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Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy
(Oxford University Press, 2020)
by Peter Cheyne

"WITH ME THE ACT OF CONTEMPLATION makes the thing contemplated," Coleridge writes in the *Biographia Literaria,* "simply contemplating, the representative forms of things rise up into existence" (*BL* I, 251–2, qtd. in Cheyne 90). That contemplation might actually *make* things "rise up into existence" resonates deeply with Coleridge's views on art and poetry, but may also serve as a good metaphor for this book. Peter Cheyne's *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* builds an articulate, precise, and compelling reconstruction of Coleridge's thought, drawing together fragments scattered across a lifetime of disparate publications, poems, lectures, notebooks, and marginalia, calling into existence (so to speak) a complete Coleridgean philosophy. Explicating the work of an expansive (and idiosyncratic) thinker like Coleridge is a massive academic undertaking: it requires a scholar to be at once a historian of ideas, a philosopher, a literary critic, and a theologian. But Cheyne navigates this challenge quite well and creates a clear picture of Coleridge's philosophical system (a system Coleridge never formalized) focused on contemplation as the way in which a human mind can access universal ideas. This reconstruction of Coleridge's thought is not meant to serve as a totalizing meta-narrative or theory-of-everything (*a la* G. W. F. Hegel); rather, Cheyne organizes a developing set of ideas that represent how Coleridge viewed the world at different points in his career. Along this development, Cheyne finds "Coleridgean constants" interwoven across three major stages of the poet's development: the earliest stage focused on poetic creation (Cheyne designates this the "imagination period"), the second stage directed toward a philosophy of ideas, and the final stage oriented towards theology. Of course, these stages are not meant to be cleanly demarcated or considered mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent for Cheyne the main preoccupation of Coleridge's thought and literary output at different times of his life: each stage, different as they are, is oriented toward articulating and developing Coleridge's ideas of the imagination, symbol, Reason, Understanding, and other key ideas that serve as "nodal points" of his thought.

Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy focuses attention primarily on the "middle period" as a bridge between early poetry and later theology. Here, Cheyne shows the central role that "contemplation" plays in Coleridge's system. Contemplation is a technical term for Coleridge: it refers to the means by which a mind recognizes and reflects the order inherent in the universe. The

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basis of Coleridge's philosophy is the belief that a fundamental "Reason" informs all reality: it dictates the natural laws that govern the universe, but also stands behind a mind's capacity to apprehend those systems. As such, contemplation can become both a method of ascent from the "lower" experiences of sensation to the "higher" order of ideas in the full Neoplatonic sense as "positive powers, existing beyond the human mind" (2), as well as a *descent* by which ideas become discernible through symbols. As the terms "lower" and "higher" connote, Coleridge's metaphysics is built on a "bi-polar" hierarchy, stretched between transcendent ideas on one end and everyday experiences on the other. However, the poles of this hierarchy remain deeply connected by the crucial midpoint between them, "the Understanding." Positioning Coleridge as a "Post-Kantian, Christian (neo-) Platonist" (342), Cheyne carves out a space for Coleridge's philosophy to stand as a unique contribution to nineteenth-century European thought.

The book is organized into four main sections, with a tightly-packed introduction and brief conclusion. The introduction makes for a steep climb into the book, but clearly and quickly lays out the key terms of the argument and larger framework of Coleridge's philosophical system, offers some key historical backgrounds (most of which will be familiar to readers of Coleridge's prose), and defines the major claims of the text. From there, the structure of the book is designed to mirror the structure Cheyne discerns in Coleridge's philosophy, following an ascent from sensory aesthetic experience toward a universal theory of mind. In the first major section (chapters 1–3), Cheyne explores the important role aesthetics plays in grounding Coleridge's philosophy in everyday experience, arguing "if…contemplation of ideas is to have practical value, ideas must be more for us than speculative objects, and enter into the way we live our lives" (313). These chapters pivot on the familiar distinction between primary and secondary imagination in the *Biographia*, which receives a thorough analysis in Chapter 2. Reiterating and closely examining this well-known passage provides the book with a clear entry point for Coleridge's more elaborate system: the relationship between primary and secondary imagination becomes important not only for Coleridgean aesthetics, but also for the larger world of ideas aesthetics might disclose.

Section II (chapters 4–6) applies the "primary/secondary" structure to a larger hierarchy of "higher" and "lower" forms of Understanding and Reason: the secondary, "higher" forms infuse themselves in symbols in the primary, "lower," sensible world, calling the mind upward toward the idea; likewise, the primary forms tether the secondary and draw them downward into thought, experience, and articulation. At the midpoint between high and low, Understanding mediates between sensory phenomena and transcendent idea, while contemplation becomes the method through which a mind navigates from pole to pole. The major contribution this section makes for Coleridge studies lies in Cheyne's investigation of Jakob Böhme's influence on Coleridge's theory of knowledge in chapter 5: adapting Böhme's mystical theology, Coleridge defined Understanding as the crux between "lower" and

"higher" mental powers. Cheyne's exploration of Böhme's influence on Coleridge is a timely and welcome intervention on a largely understudied topic. While Böhme is no stranger to scholars of Romanticism, sustained analysis on how the seventeenth-century German mystic's theology directly informs Coleridge's noetics not only reorients Coleridge's philosophy to traditions of Romantic poetry and Christian theology, but also reinforces the role contemplation plays in the "interpenetration" between higher and lower Reason, the idea itself and the expression of the idea in sensible world.

