

Ross Wilson
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The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(Oxford University Press, 2009)
Edited by Frederick Burwick

‘CRITICAL WRITING about Coleridge is labyrinthine, not unlike Coleridge’s own prose, but no serious reader of Coleridge disdains a labyrinth.’ Robert Maniquis makes this claim at the start of his essay, ‘Writing about Coleridge’, for *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. The title of Maniquis’s essay itself points in more than one direction. Is his concern with the challenges and frustrations, as well as opportunities and satisfactions, that affect anyone—such as the contributors to the volume under review and, no doubt, many readers of this bulletin—wishing to write about Coleridge? Or does he wish to offer instead a conspectus of existing commentary dedicated to Coleridge? Is the ‘writing’ of Maniquis’s title, that is, verbal or nominal? As might be expected, it is explicitly nominal: Maniquis gives a useful account of (by and large twentieth-century) written commentary on Coleridge’s work. Nevertheless, his essay, along with many others in this volume, implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—advertises to the peculiar nature of that activity that is ‘writing about Coleridge’. One purpose of a handbook such as this might reasonably be to make that task easier. A handbook after all is, if not exactly a manual or instruction booklet, meant to assist, to offer guidance and orientation. And, indeed, Frederick Burwick’s ‘Introduction’ at least aims to cast this volume as a resource for scholars to be used—and useful—alongside the now (it would seem) complete collection of critical editions of Coleridge’s works, notebooks, and letters. In general, scholars of Coleridge should welcome the appearance of this handbook, as should the interested reader, for its gathering and organisation of information, for its overviews of areas of Coleridge’s life and work and of the reception of that work, and for its (sometimes) fresh approaches to often long-established and knotty questions in interpretation of many aspects of his authorship.

H.J. Jackson enters perhaps most fully into the spirit of helpfulness apparently conjured by the format of the handbook. Her attentive account of Coleridge as a reader-cum-annotator distinguishes between the different modes of his different marginalia. Helpfully, Jackson offers a brief but considered account of the merits and demerits of the Bollingen edition of the marginalia (275-76). She is right to point out that owing to the omission of those pages of books that Coleridge did not annotate, ‘it is not easy to reconstruct where exactly in the text the notes fall’ (276), even though it is hard to imagine what the Bollingen editors might realistically have done to remedy this. Having offered this account, Jackson concludes her essay by offering some hints for future exploration of this aspect of Coleridge’s authorship (if, that is, there are such things as authors, rather than merely writers or jotters, of marginalia), suggesting that the marginalia offer potential illumination of Coleridge’s own

character and relations, critical insights into the figures on whose works he comments, new bases for investigation into particular topics across his oeuvre, and, finally, an exciting resource for the newly emerging and developing interest in the history of the book. No doubt these hints—or provocations, even—will be taken up by scholars and students alike. Thus, while the *Handbook* offers information and critical interpretation, it is also instructive in this precise sense.

Jackson emphasises but also questions Coleridge's self-presentation as an omnivorous reader—as 'a library-cormorant' who, at the age of twenty-four, claimed to have read 'almost every thing' (271; note: only 'almost'). The image of Coleridge as a corpulent devourer of everything that came his way is a tenacious one, and it is, of course, one of his central 'self-representations', which Anya Taylor examines in one of the essays in the first section, dealing with biography, of the volume. Taylor focuses on what she aptly describes as Coleridge's 'capacious subjectivity' (109), emphasising in particular the drama and wonder of Coleridge's experience of his own self and the significance of this experience for many aspects of his work. She quotes a fantastic aperçu from Coleridge's *Notebooks* in order to illustrate this (in fact, the multiplicity of quotation from all aspects of Coleridge's work is one of the advantages of this book): 'Materialists unwilling to admit the mysterious of our nature make it all mysterious—nothing mysterious in nerves, eyes, &c: but that nerves think &c!!—Stir up the sediment into the transparent water, & so make all opaque' (qtd. 108-9). Coleridge's scepticism about what passed for 'materialism'—in particular, its lack of understanding of the materials in whose name it claims to speak—is the result of 'a moment's self-introition' (qtd. 109) which was the test to which Coleridge submitted, or claimed to submit, all philosophical positions.

