaginable to us later-born generations of transmitters, ways that are intuitive or magical.

None of these easy, simple and perfect manifestations of thought are available to humankind in the postlapsarian state. Humankind is stuck with verbal communication – whether spoken or written does not appear to make a difference. The dream of the manifestation of thought without transmission is over. It has been deplaced by the deplorable history of linguistic ‘intercommunication’. Such communication is deplorable, because it is not simple, not easy, and not perfect. The transmission of thought is, instead, a permanent labour, which always involves complexity, and which is, consequently, never entirely complete, never really true. Verbal communication, thus, necessarily damages the thought it purports to convey, and the history of the communication of thought is the history of the degradation of thought itself. That man had not been denied the verbal mode of intercommunication is his misfortune. It is the reason for his

hopeless struggle to unite his mind with the mind of others. The myth, as I have extrapolated it from the short passage attributed to Coleridge, has an analogy in the myth of the spherical creatures told by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (3: 265-83), who had once been self-sufficiently whole and happy, and who after their partition are forever damned to crave reunion with their lost half.

However anthropologically and philosophically implausible one might deem such notions (and however untrustworthy one might suspect Allsop's record of Coleridge's statement to be), they introduce us to an issue of great importance for Coleridge and his work. Given that he was a prolific writer, lecturer and eloquent talker, it is hardly necessary to observe that Coleridge was most actively engaged in spoken and written "intercommunication". That he entertained the fantasy of a state of being in which his thoughts would not need to be communicated, but instead would be easily and simply manifest in perfect form, bears testimony to his self-image as primarily a thinker, but also to an attitude of ambivalence towards the possibilities of communication. The passage conveys great respect for thought in itself, and a desire to maintain intellectual matters whole, pure and perfect, and it leaves open the possibility that there are ways of dealing with thought which do not damage it. Verbal communication, in contrast, is cast in a much less respectable role. It has prevailed over thought as the sole means of expression, but, as such, it is deficient and, in consequence, corruptive. It limits the expression of thought and, thus, limits the thought itself. In other words, thought transcends the possibilities of verbal communication. If thought is the message and language the medium of transmitting it, then the problem lies in the medium, not in the message.

The diverse and vast body of works that Coleridge wrote throughout his life can fruitfully be considered as a number of manifold attempts at the communication of thought, which are painfully aware and diligently attentive of the dangers and limits of their possibilities. They bear testimony to the insight that ease, simplicity and wholeness are ideals that can ever only be approximated to a greater or lesser degree. The most general and basic thesis of the present inquiry is that much of Coleridge's work, ranging from his best-liked poems to his most-scorned prose and over many other contrasts, is characterised, and in places veritably dominated, by a strong preoccupation with questions of communication. If verbal communication was really only the second best means of making thought manifest, Coleridge was obsessed with sounding out its possibilities, with enhancing and controlling it, and with performing the fantasy of its accomplishment. Strategies of verbal communication, in speech as well as in writing, can be shown to stand in relation to what I have above outlined as a primordial vision of blissful union of mind and community. When Coleridge communicates, the problem of the manifestation of thought is always to some degree at stake. The present study highlights several aspects of the field of communication, namely, the various elements of the communicative relationship, such as the image, authority or recognition of the communicator, the conditions of successful transmission in the mind of the recipient,

and the various means of medium, genre and language, which are to safeguard the reception of the intended message.

The publication of the *Collected Works* of Coleridge by general editor Kathleen Coburn between 1969 and 2002 gradually made Coleridge's entire oeuvre available in a uniform way, making it easier to get the full picture of the author's endeavours than had previously been the case. The *Collected Works*, in conjunction with the complete *Notebooks*, again edited by Kathleen Coburn, and with the *Collected Letters*, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs, show just how little a part Coleridge's poetical works are in proportion to the rest of his output, and even more so the small group of poems which are perpetually anthologised. At the same time, his entire output shows what persistence, variety, depth, and insight there is in many parts of Coleridge's works which have been belittled as failures or as mere drafts or expressions of hope, rather than as achievements in their own rights.

As the most general basis of my approach to Coleridge, I acknowledge a number of critical efforts by scholars who have studied Coleridge in an open way, free from certain prejudices which were already circulating in Coleridge's lifetime. One of the more tenacious prejudices is that he was a gifted poet who threw away his genius for the sake of variously identified vices, ranging from abstruse rumination to drug abuse. Another is that much of his prose can be reduced to simply attempting to whitewash him from insincere changes in political attitude. An unbiased approach to Coleridge's work as the manifold endeavours of a myriad-minded thinker, however, allows the analysis of a variety of themes across the diverse text types and media. In such a vein, I expose myself to the variety of Coleridge's productions in poetry, prose and as a talker. My themes are the modes of communication itself, the elements of the communicative relationship, and also theoretical notions concerning communication.

Studies aspiring to a balanced view of Coleridge's works are often connected with an approach which is thoroughly knowledgeable of his personal life and of the relevant historical contexts. In this introduction, I want to acknowledge a few scholarly efforts which have helped me outline my approach to Coleridge and communication.¹ Marilyn Butler, as an early example, in her *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, offers an insight into the background of the canonical Romantic authors in general and of Coleridge in particular, with her observations on the changes in the intellectual scene around 1800 induced by developments in matters of publication and reading habits. Butler insightfully portrays Coleridge as a man of letters, whose profile as a public figure is to be looked for in all his efforts at publication and public advertence. The recent research of Alan Vardy, presented in his book *Constructing Coleridge*, overlaps with my subject in that its theme is the creation of the image of the author. This image

¹ In this introduction, I only mention the critical works which have served me as a general basis for my entire series of inquiries into Coleridge and communication, rather than as an input for a specific chapter or passage. Acknowledgements of the latter sort are given below where they apply. I also refrain from listing biographies or other general treatments of Coleridge, which have provided me with a background and overview.