Philipp Hunnekuhl
reads
The Reception of S. T. Coleridge in Europe
(Continuum, 2007)
edited by
Elinor Shaffer and Edoardo Zuccato

A THOROUGHLY COMPILED, forty-page timeline initially suggests what the reader finds parcelled out in the subsequent thirteen chapters on Coleridge's reception in nine European countries: as translations from and criticisms of his works, after a slow start in the nineteenth century, become rapidly more widespread in the twentieth, the European reception of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry as well as his critical, philosophical, and theological writings assumes a centrifugal trajectory. The contributors to Shaffer and Zuccato's volume aptly convey how this reception has unfolded into increasingly uneven, disparate, even contradictory fragments between and within their countries and cultures of reception. This is what makes this volume Coleridgean in the most profound sense, as I shall elaborate below.

In the extensive number of works of reception cited throughout, the reader encounters, firstly, a multiplicity of often conflicting interpretations and appropriations of Coleridge's politics, aesthetics, and thought in general from the nineteenth century onwards. Secondly, the inevitable incompleteness of Coleridge's European reception comes to the fore in the growing awareness of which works have been translated and which have remained neglected; certain works, especially *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, were translated repeatedly and not seldom adapted in order to suit each translator's aesthetic, political, or religious views. Coleridge's poetry, moreover, not only crossed the confines of its language, but also those of its art form—in the sense that, quite apart from direct translations, it came to be reflected in a variety of engravings, novels, and plays.

An inherent disquietude characterises this multiplicity of facets in Coleridge's European reception. Its single fragments seem to be at constant unease with one another, hardly ever fitting in neatly with the rest. This is precisely what Coleridge's thought is often criticised for. In 1931, for instance, René Wellek sees in Coleridge's theoretical 'building' borrowed 'blocks of foreign marble or stone' that 'were no longer rough-hewn' but 'thoroughly prepared to fit another building', and he concludes that 'Coleridge had in mind a system, but what he accomplished is merely the heterogeneous combination of different systems'.[1] Luciano Anceschi, however, only five years after Wellek, turns the argument around:

> Under this appearance of disorder and confusion a clear logic is

---

[1] René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England 1793—1838* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 67-68.

> drawn, a logic that must be followed closely. It is not a formal or abstract logic. It is a logic, on the contrary, that wants to be of the same structure of life in its own making, in its internal motion. Briefly, a logic that is, so to say, the continuous revelation of a process of growth of a mental position, of a spiritual attitude.[2]

From this point of view, Coleridge's 'agile, inquisitive spirit' developed its own dynamic, 'not chained by any schema that could prevent him from every free movement or force him to accept a definitive and committed position' (*Reception*, 223). Exactly this is what makes Shaffer and Zuccato's volume so invaluable: it uncovers the ever-expanding, apparent 'disorder and confusion' of his reception, yet points out how Coleridge gives unity to its seemingly infinite fragmentation. The reader is left with an inspiring restlessness as this volume subtly conveys how Coleridge's European reception, following the 'logic [...] of the same structure of life in its own making, in its internal motion', matches his thought: while that reception gains increasing disparity in 'space, motion, and infinitesimal quantities',[3] one finds that, by this very characteristic, it lends heavy support to his thought.

Moreover, the timeliness of *The Reception of S. T. Coleridge in Europe* is undeniable—and not only because the final volume of the *Collected Coleridge* appeared as recently as 2003. Shaffer, in her capacity as editor of the series of which the present volume forms a part, fittingly notes that foreign responses to British and Irish writers 'Often [...] provide quite unexpected and enriching insights into our own history, politics and culture' (*Reception*, vii); thus, through reaching beyond national literary histories, we are beginning to understand more fully the bearing and merit of these, 'our' writers.

Seamus Perry, in the first chapter entitled 'Coleridge's English Afterlife', finds that Coleridge was most renowned as a 'philosopher, especially as a religious and social thinker' in the first years and decades after his death (*Reception*, 14). To Coleridge, Christianity was 'Not a *philosophy* of Life, but a Life and a living Process', and the ensuing question, 'How is this to be proved?', he answered with an emphatic 'TRY IT'![4] Such an organic notion of Christianity fits in well with Coleridge's overall thought as it has been 'tried' and, ultimately, supported by the course of his European reception. This course, in England, was to lead to the growing appreciation of Coleridge's literary criticism and, finally, the acknowledgement of his rank as a poet, Perry argues in his lucid contribution.

Two essays on French matters follow, namely 'Coleridge's Early Reception in France, from the First to the Second Empire' by Michael John Kooy, and Gilles Soubigou's 'The Reception of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

---

[2] Luciano Anceschi, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte: sviluppo e teoria di un problema estetico* (Florence: Sansoni, 1992), 34. Quoted in *Reception*, 223; tr. by Franco Nasi.

