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Biographia Literaria

(Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

edited by Adam Roberts

HOWEVER LARGE IT MAY LOOM IN SURVEYS of Coleridge's thought and in the history of literary criticism generally, the *Biographia Literaria* has attracted few serious editors. The first, to whom all others are indebted, was Sara Coleridge, whose heavily annotated edition of 1847 was only the second edition of the work to appear in Britain. The second was J. T. Shawcross, whose Clarendon edition of 1907 remained, *faute de mieux*, the standard one for scholarly citations until 1983, when the edition of James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate was published in the Bollingen Series *Collected Coleridge*. Since then two lightly annotated complete editions, by H. J. Jackson for Oxford (1985) and Nigel Leask for Everyman's Library (1997), and a heavily annotated selection in the Norton Critical Edition of *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose* (edited by Paul Magnuson, Raimonda Modiano, and me, 2003) have appeared. While the Princeton, Oxford, and Norton editions are all currently available in paperback, Adam Roberts's hardback edition is presumably directed more narrowly at the scholarly market. As if to justify the £150 list price, the dust-jacket blurb boasts that this edition 'supersedes all previous editions', traces all 'unattributed references . . . materially altering the way we read this classic work', and 'is likely to stand as the definitive textual edition for years to come'. These claims deserve to be examined, beginning with the last.

The only authoritative text of the *Biographia* is that of the first edition, which Coleridge saw through the press. In contrast to Engell/Bate, who present a lightly emended version of the 1817 text (e.g., correcting misspelled proper names and inserting Greek breathings and accents in accordance with *Collected Coleridge* practice), Roberts takes a documentary approach to the text, faithfully reproducing the unaccented Greek (which was common practice at the time), typos, and other peculiarities of the original. Such conservatism is consistent with the historicist, anti-idealising tendency of much current editorial theory and is perfectly justified, although the resulting text differs minimally from Engell/Bate's. Adams's helpful appendix listing textual emendations in the editions of 1847 and 1983 illustrates what he calls the posthumous 'smoothing away' of the text's rough edges.

The scope of the annotation is stated more modestly in the editor's introduction than on the dust-jacket. Conceding that Engell/Bate's documentation of German sources is much fuller than his, Roberts in effect persistently minimises Coleridge's appropriations and misappropriations of German philosophy. Thus, for example, whereas the Bollingen editors provide a footnote extending across two pages on the distinction, in chapter 13, between the primary and secondary imaginations—a footnote adverting to parallels in various German and British philosophers, as well as to further

contextualisation of the distinction by Thomas McFarland and James Engell himself—Roberts confines himself to a single, brief note on the paragraph. This note observes that the distinction 'remains one of the most widely discussed pieces of Romantic prose' (206 n. 631), and (as Engell/Bate also record) that Coleridge was reported by Sara Coleridge to have crossed out the second clause of the sentence on the primary imagination ('the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation . . .') in one copy of the *Biographia*. If the Bollingen note perhaps goes too far in the direction of *Quellenforschung* based on verbal parallels, then Roberts's note disengages from Coleridge's distinction entirely, adducing Sara Coleridge's report as evidence that he had changed his mind about it or planned to refine it. There are grounds for not attributing great importance to the distinction, in that Coleridge did not recur to it prominently in later writings—but this fact itself might have been pointed out (as it is in Modiano's note in the Norton Coleridge). To be sure, Roberts comments on the distinction in his introduction (pp. cv–cvi), but briefly and without emphasising the crucial point that while the primary imagination, as the power of perception, is unconscious, transcendental in the Kantian sense, and hence universally human, the secondary imagination is conscious and more specifically involved in artistic creation.[1]

Though it is not mentioned in the editorial note concluding his introduction, Roberts is much more sparing of cross-references to Coleridge's other writings than Engell/Bate are—a fact that Coleridgeans may well regret, though readers more interested in the *Biographia* as literary criticism than in Coleridge will likely not notice. Elsewhere Roberts's annotation criticises or amplifies that of the Bollingen edition with mixed results, as three instances may briefly illustrate. In chapter 9, the note (101–2 n. 373) on Coleridge's phrase 'Cogito quia Sum, et Sum quia Cogito' contests Engell/Bate's insistence that Coleridge 'does *not* have in mind Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am"'. On the contrary, Roberts proposes, he 'is deliberately echoing Descartes by way of ridiculing both himself and this philosophical tradition' (though which tradition is meant by 'this'—Scholastic, Platonic, or Cartesian—is not clear). That Coleridge exploits the verbal echo to foreground his own rejection of the Cartesian *cogito* seems very plausible to me. But while Roberts may be the subtler interpreter of Coleridge's rhetorical strategy here, he is not the better translator: the conjunction 'quia', rendered 'that which' in the Edinburgh edition, means 'because', hence 'I think because I am, and am because I think' (as Engell/Bate translate).

