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Body and Soul in Coleridge's Notebooks, 1827-1834: 'What is Life?'
(Palgrave 2010)
by Suzanne Webster

AS ANY STUDENT OF COLERIDGE KNOWS, to open up one of his "Fly-Catchers" is to find oneself immersed in the tumultuous buzzing of a complex and often contradictory series of ideas, impressions, observations, exclamations and definitions relating to a wide range of topics. It is all too tempting to peruse these fascinating, yet confounding, documents for choice quotations with which to introduce or advance a particular point about Coleridge's life, thought or work. In *Body and Soul,* Suzanne Webster takes on one of the most hotly contested areas in Coleridge studies—his thoughts on Body/Soul relations—through a richly detailed study of his collection of private notebooks, which have yet to receive a great deal of scholarly attention as records of sustained reflection.[1] Through readings of Coleridge's notebook entries, public prose, and marginalia alongside meticulous attention to the scientific, philosophical and theological frameworks with which he continually grappled, Webster's study presents the reader with a deepened understanding, not only of Coleridge's ongoing theorization of Body/Soul relations, but also of the method and style of his thinking. Instead of arguing for a "linear pattern" of development in Coleridge's thinking, *Body and Soul* illustrates, through a careful examination of his own "painstakingly formulated distinctions and definitions," that he was instead "adhering to and developing simultaneously several opposing ideologies or paradigms" (xxiv-xxvi).

Chapter 1, "Coleridge in Limbo: Competing Views on Body and Soul," establishes three of these paradigms in turn: the holistic approach, the radically-dualistic approach, and the non-radically dualistic approach. The chapter begins with a reading of his unpublished essay, *Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* (1816-1818), as a way of establishing Coleridge's engagement with German Idealism and *Naturphilosophie* in his formulation of the holistic approach, which conceives of Body and Soul as taking part in an absolutely interdependent relationship. This section outlines the influence on and affinities between *Naturphilosophie* and Coleridge's *Theory*, namely the way in which thinkers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854) and Heinrich Steffens (1773-1845) provided models with

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[1] The great exception being, of course, Kathleen Coburn, *Experience into Thought: Perspectives in the Coleridge Notebooks* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979). Some notable recent article length treatments include Rei Terada, "Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction in Coleridge's *Notebooks*." *Studies in Romanticism* 43 (Summer 2004), pp. 257-81, and K. Dugas, "Struggling with the Contingent: Self-Conscious Imagination in Coleridge's Notebooks.," in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. Richard Gravil et. Al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 53-68.

which to confront the methodological limits of the empirical sciences in favor of an approach that "allowed a degree of physiological Being to exist in all strata of Creation"(6). In Coleridgean fashion, however, Webster's presentation of the holistic approach immediately begins to reveal the cracks in this assessment of Coleridge's position. Reading the *Theory* in light of Coleridge's knowledge of the ancient Greek and Biblical sources that underlie *Naturphilosophie*, Webster argues that Coleridge departs significantly from these thinkers in his assertion of God's original power and continuing superiority over Nature in relation to Man.

The second and third sections of this chapter continue focus on the extent of Coleridge's knowledge of Greek and Biblical traditions and their respective influences on his thought process. Combining a reading of Plato's *Phaedo* with Coleridge's (admittedly sparse) marginalia, other sources such as the *Philosophical Lectures*, and the later notebooks, Webster analyzes Coleridge's dialogue with radically-dualistic Platonic philosophy with nuance and care, noting his tendencies to compare Greek philosophy to Biblical thought and to assert the superiority of the latter. Through a fascinating consideration of the idea of the 'life-element' in pre-Christian Hebraic thought, Webster demonstrates the ways in which Coleridge's critique of the holistic Hebraic anthropological paradigm mirrors his earlier critique of the limits of *Naturphilosophie*. This chapter establishes Coleridge's awareness of and ongoing conflict between three paradigms of Body/Soul relations—holistic, radically-dualistic, and the non-radically-dualistic—in order to set up the question that drives the book as a whole: "*why* Coleridge felt such a degree of comfort juggling these conflicting approaches" (66).

