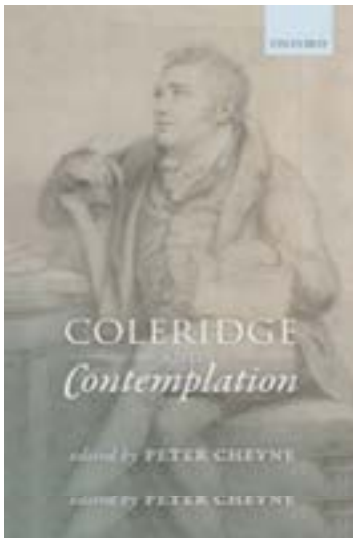


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**Antonella Riem**

**Imagination, Meditation and the Mind: Reflections on *Coleridge and Contemplation***

***Peter Cheyne ed. 2017. Coleridge and Contemplation. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press, 332 pp., US\$ 90.00, ISBN 9780198799511***



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*Coleridge and Contemplation*, brilliantly edited by Peter Cheyne, with a *Foreword* by Baroness Mary Warnock, is a thorough and comprehensive collection of essays by renowned scholars from different research backgrounds who put together their varied expertise to scrutinise Coleridge's philosophical, poetic, scientific and metaphysical thoughts (in poetry and prose) from a wide range of perspectives, but with a main focus centred on the idea of contemplation/meditation in his *opus*. The book acknowledges Coleridge's original and innovative work and constant and tireless study of the human being, from philosophy to many branches of what was to become 'science', from religion to politics, including Hinduism and the French Revolution, from Classical to musical, medical and physiological studies, including the workings of the psyche, often anticipating later psychology. Indeed, in studying the side-effects of laudanum on his mind and body, as Knight mentions, he was a "careful follower of his symptoms and coiner of the word 'psychosomatic'" (91).

*Coleridge and Contemplation* is divided into four parts, beginning with an in-depth analysis of Coleridge's "Poetics and Aesthetics" (Part I), with contributions on contemplation,

imagination and meditation, all essential concepts to understand the intensity of his poetry and his constant aspiration to beauty as a form of revelation. Part II faces the multiplicity of Coleridge's intellectual and scholarly pursuits with a view on his approach to "Science, Ethics, and Politics". Part III "Metaphysics" tackles one of the most challenging topics for Coleridge critics, his metaphysical ideas that are then, perhaps, ideally settled, or at least 'regulated' in Part IV, which focuses on "Philosophy and Religion".

As Peter Cheyne fittingly affirms in his Introduction, "Coleridge is a particularly challenging figure because he was a thinker in process, and something of an omnimath, a Renaissance man of the Romantic era. The dynamic quality of his thinking, the 'dark fluxion' pursued but ultimately 'unfixable by thought' (*Poetical Works* I: 1154), and his extensive range of interests make a philosophical yet also multi-disciplinary approach to Coleridge essential" (7). This passage testifies well to Coleridge's remarkable intellectual scope, his habitual anticipatory grasp on a multidisciplinary (as we call it today) opening to knowledge, which is actually a constant search for the secret-sacred Wisdom in all manifestations of the "One Life", also in its human expressions in literature, philosophy, medicine, chemistry, religion and so on. It is a "studio matto e disperatissimo"<sup>1</sup>, as Giacomo Leopardi defines this infinite desire for knowledge, in order to reach an "Absolute Unity", as Coleridge calls it, or a "perfect whole":

Till, by a curious art disposed, we find  
One perfect whole of all the pieces joined.  
(Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *The Art of Poetry*, I, ll. 177-180).

It is the shared yearning of the Romantics for an answer to their intellectual and metaphysical wonderings across the ocean of Consciousness, contemplated, *Krsna*-like, while floating on the Lotus flower of sacred knowledge.

Because of Coleridge's vast interest in the fruits of the human, seeking mind, *Coleridge and Contemplation* too, gracefully and exhaustively displays the all-embracing scope of the Renaissance humanism of a Romantic mind, to which critics nowadays should attend much more than "publish or perish" pressures allow. This is the first of many assets of this comprehensive book, where the specificity of the concept of contemplation is followed across different areas of interest with determination, scholarly depth and thorough creativity. As Baroness Mary Warnock says in her foreword, "this is a book to be greatly welcomed" and is also "strangely timely" (vii), not only, as she says, because it reminds us of the importance of the relationship humans have with nature, but also, I believe, because it addresses the need of our contemporary globalised and troubled world to refocus on a loving and mutual relationship among humans, with nature, with animate and so-called inanimate things and beings. Coleridge beautifully describes how we need to feel deeply:

O! The One Life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,

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<sup>1</sup> Lettera a Pietro Giordani a Milano, Recanati, 2 marzo 1818 in Viani 1849: 76.

