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Coleridge and Contemplation

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edited by Peter Cheyne

RECENT CRITICISM HAS CONTINUED TO SHOW STRONG INTEREST in the philosophical and theological aspects of Coleridge's work, and *Coleridge and Contemplation* is a most fascinating contribution to this work still in process. The first questions that come to mind when one reads the title concern the reasons why Cheyne attaches such an eminent role to "contemplation" in Coleridge's oeuvre. He first provides a working definition of the term via Thomas Aquinas: contemplation is "a simple intellectual view of the truth, superior to reasoning and accompanied by admiration," which is later redefined in a more Kantian-Christian vein as "the sustained attention to the ideas of reason, which are not merely concepts in the mind, but real and external powers that constitute and order being and value, and therefore excite reverence or admiration" (1). The stakes of Coleridgean contemplation are high, since it is the "dim intuition" of these ideas (which also come to include God, eternity, freedom, will, absolute truth, the good, the true, the beautiful, etc.) that make us human. One may even paraphrase the Coleridge of the *Church and State*, by saying that it is, precisely, the act of contemplation that constitutes our humanity and defines us as humans rather than animals. Indeed, contemplation is closely linked to cultivation ("the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity") without the normative violence and the political implications of the latter ("We must be men in order to be citizens") (*C&S* 42).

Meanwhile, one of Cheyne's purposes is to defend the value of the humanities through the exploration of the Coleridgean idea of contemplation. Opposing the popular view that culture (and cultivation) belongs to the elite, he argues that contemplation does not exclude the everyday life of everyday people: "the value that gives meaning and purpose" to our practical concerns can be found in acts of contemplation, which can simply mean that "one looks at something and sees that it is good" (3). The volume itself deals with the "late Coleridge," whose focus shifted from the Imagination and the symbol towards the ideas of Reason from around 1818. Contemplation designates this directedness towards ideas, as the leading concern of his late writings. Indeed, Cheyne does not present Coleridge's life as a decline, starting with original poetry and ending with the babblings of some unregenerate mind. He rather wishes to restore Coleridge as a philosopher in his own right and explore the

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place he occupies in the history of Western ideas (vi).

The first part of the volume shows the ways in which Coleridge's poetics and aesthetics are connected to contemplation. In the first chapter, J.C. C. Mays discusses the differences between Coleridge's poetic and philosophical contemplation, focusing on the short poem "First Advent of Love." Mays argues that the poem addresses emotional problems and conveys energy and vitality, which contrasts with the ways in which his prose strives for intellectual understanding. David E. Cooper addresses the relationship between meditation and walking, and how walking, as an "unplanned amble" (35), inspires meditation—a specific, spiritual way of looking at nature. This kind of wandering reverie is beyond conventional categories; it combines the exercise of reason, of emotion, of sensibility, mood, desire, and perception (39), yielding a communion with nature, a sense of the world as unity (42). In the next chapter, James Kirwan argues that Coleridge, in "Principles of genial Criticism," refuses to found aesthetic experience in psychological or natural terms; Coleridge is not only embedded in eighteenth century aesthetics, but equally appeals to Plotinus, for whom the beautiful reveals the divine. Kathleen Wheeler explores the ways in which Dewey's *Art as Experience* is indebted to Coleridge. She argues that Dewey was specifically influenced by Coleridge's view of perception as both active and passive, and understood experience as a delightful, active interaction with the world, which can become aesthetic. Roger Scruton turns Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination into a contemporary warning against the dangers of fantasy as opposed to the beneficial character of the workings of the imagination. While the former makes us passively indulge in what is forbidden—in what is excluded from the real—the latter, modelled on Coleridge's secondary imagination, is a "truth directed activity, which approaches the real by the avenue of the unreal" (83).

The second part of the volume is entitled "Worldviews: Science, Ethics, and Politics." The first chapter by David Knight explores Coleridge's lifelong pursuit of chemical science and medicine as contemplative: forming a worldview, it makes it possible to find "poetry . . . realised in nature." This dynamical science, as opposed to what Coleridge called the worldview of empiricists (for whom Life was the effect of organisation as a cause), offered him a contemplative vision of reality seen as a harmonious, living unity, testifying to the presence of a wise and benevolent Creator. Philip Aherne discusses the many ways in which Coleridge impacted the Cambridge Apostles, especially Hare and Maurice, and the subsequent development of theology in Cambridge in the nineteenth century. He argues that Coleridge's influence importantly shaped Utilitarianism in Cambridge, but this influence consisted in a particularly contemplative "way of seeing" (108) rather than in an adherence to some concrete Coleridgean creed. Kaz Oishi assesses Coleridge's idea of the well-being of nations against the background Robert Owen's *A New View of Society* (1813). He argues that despite the philanthropic ideals he shared with Owen even after his disillusionment with the French Revolution, the religio-philosophical basis of his ideas on education was at odds with Owen's

empiricist arguments. And while Coleridge was indebted to Kant, he also diverted from him in emphasising the importance of hope and love, not only for moral education but also as the basis of education and the "spiritual welfare of the nation" (139). Andy Hamilton assesses Coleridge's conservativism, and his relation to conservative and liberal traditions. He claims that his conservativism, which was based on rational contemplation and departed from Burke's particularist scepticism, did not appeal to those who constructed the ideology of British conservativism in the later nineteenth century" (143). He particularly foregrounds the late Coleridge's ideas of cultivation (and its contrast with civilisation), the role he attached to the clerisy, and his critique of instrumental rationality. He eventually argues that Coleridge's political ideal was a progressive conservativism, which can be paradoxically considered more Whig than Tory.

