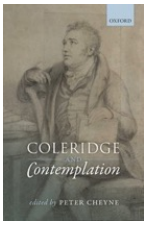
COLERIDGE AND CONTEMPLATION



Ed. Peter Cheyne
(Oxford, 2017) 332 + xx pp.
Reviewed by Stephen Prickett on 2019-05-15.

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This is an odd book -- in every sense of that word. While Samuel Taylor Coleridge was such a multi-faceted figure that that there is nothing inherently odd about a collection of essays devoted to his ideas of contemplation -- ranging from clues in his poetry to ideas in his philosophy or his theology -- what *is* odd is the way in which this theme is handled here.

"Contemplation" is an elastic word, meaning a lot or very little according to context, which might range from thinking about a current problem to the deepest experiences of mystics, sages, and saints. If the context is specifically Coleridgean, then the expectations aroused by the title suggest something closer to the latter -- presumably accompanied, as usual, by self-conscious description and reflections on his reflections. Nevertheless, Coleridge being Coleridge, there may well be surprises along the way. Definition is going to be important. And that is precisely what is lacking here.

Despite a section on the very first page entitled "Defining Contemplation," which cites Plato, Aquinas, Coleridge himself, and the neo-Thomist Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, we are not actually given any such definition. Aquinas, we are told, saw it as "a simple intellectual view of the truth" --muddied only slightly by the admission of Plato's view that ideas ultimately baffle logical understanding. Coleridge, Cheyne then adds, does not think contemplation "in its highest and purest sense is something achieved by all," but admits that an "inchoate" kind of contemplation is available to everyone. To be fair, Cheyne later explains how he thinks Coleridge evolved this two-tier model of contemplation -- somewhat on the lines of the better-known two-tier primary and secondary imaginations of *Biographia Literaria* -- but nevertheless, what follows is indeed inchoate in rather too many senses. We have to wait until page 129 before anything on the power and value of contemplation is again addressed in any meaningful way -- and then, rather unexpectedly, by Kaz Oishi, in the context of Coleridge's relationship with Robert Owen and his political views.

The key Coleridgean text is or should be, of course, *Aids to Reflection* (1825), which is not nowadays amongst his best-known texts, and, to be fair, a number of the contributors do cite it. But once again, what emerges is a number of interesting fragments rather than any overall picture. Perhaps a series of essays on the meaning of "reflection" might have been more appropriate.

Meanwhile, most of the rest of the book is occupied by a series of essays with little or no relevance to anything that looks like the normal meaning of contemplation -- let alone the two-tier model expounded by Cheyne. We have two essays on Buddhism: zen Buddhism and walking in nature (David Cooper) and "A Buddhist Response to Coleridge" (Michael McGhee). Other essays treat aesthetics (James Kirwan), Utilitarianism (Philip Aherne), Coleridge's relations with Humphry Davy (David Knight) and Robert Owen (Kaz Oishi); possible resemblances between Coleridge's thought and the philosophies of Edmund Burke (Andy Hamilton), John Dewey (Kathleen Wheeler), and Ralph Cudworth (Cristina Flores). Contributors also link Coleridge to a host of other people and themes that have some reference to him, but few of their essays deal with contemplation in any useful sense.

Though the list of contributors from Britain, Japan, and the U.S.A. is distinguished, one suspects that most of these scholars answered the request for a contribution by sorting through their files for an existing piece, adding a few sentences about Coleridge, and submitting it. Even essays that highlight Coleridge--as most of them do-- tend to marginalize contemplation. In one of the best essays, "Imagination and Truth: Reflections after Coleridge," Roger Scruton has much of interest to say about Coleridge and imagination but little on contemplation, and actually uses a turn of phrase suggesting that his paper had a rather different origin. To make matters worse, two of the essays that definitely *claim* to be about Coleridge's ideas and practice of contemplation (by Suzanne E. Webster and J. Gerald Janzen) are (to this reader, at least) virtually unintelligible. Cheyne's evasive introduction suggests that he himself has desperately tried to discover something common among the disparate contributions he has recruited. That Coleridge too is elusive and fragmentary on contemplation certainly does not help, but Cheyne's account in his essay ("Coleridge's 'Order of the Mental Powers'") nearly mirrors Coleridge in obscurity:

> Ideal objects therefore elude all conception, and, short of perfect noetic contemplation, can only be reached or intimated by an imaginative blend of the aesthetic and the intellectual, that is, via the symbol, by which we feelingly intuit meaning and value. (189)

Yes, indeed, this is probably correct, but while this collection, we must suppose, was intended to *clarify* what Coleridge thought and did, this string of abstractions does little to explain anything for the bemused reader -- especially when, in the next sentence, we are invited to be "considerate of intellectual praeter-conceptuality."

