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reads
Coleridge's Chrysopoetics: Alchemy, Authorship and Imagination
(Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011)
by Kiran Toor

COLERIDGE'S ATTRACTION TO ESOTERIC AND HERMETIC THOUGHT is not only signalled by such isolated declarations as his 1796 letter saying that his 'darling studies' included Thrice Greatest Hermes (under his Egyptian name of 'Tauth'), or the acknowledgement in *Biographia Literaria* of his indebtedness to Jacob Boehme, the seventeenth-century German mystical philosopher who used alchemical language to describe a continuum between God and the world. It is also a truth universally acknowledged that his philosophically derived trinitariarism has been greatly shaped by his study of the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions.

Coleridge's few pronouncements on alchemy have not so far been much remarked on, though Trevor Levere's *Poetry Realized in Nature* (1981) drops some pregnant hints on how alchemy fits into Coleridge's project to harmonise science with his dynamic philosophy. Kiran Toor's *Coleridge's Chrysopoetics* is thus the first book—within academic scholarship at least—to have Coleridge's view of alchemy as its main focus, and to connect this creatively with the unitary foundation of his metaphysics. Her study has much value: both for the range of rarely cited out-of-the-way material in Coleridge's notebooks and marginalia, and also for the way she recognises the significance of Coleridge's view of the essential identity of subject and object.

There is, however, one huge hurdle to surmount. Toor's central thesis applies these wonderful insights concerning the identity of subject and object to Coleridge's unacknowledged borrowings from the writings of others. In Toor's words: 'The problem of intellectual debt and plagiarism, cheek by jowl with the question of originality, relies upon the Cartesian bifurcation of the "self" and an objective other who is "not self"' (2). (This 'Cartesian' split is understood throughout the book as one subsisting between subject and object, or self and other, rather than Descartes' split between the thinking mind and the material world.) According to Toor, because Coleridge believed that the self only comes to know itself when it departs from itself and becomes 'other', 'The transformations enacted by Coleridge's use of source texts, his manipulation of the voices of others and modifications and transplantation of "himself" under the voices of "others", all fail to heed the conventional constraints of Cartesian epistemology and demand a new hermeneutic of

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plagiarism' (5).

Toor supports her plagiarism argument by portraying the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a collection of fraudulent writings. These writings, dedicated to the teachings of Thrice Greatest Hermes, were believed in the renaissance to predate Moses. It was not until the seventeenth century that a sceptical scholar first demonstrated that they must have been written in hellenistic Egypt in the early Christian era. The best of these dialogues between a master and disciple (not unlike the form of the *Upanishads*) have a deeply moving combination of piety and philosophy. One can understand a disillusioned seventeenth-century reader feeling conned on learning of their true date, but it is surprising to read a twenty-first-century scholar (who otherwise seems in sympathy with their message) characterising them in such negative terms as these: 'Founded upon a system of multiple authorship, inauthenticity and historical fraud, the text subverts the rigid distinction between authorial selfhood and multifarious otherness' (36).

Apart from the thorny question of plagiarism, the book has interesting things to say. The term 'chrysopoetics' used in the title comes from a notebook entry where Coleridge discovers, in a book on the history of chemistry, this old name for alchemists (in Greek: 'chrysos' means 'gold', and 'poiein' means 'to make'); he enjoys the analogue suggested by the verb poiein which is also the root of the English word for 'poetry' (CN III 4414). For Toor 'To seek a formula for transmuting base metals into gold is to seek the origins of origination *itself*' (81). The alchemical philosopher holds that all differentiated forms emerge from a common origin, and that the alchemical work of transformation lies in understanding and controlling the movement back and forth from that universal source. Hence,

> Since all things are but a variation of an underlying latent gold, alchemy, or "gold-making" may be understood as the quest to "express" one's origins. The quest for gold, in other words, may be reinterpreted as the attempt to bring formlessness into form, idea into expression, or potentiality into manifest being. It is, simply put, the quest for *authorship* itself (81).

This idea relates to a theme of Coleridge's that is represented by a symbol of a circle with a dot in its centre ⊙, which Toor calls the 'theta'. Initially this term left me perplexed because the Greek letter theta, being written either θ or Θ, is more like a circle with a horizontal line across its diameter than one with a dot in the middle. Toor introduces the term on page 71 as if it is already in common use, but one has to wait until page 193 to learn that it was Coleridge himself, in a remarkable 1806 notebook entry, who called this ⊙ symbol a theta. Coleridge describes his symbol as 'The • is I which is the articulated Breath drawn inward, the O is the same sent outward, the ⊙ or Theta expresses the synthesis and coinstantaneous reciprocation of the two Acts' (CN II 2784). Toor's juxtaposition of this with the alchemical idea that there is

one unified ground of being (central dot) that can take on an infinite number of different forms (circumference) helps bring out its significance, and she is surely right to see how central this idea (and its symbol) is for Coleridge's thought. Her highlighting of this notebook entry is one of the happy discoveries that makes her book valuable.

But why does Coleridge call this ⊙ a theta? (There is no mistake about the symbol—I went so far as to check the printed text of CN II 2784 against a microfilm of the MS to rule out the possibility of that dot being a horizontal line.) Coleridge's exuberant notebook entry traces in Latin, English, and German the 'metaphysical Etymology' connecting 'thing' and 'think':

> Res = thou art thinking.—Even so our "Thing": id est, thinking or think'd. Think, Thank, Tank = Reservoir of what has been *thinged*—Denken, Danken—I forget the German for Tank/ The, Them, This, These, Thence, Thick, Thing, Thong, Thou, may be all Hocus-pocused by metaphysical Etymology into Brothers and Sisters—with many a Cousin-German/All little Miss Thetas. (CN II 2784)

I shared the problem of the 'theta' with Gregory Leadbetter whose solution I am happy to accept: theta, being the initial 'th' for this long run of words, stands for the coinstananeous unity and distinction of thinker (centre) and thought, or thing, (circumference). I am not aware of any instances apart from CN II 2784 where Coleridge calls the ⊙ symbol a theta. When Coleridge uses the symbol later (OM 340; CN IV 4555), he calls it 'centrality'.

Another point Toor touches on nicely is the problem caused by M. H. Abram's influential account of the historical progression of imagination from mirror (mimetic creation) to lamp, the 'self-derived creation' that defines Romanticism (20-21). These, as Toor rightly says, are co-existent polarities of self and other that are in perpetual interplay. Abrams himself conceded that his picture of linear progression from mirror to lamp is an oversimplification, while justifying it as a necessary analytic tool. Toor is right to point out that the overarching patterns are what remain in the mind of the reader and thus lay down preconceptions for subsequent scholarship. As Wordsworth put it: '… we create distinctions, then | Deem that our puny boundaries are things | Which we perceive, and not which we have made'. This is something we perpetually need reminding of. For these thoughts, and above all for the attention shown to Coleridge's 'theta' and his marginalia on Steffens, I have found this pioneering book rewarding.