Coleridge's capacity for self-absorption—and the capacity of his self to absorb what was other to it—need not necessarily entail either solipsism, dogmatism, or unwillingness to alter. This emerges across the whole of this book's range, of course, but perhaps particularly in the third part, on the poetry. Michael O'Neill begins his typically insightful essay on 'Coleridge's Genres' by noting Sara Coleridge's riposte to Aubrey de Vere's suggestion, made in 1849, that, at least in contrast to Keats, Coleridge lacked versatility (375). Sara provided an exhaustive list of the poetic modes adopted by her father, along with the many different subjects addressed in them. Far from its suspicion of Augustan neo-classical stricture entailing an outright rejection of genre, Romanticism, as literary historians including Stuart Curran (in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* [Stanford, 1997]) and, more recently, David Duff (*Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* [OUP, 2008]) have emphasised, is deeply involved with the development and, significantly, recovery of a variety of genres. O'Neill's essay bears out its contention that '[g]enres matter to Coleridge' (377) through patient attention not just to Coleridge's verse practice, but also to his literary-theoretical pronouncements and marginal reflections. Like O'Neill's essay, David Fairer's discussion of 'Coleridge's Early Poetry'

attends to the variety of Coleridge's modes, while acknowledging that the 1796 volume, *Poems on Various Subjects*, as the title perhaps suggests, 'has to accommodate a range of voices', although it does so, as Fairer tactfully puts it, 'with a degree of uneasiness' (360). Many will be inclined to agree with this judgement—and its tact.

There are other ways in which the boundaries of Coleridge's personality were porous, as it were. The final two sections of the *Handbook* address 'Sources and Influences' and 'Reception', and thus continue the kind of enquiry conducted by Jackson and others in earlier sections, on the one hand, and indicate channels in which the Coleridgean current has run especially deep, on the other. Again, the variety of Coleridge's reading and interests makes the 'Sources and Influences' section unusually wide-ranging, and there are useful essays on most aspects of Coleridge's intellectual and creative formation, including, inevitably, one on the abiding question of plagiarism by Andrew Keanie, who offers a good guide to the various forms of this particular controversy and a persuasive reading of Coleridge's motivations and (self-) justifications. Charles Mahoney convincingly argues for seeing the basis of Coleridge's literary criticism in his deep and oft repeated readings of Shakespeare, and it is illuminating to be reminded that Coleridge was unusual in seeing Shakespeare as a poet first and dramatist subsequently (504).

What have been called Coleridge's afterlives have only come to critical prominence relatively recently, perhaps owing to their enormous significance and range: the history, theory, and criticism of English literature since Coleridge have been remarkably and often controversially shaped by him. Indeed, the source of Coleridge's influence on the literary culture of his time in particular was not even limited to what he published: Seamus Perry traces the influence of 'Christabel' through the performance of it as a 'party piece' by Coleridge and others long before it appeared in print (662). Those of Coleridge's influences that are readily called to mind—his impact on Wordsworth's career, for instance, and his shaping of the development of English literary criticism deep into the twentieth century—are so overwhelming that Perry's consideration of the less apparent lines of influence is something of a welcome surprise. For instance, he situates Coleridge's emphasis on the ability of the poet 'to defeat habit and to reacquaint his readers with the marvellousness of the commonplace' at 'the head of a tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing' which includes the perhaps otherwise rather un-Coleridgean Browning's 'Essay on Shelley' (671).

All of this might give the impression that this *Handbook* provides little more than a series of overviews of the vast, still partly undiscovered country that is Coleridge. That would, though, be a mistaken impression. While one or two of the essays here are, if not wholly without insight, a little sketchy, there are significant attempts to develop fresh, challenging critical arguments and perspectives. Michael John Kooy's perhaps unpromisingly titled 'Coleridge as Editor: *The Watchman* and *The Friend*' deserves serious attention for its attempt to overturn a set of critical orthodoxies and show that, in *The Watchman*,

Coleridge's 'radicalism is a function of his theology' (148), while offering on the way some pithily insightful remarks on the blind-spots of aspects of New Historicism (147). Comparably, Raimonda Modiano's essay on Coleridge's literary criticism develops, among other things, a patient account of the exact resonance and heritage of his idea of 'genial criticism'.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in closing that this volume received a predominantly negative review in the *Times Literary Supplement* some months ago, which focused, in part, on the laxity of its editing. Admittedly, some of the proofing leaves an awful lot to be desired and the method of referring to books and other materials in footnotes is inconsistent. It is tempting to take refuge in the defence that a certain degree of inaccuracy and impressionism is fitting for work on Coleridge, of all people. This, of course, won't do, and it's a shame that this book has these flaws. Nevertheless, it is a valuable addition to the literature on Coleridge and will provide helpful initial orientation—as well as, in some cases, impressive critical insight—for scholars and students and all sorts of library-cormorants alike.