A more disciplined approach might have been to take a number of key Coleridgean texts in turn and look at them with reference to the development of his idea(s) of contemplation. The general thematic grouping of the essays does indeed suggest an approach that started out in this way. The first section is entitled "Poetics and Aesthetics," Part 3 is called "Metaphysics," and Part 4 is "Philosophy of Religion." But Part 2, "Worldviews: Science, Ethics, and Politics," is something of a grab-bag containing the aforementioned essays on Davy, Utilitarianism, Owen, and Burke. Despite marginalizing contemplation, however, these are among the best essays in the collection, and are all in their own ways worth reading.

While the titles of some of the other essays in Part 2 promise more focus on the titular topic of the book, they are -- again I have to stress the word -- simply *odd*. J.C.C. Mays, for instance, opens Part 1 with "Contemplation in Coleridge's Poetry," and this is the only one of the eighteen essays in this collection that actually tries to examine his poetry. But the business-like implications of the title are rapidly dissipated. Instead of taking a poem like "Frost at Midnight," which surely *does* have something to say about contemplation, Mays presents as his proof text (if that is the correct term) an almost unknown six-line poem entitled "First Advent of Love," which begins, "O fair is love's first hope to gentle mind..." Though a detailed analysis, over several pages, stresses the importance and historical significance of what might be meant by "gentle mind," its meaning has very little to do with contemplation as the word is normally understood, and as a way of approaching the idea in Coleridge's poetry as a whole, this essay is little short of extraordinary -- as well as almost wilfully misleading. Other essays in Part 1 include Kathleen Wheeler's on links between Coleridge and (of all people) the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. The latter essay argues for a view of romantic perception that most of us have been familiar with for years.

Part 3 ("Metaphysics") contains the essay on Cudworth and Coleridge already mentioned, a distinguished essay on the philosophical origins of Coleridge's imagination by Douglas Hedley, and an interesting essay by James Engell on Imagination as an "act." Before these come--at the head of Part 3 -- Cheyne's second essay, on Coleridge's two-tier theory of contemplation, and a supporting essay by Dillon Struwig tracing a similar structure in Coleridge's *Logic*, which, despite its published title, is again a fragmentary collection of pieces never published in the author's lifetime. Insofar as Cheyne's essay aims to amass a theory of contemplation from the various scattered hints in Coleridge's writings, it is perhaps the centerpiece of this collection. Though sometimes obscure, as noted above, he writes with intelligence. But even if we accept his version of what contemplation meant for Coleridge, what is its significance? Is it at all surprising, new, or important that some few exceptional figures -- Socrates, Plato, Jesus, and various seers and saints through the ages -- have given us profound insights through contemplation (though not necessarily in the same form), while the rest of us have struggled at a much lower level? While Coleridge's division of the Imagination into Primary and Secondary forms has been discussed and debated over the past two hundred years (I know of at least one critic who has disputed its practical value), I find it hard to see this bi-level concept of contemplation making any ripples at all.

The final section ("Philosophy of Religion") promises the most - for contemplation, at least at its highest level, is surely a source of philosophic, if not necessarily religious, insight - and delivers least. Oddly -- that word again -- it starts with McGhee's Buddhist "response" to Coleridge, though what exactly McGhee is responding to is unclear. While he offers some interesting nuggets on Buddhist thought, his contribution repeatedly uses the question-begging phrase "things as they are," which should have been left behind by any student of Philosophy 101. Noriko Naohara's essay on "Coleridge's Contemplative Theology" fills an obvious lacuna in the collection, since Coleridge was not merely a Christian but one of the most significant theologians of the nineteenth century, though one might not guess it here. The remaining essays, by Suzanne Webster and Gerald Janzen, are in the best tradition of metaphysical obscurity.