Section III (chapters 7–8) further explores the hierarchy of reason, putting Coleridge in dialogue with some major figures in academic philosophy—Plato (and partly, Plotinus) in Chapter 7, and the English Empiricists and German Idealists in Chapter 8. In contrast to Hegel or Schelling, Coleridge's "bi-polar" idealism does not seek resolution in an absolute: while universal "first-order" ideas may inform social norms or political economies, their articulations via symbols are always "second-order" ideas, and must therefore always be subjected to revision. Likewise, accepted notions of law, morality, taste, or other marks of the status quo must always be reassessed. Such careful self-examination is the starting point of contemplation. Hence, Cheyne argues that Coleridge's "later political thought is inherently more progressive than is generally admitted," as "first-order, transcendent ideas (e.g. God, infinity, the good, and the soul)" are to be distinguished from "second-order, historical ones (e.g. Church, state, and the constitution) that actualize and evolve" (226).

Finally, the fourth section (chapters 9–11) offers the most complete explanation of Coleridge's philosophy, and applies the system in an analysis of some of Coleridge's poetry. Here, Cheyne explicates two major structures through which contemplation might carry ideas: the *tetrad*—a relationship between four absolute terms, such as "the Trinity, reality, being, the good, etc."—and the *pentad*—a relationship between five non-absolute terms, such as "human institutions, natural powers, and phenomena" (268); as Coleridge himself put it, "In *divine matters* a *Tetrad. A Pentad* in all others" (qtd. in Cheyne 288). Drawing primarily from the *Marginalia, Notebooks,* and *Logic*, Cheyne synthesizes a complex, though clear, articulation of Coleridge's system, even if presented in its most abstract form. Helpfully, the section ends with a strong close reading of the "Limbo" sequence of poems ("Moles," "Limbo," and "*Ne Plus Ultra,*" collected in 1834's *Poetical Works*). The literary analysis concretizes much of the more abstract philosophical concepts argued throughout the book, and provides a model for how literary scholars might approach Coleridge's poetic corpus through this lens.

Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy is a smart and well-argued book, and it makes important contributions to diverse fields surrounding Coleridge studies. Chapters are rich with examples of ways Coleridge's thought emerges from classical antiquity, read through medieval mystical theology, and put into dialogue with some of the major thinkers of modern philosophy (particularly Kant, Schelling, and Hegel). Cheyne makes a strong case for reading Coleridge as part of this wider constellation of thinkers, but readers less versed in any of

these discourses may find the many references to Hegel, Kant, Plato, Plotinus, Law, and Böhme disorientating. Regardless, Cheyne's rigorous contextualization makes a good argument for the significant contribution of Coleridge's work to the history of ideas in the early nineteenth century, aiding studies in both the history of philosophy and nineteenth-century theology. The powerful synthesis of such a wide array of influences drawn from Coleridge's vast (and untidy) corpus owes just as much to Peter Cheyne's work as a philosopher as to Coleridge's. The book carries forward scholarly investigations of contemplation begun in Cheyne's own 2017 edited collection *Coleridge and Contemplation*, but also extends the vast field of monographs on Coleridge and philosophy—such as, for example, James Vigus's *Platonic Coleridge* (2009), Ewan James Jones's *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (2014), or Monica Class's *Coleridge and Kantian Ideas in England, 1796–1817* (2012)—by offering a more comprehensive view of Coleridge's thought.

For Coleridge, contemplation was never meant for mere academic inquiry; rather, contemplation is the way ideas become practicable: Cheyne writes, "contemplation enacts the idea so it can be applied in countless actual situations. … To think freedom, for example, as an abstract object detached from the thinking, willing subject could be an act of fancy or theory, but it would be a failure of contemplation" (251). At the same time, because the book reconstructs a system of thought rooted in early-nineteenth century Britain, aspects of Coleridge's philosophy may strike post-modern readers as overly optimistic: the hope that a transcendent Reason will make itself known to us through symbols is, at the very least, prone to suspicion. Cheyne concedes early in the introduction, "That Ideas, in a Platonic (transcendent) sense rather than a Kantian (transcendental) sense, can be contemplated objectively will sound strange to readers today, as it sounded strange to readers in Coleridge's time" (1). Cheyne addresses this objection by concluding the book with a brief response to the "school of suspicion"—Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche—from a Coleridgean perspective: exposing transcendent universal ideas as the mere pawns of larger systems of power (be they biological, economic, or existential) is the essential first step in moving toward wisdom, but only a first step. Here, Cheney likens Coleridge's philosophy to Socratic ignorance, the first stage of an elenchus: by criticizing inherited notions of sense or fashion, we actually begin the process of contemplation. In the end, it is only through this process—a tireless re-examination and critique of the source of one's own thoughts—that one begins the slow ascent toward understanding.