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Imagination and the Playfulness of God: The Theological Implications of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Definition of the Human Imagination
(Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011)
by Robin Stockitt

and

Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith from Coleridge to Tolkien
(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)
by Michael Tomko

Imagination and the Playfulness of God by Robin Stockitt and *Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief* by Michael Tomko are welcome forays into Coleridge and Christian theology, and Coleridge, religion, and literary theory/criticism, respectively.[1] Coleridge merits more attention from the standpoint of theology, although theologians Jeffrey Barbeau, Colin Gunton, Alan Gregory, and Douglas Hedley, for example, have all made important contributions to Coleridge studies. The case is different for Coleridge and literary theory since the pertinence of Coleridge to theory is more current—either as a positive exemplar (e.g., by Ewan James Jones) or a target of critique (Terry Eagleton). A major challenge for "Coleridge-AND" studies is the need for riding two horses without slipping off either one. Both these books set out to meet this challenge with regard to an author who continues to draw the attention, and often enthusiasm, of readers and scholars from other disciplines, and who has much to say to them. As many readers can attest, however, an enthusiasm for Coleridge, if followed up, leads to some hard fell climbing!

Imagination and the Playfulness of God is the publication of a doctoral thesis accepted by the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Tübingen University. The book is divided into two parts. The first explores the definition of "imagination" and its "theological resonance"; the second discusses how attention to Coleridgean imagination influences "our understanding of the nature of God," since Coleridge defines imagination as "a reflection of, and a participation in, the divine imagination" (9). After an introduction in Part I, Chapter 2 provides sketches of thinkers who have influenced Coleridge's view of the imagination (e.g., Plotinus, Hartley, Kant). The contents of this chapter in context seem to stand off on their own, away from the focus of the book. Chapter 3, just six pages, presents Coleridge's definition of the Imagination, and Chapter 4 goes on to discuss key features of that definition, including a

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discussion of symbols. Part 2, "Imagination and the Playfulness of God," comprises Chapter 5 "Imagination and the Ontology of God"—over 75 pages and the heart of the book—then a conclusion and finally an appendix on how the views of nineteenth-century Christian teacher and novelist George MacDonald relate to the main argument. About half of Chapter 5 addresses theological ideas of play, suggesting connections between play and improvisation, music, "purposeless delight" (135), and other related topics, without much reference to Coleridge.

This book has a number of salient strengths. The use of imagination as a filter through which to view "thornier issues of theological discourse" (94) is innovative and promising. The argument makes good use of heuristic questions. For example, in relation to one of Coleridge's definitions of the imagination, Stockitt asks, "Is there a way in which the paradigm of activity and passivity is a useful one with which to engage when exploring Trinitarian questions? (125). In addressing the famous definitions of the imagination and the fancy in Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*, the question, "What is this 'eternal act of creation'?" (165), leads to a helpful review of pertinent Old Testament Hebrew words relating to creation, translated (when applied to humans) as "imagination." Nor does this study lack in courage, in moving beyond the familiar ground of the *Biographia*, to cite from the *Opus Maximum*, the "Essay on Faith," *Aids to Reflection*, and the notebooks.

A number of issues in the book combine to weaken these strong directions in the book, however. There are numerous errors in detail throughout the argument. In relation to biography, some dates of Coleridge's works are incorrect (15); it is highly debatable that Coleridge's output diminished after 1817 (10), and doubtful that by the turn of the century he "became firmly committed to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith of the Church" (13). There are also problems in presentation of definitions of Coleridge's key terms. Chapter 13 does not see the Fancy as one of "the three forms" of Coleridge's Imagination, nor is the Primary Imagination "quite simply an act of faith …, the interpenetration of the divine" (63–65). Another impediment to more persuasive argument is a logical hiccup in the central premise, evident in this comment on the primary imagination: "This human faculty, possessed by all, is none other than a reflection of the 'eternal act of creation in the Infinite I AM.' Imagination is thus, for Coleridge, both the *mode of being* and the *modus operandi* of the Trinitarian God" (171). That the "*human* faculty" (emphasis added) is a "reflection" of the divine act of creation is explicit in the definition; the inference that God therefore has an imagination is not. This shaky inference is omnipresent in the ensuing argument. Specifying God's creativity could be on safer ground; in his famous essay "On Fairy Stories," for example, J. R. R. Tolkien, building on the classic biblical notion that humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1.26), assumes that because God is a maker, human beings are too.