Rhythm in all thought and joyance every where –  
 Methinks, it should have been impossible  
 Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;  
 Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air  
 Is Music slumbering on her instrument  
 ("The Aeolian Harp", ll. 26-33)<sup>2</sup>.

As Nehru says: "The human mind appears to have a passion for finding out some kind of unity in life, in nature, in the universe" and "the search for unity in India, Greece, and elsewhere, yielded positive results and produced a harmony, a balance, and a richness in life"<sup>3</sup>. In the Romantic mind this passion and aspiration is strong, and in particular in Coleridge's writings there is "a never-appeased longing to recompose the multifarious nuances of existence into what he calls an 'Absolute Unity'"<sup>4</sup>. As he says:

I would make a pilgrimage to the burning sands of Arabia to find the Man who could explain to me there can be *oneness*, there being infinite Perceptions – yet there must be a *oneness*, not an intense Union but an Absolute Unity<sup>5</sup>.

Under the lens of his philosophy and metaphysical thinking, *Coleridge and Contemplation* revolves around Coleridge's synaesthetic interconnections of soul and mind, music and air, inner and outer spaces, found in "The Aeolian Harp" and most of his work.

In Part I, J. C. C. Mays says: "if contemplative suggests a detached or achievable position of calm, there must be a better description of a mind divided. Coleridge was *homo viator*, a wandering man [...]. He was a man who wrote about and communicated energy – vitality – hedged about as he was by human difficulties and frustrations" (32). The gift of a focussed and calm mind, of a metaphysical unity in the face of horizontal multiplicity was a constant pursuit for Coleridge, only momentarily and fugitively achieved, especially in his poetry, so that he had to start all over again (and again). In Hinduism, which Coleridge frequented in his vast readings, the aspiration to Oneness does not negate division or movement and change in human journeying. While Western philosophy tends to think in terms of *aut aut*, reality from an Oriental perspective is seen from a more inclusive *et et* point of view. For example, with the concept of *māyā*, often inaccurately translated as 'illusion', Hinduism speaks of different levels of consciousness and René Guénon, the eminent French orientalist, appropriately defines the word *māyā* as "work of art":

He who produces the manifestation through the means of his 'art' is the Divine Architect, and the world is his 'work of art'; thus thought, the world is no less 'real' than our works of art, which, due to their relative impermanence, are also 'unreal' if

<sup>2</sup> Coleridge 1983: 101.

<sup>3</sup> Nehru 1981: 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> Riem 2005: 2.

<sup>5</sup> Coburn 1957: 556.

compared to the art 'abiding' in the artist. Indeed, the main danger one runs when using the word 'illusion' is that we can too easily use it as a synonym for 'unreality', in an absolute sense, that is considering things as illusory, as if they were absolutely nothing, while they are instead only different gradations of reality<sup>6</sup>.

So, in his life and work, Coleridge reached "different gradations" of harmony, contemplative and meditative calm and perceived/imagined in himself diverse forms of 'reality' as in the case of the meditative concluding lines of "Frost at Midnight", where the speaker's initial sense of separation from all 'quiet' life is superseded through memory, meditation and contemplation. Even if the "secret ministry of frost" cannot be completely unveiled and revealed, it can light up the poet's imagination "in a sudden flare of illumination, an unexpected shaft opening to the spiritual and intuitive *sight* of the One, in a vision of Beauty and Truth"<sup>7</sup>. In particular, Nature, being a manifestation of Life, functions as a fundamental element and focus in order to find inspiration; it represented for most of the Romantic poets the restorative energetic field of calmness and inner tranquillity that verged on (or imitated) a meditative state: "the walker will enjoy a sense of convergence or communion with nature and a sense, too, of the world as an integral whole, a unity. [...] For then the meditator is not only on the move but 'on the Way' and 'in the truth'" (David E. Cooper, 45).

