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A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

by Andrea Timár

ANDREA TIMÁR'S STUDY BRINGS A FRESH PERSPECTIVE to the problem of Coleridge's mature politics by viewing his concerns about the dangers of the fast 'diffusion of information and knowledge' (64) and restless craving for 'the wonders of the day' (63) alongside the similar concerns of Walter Benjamin, who—in the years leading up to the Second World War—identified the deleterious effects of modernity. This is what Timár means by 'A Modern Coleridge': one who anticipated, in the early nineteenth century, problems that became increasingly apparent a hundred years later, and that have escalated in our time through the overheated dissemination of partisan versions of 'truth' made possible by the internet.

The second part of the title, 'Cultivation, Addiction, Habits', indicates how Timár marshals her argument into a dynamic Coleridgean polarity. Coleridge advocated 'cultivation' as a form of moral education that would counter the harmful effects of modernity (epitomised here as 'addiction' in the broadest sense of that term). In the middle of these two opposing forces stands a third term 'habits', which could equally be associated with 'bad' habits (i.e. addiction), or be employed as a means of inculcating the 'good' habits of self-culture and self-discipline. Timár's central concern is this paradoxical role of habit. Coleridge defined a cultivated person as someone who has the capacity to exercise free-will through the use of Reason; but he nevertheless thought this freedom could be achieved (in part at least) through subjection to habit, which (being a compulsion to repetition) is the very opposite of free-will.

Coleridge's pronouncements on the evils of widened readership—facilitated by the cheap availability of newspapers, journals, and novels—have been hard to defend from accusations of conservatism and elitism. The standard critical template presents Coleridge as a wonderful young Pantisocrat, who turns into a stuffy old reactionary wanting to keep the lower orders in their place under the regulation of 'a permanent nationalized, learned order, a national clerisy or church' (C&S 69). Those commentators who are sympathetic to the later Coleridge prefer to concentrate on his philosophical theology.

Timár retains awareness of the political dimension, but by bringing in Walter Benjamin she reaches a better understanding of the real cause for Coleridge's alarm:

> I shall examine Coleridge's writings in the light of Walter Benjamin's

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> theorisations of the 'addict', this figure *par excellence* of modernity, who, according to Benjamin, is constantly craving for the overwhelming stimuli offered by modernity. It will be argued that Coleridge's writings on the new, 'alien stimulants' emerging with the spread of 'civilization' importantly anticipate many of Benjamin's insights concerning the 'shock', or else, the overwhelming excess of stimuli characterising modernity. (66)

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was a German-Jewish intellectual, whose essays drew on Marxist theory, Jewish mysticism, and Romanticism. In putting Coleridge alongside Benjamin (who was not, politically, a conservative), she shows that Coleridge's true source of alarm was not the prospect of the lower classes getting out of control, but the harmful effects on society as a whole from what we now call 'the media'.

Timár's chapter 8, 'The "habits of active industry"', is particularly gripping. Coleridge regards Will (I will capitalise his terms) as pure self-hood, a state of freedom supported by Reason, that nevertheless requires cultivation *ab extra*. Coleridge also distinguishes between 'good' behaviour based on fear of punishment, and 'good' behaviour based on indwelling conscience born of moral truth, preferring the latter because it is authentic and grounded in Reason. In the passage quoted below, Timár refers to this paradox as an aporia (i.e. *impasse*):

> Coleridge's idea of cultivation is inherently related to the ideas of freedom and autonomy. However, education, in Coleridge's view, has to elicit the kind of autonomy that is in harmony with the will of God and that of the State. . . . Coleridge, as both the inheritor of the British empirical tradition, and an advocate of Kant's idea of moral autonomy, introduces the idea of love and the practice of habits as a partial solution to this aporia. (107)

Timár goes on to look at this 'practice of habits', pointing out how in *Opus Maximum* Coleridge regards the 'the Will [. . . .] as an abiding faculty, a *habit or fixed and systematic predisposition*' (121; OM 33, with Timár's added emphases). The negative aspect of habit occurs when gratifying a desire leads not to satisfaction but to a need to repeat the experience, which leads to the compulsive re-iteration that is the state of addiction. This kind of analysis brings new significance to notebook passages such as: 'Sometimes when I earnestly look at a beautiful Object or Landscape, it seems as if I were on the *brink* of a Fruition still denied—as if Vision were an *appetite'* (121, quoting CN III 3767). As this shows, Timár is more interested in the subtleties of Coleridge's observations on the psychological state underlying addiction than in the biographical particulars of his dependence on opium.

The book is mainly based on the late prose: *The Friend*, *Biographia*, *Lay Sermons*, *Aids to Reflection*, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, and *Opus Maximum*. Coleridge is not approached in a developmental way, he is shown working at the same core problems, to which he finds different solutions in different contexts. As the same time, says Timár, these later prose

works 'can be considered as conscious attempts to monitor, control, or at least keep at bay the various intoxicated voices of his poetry' (86–87). Poems, such as 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'Christabel', and 'Kubla Khan', are accordingly introduced to further the book's argument in ways that can sometimes feel forced.

In her discussion of the evolution of 'Effusion 35' (1795) to 'The Eolian Harp' (1817) however, Timár *does* present an exciting discovery. The *Analytical Review* of October 1795 quoted excerpts from Mme Roland's 'Appeal' (translated into English), from which Coleridge (having traced the French original) took a very short extract for the footnote that elucidates the 'faith that inly feels'. Coleridge's footnote has always been understood to express criticism of the atheist's lack of religious feeling, which makes it an endorsement of Sara's disapproving piety. However, as Timár explains, Coleridge must have been aware of Mme Roland's full passage, in which she clearly states that she prefers the ecstatic rapture inspired by nature to the sterility of formal religious practice. This means that Coleridge's footnote—ostensibly favouring the religious orthodoxy personified in the poem by Sara—actually contains a concealed message to the opposite effect. Coleridge, you crafty devil!

Unfortunately, Timár's book has not received the final polish it deserves. There are many errors that should have been spotted in proofing. Some quotations don't make sense until checked and corrected by looking up their original source. Particularly tantalising is a reference to 'what Sedgwick calls, as we have seen, the Nietzschean hypostatisation of the will' (90). 'As we have seen'? I don't think so. Reader, I hunted long and hard without success to locate any previous citing of this marvellous phrase, whose earlier appearance must presumably have been edited out. In such cases an index should at least spare one the hunt, but this one is too skimpy to mention either Sedgwick or Nietzsche. However, this is too petty a note to end on. At the end of the day the content is what really matters. A badly proofed book as stimulating as this is worth a hundred lesser books however perfectly presented.