The essays composing the third part of the volume discuss Coleridge's metaphysics. Most of them are concerned with Platonic or Neo-Platonic influences, and Coleridge's "Order of mental Powers." Peter Cheyne's own essay describes Coleridge's dynamic, two-level model of the mind. On the upper level, we find the higher, intellectual mind, which is composed of ideas, such as "God, the soul, eternal Truth, etc."; these cannot be fully expressed, nor comprehended, and work within the *energeia* of free will. On the lower level, we find desire, fancy, and the associations, and all psychological pressures driven by pleasure and instinct, to grasp and appropriate (189), subordinated to the higher mind. These two levels, according to Cheyne, are "capable of association across a fundamental difference" (12). Dillon Struwig carefully reads Coleridge's *Logic* not as an imprint of but rather as a critical engagement with Kant. He equally presents Coleridge as a two-level theorist, who reorients Kantian philosophy to distinguish between a subjective metaphysics of "negative reason" (concerned with what Plato calls *dianoia*) and an objective metaphysics of "positive reason" (concerned with *nóësis,* a contemplative knowledge transcending the finite human mind) (195). Cristina Flores magnificently explores the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth's influence on Coleridge's idea of contemplation, focusing, especially, on the Conversation Poems, such as "Effusion XXXV," "Religious Musings," "Frost at Midnight," or "The Nightingale." Douglas Hedley considers the genealogy of contemplation in Coleridge, from the Late Antique Platonism to the Cambridge Platonists and the German Idealists. He specifically considers the Platonic implications of the "image" for Coleridge and its Trinitarian connotations, departing from the more secular focus on the Coleridgean symbol in recent scholarship. James Engell's starting point is the claim that "At the centre of Coleridge's [...] thought is the Act" (237). The Act unites Coleridge's philosophical and religious thinking: it is essential to Coleridge's assessment of German philosophy, to his modified Platonism, as well as to his Trinitarian thought. It is crucial for Coleridge's treatment of "perception, understanding, knowing, thinking, imagination, being, Reason, and contemplation" (237). Engell's paper, like Coleridge's thinking in his view,

revolves around Coleridge's understanding of the act of contemplation from his early years until his death.

The fourth part of the volume places Coleridge's philosophy and religion in the frame of contemplation. The first essay by Michael McGhee offers a Buddhist response to Coleridge. It seeks to establish a dialogue between Coleridge's Kantianism, his Christianity, and the Buddhist traditions. Focusing on "mindfulness" and "concentration," two spiritual faculties in Buddhism, McGhee analyses "Fears in Solitude" and "Frost at Midnight" to eventually argue that Coleridge's Christianity, involving the acts of seeing steadily and seeing the whole, involves a compassionate, communal vision of the world and of humanity. Noriko Naohara's "The Will to Faith: Coleridge's Contemplative Theology" explores the intricate relationship between religion as pious feelings and philosophical rationality in Coleridge's search for the spiritual existence of a loving God (279). The essay outlines, among other things, the ways in which Augustine influenced Coleridge's idea of language, elaborating on Coleridge's idea of "the visible Words of the invisible Word," that is, Christ. Suzanne E. Webster presents Coleridge's thoughts on the "triple Ichheit," as a context for the Order of Mental Powers. She discusses how the "Animal I," the "Spiritual I," and the "human I" engage in a co-operative relationship, and how the ordering of mental powers relate to Coleridge's thoughts on God, the Trinity, and the relationship between Will, Reason, and faith (293). The last essay of the volume by J. Gerald Janzen discusses Coleridge's last notebook, No 55. He argues that the ultimate goal of Coleridge's lifelong reflections is, precisely, contemplation. The chapter, and with it the book, closes almost on a note of despair: Coleridge kept longing for the affective dimension of faith throughout his life, which nevertheless remained absent, but was still somehow present, precisely in the awareness of its absence (318). Yet, Janzen eventually manages to recuperate Coleridge for a more optimistic religiosity: Coleridge's "was a life of contemplation grounded in simple faith, however 'splintered,' awaiting its final end in delight, awe, and thanksgiving" (318).

What I found especially relevant among these studies are Andy Hamilton's reassessment of the reception Coleridge's political thought, Peter Cheyne's and Suzanne E. Webster's fascinating engagement with his order of mental powers, and J. Gerald Janzen's exquisite focus on the place of affect in Coleridge's life. Meanwhile, the way in which Roger Scruton places the Coleridgean distinction between fancy and imagination in a contemporary context distorts, I think, the complexity of the Coleridgean argument. All in all, however, while the foregrounding of the act of contemplation in Coleridge's thought might have seemed somewhat arbitrary at first, the volume as a whole wonderfully succeeds in highlighting how this single term can inspire such a great plethora of powerful arguments that prove that Coleridge's ideas still continue to live with us.