[3] BL I 298: 'infinitely small quantities'. For the above quotation and further references see *Reception*, 270n (Procházka).

[4] AR, 202. Quoted in *Reception*, 16.

through Gustave Doré's illustrations'. Despite French responses not being the earliest ones, the fact that many of them, often in translation, eventually found their way into other European countries and repeatedly re-appear in the remainder of the book justifies these essays' early positioning in the arrangement of chapters. The most frequently cited academic responses throughout the *Reception* are Philarète Chasles's, whose detailed assessment of Coleridge Kooy introduces. Chasles recognises Coleridge's 'brilliant power of the imagination, both strong and original', which, however, he 'sacrificed' to the German school of poetry.[5] It is difficult to determine whether this is more of a positive or negative judgement, and indeed opinions on Chasles's estimation of Coleridge vary from 'admiration' to 'strong disapproval' among this compilation's contributors (*Reception*, 65; 277).

Be that as it may, indifference or largely negative prejudices towards Coleridge would prevail in many parts of Europe until well into the twentieth century, just as Hazlitt's strong disapproval of Coleridge's politics and dissemination of German thought had previously influenced the French reception. Kooy convincingly argues that Coleridge, despite such a problematic start with the critics, had by the mid-nineteenth century "entered mainstream French culture through a variety of journals, 'minor' poets and literary journalists who knew their subject well and communicated it in thoughtful and sometimes original ways" (*Reception*, 57). Moreover, he explains the way Coleridge's novel use of the uncanny, dream, and mysticism, especially in the 'Ancient Mariner', prepared the ground for French Symbolism and influenced Baudelaire in particular.

Gilles Soubigou provides a detailed analysis of the artistic response through which this very poem, in many translations and editions, was disseminated even beyond Europe from 1876 onwards: Gustave Doré's illustrations, which soon became an incentive—or even pretext—for translating Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' in the first place (*Reception*, 74). From the first editions in Britain and the US (both 1876), France and Germany (both 1877), Italy (1889), Russia (1893), and Spain (1898), the number of reprints, new editions, and further translations increased quickly, so that the reverberations of Coleridge's poem could soon be traced in many more cultures. Soubigou impressively combines meticulous scholarship with a gripping narration of Doré's general fascination with English matters alongside the provenance, distribution, and impact of his illustrations.

Chapters four and five cover Coleridge's reception in Germany before and after World War II, contributed by Frederick Burwick and Hans Werner Breunig respectively. Coleridge's attending Blumenbach's 1799 lectures is mentioned only in passing—not unjustly so, because it is not part of his reception in Germany as such—and yet I wish to point out that it is in the direct Blumenbach-Kant link that the origins of Coleridge's own organic

[5] Philarète Chasles, 'Essai historique sur la poésie anglaise et sur les poètes anglais vivants', *Revue encyclopédique*, 9: 228-40, 446-58; 447. Quoted in *Reception*, 31; tr. by Michael John Kooy.

concept of philosophy, repeatedly addressed in the *Reception*, may lie.

While Kooy mentions that different political parties in France interpreted Coleridge in their favour, Burwick, having pointed out the unique reciprocity of his relationship to Germany, explains the manner in which Coleridge's politics entered the German agenda even during his lifetime. It is indeed fascinating to trace how in the pre-revolutionary *Vormärz* Coleridge was praised for his alleged egalitarianism, whereas in the second half of the nineteenth century his promotion of German thought and poetry in England helped a strongly hierarchical German nation to define itself.

Breunig's essay is nicely broken down into several aspects of Coleridge's reception in Germany after 1945, achieving readability through thematic (and not primarily chronological) cohesion. Through Coleridge's organic notion of the state, poetry, religion, and life in general, the 'Fragmentation, polarity and dialectic' of his system are neatly made out, and, as a result, so are those very characteristics of his reception (*Reception*, 124). The political polarity in reception in particular can be traced in the different treatments Coleridge received in East and West Germany, with scholarship being partially sacrificed against the backdrop of GDR ideology.

Eugenia Perojo Arronte contributes chapters six, 'Imaginative Romanticism and the Search for a Transcendental Art: Coleridge's Poetry and Poetics in Nineteenth-Century Spain', and seven, 'A Path for Literary Change: The Spanish Break with Tradition and the Role of Coleridge's Poetry and Poetics in Twentieth-Century Spain'. In the former, the Spanish path to Coleridge via Wordsworth and, subsequently, the important role of the Spanish emigré Blanco White strike the reader. Still more so does the Spanish association of Romantic ideas with political reactionary ideology. This is, as Marilyn Butler has shown,[6] only one tendency within the various and contradictory Romantic literature in its entirety, and yet the complexity of this literature is best grasped using Coleridge's thought as a microcosm.

