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reads

Poetic Lives: Coleridge

(Hesperus Press, 2009)

by Daniel Hahn

THERE ARE TWO DISTINCT MOVEMENTS to Daniel Hahn's *Poetic Lives: Coleridge*—the biographical detail and the choice of poems. Hahn comments that it was impossible to cram Coleridge's long-for-a-romantic-poet life into a short book: "Coleridge deserves a rich, leisurely portrait, he deserves being read in a magnificent, rich, sympathetic, teeming biography" (164). On the topic of the choice of poems, he self-deprecatingly writes, "And what, no 'Christabel'? You actually cut 'Fears in Solitude'?!" (164). Hahn makes much of his Cambridge connections, although this seems to have involved him in what he knocks as mere hackwork—and the result is that the poems are not explicated in this "sprint through the basic facts" (164-6). That said, the biographical material is well-handled, despite a tellingly small number of references to Richard Holmes. Indeed the hovering background presence of Holmes's influence shows up Hahn's workman-like prose: "into these notebooks… we find Coleridge's massive brainpower seeping—not in worked-through, fully realised and structured finished poems, but what Richard Holmes has called 'a kind of glistening chaos'" (90). Holmes, I think, alludes to symbolic translucence. Hahn admits that "if you want to read a biography of Coleridge, you read Richard Holmes. The first volume, *Coleridge: Early Visions*… is not only the best book about Coleridge I know, but my favourite biography, by anyone, of anyone" (164). My own preference was for the second volume, *Darker Reflections*, and I would heartily recommend Frank MacLynn's *Napoleon: A Biography* as a rival Romantic era life because of the commanding epic sweep of the narrative, which contrasts with the absolute but microcosmic genius of Coleridge's later notebook jottings. Due to Hahn's provisos and limitations, this review will concentrate upon the stylistically grounded biography in an effort to trace what Hahn adjudges to be the most important occurrences in Coleridge's life.

Perhaps the most significant statement that Hahn makes is to write that Coleridge's childhood was characterised by a mixture of indulgence and bullying which is backed up with Coleridge's Joseph-recollection that "My father was very fond of me, and I was my mother's darling: in consequence I was very miserable" (9). Hahn pays attention to Coleridge's habit of running away from his problems, first as a child, who hid at night on the banks of the Otter, then as a student enlisting in the dragoons and finally the ill-starred voyage to Malta. Then to cap it all, this artful Chattertonian dodger of familial responsibility retreated to Highgate the entire length of the country from Sara and Asra. But Hahn is strangely elliptical with regard to the death throes of Pantisocracy and instead of quoting from that effusively plangent letter to

Southey, Hahn just mentions in passing that "the early burning enthusiasm for Pantisocracy had already begun to cool" (33). Holmes speculates that the deliciously sensitive Coleridge may have had gay tendencies and it cannot go unnoticed that Coleridge married his best friend Southey's wife's sister and then fell desperately in love with another best friend's wife's sister. Lloyd's *Edmund Oliver* is not mentioned by Hahn.

Where Hahn is at his deftest is in employing mild sarcasm to portray Napoleonic peccadilloes, "those Cumberland-born Wordsworths didn't have acceptable local accents, and so were almost certainly dangerous radical lunatic foreign types" (49). His comparison of Wordsworth and Coleridge while in Germany is pithy enough to quote, "one manic, the other sedentary, one garrulous, demanding, dazzling, the other reflective, self-sufficient" (80). Unfortunately, the friendship cooled with each draught of procrastination and laudanum, until the gossipy Basil Montagu let slip that Wordsworth considered Coleridge an "absolute nuisance" and a "rotten drunkard" (110). Hahn adds that Wordsworth believed Coleridge could only latterly compose in an involuntary fashion just as the birds sing, "as if he could not help it" (123). One new thing I learnt from perusing these pages was the word "anhedonia", a term meaning a depressive loss in the ability to experience pleasure, which is employed to characterise the tone of *Dejection: An Ode* (93).

I had the distinct impression that the tragedy for Hahn was that in the latter years of Coleridge's life, "the poetry is replaced by lectures and essays, pamphlets and newspaper articles, by the writing in his notebooks" (119). The quotation that Hahn provides as a eulogy for Coleridge is from the curiously late-to-the-story Leigh Hunt, "Oh! It is too late now; and habit and self-love blinded me at the time, and I did not know (much as I admired him) how great a poet lived in that grove at Highgate" (135). Ultimately, Hahn believes Coleridge to be a poet more than a theologian, philosopher, journalist, or talker: "But it's no surprise that it was as a poet (especially of just a certain small number of poems) that he will be chiefly remembered" (137).

The poems are largely left to speak for themselves which is a blessing in this day and age. The only quibble I have here is that the publication history of the poems is somewhat neglected with the noble exception of the glossed later version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. For instance, that version of *The Aeolian Harp* that contains the addition of the One Life vignette is quoted anachronistically with the poem's first writing rather than later, when the *Sybilline Leaves* volume came to print. Having not read this poem for a couple of years what came across in this recapitulation was Coleridge's delicately tremulous sensitivity as a botanist poet of enough bewitching beauty to seduce latter-day Cantabs. Hahn has an eye for beauty, as his thoughts on *Kubla Khan* aptly demonstrate, "a fifty-four-line poetic vision—sustained, intense and musical, a sequence of vivid dream-images, each one crystallising and growing into the next" (50). He notices Coleridge's attentive poetic descriptions of bees and gardens but does not develop the thought—"(populated with bees

again)" (129). Could it be that as God's industrious creatures the bees have geometrical knowledge and yet no free will and exist in an Edenic environment reminiscent of Coleridge's own spoilt-rotten childhood paradise in Ottery? And the presumed rationality of the honeybees (addicted to nectar) perhaps symbolises Coleridge's craving for the transcendental but salted by the knowledge that the general will of Rousseau's philosophy was implicated in the Terror. This insight leads to the further nuance that grotesque sensuality attended his own opium addiction and that sensuality is sometimes associated with atheism in Coleridge's writings, the same atheism that led the Cathedral of Notre Dame to host a bizarre ceremony to Reason during Citizen Robespierre's reign. My guess would be that the perception of bees at work in a garden stimulates many dark reflections on the topic of innocently ordered happiness and chaotic experiential torment and hence the impossibility of baking better philosophical bread than can be made from human wheat. It might be that Hahn was thinking the same fallen dystopian chain of associations but his *Poetic Lives* vehicle represents intellectual limitation and moreover largely ignores the context of the French Revolution.

Poetic Lives: Coleridge would seem a lyrical biography choked with limpid just-so syntax, but redeemed by a liberal quota of Coleridge's more accessible shorter poems and chunky sections from the longer ones, though by lyrical I mean that this little beginner's guide to Coleridge is full of lyrics rather than Cider-with-Rosie sentences. Taken on its own terms the book would make an excellent introductory present for a lay reader or else a young person interested in learning more about Coleridge, perhaps for the purposes of passing an A-level English Literature examination. To the purist, the academic, or even a doctoral student, the tome might feel lightweight, but this is to read the work against the grain of its publisher's intention.