Truth, as in Keats' "Ode to the Grecian Urn", needs to be always intimately interlaced with Beauty, and for Coleridge Beauty is distinguished from "the agreeable" that gratifies our senses, while "the beautiful, by contrast, is 'pleasing for its own sake'" (48). James Kirwan's essay on beauty traces Coleridge's philosophical concerns across eighteenth-century aesthetics and Kant, noting how Coleridge prefers the "neo-Platonic idea of beauty as emanating directly from the divine. [...] For, it is only by remaining a matter of pure contemplation that beauty can become revelation" (57), as Coleridge elucidates in his *Notebooks*: "Man knows God only by revelation from God – as we see the Sun by his own Light"<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, "What is mere longing for Kant is for Coleridge the soul recognizing its divine origin"<sup>9</sup>. In the following essay on the 'art of contemplation', a comparison between Coleridge and Dewey, Wheeler demonstrates how the reader is a "fellow labourer" (72) in the imaginative process of poetic creation, and artistic power is "the paradigmatic form of all human mental activity", where "metaphor epitomizes human perception building up a world of nature and mind" (73), thus bringing praise to Coleridge's innovative and important "insight into the imaginative nature of perception and the sensuous nature of imagination" (75). Scruton's essay concludes this part focussing on the fancy/imagination relation and debate and sees imagination as "truth-directed" (79-83) because it involves, also in the reader, "the active participation in forming images, scenes, and narratives, with a view to understanding the world in which we live and our own states of mind and aspirations" (84). Understanding, stemming from the highest faculties of the human soul, means to partake in the creation

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<sup>6</sup> Guénon 1990: 95.

<sup>7</sup> Riem 2005: 133.

<sup>8</sup> Coburn 1957: 209.

<sup>9</sup> Cooper 2018: 2.

of things as images, descending from the *mundus imaginalis*, or 'middle world of images'<sup>10</sup>. Speaking of the quality and power of imagination, the *modifying*, and *coadunating* Faculty, Coleridge says: "the Hebrew Poets appear to me to have possessed beyond all others - & next to them the English. In the Hebrew Poets each Thing has a Life of its own, & yet they are all one Life. In God they move & live, & *have* their Being – not *had*, as the cold System of Newtonian Theology represents / but *have*"<sup>11</sup>.

In part II, Knight's essay focuses on the possibility that chemical philosophy could reconcile "science and Romantic sensibility". Coleridge is an attentive and imaginative language creator, for in a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science he "denounced the use of the term 'philosopher' for all the chemists, mathematicians, physiologists, and other assembled; and William Whewell proposed the term 'scientist' on Coleridge's prompting (like Coleridge, he was a great word-coiner)" (100-101). Aherne proposes an analysis of the "formative and spiritual impact" Coleridge had "upon the Cambridge Apostles and the subsequent development of theology at the university during the nineteenth century" (105), while Oishi treats the connection between contemplation and philanthropy, pinpointing in the end how the "emotional intensity towards contemplation" (135) distances Coleridge from the Kantian system of reason, for Coleridge "kept claiming 'an opening of the inward eye to the glorious vision' of 'I AM THAT I AM' (*Friend* I 519; Perry 199, 128)" (137). This glorious inner vision of Oneness is analysed in detail by Engell (chapter 14) who traces it into the "Originating act of self-affirmation – in religious terms Jehovah's I AM THAT I AM (Exodus 3: 14), in philosophical terms 'the SUM or I AM' (*Biographia* I 272 and n), the *Ich bin weil Ich bin*, as opposed to Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* – is paramount" (Engell, 236). I think it is one of the many clear signs of Coleridge's interest in Eastern philosophies, as it refers to the much more ancient Sanskrit concept of *Ham So, I Am That*, which in Vedic philosophy means identifying oneself with the universe, or ultimate reality, or God. The verse can be found in the *Vajasaneyi Samhita Upanishad* or *Isha Upanishad*, which ends with the line *tejo yat te rūpaṃ kalyāṇatamaṃ tat te paśyāmi yo 'sāo [asau puruṣaḥ] so'ham asmi*, "The light which is thy fairest form, I see it. I am what He is"<sup>12</sup>. It is also connected to the very similar expression *Tat Tvam Asi* "Thou art that" (found in the *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7), which implies the Unity of all: the I, *Jivātmā*, is one with *Ātmā*, the Self, as an individual ray of *Paramātmā*, God<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Corbin, Henri, *Corps Spirituel et Terre Céleste*, ch. 2, my translation: "We are thus offered a triple universe: an intelligible universe, a sensible universe and between the two that inter-world that, resorting to Latin, we have learnt to call *mundus imaginalis* [which] does not have anything unreal or 'shadowy' in itself. It has full right to a sui generis reality, and it is what we have completely forgotten in the West, since when the 'battle for the Soul of the World' was lost: once lost the Image is abandoned to all its degradations, to all the licences of an Imagination that has lost its orienting axis, and with this its cognitive function. Thus one can only know the Images derived from the sensible or perceptible through the senses (the so called civilisation of images, the cinema screen). Therefore, no more metaphysical Images nor metaphysics of the Images and of Imagination, for the Imagination principle is that, through the Soul's organ, through its imagining function, the very Universe of Being reveals itself in the 'imaginal' Forms of the *mundus imaginalis*".

