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*Coleridge's Responses, Volume I:
Coleridge on Writers and Writing*
(Continuum, 2008)
edited by Seamus Perry

THIS IS the first of three volumes in the series, *Coleridge's Responses: Selected Writings on Literary Criticism, the Bible and Nature*, whose general editor is John Beer. The second volume, *Coleridge on the Bible*, is edited by Anthony Harding and the third, *On Nature and Vision* by Samantha Harvey. With this new three-volume set and a previous series, *Coleridge's Writings* (Palgrave; John Beer also the general editor),¹ readers—whether general or specialist—are now provided with volumes which attempt to gather together, in a much more accessible form, Coleridge's ideas on a particular area of interest or an author. All the volumes in these two series seek to help the reader perceive more clearly the development of Coleridge's thought in a given area, partly by focusing on the more significant writings. The texts of most of the selections in this volume edited by Seamus Perry are taken from early editions, though there are exceptions, as the editor explains fully in his preface. As for notebook and other manuscript texts, where the manuscripts were not available in Britain, the editorial sources were the Bollingen edition of the *Collected Works*, Kathleen Coburn's edition of the *Notebooks*, and E. L. Griggs's Oxford edition of the *Letters*.

Seamus Perry's volume is arranged in two sections; the first—in chronological order—offers a selection of Coleridge's remarks on writing itself, and the whole range of issues which that theme includes, from poetry, the poem, the poet, metre, and figures of speech to aesthetic issues of beauty and taste, as well as historical remarks on past literature (and much else). This section is the shorter of the two, running to just over 100 pages. The second section—of nearly 500 pages—presents Coleridge's writings under authors' names (or occasionally titles of books), in alphabetical order. It ranges from Aeschylus to Edward Young, and is confined, in the main, to 'literary writers' rather than philosophers, theologians, historians, scientists. (Shakespeare and the Bible are reserved for the other volumes mentioned above, apart from passing remarks.) Little-known authors are included side-by-side with Wordsworth, Milton, Spenser, and so on. Another principle guiding this splendid collection was the need to provide the reader with fragments from the whole range of Coleridge's jottings. Hence, we find an astonishingly refreshing variety of tones, styles, and diction as we read bits of letters or notebook entries, scraps of marginalia, paragraphs from published writings, reports from *Table Talk*, pieces from lecture notes, and other sources. The reader is

¹ Another volume in the Palgrave series, Coleridge's writings on Shakespeare, is in preparation.

presented with anything from brief, pithy remarks of typical Coleridgean insight and taste, to much longer, carefully thought-out ruminations. Take Coleridge's remarkable insights on William Blake. These occur in a letter of February 6, 1818, to H.F. Cary, upon reading a 1794 copy of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* lent him by his Swedenborgian friend, Charles Augustus Tulk:

P.S. I have this morning been reading a strange publication—viz. Poems with very wild and interesting pictures, as the swathing, etched (I suppose) but it is said—printed and painted by the Author, W. Blake. He is a man of Genius—and I apprehend, a Swedenborgian—certainly, a mystic *emphatically*. You perhaps smile at *my* calling another Poet, a *Mystic*; but verily I am in the very mire of commonplace common-sense compared with Mr Blake, apo- or rather anacalyptic Poet, and Painter! (CL IV 833-4)

There is a much longer response to Blake in a letter six days later, again to Tulk (CL IV 836-8), which makes for simply fascinating reading (Perry 125-27).

A more ambivalent response is found in Coleridge's brief but intensely feeling-ful note (in his 'Gutch Memorandum Book', see CN I 24) on Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which Burke provoked considerable controversy for his attack upon the revolution (Perry 150): 'What (Burke's book) repugnant feelings did it excite? I shuddered while I praised it—a web wrought with admirable beauty from a black bag of Poison!' Or take the sharp comment many years later (Perry 154), in late August, 1827, recorded in *Table Talk*: 'Burke's Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful seems to me a poor thing; and what he says upon Taste is neither profound nor accurate.' But only a few years later, Coleridge said (pages 154-5):

Burke was, indeed, a great man. No one ever read history so philosophically as he seems to have done. Yet, until he could associate his general principles with some sordid interest, panic of property, Jacobinism, &c., he was a mere dinner bell. Hence you will find so many half truths in his speeches and writings. Nevertheless, let us heartily acknowledge his transcendant greatness. He would have been more influential if he had less surpassed his contemporaries as Fox and Pitt, men of much inferior minds in all respects. (*Table Talk*, 5 April 1833. Burke published, in 1791, a defence against charges that he had been inconsistent in his attitude to the American and French revolutions; see his *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*.)

