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reads

Coleridge and Kantian Ideas in England, 1796-1817: Coleridge's Responses to German Philosophy

(Bloomsbury, 2012)

by Monika Class

> And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing,
> But, like a hawk encumber'd with his hood,
> Explaining metaphysics to the nation—
> I wish he would explain his Explanation.

BYRON'S JIBE AT COLERIDGE in the 'Dedication' to *Don Juan* doesn't explicitly mention the elder poet's debt to foreign thinking, but the fact that Coleridge attempts to explain metaphysics '*to the nation*' certainly suggests that what Coleridge was up to was trying to win over a John Bullishly sceptical public to a non-native way of seeing things—indeed, 'metaphysics' as such has often been felt, and perhaps is sometimes and in some quarters still felt, to be an embargoed import into these islands. Byron was not the first to respond —in his case, as was often the case with Coleridge's near contemporaries, with perplexity and not a little scorn—to Coleridge's philosophy generally and to his reception and adaptation of German thinking in particular. Nor, of course, was he the last. There have been many treatments of Coleridge as a thinker and, indeed, of his formation as a thinker in response to German philosophy. That German philosophy may now seem ineliminable from many an 'Introduction to Modern Philosophy' for first-year undergraduates, but it was once, to be sure, avant-garde and, from a non-German perspective, either excitingly or troublingly exotic—or both. In the twentieth century, Coleridge's reading of Kant, in particular, but also of Schelling, the Schlegel brothers, Schiller, and a host of other, now less widely studied figures, has received extensive treatment, both in a range of specialist studies and in numerous more broad-ranging examinations of Coleridge as a thinker. To this considerable critical heritage is now added Monika Class's *Coleridge and Kantian Ideas in England, 1796-1817*. It is testament to this book's achievement that, in an already quite burgeoning field, it ought quickly to become a vital point of reference. Instead of retelling a familiar story, it seeks to overturn a number of established viewpoints, set Coleridge's engagement with German philosophy in new contexts, and extend consideration of this engagement into areas of Coleridge's work hitherto insufficiently discussed in this connection. It is also exhaustively researched and, for the most part, clearly articulated; it is a significant addition to contemporary commentary on Coleridge's work.

One danger faced by works of this kind is that they become a study of mere influence—where 'mere' indicates that the accurate determination of influence (an important and often illuminating critical endeavour) has

degenerated into simply spotting sources and falsely chalking up the results to critical insight. This book admirably avoids that danger. This is in part because it doesn't simply focus on Kant's works as they were read and absorbed by Coleridge, but rather on, as the book's title has it, 'Kantian Ideas'. What this label means in Class's application is the mediation of Kant's work by popularisers and explicators whose work in English and its connection to Coleridge has been under-examined heretofore. So, for instance, one of the major figures of the early part of the book is the now (very) little regarded Friedrich August Nitsch, whose wonderfully titled *A General and Introductory View of Professor Kant concerning Man, the World and the Deity* of 1796 is shown to have been, despite previous scholarly degradation, in fact central to the mediation of Kant in England.

Class is able to demonstrate Nitsch's importance through exhaustive archival work of the kind for which Coleridge's often unfinished, often fragmentary philosophical corpus so frequently seems to call. But Class is distinctively tenacious in her researches. Her patience in reassembling a context, in tracking the sometimes helter-skelter dissemination of a particular text or translation, or in framing the significance of an apparently fleeting notebook entry is exemplary. Indeed, this is perhaps the book's chief strength and provides the basis for its main claims on our attention. Noting that the first of Kant's texts to be translated into English was the important essay *Zum ewigen Frieden*, 'Toward Perpetual [or Eternal] Peace', which advocates a republican constitution and league of nations, Class details the importance of Kant's thinking to the dissenting and republican circles with which the young Coleridge, especially during his time in Bristol mixing with radicals like Thomas Beddoes, was involved. It was not, then, that Kant was an abstruse metaphysician to whom Coleridge, with his alleged taste for abstraction, was attracted; rather, he was a potent interlocutor in debates that had an immediate national and political resonance. Likewise, Class traces the mediation of Kant by the now critically re-emerging Karl Leonhard Reinhold, who, it is fair to say, was largely responsible for popularising Kant in Germany and who significantly influenced Kant's early mediators in England. The importance of Reinhold's wide-reaching work on Kant lies in the fact that the great critical philosopher became, in Reinhold's representation, a crucial disputant in the so-called *Pantheismusstreit*, or 'pantheism controversy', which was carried on between, among others, Friedrich Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn in the aftermath of the former's objection to Gottfried Lessing's apparent lauding of the philosophy of Spinoza. Kant was held up as the severer of this particular Gordian knot, and thus as a key proponent of a rational theology, beyond the positions of both Jacobi (Spinozistic pantheism is the ultimate resting-place of any philosophy predicated upon reason) and Mendelssohn (Lessing wasn't all that much of a Spinozist actually and, in any case, his modified pantheism wasn't that different from theism after all).