<sup>11</sup> Griggs 1802: 866.

<sup>12</sup> *The Upanishads* 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Raphael 1992.

Hamilton's essay on "Coleridge and Conservatism" aptly concludes this part, with a wide-scope analysis of Coleridge's original and evolving ideas on politics, which were disregarded for a long time after Chamber's biography in 1938, which superseded Muirhead's fundamental analysis (1930) of Coleridge as the "most important forerunner of British idealism, a Platonist and transcendentalist whose work was inspired by, but in tension with Kant" (144). This forgetfulness of Coleridge as philosopher continued for such a long time that his philosophical writings remain "little known" and he is not mentioned in "ten volumes of the *Routledge History of Philosophy* (2003)" (145). (Coleridge does, however, receive a full, discursive entry in the *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Hamilton fills in this gap and investigates in depth his specific mode of conservatism, which he defines "contemplative" because of his view of society "not as a machine but as a highly complex organism" (146) and because of his interest in "elitism" rather than "populism" (Coleridge's original distinction, 143), which arises from "the impassioned defence of cultural as opposed to material progress" (158). For this, he can be "'loosely described as conservative but neither archaic nor reactionary [...]" (Morrow 1990: 4)" (164), being rather a "radical or critical conservative" (164).

Part III, the spinning "metaphysical" centre of the book, opens with Cheyne's remarkable essay dealing with Coleridge as a "two-level theorist, with *higher level, energetic* acts and ideals in the highest understanding, imagination and reason organizing and cohering [*Citi*], at least ideally, *the lower level energetic* desires, associations, and conceptual structuring of sense, fancy, and the lower understanding [*manas* or, at an intermediary level *buddhi*]" (171). In my study *The One Life*, I compared Hindu and Western ideas of the mind, and I find that Cheyne's *higher level* can be connected to the faculty of universal consciousness, *Citi*, ("reason considered objectively, as the universal logos, beyond the human mind", radiating its light in the human soul, *buddhi*, the intellect, an intermediary between *Citi* and *Manas*, the *lower* individual human mind – "reason considered subjectively" (176). It is a threefold, rather than twofold, gradation of understanding that partakes of the tripartite dimension of reality we can find in many *Conversation Poems* and also in the movement from mind, to fancy, to imagination, progressively reaching a *higher* or more perfect form of Unity, that undeniably stresses the importance Coleridge gives to the "dynamic relationship between synthesis and analysis, between combination and division" (175). Struwig, focussing on *Logic* and *Opus Maximum*, in harmony with Cheyne's perspective, draws a difference between Coleridge's ideas of a Kantian transcendental a priori, from a noetic, Platonic one, showing how he "sets out philosophical views that are central to his own system of 'rationalist intuitionism'" (194). Flores explores the impact on Coleridge of the "Christian neo-Platonism that gained strength during the seventeenth century in the Cambridge Platonist school" (212), led by Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) and Henry More (1614-1687). She studies in detail some poems such as "Effusion XXXV" (later to become "The Aeolian Harp"), "This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison", and "Frost at Midnight", which according to her view "illustrate Coleridge's conviction at that time that the role of the ideal poet is first to discover, and then further to convey in verse, the spirit of nature – plastic nature which is accessible to the poet only through contemplation" (219).

