

Andrea Timár, *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 264. £55. ISBN 9781137531452.

Coleridge distinguished civilization from cultivation; a civilization of atheistic rationalism was for him the ultimate cause of the French Revolution, while cultivation or education is the means of nation building. The riddling title *A Modern Coleridge* neither points towards what other versions of Coleridge there may be nor advertises itself as a selective presentation of his writing; rather it asks the question of how much Coleridge may be merely symptomatic of a transition to modernity; or, alternatively, how much he may anticipate or represent that transition. The idea of agency – of Coleridge’s Kantian ‘Will’ – is therefore crucial and is what is threatened by the ‘addiction’ of the sub- title; collectively as well as individually, addiction is prolonged interruption, and habit the faculty that mediates between wellbeing and disease.

The modern disease for Coleridge is a craving for immediate stimulation precisely with the element of volition removed; addiction to reading is the wrong kind of reading of the wrong kind of print. His modernity, then, is not a culture of proliferating print and other consumer items that stimulate and pander to appetite, since such a culture is not a product of the agency of the will. Not surprisingly, Coleridge is clearer about these negative aspects of modernity than he is about fielding a positive alternative; nevertheless, this book implies that a case for his modernity might rest, despite his denial of enlightened rationalism, on a claim that enlightenment had not been tried. Coleridge attempted a ‘political application of the concept of the imagination’ (33) by adumbrating a state that would be reflective and religious, its society stratified and its laws organic.

Although paradoxically dependent on involuntary repetition, ‘habit’ is the positive counterpart of addiction – or rather ‘habits’ are its counterpart, since there can only be examples of how a positive modernity might look: so Sir Alexander Ball, the Governor of Malta for whom Coleridge worked, embodies a kind of ideal pedagogue. It is not the violence Ball inflicts as punishment that pains him but the fact that he is obliged to treat victims as beasts; or, ‘this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you’ (46). Coleridge enlists Ball on the side of Andrew Bell over Joseph Lancaster in the controversy over the monitorial or Madras schemes of education and recommends that the Governor read Wordsworth’s poem ‘Peter Bell’ rather than ‘The Ancient Mariner’, as though in agreement with what he later recounts as the view of ‘Mrs Barbauld’ that his own poem had not enough moral.

These sorts of argument of course depend on a history larger than the individual’s lifespan, and Coleridge’s writings are not treated in anything like chronological order in this book, unless it be a reverse chronology: it begins with *Church and State* (1830) and ends with ‘The Eolian Harp’ and its earlier (1796) version. These texts are symptomatic and, like the stages upon which the book is structured, they act synchronically; progressive and regressive forces co-existing without being reconciled, as Coleridge famously writes ‘opposite or discordant qualities’ are reconciled when co-existing in a poem. The paradox of the intoxication of poetry is first discussed by Coleridge himself within the poems themselves, most obviously ‘The Ancient Mariner’ and ‘Kubla Khan’, for which passages on education and the essay on Luther and Rousseau from *The Friend* provide the respective contexts in this book. We can see why Andrea Timár employs a conceptual rather than developmental model, but part of the point in each case is that the passages from two decades later seek to repress the performative energies of the earlier demonic poems: ‘Kubla Khan’ has lots of temporal layers (the ancestors, the revival, the epilogue, its later preface) but the book’s conceptual structure can only juxtapose later prose with earlier poems. ‘The Eolian Harp’ and its earlier versions feature not to illustrate conflict between the Unitarian radical of the 1790s and the later Anglican philosopher but, showing a move from the private and domestic to a political

community in ‘a problematic display of *Bildung*’ (138), leave the traces of an individual poetics within a wider ‘politics of cultivation’ (146).

Those later chapters can seem to reinstate a more familiar lapsarian view of Coleridge by which what delighted the radical poet shocked the virtuous philosopher. By then, however, it is clear that this book, imaginatively structured, energetically researched and lucidly written – although with more typos and small errors than used to occur when publishers could afford copy editors and proofreaders – is one with which readers of Coleridge are going to have to engage. For this reader, it is the most provocative and exciting book on Coleridge for decades.

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