

CHAPTER-IV

COLERIDGE I : PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

We have reasons to believe that the philosophical renaissance in England after the middle of the century was a late off-shoot of German Idealism, that it nourished itself on German sources, and was penetrated by the German spirit, or, to speak more prosaically, that it was essentially a German commodity. This is intended simply as a statement of fact, not as a judgement of praise or blame. We are saying nothing at the moment of the changes to which the foreign article was subjected after it had become established on British soil, of the extent to which it was linked to native lines of thought, or of the new forms that grew out of it. Indeed, we must emphasize the fact that the incursion of the German stream of thought was not brought about in a purely external fashion, for example, by scholastic interests or by intrigue, but happened when it did because of an inner necessity. For there can be no doubt that at that time the conditions for the acceptance of the new seed were specially favourable, and that the deciding factors were several and various.

First of all the mental atmosphere was prepared for the reception of an idealistic view of the world by means of poetry and literature generally. The preliminary work performed in the first half of the century by outstanding poets and other writers outside professional philosophical circles, and for the most part in opposition to them, was a very important factor in the release of the strictly philosophical movement. It was out of the poetry of the Romantics that the new view of the world and attitude to life grew up which superseded the antiquated forms of thought of the Enlightenment. The earliest indications of the new spiritual content, which much later was to break its way through into philosophy also, are to be found in the poems of Shelley and Keats, of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Of these, however, only Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) has any special importance. He was not only an inspired poet, but also a man of genuinely philosophical endowment, always striving to give his vision of the universe a theoretical as well as an artistic articulation. In the process

his extremely receptive and restless mind passed through many changes, submitting itself at one time or another to the influence of Hartley, Berkeley, Spinoza, Plato, Plotinus, Kant, Schelling, and others. After various confusions and revulsions he finally arrived at a kind of spiritualistic metaphysics which found expression more in brilliant aphorisms and fragments than in strictly systematic form. In these he sharply opposed the prevailing philosophical views of his time and country, especially the empiricist Utilitarianism of Bentham, which was then coming into vogue. That Coleridge introduced into British philosophy a new spirit which had next to nothing in common with the current dogmas was occasionally noticed even in strictly philosophical circles (as in J.S. Mill's articles of 1838 and 1840 on Bentham and Coleridge, reprinted in his **Dissertations and Discussions**, vol. 1). Still, of any intrusion of this new spirit into academic circles there is no trace at all either during the lifetime of the poet, or even for a generation after his death, which is the best proof that the time had not yet come for a comprehensive idealistic renovation of British thought.

In another respect the philosophy of Coleridge is of importance for our survey. With it a broad stream of German Idealism first flowed into England. Whether the central ideas of his view of the world had already shaped themselves in the poet's mind before he came into contact with the German systems,¹ or whether they only did so as a consequence of that contact, is a question difficult to settle; but all that concerns the history of thought is the fact that such a contact did happen, that it was an extremely close one, and that with it German philosophy entered into the mental perspective of the English for the first time². We know that Coleridge studied in detail the doctrine of Kant, and that this left evident traces on his own thought. Still deeper, however, was the influence of Schelling, whose cosmological and aesthetic doctrines attracted and shook him and at times almost overwhelmed him. Recent research has shown that he studied various writings of Fichte and Hegel as well, and made marginal comments on them, although the influence of these thinkers is less noticeable in his published works (see footnote, *Coleridge as Philosopher*, 1930, p. 271). In addition, Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller acted decisively on his thought. In Coleridge, therefore, we have the spectacle of an early and extremely striking invasion of English spiritual life by

German idealistic thought, along with a sharp reaction against the mental attitude of the eighteenth Century and the persistence of this throughout the first decades of the nineteenth Century in the native philosophy. The empiricist current of Utilitarianism, which found in J.S.Mill a new champion, was able to dominate the field until after the middle of the century, with the result that Coleridge's profound insights remained scattered and unable to find almost anywhere soil in which to strike root. In one disciple only was the seed he sowed to spring up. This disciple was the surgeon Joseph Herry Green (1791-1863), the poet's intimate friend for many years, and eventually his literary executor. In this latter capacity he had the task of sorting Coleridge's philosophical remains and putting them into systematic shape, a task to which he selflessly devoted the greater part of his later years, without bringing it to completion. Out of the writings, memoranda, marginal notes, and conversations of the poet, however, he built up a sort of Coleridgean system of philosophy, which was posthumously published under the title *Spiritual Philosophy, founded on the teaching of the late S.T.Coleridge* (1865, two vols.). Despite the change that had set in since Coleridge's death this work appeared and remained unnoticed, being overshadowed by Stirling's book on Hegel, which appeared the same year; and thereafter men went straight to the German sources without troubling themselves about Coleridge and his disciple. Only a few of them besides Green kept Coleridge's thoughts alive, for instance, F.D.Maurice and S.H.Hodgson; the latter's *Philosophy of Reflection* (1978) is dedicated to him as the author's "Father in Philosophy". It is only recently that Alice D. Snyder (*Coleridge on Logic and Learning*, 1929; *Coleridge's Treatise on Method*, 19234) and J.H.Muirhead (*Coleridge as Philosopher*, 1930) have won the merit of subjecting the great romantic poet's philosophy to historical investigation.

Finally, Muirhead has made a distinguished contribution to the history of the idealistic movement. Placing the movement in a wider intellectual setting, he has sought to understand its origin and development as well as its total significance. He traces what he calls the "Platonic tradition in Anglo-Saxon philosophy" to its very beginnings and exhibits, in opposition to the usual accounts, a unitary and uninterrupted stream of idealistic thought, flowing, if only at times as an undercurrent, through the entire history of British philosophy; and shows how the XIXth Century renewal

under the influence of Germany was being prepared for on English soil long before its obvious outburst, firstly through the romantic poetry of Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge (on him Muirhead has written the very penetrating monograph), then through the literature of such Victorians as Carlyle, Emerson, Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, and finally through the general change in ideas and institutions which marked the latter half of the century. Having been an eye-witness of the outburst of the movement in the 'seventies, and an active participant in it ever since, Muirhead was better fitted than anyone else to look back upon it in the eventide of his long life, see it as a whole, and disclose to the younger generation both the story of its development and the riches of its doctrinal content.

References :

1. This contact occurred first during his visit to Germany in 1798-99, and thereafter through intensive study of German literature and philosophy.
2. On the introduction of Kantianism into Britain see *Kant in England*, by R. Wellek, 1931 (Princeton).

The first books in English on Kant were : *General and Introductory View of Professor Kant's Principles*, by F.A.Nitzsch, 1796; *Principles of Critical Philosophy*, by J.S.Beck, trans. by J. Richardson, 1797; *Elements of Critical Philosophy*, by A.F.M. Willich, 1798.

The earliest English translations of Kant were - *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political and Various Philosophical Subjects*, two vols., 1798-99; *Metaphysic of Morals*, 1799; *Logic*, 1819; *Prolegomena to Every Future Metaphysic*, 1819; the last two reissued with *Enquiry into the Grounds of Proof for the Existence of God*, 1836. All these were translated by J. Richardson. J.W.Semple's version of the *Metaphysic of Ethics* first appeared in 1936. The first translation of the first *Critique* was by Francis Haywood, *Critick of Pure Reason*, 1838 (Second edition, 1848). Haywood published in 1844 *An analysis of Kant's Critick of Pure Reason*.