

## SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE.

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THE year 1934 marks the centenary of Coleridge's death. It is not unfitting that we should recall to mind, in these pages, some characteristics of that strange, enigmatic figure; for Coleridge was not only a poet, but a theologian. True it is that the present generation knows him almost solely as the poet; but his theological writings are well deserving of mention, even though they are half-forgotten and almost wholly unread to-day.

The close of the eighteenth century was one of the most remarkable periods in all modern history. The French Revolution, which began in 1789, had come, like a dreadful whirlwind, to sweep over the intellectual, the moral, and the political face of Europe; within less than a decade it had given birth to one of the most amazing phenomena in human history—the rise of Napoleon, one of the dynamic (we might almost say dæmonic) figures of the modern world. When the Revolution first began, it was hailed by men like Wordsworth as the beginning of a new and splendid movement:

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
And to be young was very heaven.”

But the prescient mind of Burke had already detected, behind the imposing façade of the new-founded temple of Liberty, the signs of something both dreadful and sinister in its implications. For, indeed, a change was coming, so vast that even now we can hardly estimate its results fully: we are still living in the backwash of that immense cataclysm. And among the first-fruits of the movement wrought in France may be found a sudden and, as it might seem, a wellnigh inexplicable change of thought and temper in the literary and philosophic world of England. The classical period, inaugurated a hundred years before, and reaching full maturity in the work of Pope and his successors, was almost at an end. The so-called Romantic movement was beginning, when men felt impelled to look anew into their hearts and emancipate themselves from a tradition that had grown to be a rigid orthodoxy. The “*Renaissance of Wonder*” had started on its untried course. New hopes, new aspirations; a quickened love of Nature; fresh speculations on the origin of the world and man; a deep mystical brooding on the facts of life—all these things were part of that re-birth. Medieval art was to become appreciated as it had not been for centuries; there was a quickened sense of beauty everywhere, and a dim but increasing belief in the unity of mankind. Men were touched with new emotions, which puzzled, even when partially understood. Among the most inspiring forces of the time was Coleridge. He was only seventeen when the States-General assembled in Paris; he lived long enough to witness the grim and impressive sequel. Not the least formative influence in

his early life was his meeting with, and lasting friendship for, Wordsworth. But it was not till the year 1798, when he was only twenty-six, that the world of letters woke up to the fact that a new spirit in literature was abroad. In that year he published in *Lyrical Ballads* that poem which, beyond almost anything else he wrote, marked him out as an innovator. Wordsworth contributed the major part of the volume, which contained (*inter alia*) the memorable "Lines written above Tintern Abbey," in which he laid bare his overwhelming conviction of that strange consciousness of man's unity with Nature, which was to him a veritable inspiration from above—

" A sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interposed,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns."

But the "Ancient Mariner"—Coleridge's contribution to the *Ballads*—was not the only poem to give a signal to the "elect" that a novel and potent element had come into the literature of the time. He was still to give us "Christabel" and the "extraordinary fragment"—for it is little more—called "Kubla Khan," composed (he told us afterwards) while he was sleeping. On these three poems, all written before he was thirty, and one or two minor pieces, Coleridge's fame securely rests. All these poems were poems of "vision," with that touch of the mysterious, and of the supernatural element, which lend them so singular and potent a charm. William Watson (surely our greatest living poet) has spoken of "the wizard twilight Coleridge knew," and in two words has summed up a great deal. What was it that fell, like a cloud, on such a supreme genius, and turned that twilight into a gloom, rarely pierced, in later years, by any shaft of sunshine? What (to borrow Wordsworth's own words) happened to freeze all the mortal powers of Coleridge at their marvellous source? We know only too well; he became, like de Quincey, a drug-addict; and after (say) 1800 we have but "*disjecta membra poetae*," when the world might well have expected more than one masterpiece. Not that he wrote nothing: his criticisms on Shakespeare and Wordsworth in *Biographia Literaria* are—unlike most contemporary criticism—living things to-day. Arthur Symons has called this fragmentary and desultory composition the greatest book of criticism in English; and so, perhaps, it is. But he hastens to add that it is one of the most annoying books in any language; and that, too, is just. Later on Coleridge, who was deeply versed in German philosophy, wrote his "Aids to Reflection," and here perhaps we may discover what is meant by the dictum that "from his earliest childhood he hungered for eternity." Readers of Pater's fine essay on Coleridge will remember how subtly this fact is emphasized. Coleridge, despite his grievous failings, was at heart a great Christian expositor; he did emphatically long to entrust to his fellow-countrymen those living words, those

" truths that wake  
To perish never,"

which are, and must be, the treasured possession of mankind for all time. He had, as he himself admits, only the faintest pleasure in things contingent and transitory; he saw everything, to use Spinoza's words, "sub specie aeternitatis." The core of his creed lay in the deep conviction that the real life of the soul rested not on "the cautious balancing of comparative advantages," but of instincts—often dimly perceived—which are deeply rooted in human nature. It was his constant aim to show how vital it is, in any well-regulated world, to replace the mechanical interpretation of

"man, and nature, and of human life"

by one that is consistently spiritual. That lesson is necessary to-day, even more so than when he promulgated it.

"Great in his writings, he was greater in his conversation," wrote Lamb, his "fifty years' old friend," as he calls himself. For half a generation his unique qualities of mind and soul made him a sort of inspired oracle at his Hampstead home, a veritable intellectual and spiritual focus for the generation that hung on his words. Perhaps there has never been a talker like him. Not in vain did Wordsworth—not prone to praise anyone—speak of him as "the most wonderful man I have ever known."

"Coleridge, strong-limbed voyager thro' heaven!  
Thy path was hewn into the angels' ken:  
Then sudden fell—but oh! thou wert forgiven  
And crept along the pitiful ways of men."

It is not doubtful that Coleridge's strong zeal for the verities of religious faith came after his hour of poetic transfiguration was past. But that zeal, that glowing certainty, were as absolute a part of his instinctive conviction as anything in his life; we are wrong to disregard the fact. His ambition, and it was a noble ambition, to propound some final eirenicon between faith and reason may not have won for itself any complete success; it rarely does, though the process goes on from age to age. But his "Aids to Reflection" and the posthumous "Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit" have been instrumental in "deepening and widening religious thought within and without the pale of the Churches." And the leaven is still at work. The day may yet come when the religious world will find, even in those fragments of a great scheme of religious and philosophical thought which he left us, some sure basis for a healing of the breach that has so long continued between the exponents of pure reason and the apostles of faith. Coleridge still has a message for our time.