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reads
Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination
(Palgrave Macmillan 2011)
by
Gregory Leadbetter

IN THE COURSE OF A LETTER TO SOUTHEY in July 1802, Coleridge wrote, 'I rather suspect that some where or other there is a radical Difference in our theoretical opinions respecting Poetry—this I shall endeavor to go to the Bottom of... ' In many respects, of course, Coleridge and Wordsworth had originally seemed to be in full agreement concerning their enterprise, Coleridge likening the poems they planned to the 'sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape,' which 'appeared to represent the practicability of combining both,' and going on to differentiate between the two sorts of poem that were suggested ('to which of us I do not recollect'): his own endeavours being directed to persons and characters 'supernatural or at least romantic', and Wordsworth's to giving 'the charm of novelty to things of every day'.

Gregory Leadbetter, in his fine study, which is to be warmly welcomed for its important contribution to our understanding of both poets, maintains that the 'Difference' sensed by Coleridge was not only very extensive but can be traced back into the project of the *Lyrical Ballads* itself, since his interest in the 'supernatural or at least romantic' took Coleridge into the realm of the 'transnatural', and so into the 'daemonic', where Wordsworth could not accompany him. The effect was that while Wordsworth could concentrate on the human, heightening its effects as much as possible, Coleridge was always inclined to press his insights into the supernatural towards the sublime of the transnatural. In consequence, when the collection first appeared his contributions would be confined to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'The Nightingale' (with its maiden devoted to 'something more than nature in the grove'), along with two poems 'The Foster-mother's Tale' and 'The Dungeon'—which were really written as parts of the drama *Osorio*.

How far is Leadbetter's emphasis justified? Ever since Socrates discussed the nature of his 'daemon' with Diotima in the *Symposium* the nature of this phenomenon has been a matter of lasting interest to readers generally. Most notably, perhaps, D. H. Lawrence declared that he was haunted by a 'demon', as he spelt it:

To this day I still have the uneasy haunted feeling, and would rather not write most of the things I do write—including this note. Only now I know my demon better, and after bitter years, respect him more than my other, milder and nicer self.

As far as Coleridge is concerned, Leadbetter's argument is initially focused on a

notebook entry of 1812 in which Coleridge discussed a phenomenon he had sometimes noticed in himself, amounting to second sight, by which he perceived in someone with whom he had just become familiar signs of a 'Vice' which might be rejected firmly by his own consciousness, but which would later appear to be confirmed in that person's subsequent behaviour: 'Thus it was thwi *Gift tuum* and so thwi Yram + ettolrach—/'

The thinly veiled references are to Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Morgan and her sister Charlotte Brent. Leadbetter does not make any assertion concerning the nature of their 'Vice', but seems to imply that all three women may have been drawn to an illicit relationship with himself. This may be so, though it is equally likely that he was drawn to believe that each of the three was subconsciously indulging incestuous longings towards a close relative of their own—an idea which his own conscious self might reject but which would nevertheless hover in some corner of his consciousness and might help to explain their subsequent behaviour.

The idea that the daemonic had already been a matter of concern to Coleridge for many years previously to 1798 is certainly enticing: if any doubts are raised, they are likely to be more a matter of proportionality than anything else. In the mid-1790s he might have hovered in theory between the political and Unitarian views which he had embraced after leaving Cambridge and his developing esoteric interests, but during this period there was in practice no hesitation: he was overwhelmingly committed to the Unitarian cause as embraced by the Bristol radicals with whom he spent most of his time; he acknowledged his interest in 'facts of mind', but such esoteric interests were his theme only occasionally and casually. After all, political issues were pressing, and the philosophy of Locke and Hartley dominated the intellectual scene; he was also in demand to preach in Unitarian chapels and might indeed have become a regular minister at Shrewsbury had not the Wedgwood brothers fortunately intervened with their 1798 offer. It was only when such commitments lapsed that he could afford to be an ebullient conversationalist—though then who can say how much of his talk was commonly given to one topic or another?

In these circumstances the advent of the Wordsworths was clearly a most crucial event. Coleridge's earlier lines picturing animated nature as consisting of organic harps need no longer be balanced against the supposed strictures of a more pious wife; instead, such speculations could be taken over in their magnificence by William Wordsworth and the three enthusiasts could extend them into a shared vision of the life shared by humanity. The ambiguous legacy of the French Revolution could now be superseded by a devotion to nature and the welcome idiosyncrasies of individual human beings.

What is stressed in Leadbetter's investigation, however, is that while all three figures were enthralled by their common sense of 'one Life', Wordsworth was particularly engaged with the straightforwardly natural, Coleridge with the 'supernatural', or, to use Leadbetter's favourite term, the 'transnatural'. Thus when the poem 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' was produced, Coleridge's urge