This collection of essays contains some valuable insights. What it lacks is consistent adherence to the announced theme of the book, even though at least some of these papers emerge from a conference on contemplation held in Cambridge in 2016, presumably with this book in mind. As F.J.A. Hort observed many years ago, the seeming fragments of Coleridge's thinking sometimes, in the end, become links in the "golden chain" of his own thought. It is a pity there is no such chain here.

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Peter Cheyne responds to Stephen Prickett

Stephen Prickett remarks that I do not define "contemplation." On page 1, in a form that includes "the metaphysical realism held by Coleridge," I

> define contemplation 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.

"Contemplation," as used in the book, therefore relates to Coleridge's belief in the reality of ideas as powers beyond the human mind.

All contributors adhere to this sense, although they approach it from different angles. Roger Scruton finds the contemplative dimension essential to the Coleridgean imagination in that it penetrates through surface appearances to aim at significant truths beyond oneself. This he contrasts to what Coleridge terms fancy, which Scruton describes as being trapped by selfish desires and thereby made "an object immersed in the flow of nature" rather than a free subject (85). One could go through the collection like this. Tracing Coleridge's initial enthusiasm with "chemical philosophy," David Knight portrays his hope in an emerging science of nature as an interconnected whole, governed by laws understood as eternal powers that shape the universe and which must ultimately be approached through the enlightened understanding and reason. His disappointment arose, Knight explains, when Davy's natural philosophy became, for Coleridge, one more view that reduces all things to atomic particles with no meaning or unity beyond the mechanics of aggregation. One is faced here with the contest between a unifying, contemplative view of nature, on the one hand, and reductive atomism, on the other.

For Coleridge, relatively few "possess" ideas in clear contemplation; the majority, he says, are "possessed by" them (*Church and State*, 13). Yet contemplation is not an all-or-nothing state. It has degrees, and there are stages along the way. Throughout his writings, especially in his notebooks, Coleridge describes reason as "the Light of Ideas" that filters through imagination down to sense (e.g. *Notebooks*, 5: §6849). The mind is thereby able to direct itself toward what Coleridge calls "the eternal verities" and this directedness is essential for contemplation. Each author in this volume addresses the importance of Coleridge's view of directing oneself to the light of ideas. Prickett acknowledges that Kaz Oishi's essay conveys the sense of the power of contemplation in practical and political life, but he seems unaware of different instances of this recognition in preceding essays. He questions Kathleen Wheeler's contribution by implying that her relating Coleridge to John Dewey is irrelevant. Yet, as detailed in the book, Dewey wrote of the influence that Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* had on his intellectual development, calling it "my first Bible" and celebrating the "spiritual emancipation" it provided him. (See also John Beer's Bollingen edition of *Aids to Reflection*, cxxv.)

While acknowledging that it is quoted often, Prickett says that *Aids to Reflection* should be the key Coleridgean text throughout the volume. He further suggests that writing about reflection rather than contemplation might have been more appropriate. For Coleridge, however, the problem is that reflection is a matter of understanding, whereas contemplation is one of reason (*Aids to Reflection*, 223, cited in the reviewed book at 114, 177, and 255). Consequently, inattention to the accounts of the mental powers in *Aids to Reflection*, the notebooks, marginalia, and other writings, and carelessness with their related terminology, can lead to misreading key concepts in Coleridge's writings.

Further, Coleridge confided a wish to provide "A more positive *insight* into the true character of Reason," than he gave in *Aids to Reflection*, with "a greater evidentness of its diversity from the Understanding." He then writes:

> this I have done in my larger work, in which I commence with the Absolute, and from thence deduce the Tri-unity, and therein the substantial Reason (Λογος) .... But in Aids to Reflection I was obliged to proceed analytically and a posteriori-- (*Notebooks*, 4: §5210, May 1825)

For this "larger work," one must turn to writings unpublished in his lifetime and only recently available in printed form: the notes, marginalia, and fragments including, especially, the *Opus Maximum*. Unfortunately, Professor Prickett describes the *Logic* as a "fragmentary collection," seemingly unaware that two bound volumes exist in fair copy (vol. 1 is 90 continuous folios, vol. 2, 467). I refer him to Robin Jackson's historical and contextual introduction to his Bollingen edition, which emphasizes that it is perhaps the least fragmentary of Coleridge's texts. Notably, Coleridge tried to publish it in 1823, 1826, and 1829, intending to add a final section on the "Noetic."