According to Webster, the beginnings of an answer to this question lie in the "personality and Scriptural teachings of St. Paul"(66). Chapter 2, "Indecisive Reflections: Body, Soul and Pauline Theology" focuses on readings of notebook entries that consider the Body/Soul dynamic in the context of New Testament theology. It is at this point in the book that a defining aspect of Webster's study emerges: for Coleridge, the issue of Body/Soul relations was not only scientific, philosophical and/or theological, but also deeply personal. The chapter thus begins with a consideration of Coleridge's knowledge of—and attitude towards—Paul's personal, intellectual and theological development. The heart of this chapter is an extensive close reading of the notebook entries that engage with the Pauline Scripture that contained, for Coleridge, the most significant references to the Body, Romans 7.24: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death!" These readings begin with a particularly intriguing consideration of an 1827 note on mesmerism in which Coleridge meditates on the state of "*acting*" and thinks through the implications of the Body figured in radically-dualistic terms, as "a moveable Dungeon with Windows, and Sound-holes" (76, quoting CN V 5671). Webster draws a compelling portrait of Coleridge as sage, working through a series of theological speculations permeated with personal struggles

with pain, disease, impending death and—crucially—the nature of sin.

In Chapter 3, "The Crux of the Dilemma: The Incarnation, Humanity, and 'Obnoxious Body' of Christ" and Chapter 4, "Resurrection: the Role of the 'Natural Body,'" Webster argues that the "locus of humanness" of Jesus poses a problem that lies at the crux of several key tenets of Christian doctrine, and as such, the Incarnate body and Resurrected state of Christ emerge as crucial aspects of Coleridge's thinking on Body/Soul relations, indeed, the "issues closest to his core values" (113). Chapter 3 begins with readings of notebook entries alongside close readings of ambiguous key terms from Scriptural sources, in particular the phrase "likeness of sinful flesh" as it appears in Paul's Epistles and plays a key role in Coleridge's musings on Christ's Humanity, which combines "true identity" with some aspect of "difference" from human beings (133). Through a consideration of Coleridge's private remarks on the issue alongside the public and controversial writings of Edward Irving (1792-1834), Webster explores the theological implications of viewing Christ's Mission on earth through fleshly limits. Chapter 4 examines Coleridge's extension of these implications to the problem of the Afterlife or the Future State, which, in a return to the major dilemma of Chapter 1, point back to his urge to "accommodate both his scientific and religious beliefs"(162). This chapter proves to be a satisfying conclusion to the study as a whole, as it draws from and adds to the substantial theological and scientific contexts that have been previously established in order to explicate the nuances in Coleridge's conception of Personal Identity, developing his idea of the Triple Ichheit, which situates the Spiritual 'I,' or soul, and the Animal 'I,' or Body, through the Human 'I,' or 'I am,' as a "compromise," or a "median state" that "experiences and shapes everyday reality" (172).

Body and Soul presents the reader with a thorny set of philosophical and theological issues through the lens of a primary text that poses its own considerable interpretive problems. In this sense, the greatest weakness of the study is its reluctance to address these theoretical difficulties head on, beyond the acknowledgment that the notebooks present a more private and personal Coleridge than the one that usually attracts the scholarly eye.[2] Readers new to Coleridge scholarship or unfamiliar with the tenets of Christian doctrine central to the final chapters may find the sheer density of the argumentation, which often (though arguably, given the scope of the study, necessarily) relegates the primary materials to the footnotes, difficult to follow.[3] The dedicated reader, however, will be introduced to a wealth of questions and a compelling account of Coleridge's vexed treatment of them. Webster's arguments are at their best when grounded clearly in readings that explicate the

[2] Readers interested in thinking through the status of Coleridge's notebooks as texts will find a fine starting point in Paul Cheshire, "Coleridge's Notebooks," in *The Oxford Companion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).

[3] The notes themselves are quite clear. Webster employs a method distinct from Coburn and later editors of *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* for citing entries, but explains the method thoroughly in her Notes to the Text, and includes the standard notation as well.

ambiguities and contexts of specific notebook entries, and her close readings of Biblical, Platonic and other contextual sources are engaging and illuminating. Most significant, however, is Webster's sizeable contribution to a growing body of scholarship that takes Coleridge's later thought seriously. It could be argued that *Body and Soul* lacks a sustained engagement of the key texts in this area, namely *Aids to Reflection* and *Opus Maximum*; however, these sources do play a role in the book's major arguments, and are cited frequently in the notes. In this sense, *Body and Soul* is an excellent work to consider in conjunction with studies that do focus on these texts explicitly.[4] It is a book that seeks to develop rather than dismiss the *saltus* between Coleridge's scientific proclivities and his religious musings, allowing for a compelling glimpse of the personal struggles that drove his work.

[4] For example, the lengthy 'Prolegomena' to *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi, Vol. 15 of The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), *Coleridge's Assertion of Religion: Essays on the 'Opus Maximum,'* ed. Jeffrey Barbeau (Leuven: Peeters, 2006) and Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).