

From

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Ross Wilson  
reads  
*Coleridge and Scepticism*  
Oxford University Press, 2007)  
by Ben Brice

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**B**EN BRICE concludes his study of Coleridge's relation to scepticism by quoting from Walter Pater's assessment of the poet. In an essay that can by turns appear to be a eulogy to Coleridge's genius and a litany of his gravest flaws, Pater draws attention to Coleridge's 'faintness, his broken memory, his intellectual disquiet' ('Coleridge', quoted 204). Brice's book attempts to make us listen attentively to Coleridge's 'intellectual disquiet' not by dissecting his no doubt already over-dissected character but by means of a patient examination both of his reception of the tradition of philosophical and religious scepticism, illuminatingly and broadly conceived, and of those aspects of his own thought that are either responses, sometimes successful, sometimes not, to scepticism or are indeed themselves sceptical.

Brice opens his book with the contention that the problem of scepticism is most acutely felt in Coleridge's work in the endeavour to articulate a theory of symbolism. Coleridge's theory of symbolism faces a number of related perils which are lucidly outlined at the beginning of the book and which we are usefully reminded of throughout. Foremost among the problems facing a symbolical account of the created world is the suspicion that unless some gap between God and His creation is kept open, symbolism can all too easily become idolatry, which is to say that natural and, indeed, often inanimate things are blasphemously mistaken for (aspects of) the divine. Similarly, Coleridge's attempt to ground human access to the divine in a 'spiritual sense'—ably examined in Brice's discussion of it, which is especially alert to the oxymoronic tenure of Coleridge's understanding of the concatenation of the spiritual and the sensible—neglects to show how the sensation of the spiritual is distinct from sensations of mere sublunary phenomena. How exactly is the feeling of access to the divine to be distinguished from the feeling of looking at a lamppost?

As Brice acknowledges, Coleridge's difficulties in articulating a plausible theory of symbolism have long been acknowledged in commentary on his work—not least by the self-critical Coleridge himself—and thus exploration of this topic is hardly original. Rather, Brice seeks to add to the understanding of Coleridge by placing all this epistemological and theological gnashing of teeth in a painstakingly mustered context of post-classical—and, indeed, post-Reformation—philosophical and religious scepticism. Brice attempts to show, that is, that the 'hermeneutic anxiety' (3) that Coleridge undeniably displays in his articulation of a theory of symbolism is only properly understood against the background of a tradition of modern scepticism that has as important currents in radical Protestantism as in materialist atheism of the kind

represented, on a Coleridgean account, by David Hume. Moreover, Brice contends that this sceptical strain in Coleridge's work does not bear a merely accidental relation to the theory of symbolism in his thinking but rather an essential one. In the light of the tradition of scepticism in which Coleridge is taken to stand, that is, it becomes clear that any attempt to think of the world as revelatory of the divine in the particular sense, according to Coleridge's theory of the symbol, that mundane phenomena actually participate, somehow, in divinity, is inevitably bound up with the twin anxieties of the threat of slipping into idolatry and of over-estimating fallen human capacities.

By seeking patiently and in detail to elaborate a long tradition that stands behind Coleridge's own thought, at least the first half of this book is, then, an exercise in intellectual history. In the chapters prior to the arrival of Coleridge on the scene—and Coleridge, perhaps understandably, plays very little role in the opening discussions—it can feel at times that we are being treated to a fairly pedestrian outline narrative of the history of modern scepticism. Little is really ventured, for example, in the early discussions of the Protestant critique of the capabilities of human reason. However, the nuanced discussion showing that Robert Boyle's attempt to establish scientific investigation of nature on a secure footing relies upon his self-estimation as a member of the Protestant elect is certainly revealing and plays a pivotal role in the rest of the book's argument. The Protestant critique of reason, which, for sure, is clearly set out by Brice, comes, then, to shape the book's picture of the kind of scepticism that in turn shaped much of Coleridge's intellectual outlook: it is only under election—or, more broadly, under certain moral and religious conditions—that fallen human reason is good for anything much at all. What might be described as this epistemological piety is fundamental to the history of modern philosophy, stretching up to Hume and Kant, as, for example, recent Kantian scholars such as Rae Langton and others have sought to re-emphasise. It would be fair to suggest that some of this tradition, while ably presented by Brice, might have benefited from further examination. How, for example, does the Protestant dovetailing of epistemological piety, on the one hand, and religious election as a guarantor of reason, on the other, operate in Kant, who, of course, was so keen to keep theoretical and practical—that is, moral—knowledge separate? Furthermore, the account of the Kantian sublime is, as Coleridge would have recognised, simply too brisk: Kant's account is much more complex and nuanced than Brice at times seems willing to allow.

This is, perhaps, pernickety and many readers will be glad that Brice did not wander further into Coleridgean intellectual pre-history: it is only just under halfway into the book that the first substantial discussion of Coleridge arrives. In one sense, however, the arrival of the book's main subject on the stage does not entail much of a shift in emphasis. Coleridge, that is, is made to fit quite neatly into the philosophical story, albeit as some type of culmination of it, that stretches back to the birth of Protestantism with Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli, that Brice has so far been telling. This in itself is not unwelcome:

Coleridge is dealt with as a serious figure in Western intellectual history alongside authors more familiar from such intellectually historical narratives. In another sense, however, there is a shift in the book's approach with the introduction of serious attention to Coleridge himself. It is for Coleridge that a somewhat finer-grained, less over-arching interpretative approach is reserved. This greater interpretative depth is matched by the greater breadth of texts with which Brice deals in the later discussions. It is with Coleridge that the book also departs from what is if not a mainstream of intellectual history then certainly a major tributary of it in order to take up, in Coleridge's notebook reflections, letters, and often frustrated self-revisions, a more subterranean development of scepticism. Also, while never indulging in a kind of speculative biographical explanation for Coleridge's intellectual development, Brice usefully balances Coleridge's engagement with what can now seem somewhat esoteric texts and the pressure his own personal circumstances exerted on the course of his thinking.

As I noted above, the last paragraph of the book is a quotation from Pater's 'Coleridge'. The short 'Conclusion' is, unfortunately, the most disappointing section of the book. The reference to Pater's 1865 essay is meant to re-enforce the claim that Coleridge's work 'still has a representative value today' (204). Apart from a tantalisingly brief paragraph on the resonance of Coleridge's thinking with aspects of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* toward the end of the main body of the book (163), for example, there is little, almost no, consideration of Coleridge's work in relation to subsequent intellectual developments. Although Brice's book does not leave the reader with the sense that it has outlined just so much history with little purchase on what we might believe today, more work on the continuing contribution of Coleridge's thinking to contemporary problems of scepticism and belief might have been worthwhile. Nevertheless, this is an informative, useful book that will certainly be of interest to everyone concerned with the philosophical and theological contexts of Coleridge's work.