Finally, while Stockitt helpfully focuses on Coleridge's association between imagination and divinity, characterization of Coleridge's Trinity in *Imagination*

and the Playfulness of God is something of a jumble. There is proper recognition of Coleridge's belief that in the Trinity, Will is prior to Being (106). An important citation follows from Nicholas Reid's *Coleridge: Form and Symbol*[2] that Absolute "Will is the ground of the Trinity" but its only "existence" is in "its expression" in the Persons of the Trinity"; Absolute Will is not "to be equated with the Father" (qtd in Stockitt 106). Stockitt adds that Coleridge uses the language of "eternal Act," rather than of "substance," for the Ground or Absolute in the *Opus Maximum* (110). But Stockitt's application of these key points in the Coleridgean Trinity does not follow. This is, first, a matter of accuracy. Mary Anne Perkins, to cite one authority, does not argue that Coleridge "rejects" the conventional view of the Trinity as a Triad of Persons (Stockitt 110). Rather, he prefers an alternative formulation that is also orthodox[3] if less well known, the "divine tetractys": Absolute Will, Father, Son, and Spirit. Coleridge also stipulates that Absolute Will is not a person of the Trinity but rather "a purely critical concept" (Reid 129–31). Second, following through on Coleridge's notion of the Divine Tetractys can lead to stronger insights on, for example, the relation of the act of the primary imagination and the acts of the Tetractys in creation: a rich gateway further into the topic of this monograph.

Since Coleridge's ideas are the lens for analysis in this study, these issues weaken the reliability of larger discussion. The remedy is drawing more on the support of generously existing secondary sources, on definitions of imagination and fancy, and on Coleridge's view of the Trinity, for example. Careful incorporation from Owen Barfield's *What Coleridge Thought*, Mary Anne Perkins's *Coleridge's Philosophy*, and Nicholas Reid's *Coleridge: Form and Symbol*, for example—all sources named in Stockitt's bibliography—can help obviate the dangers associated with "reinventing the wheel" for scholars approaching these challenging topics.

Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief, by comparison, addresses a point of contention in literary theory of the last couple of decades. On the one hand, is the aesthetic appeal of texts to readers, for pleasure and imaginative transformation, actually a dangerous exposure to covert ideological possession—bad politics disguised as reading pleasure? On the other hand, would defensive reading that resists this danger of aesthetic pleasure also dissolve "the necessary illusions" that promise "human goods available through art" (109)? To answer this question, Tomko explores Coleridge's notion of the "willing suspension of disbelief" from Chapter 14 of the *Biographia*. He argues that some critics' use of Coleridge's idea "has consistently, and most recently in New Historicist theory," attempted to resolve this dilemma "by offering an engaged aesthetic experience, but one safely curtailed by a guarded gaze that 'goes along' with aesthetic tolerance."

[2] Nicholas Reid, *Coleridge, Form and Symbol: Or the Ascertaining Vision* (London: Ashgate Press, 2005), 120.
[3] Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 9n33, 62–63, 65.

Other critics, J. R. R. Tolkien for one, regard this view of Coleridge's idea "as a middling compromise that is unsatisfactory on all fronts." Chapter 1 critiques the New Historicist position; Chapter 2 investigates "faith" and "belief" in relation to "willing suspension of disbelief" and the associated "poetic faith" in the *Biographia* (14). Chapter 3 proposes a "willing resumption of disbelief" to preserve the recommended aesthetic engagement yet also to protect readers against "ideological domination," with particular reference to the work of Tolkien. Thus Tomko weds his theoretical subject, of much recent currency, to an investigation of a classic and important Coleridgean idea, the "willing suspension of disbelief."

Tomko, then, has chosen a very strong topic: the tension between aesthetic cum ethical appeal and ideological imperiousness. His tendency to use a dialectic of opposing positions, examine the shortcomings of either extreme, and explore intermediate positions makes a good match for Coleridge's own heuristic inclinations. The scope of the book is broad, encompassing numerous theoretical/critical texts (Eagleton, McGann, Tolkien, to name only a few) and primary texts (e.g., Shelley's "Ozymandias," Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Tempest*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*). There is no doubting the drive to discover in this author. Given these strengths, the book sets the bar very high on a topic of pressing interest for many readers.