to write off for Erasmus Darwin's volume was presumably driven by the need to quote the empirical evidence brought forward by Darwin as adding weight to the supernatural element in the phenomenon of the curse. This apparent factor in cursing may also throw light on the poem 'The Three Graves'. Wordsworth claimed that he had given Coleridge the idea of the poem (which they originally planned to write in six volumes) and in fact a single passage intended to form part of the second book survived among his manuscripts; but he told Barron Field that he found his friend's development of it too 'shocking and painful, and not sufficiently sweetened by any healing views', so that it was left to Coleridge to write the third and fourth books and eventually publish them. Wordsworth was presumably uncomfortable with the supernatural element in the poem, whereas Coleridge himself had no such problem, remaining fascinated by accounts of the effects of cursing among primitive people. He may nevertheless have shared Wordsworth's hesitancy to some extent, since he did not go on to write the last two parts, and maintained to his friends that any qualities that the third and fourth might possess were 'psychological' rather than poetic. It is also possible, indeed, that he did not wish to follow further any possible implications that might be found in what he had already written. When in the fourth book the mother curses Ellen, Leadbetter assumes that Edward has been drawn into an adulterous relationship with her. There is no more evidence in the text than the statement that Edward loved and prayed for Ellen as much as for his wife—which is hardly conclusive; yet it is possible that Coleridge felt himself being drawn into deep waters where he had no desire to probe further.

Discussions such as this indicate the intricacy of the issues involved and the delicacy with which they need to be handled. Leadbetter follows the common assumption, for example, that Wordsworth's failure to include 'Christabel' in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, as had originally been planned, was a snub on his part, calculated to wound his friend deeply; but while this was no doubt its devastating effect, he also records the delight with which Wordsworth and his sister had received the second part a day or two before the decision against including it was taken. It seems likely that in the light of his sense that its nature did not accord with that of his recent writing, he simply seized on Coleridge's failure to produce the remaining sections of the work promptly as providing a convenient excuse for dropping it from the second volume, while yet expecting it to be completed and published separately in due course. On this reading, Coleridge's subsequent withdrawal was not at all what the Wordsworths expected.

Coleridge published 'Spots in the Sun' shortly after Wordsworth's marriage, with the name of the 'lovely Courtesan' changed from 'Thais' (as in Wernicke's original version) to 'Annette'. William and Dorothy had just been to Paris to settle matters with Annette Vallon and her child, Wordsworth's daughter, but I don't believe that Coleridge was thus charging Wordsworth with hypocrisy. Several critics are said here to have observed that 'the alteration cannot be coincidence' (only one being mentioned by name, however), but I disagree,

preferring Mays's statement that 'there is no knowing whether the allusion was intended or was an unfortunate (perhaps 'Freudian') error'. (It may be comparable to Wordsworth's own curious slip in giving the heroine of his poem 'The Thorn' a name, 'Martha Ray', that was identical with that of Basil Montagu's mother.) It is certainly the case that Coleridge's long-sustained admiration for his friend was gradually undermined—especially after their quarrel of 1810—by a growing sense of resentment concerning the lack of support he had received from the Wordsworths, but in 1802 he was surely still—at least consciously—in awe of his friend, with any consciousness of disenchantment slow to emerge.

In spite of Coleridge's desire to explore the nature of the supernatural in his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's reluctance to acknowledge it was striking, showing itself particularly in his inability to perceive the point of the daemonic references. After all, what is the Mariner, with his 'strange powers of speech', his ability to 'pass like night from land to land', his exciting of both attraction and fear in his audience, but a daemonic figure? Yet Wordsworth seemed blind to this: it was left to Lamb to disagree firmly with his assertion that the Mariner 'should have had a character and a profession'. He thought of omitting the poem altogether, as having been 'an injury to the volume', and when he agreed after all to put it into the second edition, gave it a subordinate place, retitling it in the process 'A Poet's Reverie'. He must have been somewhat relieved when his friend's slowness in producing the last sections of 'Christabel' encouraged him to drop that poem altogether (while not, I have suggested, dismissing the prospect of its being published elsewhere) and give over the second volume to humanitarian portraits that seemed more suited to his own preoccupations. Coleridge apparently bowed to the implied devaluation—whether actually intended or not: he did not publish 'Kubla Khan' for many years, and when he did so, presented it simply as a 'psychological curiosity', omitting any reference to its daemonic content—or, indeed, to any meaning at all. Yet Leadbetter has no difficulty in showing its wealth of daemonic reference. Coleridge's reticence is equally apposite to *Christabel*. Geraldine, too, has all the signs of being a daemonic figure, but Coleridge was evidently unwilling to be very open about her—or even to complete his poem, expressing no more than a fear that he 'could not carry out with equal success the execution of the idea, an extremely difficult and subtle one.' In regard to this Leadbetter is unwilling to yield to any suggestion that the daemon is simply evil; and in spite of the fact that he is forced to omit mention of the late gloss in the 'Ramsgate' copy where the word 'Evil' occurs in association with Geraldine, he is very persuasive—even though my own view is that Coleridge did not always remain true to his intuition that the daemonic was morally ambiguous, but was sometimes drawn by his less adventurous associates into accepting the more orthodox view that the 'daemonic' was always, ultimately, 'demonic', and evil.

To say this is to maintain (unlike Leadbetter, it seems) that Coleridge never finally resolved the ambiguities of his predicament. If he had taken the

Lawrentian line of being true to the urgings of his daemon he might well have achieved much more as a poet, and perhaps even been a better one. Yet one is forced to the conclusion that since the world consists of more than is available to the insights of any single person, Wordsworth's insistence on the intractability of the natural also had its virtues. If Coleridge had devoted himself more completely to the daemonic he might, paradoxically, have been less successful as a human being.