So, the Kant that the early Coleridge, at least, encountered was quite different from the one now familiar from outline histories of modern

philosophy. That is not to say that Kant's critical philosophy was unimportant to Coleridge's intellectual development. On the contrary, Class shows in a fascinating chapter—a kind of intellectual detective story—that Coleridge was attracted to and reformulated in his notebooks as early as 1795 Kant's notion of the 'categorical imperative'. Class argues that Coleridge would have encountered it in Nitsch's exposition—an exposition that interpreted Kant's account of moral desert as implying the possibility of and hope for the realised happiness of the just *in this world*. Whether directly or, as Class convincingly argues, indirectly, the central contentions and concepts of Kant's critical work were important to Coleridge early in the poet's career. Indeed, the Kant and 'Kantian Ideas' that shaped Coleridge are given a much more nuanced and finely articulated expression here than they have received previously. On this basis, Class offers re-readings not just of Coleridge's philosophical work, but of his poetry too, the most sustained focus being on 'France: An Ode'. This section of the book certainly warms up from the initial, flat statement that '[t]he verse is soul searching and ambivalent, which opens the poem up to countless interpretations'; Class's readings, that is, turn out to be often illuminating in their own right.

But it is nonetheless here, in the association of 'France: An Ode' and Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, that the reader (this reader, at any rate) feels something of the strain perhaps inevitably involved in the kind of quasi-biographical but also carefully archival and philosophically sensitive work that Class is undertaking. Having argued in detail that Coleridge probably knew of Kant's important contribution to republican theorising via Thomas Beddoes, Class associates Coleridge's poem and Kant's essay on a number of grounds, including their shared frustration with but refusal to reject revolutionary ideals, their common pairing of aspiration toward impartial judgement with an acknowledgement of its impossibility, and even their 'formal' similarities, such as their directedness to a public and their comparable relation (so Class asserts) to the Pindaric ode in Coleridge's case and the form of the international peace treaty in Kant's. Many of these grounds of comparison feel quite yielding under even rather slight pressure—that 'France: An Ode' does such-and-such a thing 'in much the same way as' (p.104) *Perpetual Peace* is, indeed, the keynote of the chapter. There is, then, no clincher here, no decisive piece of evidence to demonstrate the indubitable significance of Kant's essay to Coleridge's poem; there is a great deal of meticulous side-by-side reconstruction and powerful suggestion but, at this point in the book's argument at least, that is all.

But that 'all' is still persuasive and illuminating. And there are points in the book—in Class's readings of Coleridge's notebooks, for example, and in her account of his relationship with Beddoes—where the evidence does, certainly, feel rather weightier. This is a vastly researched book, not just in German philosophy and late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century English intellectual culture, but in the relevant secondary literatures from the many angles available on those much-studied historical periods and topics. It is for the most part a well-written and organised book, even if one can apparently belong to a

'fraction within Kant scholarship' and even if the 'Introduction' gives two substantially similar overviews of the book's organisation (rather as Genesis gives two accounts of creation). Despite these relatively minor foibles, this is a significant book, for which students of Coleridge's reception of German thinking, and of his intellectual formation quite generally, ought to be grateful.