These strengths would better shine if combined with more successful navigation of a number of challenges, however, most notably quoting out of context. There is a puzzling avoidance of analyzing the "willing suspension of disbelief" and "poetic faith" together, even though Coleridge yokes them in context: "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (BL II 6). This combination casts doubt on reading the syntax to mean that the first formulation is a "restrained, rationalistic hermeneutic" and the second "a cooperatively creative hermeneutic" (65–66). It is not clear, moreover, why the first formulation "should" necessarily "yield to" the second (110). Nor does the recurring dynamic of Coleridge's polar opposites, such as Reason and Understanding, apply to this pair of formulations so as to underwrite their separation (89)—particularly for a thinker who condemned "distinguishing, to divide." Instead, there is an even richer context in the *Biographia* for Coleridge's famous phrase, including commentary on "that *negative* faith, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own force" (BL II 134). There is also the immediately preceding version of "willing suspension …" concerning Coleridge's part in the division of labour with Wordsworth for the *Lyrical Ballads*: on "the interesting of the affections [of readers] by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real" (6). These passages also communicate with the extended discourse of Coleridge's critique of Wordsworth in Chapter 22. All these contexts deserve mutually to illuminate one another first, before one moves on to critique Coleridge's famous formulation. There are other such cases of quoting out of context in this study. For example, Tomko argues from Tolkien's "On

Fairy-Stories" that a positive alternative to "willing suspension of disbelief" is "Primary Belief,"[4] characterized as readers' feeling "simply there" in a deep identification with texts (60–61). But Tolkien regards such "belief" as delusion, more fit for elves than humans.

There is a larger context, too, of scholarship and theory that would help strengthen this study. Tomko's repeated claims that "in interpretations of Coleridge's theory from Tolkien to Gallagher the meaning of belief, faith, and disbelief are inconsistently and unclearly delineated" (61) mischaracterize a body of scholarship on these topics.[5] Also, Romanticist Marjorie Levinson's recent work on "new formalisms" seems a very good fit for this exploration of aesthetics and ideology in relation to literary theory and interpretation. Tomko's study would benefit from a fuller engagement with the existing conversation.

Another issue for the book is a preference for theorizing by inference from fiction and drama, rather than using available theoretical discourse as a more direct route to theorizing. For example, in mapping the "willing suspension …" onto the ghost scenes of Act 1 of *Hamlet*, the argument uncomfortably combines Coleridge's theory of reading literary texts, with a dramatic character seeing a ghost: "The drama does unfold in earnest when Hamlet … meets this 'questionable shape' with something akin to a Coleridgean 'poetic faith' that can 'as a stranger give it welcome' (I.iv.43, 174) … Hamlet performs the willing suspension of disbelief" (67). That Hamlet seeing a ghost is "something akin to" a person reading a literary text lacks the theoretical purchase and substance offered by Coleridge's statements on reading texts in the *Biographia*. This approach amounts to allegorizing narrative rather than using theoretical discourse where such translation is not necessary. The issue recurs in subsequent use of the wizard's debate from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, between Gandalf and Saruman at Orthanc, after the defeat of the latter's forces at Helm's Deep (Tomko 133–42). Here, for example, "if Gandalf attends to Saruman with 'poetic faith' and allows others to do so, then how does he eventually disarm the dark wizard with the effort of mind and will that constitute the 'willing resumption of disbelief'?" (135). Tolkien's fiction can bear the weight of such theorizing only with great difficulty, whereas Tolkien theorizes on the topic of readers' receiving the "unbelievable" in fairy tales, directly, at length, and with great sophistication, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories." Rather than dealing with the essay piecemeal, as this study does, gathered attention to its insights—and its many parallels to Coleridge's "willing suspension …" in spite of Tolkien's antipathy to the notion—could provide more persuasive analysis of Tolkien's place in the larger argument. Direct engagement with theoretical discourse as it exists elsewhere in the book is relatively stronger.

This review opened with a comment about how Coleridge draws scholars

[4] http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/fairystories-tolkien.pdf, p. 17, accessed August 31, 2017.
[5] Tomko includes numerous helpful sources in the bibliography. Evans, *Sublime Coleridge*, 144–51 and passim also addresses the topic.

from related, or more distant disciplines. This enthusiasm and often deep sense of resonance with Coleridge, if pursued further in scholarship, soon requires careful close reading and conceptualizing, moving from a felt affinity into Coleridge's exacting discourse, then out to related concerns. The authors of these two studies, coming from different disciplinary places, are to be commended for taking the plunge into these very challenging topics.