Rather than engage philosophically with the book, Professor Prickett dismisses a number of essays as "obscure," but it is difficult to assess his claim, since he does not offer substantive arguments. He charges Jim Mays with "misleading" the reader with the impression that his essay addresses the theme of the book. Prickett therefore dismisses Mays' framing his chapter with "the crucial question: what raises the meditative reading ... to the level of contemplation?" (19). Mays offers a tentative answer: what is needed is *enérgeia* --for Aristotle, the "working power connected with the happiness of being alive," and for St Paul, a relation to "supernatural power". Throughout, Mays demonstrates the meditation required for reading a later Coleridge poem if one is to receive its full meaning. Meditation in this sense involves slowing down, shifting one's mental stance, turning words over, listening to their histories, and other activities of the understanding, until one moves into contemplative reason. The reader thus attuned, a poem "rooted in sense and understanding," as Mays says, "opens within the mind, pointing in one direction and enacting a process of sublimation" (20).

Prickett questions the relevance of Mays' choice of poem. Curiously, while Prickett notes the significance of "Frost at Midnight" for Coleridgean contemplation, suggesting this as an appropriate "proof text," he does not discuss Michael McGhee's reading of that poem (274--6). Mays' reading of "First Advent of Love" helps bring out an image of gentle contemplation that describes, as the poem does so beautifully, "the sultry hind" who, in a Sabbatical moment, "stays his reaping" "with brow uplift," to meet "Eve's first star thro' fleecy cloudlet peeping." This is a Coleridgean description of the infrequent but widely accessible mode of contemplation available to all. Not dazzling, it is sensual and available, intimating a higher value. The image recurs throughout Coleridge's poetry and prose, where light is seen through a veil. Thus he describes seeing "through clouds that veil his blaze" ("Destiny of Nations"); "the thin gray Cloud" ("Christabel"); "fair luminous mist" ("Dejection: An Ode"); "glist'ning haze" ("Constancy to an Ideal Object"); "Eve's first star thro' fleecy cloudlet peeping" ("First Advent of Love"); "Mists and painted Vapours" ("Last Words of Berengarius"); "Lamps in noisome Air" ("Duty, Surviving Self-Love"); "thro' the veiling mist" ("Alice du Clós"); "Mist in glee" ("Alice du Clós"); and the "semiopaque, or clouded mass" of a "chrystal ... lost in the light which it yet contains, embodies, gives a shape to" ("Principles of Genial Criticism"), to list only some of his images that describe his view of contemplation at the levels of sense and imagination, where value is beheld in diffuse but powerful ways, and always through a medium.

Having demonstrated the relevance of Mays' essay and his choice of poem to the theme of contemplation, I shall not repeat the process for each chapter. Mays' essay provides a model for refutation that can be applied throughout. Because, if Coleridge is correct, contemplation in the highest sense is ungraspable by concepts, the remaining possibility for clarification must be to illuminate the intermediate approaches to it. These approaches do not pretend to reach, in one stroke, pure "Reason" itself, in Coleridge's Christian Platonic sense of "Logos." They are, rather, stages that set out from aesthetic sense, meditative understanding, or symbolic imagination, stretching toward "the ideas of Reason." Thus the book advances from aesthetics (Part 1), through worldviews (Part 2), to metaphysics (Part 3), before ending with philosophy of religion (Part 4). Perhaps Professor Prickett might have been happier had the book been titled *Coleridge (with reference to some other relevant thinkers who influenced him and whom he influenced) and Contemplation (and stages on the way to contemplation)*. I trust, however, that the general reader will realize that something like that expanded title inevitably describes the content of the book.

Professor Prickett characterizes my work as "written with intelligence" and "probably correct" but fears it "nearly mirrors Coleridge in obscurity." To this I respond that while metaphysics is not for everybody, my essay brings together in one place a chain of interrelated Coleridgean texts to propose a logical and coherent account of a difficult topic. Prickett then asks:

> Is it at all surprising, new, or important that some few exceptional figures--Socrates, Plato, Jesus, and various seers and saints through the ages--have given us profound insights through contemplation ... while the rest of us have struggled at a much lower level?

