

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 30 (NS) Winter 2007

© 2007 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Kaz Oishi

reads

The Poet's Eye: A Reading of Coleridge (Azekura Shobo, Tokyo, 2001) by Kazuko Oguro

An Approach to the System of Coleridge's Imagination (Otohashobo Tsurumi Shoten, Tokyo, 2006) by Nobuo Takayama

Coleridge and 'Others': An Analysis of a Family as Depicted in His Poems (Eihosha, Tokyo, 2006) by Yoshiko Fujii

JAPAN REMAINED INSULAR for more than two and a half centuries during the feudal Edo period. Political pressures from foreign powers, such as America, Britain, and France, finally forced her to open the ports for trade, which eventually led to the collapse of the time-hallowed Tokugawa regime in 1867. It was then that Romantic literature landed on the Japanese islands along with Victorian novels and poems, such as works by Thackeray, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold. More interestingly, they came as part of the Western package with steam engines, electricity, silk hats and dresses, bread and brandy, to mention a few. The Japanese people hailed these new arrivals of Western culture as symbols of civilization.

Was Coleridge then accepted in Japan as such an icon of Western civilization, also? Not quite so, at least till the turn of the century. As a matter of fact, Japanese readers came across his name for the first time in the 1870 translation of Samuel Smiles's *Self-help* which continued to be a best-seller in Japan for more than a few decades. The book exerted vital influence upon those seeking to improve and promote themselves in newly democratized Japan. There, Smiles quoted Coleridge as appraising Humphry Davy as a self-made man who had established himself through industry with 'an energy and elasticity in his mind'. Coleridge, in turn, was introduced by Smiles through a quotation from Davy, as 'the most exalted genius', yet, 'the victim of a want of order, precision, and regularity'. Basically, the ideal role model for the aspiring Japanese people was the studious, self-dependent scientist, rather than the procrastinating, and embarrassing dependent poet.

It is hard to tell how much this scathing reference to Coleridge prejudiced Japanese readers from the beginning, but the fact is that, unlike other Romantics, Coleridge received otherwise little critical attention in Japan until 1893, when the first article exclusively on Coleridge finally appeared. Even then he was discussed as a philosopher, not as a poet. Indeed, only a few translations of his poems, such as 'Love' and parts of 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel', were available at the time. In effect, Coleridge's reputation in Japan solely relied on his friendship with Wordsworth.

The scarcity of Coleridge studies continued even after the First World War. Edmund Blunden and William Empson came over to teach at Japanese universities, respectively during 1924-27 and 1931-34, but that produced little immediate effect on Coleridge studies. This is in part because their students

and colleagues were more interested in Wordsworth and Keats among the Romantics. Only two books on Coleridge appeared before the Second World War: Yoshimi Kudo's *A Study on Coleridge* (1931) and Rikichi Katsurada's *Coleridge* (1934). While the latter is a general biographical account of Coleridge, largely based on James Gillman's *Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1838) and Hall Caine's *Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1887), Kudo's work, the first book on Coleridge in Japan, was more methodical in approach and supremely refined in both style and language. Perusing Coleridge's works, letters and drafts at the British Library and Oxford, Kudo presented a clear, masterly picture of Coleridge as a poet-philosopher who had intertwined Man with Nature and God through his imaginative power.

Given this situation, it would be surprising to find Coleridge studies flourishing in the wake of the Second World War. Yet when sanctions against foreign studies were lifted, people resumed studies in English Literature far more eagerly and assiduously than ever before. Coleridge came to be regarded as a key figure whose poems and prose works would illuminate not only the vital principle of Romantic imagination, but also the whole religious and philosophical context of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature. The leading Japanese scholars, such as Kimiyoshi Yura, Yasunari Takahashi, and Hisaaki Yamanouchi were all deeply engaged with Coleridge in the 1960s and the 1970s. Ryutaro Kato's book, *Coleridge's Literary Theory* (1961), a massive compendium of Coleridge's works and philosophy, is still a useful textbook for today's undergraduate courses in English Literature in Japan. Circumstances remarkably improved for Japanese scholars in the 1980s, when the boom of Japanese economy provided easier access to foreign scholarship. A number of valuable articles and books on Coleridge have been coming out successively thereafter.

The three Coleridge books, published in Japanese during the last six years, are distinguished additions to this Coleridgean tradition in the Far East. They are Kazuko Oguro's *The Poet's Eye: A Reading of Coleridge* (2001), Nobuo Takayama's *An Approach to the System of Coleridge's Imagination* (2006), and Yoshiko Fujii's *Coleridge and 'Others': An Analysis of a Family as Depicted in His Poems* (2006). The first two books follow the footsteps of those Japanese scholars who pursued Coleridge's philosophical achievements in the main. Oguro examines in detail the way in which Coleridge emancipates his thoughts and imaginings from the 'despotism of the eye' into the world of divine imagination. Her argument as a whole reinforces the long-established view on 'Romantic Imagination'. What distinguishes the book, in particular, is her extremely perceptive reading, which unravels the complex meanings of some images which are idiosyncratic, recondite, yet crucial to his philosophical system. The image of concentric circles on the lake is one of such images, as Oguro clearly represents in her book. While expatiating on his theory of life, Coleridge argues:

the essential vitality of Nature... does not ascend as links in a suspended chain, but as the steps in a ladder; or rather she at one and the same time ascends as by a climax, and expands as the concentric circles on the lake from the point to which the stone in its fall had given the first impulse. (SWF I 509)

Coleridge here replaces the clichéd Renaissance image of the Great Chain of Being with that of circles expanding gradually on the water, which suggests the subtle interrelation between different stages of sentient beings. A lower kind of life does not lead to a higher state of life, as in a linked chain: it is assimilated into the wider sphere of existence, while continuing to hold the same centre of life force. Oguro persuasively reveals how much Coleridge was obsessed with this unique image even in his later years.