According to Engell, Coleridge's development of neo-Platonic ideas is not in contrast to his study of Kant; he takes Schelling's idea that imagination is "intimately linked to contemplative reason" (224) and it can "incorporate the ideas of reason into the images of sense" (227). Coleridge's analogical thinking and his metaphysical 'Syncretism' allow him to be a "modified Platonist", "something of a pragmatist and a Trinitarian Christian" (13), without incongruities or contradictions. That higher reality and unity he pursues in all fields always bring him to a more comprehensive and non-excluding approach to life.

Part IV opens with McGhee's stimulating "Buddhist response to Coleridge" that reads closely note I 576 in *Marginalia* connecting it to the revised and extended version found at the end of *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge describes a state of "inner adoration to the great I AM" (*Biographia* II 247-8, quoted 263). This inner adoration is the means "to know God", which equals the knowledge of "the reality of love", for only those who "love know God" (264). McGhee aptly comments that the phrases he quotes have "points of contact, at least, with Stoicism and with the Buddhist traditions" (263), and I would add to this a more ancient Hindu connection, with a special type of love for God, *Bhakti* in Sanskrit, as Coleridge tellingly expounds describing his son Hartley's contemplative deep love for nature as his "*Brahman* love & awe of Life"<sup>14</sup>. The essay then analyses "Fears in Solitude" and "Frost at Midnight", showing how the special quiet and silence created by inner contemplation "seems to be one of the conditions for the formation and then contemplation that awaken 'the soul of man' (*Marginalia* I 576; *Statesman's Manual* 24)" (276). Through this awakening, the vision of God penetrates the soul which becomes "reunited in mystical ecstasy with that radiance which is the source of the very Intellectual Principle"<sup>15</sup>. Noriko Naohara presents Coleridge's "spiritual truths", where reason is "an inward Beholding" (278), where through inner vision/contemplation one can relate with a loving God: "Coleridge retained a Christian spirituality; this definition of reason indicates his confidence about the human mind intuiting God as a spiritual substance" (278). The essay then studies the affinity of ideas of language between Coleridge and Augustine, and finds that "in Coleridge's theological thinking, reason is an 'inward Beholding' (*Aids to Reflection* 224) and a spiritual faculty to know the divine Word" (288). Next, Suzanne Webster studies Coleridge's *triple Ichheit* noting: 1) "A, The Spiritual I", connected to "Moral Self-consciousness" and to the "Mind" (298); 2) "(-A), the Animal I", or the "mind of the flesh", "the lowest *active* mental faculty in humans", which was for Coleridge a complicated faculty, being "perilously close to being truly animal in nature" (301); 3) "(B) The human I or I am", "possessing human Understanding" (302). She concludes stressing how even if the *Triple Ichheit* "may contain three distinct parts", it "counterfeits *sameness*, single identity" (304). J. Gerald Janzen focuses on the codas to *Biographia Literaria* and *Opus Maximum* Fragment 2, where Coleridge sees prayer as "pure will", the "energetic core" of contemplation (313). Then Janzen turns to Coleridge's childhood memories of his mother and father, to the "affective core" of his "contemplative reflections" (313) that can, like in many of his poems, bring the "deep devotion of Delight" (317), connected to the "very hunger at the mother's bosom / that very hunger a mode of

<sup>14</sup> Coburn 1957: 959 (4.84).

<sup>15</sup> Werkmeister 1961: 99-123, 111-112.

love (Notebooks 3 §4348)" (318). Once again it is an "Act of Adoration", or *Bhakti*, the deep reverent 'awful' feeling of love for God, which is the great Mother Spider found in a Notebook entry (311), forever spinning the thread of Life. The same analogy can be found in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (1.1.7): "As a spider projects forth and draws back (its threads), as plants grow on earth, as hairs grow on the body, so does the universe emerge from the Imperishable Being".

In conclusion, I agree with what Andrew Cooper says about *Coleridge and Contemplation*: "The volume is of interest to theologians, literary theorists and philosophers in search of a more expansive account of nature in which the human and her capacity to think do not feature as puzzling remainders. Cheyne should be praised for his enormous editing achievement, and for the remarkably high standard of the essays in the volume"<sup>16</sup>. I am sure that this excellent book, bound to become a classic in Coleridge's scholarship and criticism, will continue to inspire meditations and contemplations on his work for a long time. As a passionate and contemplative devotee and scholar of Coleridge's intense relations to Hinduism, meditative inner states and Eastern philosophies, I am very grateful for this book's accomplishments, which will bear many fruits.

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<sup>16</sup> Cooper 2018.



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