To that, I would affirm that it is, *pace* Prickett, profoundly important that there are levels and degrees of contemplation. Work in the last fifty years that covers this area from different perspectives includes Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1972), Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), Graham Priest's *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (1995), and C. D. C. Reeve's *Action, Contemplation, and Happiness* (2012). The attempt, therefore, to understand these differences of quality and degree constitutes important thinking in philosophy and much discussion in the religious apprehension of contemplation not only in ancient times and throughout Coleridge's later writings but also by serious thinkers in recent decades.

Stephen Prickett replies to Peter Cheyne

In discussing any work there is always a danger of the critic's comparing it with the (totally imaginary, but much more brilliant) work that "I would have produced if I had been writing this book..." I have, myself, been attacked in precisely this way by more than one angry critic who had not actually written anything on the subject in question, but felt they might have done if they had had the time and inclination. So, at the start, I must salute Peter Cheyne for tackling a topic that I have always been interested in but have only touched on tangentially in my own writing. I should also add that I am writing this from Italy, and do not have access to my own books at home and am working to some extent from memory.

That said, I do not intend to discuss in detail Cheyne's defence of his collection, beyond saying that I did not (and, incidentally, still do not) see as clearly as he claims I should the connections between many of his essays -- and, in particular, Mays's opening essay on "Contemplation in Coleridge's Poetry," which, for me, was a frustratingly inadequate essay, and set the tone of deepening disappointment for what follows. Here we must simply agree to differ.

I should, however, add that I still do not find Cheyne's "definition" of contemplation as clear as he does. According to Cheyne, contemplation is

> 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.

If by "reason" he means the specialist Kantian meaning (as he makes much clearer in his response to me than he does in the book) then he should, I suggest, have given it the usual capital letter to signal that this is not the usual, looser, meaning of the word. The problem then is that (if I remember rightly) "ideas of Reason" are confined to the famous "ideas" of God, Freedom, and Immortality, while other ideas belong to the realm of the "Understanding." The claim that follows--these ideas are "real and external powers that constitute and order being and value"-- I still find too vague to be intelligible. What does "external" mean, for instance? Does it just mean that a lot of people think this, or that the ideas of "Reason" float freely and independently of humanity, perhaps in some Berkleyan sense in the mind of God? God contemplating God? And how exactly do they *constitute* "being"? Etc. This claim simply seems to me too philosophically inadequate and vague to bear the weight that Cheyne seems to want to attach to it.

But my strongest gripe about this collection is that it does not address the central relationship of Coleridge's thought to his time. For me (and, I would argue, Coleridge) "contemplation" has strong philosophic, religious, and psychological connotations. There was a mystical side to him that has been still little discussed -- though Douglas Hedley has probably come closer to this than most. By any reckoning Coleridge was one of the leading theologians of the nineteenth century. He enormously influenced later theologians such as F.D. Maurice, F.J.A. Hort and (though he denied it !) even J.H. Newman; we have recently learned more about Coleridge's reception in Germany -- involving more of a two-way relationship with such figures as Schleiermacher and Schelling than we were often led to suppose; he was the inspiration behind the Cambridge Apostles -- not merely Maurice and Sterling, but also Tennyson; he massively influenced George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, and Lewis Carroll -- and, of course, through them influenced the Oxford Inklings in the twentieth century. Not one of these names is even mentioned in Cheyne's book. A whole central tradition of nineteenth century spirituality is simply missing. This is why my chosen adjective for the collection is "odd." Some of the essays are indeed excellent, but they are still a rag-bag of insights on Davy, Owen, Dewey, etc. or various Buddhist ideas, all of which may well be valid, but lack any comprehensive overall historical context or framework. We have here quite a lot of interesting leaves, but there is no visible trunk, and, on examination, they appear to be from different trees.

Peter Cheyne replies to Stephen Prickett

In a paragraph describing what Stephen Prickett calls his "strongest gripe" with this book, he gives a list of "later theologians" whom Coleridge influenced and then claims that "Not one of these names is even mentioned in this book." This is not true. Maurice, Hort, Sterling, Newman, Schelling, Kingsley, and Barfield (representing the Inklings) are indeed mentioned, some of whom appear throughout the book, and Maurice even shares a section, describing Coleridge's influence, titled "Julius Hare and J.F.D. Maurice".

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