Sometimes responses to a poet may evoke more general remarks, as in the following case of a very early notebook entry. Here, the reference to Gray is almost incidental to the more general, (perhaps) more interesting remarks, on the effect of a given language upon Poetry (pages 239-40). It might at first seem to have been useful to have this passage in 'Part One: On Writing', rather

than under the Gray heading. But readers familiar with Coleridge, trying to find this passage, would certainly succeed more quickly by having it exactly where a difficult editorial decision has put it:

The elder languages fitter for Poetry because they expressed only prominent ideas with clearness, others but darkly—Therefore the French wholly unfit for Poetry; because [all] is *clear* in their Language—i.e.—Feelings created by obscure ideas associate themselves with the one *clear* idea. When no criticism is pretended to, & the Mind in it's simplicity gives itself up to a Poem as to a work of nature, Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally & not perfectly understood. —It was so by me with Gray's bard & Collins' Odes—The Bard once intoxicated me; & now I read it without pleasure. From this cause it is that what *I* call metaphysical Poetry gives me so much delight. (CN I 383)

Another well-chosen section, of Coleridge on Philip Sidney, has three remarkable passages, parts of which are so moving and insightful as to make the reader wish more could have been included. For example (page 421), 'Sir Philip Sidney—he dwells in our thoughts as in an element of his own effluvia, a divine Empyreaum of Love and Wonder, ever like some rare Balsam insulated by an atmosphere of it's own delightful Odors (CN III 4034). Selection and exclusion is ever the editorial nightmare, however, as expressed by Herman Melville some decades later in his lament, 'Oh time, strength, cash and patience!'

Some of the editor's most felicitous choices, amongst these hundreds of intensely striking Coleridgean gems, are the choices made for the Edmund Spenser section. Surely Spenser was one of Coleridge's most admired poets after Shakespeare, and these editorial choices comprise one of the most moving sections in this wonderful treasure chest of jewels. Sometimes an excerpt will be fascinating because Coleridge relates Spenser to another poet, like Wordsworth. More precisely in this case, two stanzas from *The Faerie Queene* are quoted by Coleridge to challenge remarks in Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. This excerpt (page 433) comes from the *Biographia Literaria* (written 1815):

I remember no poet, whose writings would safelier stand the test of Mr. Wordsworth's theory, than SPENSER. Yet will Mr. Wordsworth say, that the style of the following stanzas is either undistinguished from prose, and the language of ordinary life? Or that it is vicious, and that the stanzas are *blots* in the Faery Queen? (BL II 76)

Other entries about Spenser (page 434) include such remarks as Coleridge's love of the 'indescribable sweetness of his verse distinguished from Shakspear & Milton', or 'the exceeding vividness of his descriptions [;] not picturesque; but a wondrous series as in certain dreams—P. 73, His haughty Helmet.' He

referred to ‘Spenser’s great character of mind. Fancy under the conditions of Imagination [...] above all, deep moral earnestness’ (page 435), and insisted (also page 435) that

I have never been able to understand what people mean by the tediousness of the *Faerie Queen*; for, to me, those winding and protracted paths always seem [...] as pleasant as a Summer passage on a crooked river, where going about and turning back is as delightful as the delays of parting lovers. There is, moreover, a peculiar and delicious charm even in the occasional dimness and obscurity of his pictures. The rich and solemn strain of his Muse still enchants the ear, though her features only glimmer faintly upon the eye [...]

(IT II 464).

One yearns, however, for the famous remark in Raysor’s 1936 edition, *Miscellaneous Criticism* (36), ‘You will take especial note of the marvellous independence and true imaginative absence of all particular space or time in the Faery Queen [...] It is truly [...] of mental space. The poet has placed you in a dream, a charmed sleep, and you neither wish, nor have the power, to inquire where you are, or how you got there.’ This is so closely related to the passage quoted here below (page 434) that one misses at least an editorial note about the former Raysor excerpt: ‘the marvellous independence or true imaginative absence of particular place & time—it is neither in the domains of History or Geography, is ignorant of all artificial boundary—truly in the Land of Faery—i.e. in mental space.’ And readers are rewarded by the following heady passage, in an editorial note (437), on Spenser’s stanza, in which Coleridge quotes from Milton’s ‘L’Allegro’, being one of the finest demonstrations of how Coleridge’s mind constantly interrelated poets and poems: ‘that wonder-work of metrical Skill and Genius! that nearest approach to a perfect Whole, [...]—that “immortal Verse”, that “winding bout Of linked sweetness long drawn out untwisting all the chains that tie The hidden Soul of Harmony”!’ (SWF II 857).

The samples quoted above should give every reader an intense sense of the value of the edition under discussion. But also included by Perry are long entries such as several pages of Coleridgean deliberations, in note-form, which eventually were delivered as lectures. These add immensely to the sense this volume gives of the sheer power and delicacy of Coleridge’s mind. And to add to the scholarly excellence we find in the book, the editor has often delved into early editions and manuscripts for notebooks and other writings in many cases, but has equally given references to the Bollingen, Coburn, and Griggs editions where these were not his primary source. He has also provided dates, where possible, for each extract, whether of publication or composition. And there is a scholarly apparatus consisting of full and informative footnoting after each main section and author. A short but invaluable editorial ‘running commentary’ is a feature throughout, giving crucial information of many kinds

which every reader will welcome.

In short, Seamus Perry has produced a wonderful volume of Coleridge on writers and writing, which will attract the general reader as never before, yet provide students and academics with a scholarly apparatus of great value. There is a thorough index, not just of names, but also of subjects, which this reader found especially helpful. This 'model' edition must be read, then, not only as an accomplishment of which its editor can be proud. It is also a testimony to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'the most extraordinary English mind of the time' (John Beer, 'Foreword', xii).