In her latter contribution, Perojo Arronte argues that in the twentieth century, Coleridge's works were 'received and appropriated in the most diverse ways by Spanish writers', contrasting it to the scarce and predominantly classicist reception in nineteenth-century Spain (*Reception*, 196). In this increasing fragmentation, it is once more Coleridge who, now passively, 'grasp[s] at unity in the diversity of a fragmentary world' (*Reception*, 179); it is his notion of the imagination that permeates and explains his reception, poeticised, as it were, by the stylistic and linguistic beauties the reader encounters in the many European recipients of Coleridge in the course of this volume.

Edoardo Zuccato's 'The Translation of Coleridge's Poetry and his Influence on Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry' and Franco Nasi's 'Coleridge's Aesthetic Philosophy and Critical Writings in Italy' come next. Zuccato describes the most poignant literary response to Coleridge's poetry throughout, namely Primo Levi's comparison of himself to the Ancient Mariner, compelled

6 Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

to pass on his personal account of surviving Auschwitz. The quandary of the objectively unjustifiable, albeit subjectively perceived 'guilt' of the survivor and his search for purification from it emerges most distressingly through this comparison.

Furthermore, stage adaptations of the 'Ancient Mariner' came to play an important role in Italy, thereby transgressing genre boundaries. Coleridge, Zuccato argues, gradually entered the rank of the most prominent English romantics in Italy, although, paradoxically, through translations of his less well-renowned texts.

In addition to Anceschi's above-quoted novel interpretation of Coleridge's logic, Franco Nasi persuasively depicts the oscillation in the Italian reception of his thought as it gained momentum in the early twentieth century. Nasi uncovers 'changes in sympathy for Coleridge, the passage from indifference to extreme fascination and vice versa, the constant change of an ever-moving horizon' (*Reception*, 241); changes as 'ever-moving' as Coleridge's very thought, I may add, and as such furthered by Chinol, Orsini, and Marcucci in the second half of the twentieth century.

Chapter ten is Jorge Bastos da Silva's 'On the Very Late Reception of Coleridge's Writings in Portugal'. Here it stands out even more than in the previous chapters that nineteenth-century references to Coleridge were not only scarce, but virtually absent in Portugal. Only through Fernando Pessoa did Coleridge's reception find a solid basis in the 1920s and 30s, paving the way for 'the displacement of the centripetal subjectivity of Romanticism by the centrifugal, fragmented subject of modernist writing'; only through Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' did Pessoa find his very own 'modernist deployment of the self's fragmentation' (*Reception*, 251-52).

Besides Wellek's above mentioned treatment of Coleridge, Martin Procházka, in 'A Spectre or an Unacknowledged Visionary? Coleridge in Czech Culture', discovers a wide (and widening) range of Czech responses. Just as Wellek and Anceschi diverged in their evaluation of Coleridge's thought, the Czech controversy regarding vision and hallucination in Coleridge's poetry represents another profound disagreement on Coleridge's merits. The important role of Chasles's translations, as well as the appropriation of Coleridge in the process of self-definition in nations struggling for their very existence, link his Czech with the following chapter on his Polish reception. The Czech picture of Coleridge, Procházka concludes, had become that of a 'minor subversive voice identified with the banned bourgeois culture, especially with Modernism and Catholic poetry' after World War II (*Reception*, 272).

Monika Coghen's 'A Laker, a Friend to Poland, or a European Classic: Coleridge's Polish Reception' conveys his early fascination with Tadeusz Kosciuszko, leader of the Polish insurrection of 1794. This fascination—and the Polish appreciation of it—occasionally found its way through the Russian censorship of the time, for instance in the works of Feliks Jezierski, but failed

to find a larger Polish audience, Coghen elaborates. As in most of the previously mentioned countries, Coleridge gained his main recognition in Poland only in the twentieth century.

The thirteenth and final essay is titled 'The Albatross in Russia: Praised, Shot and Repented', written by Elena Volkova. It takes the most poetic turn, as it were, of all the contributions, projecting the Mariner's tale onto Russian (literary) history under communism and after it. Volkova repeatedly uses lines from Coleridge's poem as epigraphs to her several paragraphs, seeing the albatross and its being shot as an allegory of Christianity in Russia in 1917. Moreover, Nikolai Gumilev, according to Volkova the best Russian translator of the 'Ancient Mariner', was executed for being a counter-revolutionary in 1921. His death, as a consequence of the newly established 'militant atheism' of the regime, may thus be viewed as another result of a sin that needs constant reiteration and repenting (*Reception*, 316).

Through all these brief recapitulations I have sought to give a thorough impression of the diversity of Coleridge's reception that I outlined initially, and thereby highlight the significance of Shaffer and Zuccato's edition. It remains to be hoped that *The Reception of S. T. Coleridge in Europe* will find its readership in the countries that it deals with, and, through the literary cross-currents it uncovers, spark further dialogue between as well as research into the interplay of these countries' cultures.