In chapter 14, commenting on Coleridge's disgust at the homoeroticism of Anachreon's seventeenth *Ode*, Robert notes that Thomas Moore bowdlerised

[1] That the primary imagination is the power of perception is the received opinion of almost all Coleridge scholars. However, there are some variant voices, e.g. Jonathan Wordsworth, 'The infinite I AM': Coleridge and the Ascent of being', in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn and Nick Roe, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 22-52; and Graham Davidson, 'The Primary Imagination, Perception and the Divine Ideas', in *The Coleridge Bulletin, NS 28* (Winter 2011), pp. 86-92.

his own translation (of 1800) of the ode—information that is absent from the corresponding note in Engell/Bate and is evidently offered here to contextualise Coleridge's vehemence, which to a present-day reader might seem bizarre or even perverse. But the difficulty with such contextualising by analogy is that it lacks a firm principle of selection and hence control, whereas *Quellenforschung*, however limited its actual explanatory value, can appeal to a recognisable criterion of relevance (i.e., that Coleridge is known or likely to have read such-and-such a work). Roberts's notes on 'Satyrane's Letters', on the other hand, are generally more informative than those in the Bollingen edition, especially the first note on Letter 1, which explains the circumstances of the Letters original publication in the 1809 *Friend* and glosses the name Satyrane. (Roberts's introduction makes a strong case for reading the Letters 'as integral to the textual architecture of the whole, rather than as some random last-minute supplement' (p. cxxviii).)

For the most part—with an exception to be mentioned presently—the 154-page introduction, despite its extended analyses of the work's contents and forthright treatment of Coleridge's plagiarisms, does not strike me as an improvement on the Bollingen editors' 95-page introduction. Roberts's idiosyncratic survey of Coleridge criticism (pp. cxliii–clxiii) in particular will age quickly. In one respect, however, the introduction does make a significant editorial contribution, and that is its reconsideration of the chronology of the *Biographia*'s composition. In the absence of any manuscripts and the unreliability of Coleridge's letters on the subject, this has been a particularly fraught issue because, as Modiano states in her introduction to the Norton selection from the work, both mitigatory and condemnatory accounts of Coleridge's plagiarisms have appealed to speculative reconstructions of the book's composition. If the 'philosophical chapters' were dictated last, the plagiarisms can be more easily attributed to a combination of external pressure, fatigue, and Coleridge's opium addiction; if they were dictated earlier, the plagiarisms can be taken as evidence of the disparity between his philosophical pretensions and actual achievement. The former account was roughly that of the Bollingen editors, following a chronology proposed by Daniel Fogel in 1977; the latter, based on a letter from Coleridge to R. H. Brabant claiming to have finished composition by 29 July 1815, that of Norman Fruman.

Roberts complicates these alternatives, especially Fogel's more widely accepted one, by calling attention to Coleridge's antepenultimate note to chapter 10, which refers to a speech of 15 February 1817 by Lord Grenville in the House of Lords (not identified by the Bollingen editors). Since the long note could not have been inserted into a page already printed by J. M. Gutch (who had turned over the sheets of vol. I to the new publisher, Gale and Fenner, in April 1817 after prolonged negotiation), and its presence would have affected the printing of the succeeding text, Roberts reasons that the whole of pp. 208–96 (or more likely, the whole of gatherings O–U, i.e., pp. 193–296) must have been reset by Gale and Fenner between April and July 1817, when the book was published, meaning that 'the *Biographia* was in a

much greater state of flux than has hitherto been realised' (p. xxxi). Assuming that his identification of the speech referred to in Coleridge's footnote is correct, Roberts's account of the composition of the *Biographia*, though itself speculative (as he acknowledges), is more solidly founded on temporally specific facts than either of the competing alternatives. Its effect is not to clarify the process of composition, and by implication the circumstances in which the plagiarisms were introduced, but rather the opposite: radically to undermine any attempt to explain the plagiarisms by reference to the work's composition. Nonetheless, despite the advances represented by Roberts's chronology of composition and by individual notes, the Edinburgh edition cannot claim to have superseded its Bollingen predecessor as the standard scholarly edition, and its usability is greatly diminished by the absence of an index.