Coleridge's visionary power is also re-examined by Nobuo Takayama in *An Approach to the System of Coleridge's Imagination*. With his thorough expertise in classical and German philosophy, Takayama clearly and meticulously configures the epistemological nature of Coleridge's imagination. Some of Takayama's topics, such as 'The Function of Imagination and Qualifications as a Poet' (Chapter 4), may sound banal, but such apparent platitude is fully offset by his all-embracing knowledge of German idealism. What I find most penetrating and original is his observation upon the central importance of Schiller for the formation of Coleridge's idea of 'taste', as illustrated in his 1808 *Lectures on the Principles of Poetry* (not in an '1810' essay, as Takayama credited, following Shawcross). Through a close reading, Takayama traces in detail how Schiller's *Über Anmut und Würde* helped Coleridge develop the idea of 'taste' as an aesthetic mediator between perception and reason. Coleridge observes:

By Taste therefore, as applied to the fine arts, we must be supposed to mean an intellectual perception of any Object blended with a distinct reference to our own sensibility of pain or pleasure, or vice versâ a sense of enjoyment or dislike co-instantaneously combined with and appearing to proceed from, some intellectual perception of the Object. *Intellectual*—for otherwise it would be a definition of Taste in its primary rather than its metaphorical sense—. Briefly, Taste is a metaphor taking from one of our mixed senses, and applied to objects of the more purely organic senses, and of our moral sense, when we would imply the co-existence of immediate & personal Dislike or Complacency—. (LL I 37)

For Coleridge, as for Schiller, 'taste' is important because it not only connects the senses with spirit, or *Sinnlichkeit* with *Geist*, but unifies them into 'intellectual perception of the Object'. Other arguments of Takayama's also include shrewd and original observations. Written in lucid Japanese, the book will no doubt serve as the authoritative guidebook on Coleridge's philosophy for Japanese students.

In *Coleridge and 'Others': An Analysis of a Family as Depicted in His Poems*, Yoshiko

Fujii examines Coleridge as a poet deeply obsessed with the image of family. Decidedly, this is a bold, innovative step forward in the tradition of Coleridge studies in Japan: she differs from any of her Japanese predecessors in approaching Coleridge's canonical works from a socio-psychological standpoint. For Coleridge, she argues, 'family' remained as the 'other', both psychologically and socially: it continues to haunt his self-consciousness through and through, conjuring up those ominous images, such as the image of a haggard mariner and that of a serpentine woman, which threaten to disrupt his paradisiacal poetical visions. Geraldine in 'Christabel', for instance, could be seen as a personification of the Mother Earth, whose relationship with Christabel and the narrator symbolises not only the conflict between Mother and Daughter, but the conflict between Man and Woman also. Coleridge weaves similar images of family into 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' accordingly.

Despite Fujii's minute analyses of poetical texts, however, she curiously bypasses the vital question as to why Coleridge is so obsessed with such a destructive image of the 'Other'. In fact, the Romantics are more or less obsessed with the 'other' of various kinds, which invariably turns out to be a dark, unknown, threatening force. Perhaps we can turn back to Tilotama Rajan's admirable 1986 book, *Dark Interpreter*, to review why the Romantics are preoccupied with the dark, sublime 'other', and how this 'other' deconstructs Romantic discourse in general. Nor should we forget that Coleridge most passionately, yet tragically sought for his own ideal 'other' in Asra, or Sara Hutchinson, in 'Dejection, an Ode', which Fujii entirely excludes from her argument. Psychoanalytical or socio-psychological criticisms of Jacques Lacan and J. Hillis Miller on Coleridge, to which she refers only briefly in her 'Introduction', may well offer solutions to these problems in part, while feeding back directly to support her textual analyses.

Nevertheless, *Coleridge and 'Others'*, as well as the books by Oguro and Takayama, testifies to the fact that Coleridge is no longer an icon of the forbidding cultural 'Other' in Japan now. Friends of Coleridge regularly meet both in Tokyo and in Kyoto to discuss various aspects of Coleridge as well as of Romantic literature in general. On the Tokyo side, a translation of *Biographia Literaria* into Japanese has been conducted assiduously for publication through a major publisher. Moreover, Oguro's translation of *Essays on the Principles of Method* in 2004 has succeeded in disseminating part of Coleridge's philosophy among Japanese readers, while Kenkichi Kamijima's accurate and highly sophisticated translation of Coleridge's poems has found a large number of non-academic readers in the literary market since its publication in 2002. They have both helped to further people's understanding of the literary and historical significance of Coleridge's works in Japan.

Perhaps, it is high time to review and explicate how Coleridge has been read and interpreted among Japanese readers for the past 140 years. There are various reasons for Coleridge's unpopularity before the Second World War.

First, Coleridge's poems certainly appeared difficult for the Japanese people, who enjoyed the conventional form of short poems, such as *haiku* and *waka*, and thus preferred short poems in *Lyrical Ballads* to the supernatural 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. Second, they could not readily assimilate the unfamiliar Christian ideas infused in Coleridge's works, while their indigenous religious beliefs in nature and spirits enabled them to accept Wordsworth's pantheistic view of nature with relative ease. Third, Coleridge's narrative poems appeared to them as lacking the charms of Byron's *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. And yet all these tendencies still do not fully explain the historical relationship between Coleridge and the East. There is a plan to host an international Coleridge Conference in Kyoto in 2011 in order to explore the vast field covering Coleridge's relationship with the Orient. That, I hope, will provide an invaluable opportunity to examine the reception and influence of Coleridge in Japan in a full scale, and, more broadly, to configure Coleridge's position in Asia on the whole.