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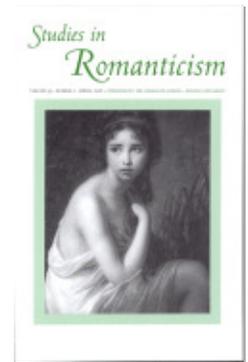
A Modem Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits by Andrea Timár (review)

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Andrea Timár. *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 180. \$90.

Andrea Timár describes her compact and engaging study of Coleridge as a first attempt to bring into conversation the “discourses of cultivation, addiction, and habit” (1). Contending “that the ultimate aim of Coleridgean education is to turn the working of free will into the automatism of habit” (2), Timár scrutinizes Coleridge’s idea of the human by focusing on three concepts that seem to reveal the complex entanglements and potential material determinacy of the Coleridgean will. The result is a fairly standard, naturalist, and in outline declensionist narrative extending from the ostensibly reflective and value-laden domain of education via the psychophysiological inferno of Coleridgean addiction to the “automatism of habit.”

At stake in Timár’s argument is, ultimately, the inherent truth value of “Coleridge’s thinking about the human” and its declared source: the human will. Already early on, she moves to challenge Coleridge’s key claim, namely, that the will preserves its integrity “not only without but even against alien stimulants” (6). This contestation is unfolded in more detail in Part 2 (“Addiction”), which features an engaging discussion of the seeming defeat of a reflective, cultivated imagination by what Coleridge judged so apprehensively as “the mindless overconsumption of printed works” and the public’s seemingly limitless “desire for being further stimulated” (66). Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s Baudelaire-inspired discussion of the traumatic shock of a type of “event” (*Erlebnis*) that refuses to be converted into meaningful “experience” (*Erfahrung*), Timár sees Coleridge resisting this dynamic. Her chapter on “Intoxicated Reading” explores Coleridge’s compound anxiety over his own addiction to stimulants, novel reading, and large-scale reading audiences addicted to novels and romances yet unable to distill any meanings from their consumptive reading habits. Timár finds that dynamic captured with special poignancy in the figure of Christabel, so utterly paralyzed by Geraldine’s “shrunken serpent eyes. . . . That all her features were resigned / To this sole image in her mind: / And passively did imitate / That look of treacherous hate.”

Yet what does it mean for Coleridge’s poetry and prose to throw into relief, time and again, the mind’s addictive proclivities? Does a poem like “Christabel” not institute a reflective and attentive model of reading precisely by staging, at the level of plot and description, the disastrous consequences arising from its opposite: viz., reading as sheer mindless addictive gazing? Here Timár’s argument seems unclear about whether to regard Coleridge’s conception of the human as ultimately succumbing to the same addictive dynamic that his writings often capture with such forensic precision. Coleridgean *mimesis*, I would maintain, does not inadvertently replicate the addictive pathologies that furnish its subject matter. Rather,

through its highly sophisticated formal and figural structure, it tends to yield a considered perspective on the treacherous dynamics of cultivation, addiction, and habituation. The larger point here is that in engaging literary and philosophical writing of any variety, we inevitably commit ourselves to fundamental assumptions as to whether the reflective and analytic operations of a given work merely conceal an underlying and supposedly inescapable naturalistic scheme, or whether the latter can be positively transcended by the hermeneutic practice of writing and reading, respectively. To put the matter in the form of a question: does Coleridgean *mimesis* in the final analysis *enable* reflective cognition or merely *replicate* the addictive pathologies that furnish its dramatic proposition?

By and large, Timár's account seems to plump for the latter, naturalistic position. Thus she opens by positing the supposed capacity of stimuli "to undermine the workings of the will [and to] render individuals similar to those passive beings that are governed by 'alien stimulants' or . . . even to automatons or machines" (6). Yet it is not clear from her account why "stimulatability" should be considered a specifically "*human* characteristic" (6; Timár's emphasis); Coleridge for one credits both animal and human organisms with a responsiveness to stimuli, though he is also careful enough not to invest "stimulatability" with efficient, causal powers where human beings are concerned. On this key point, however, Timár's analysis appears fundamentally flawed in that, perhaps inadvertently replicating Ockham's voluntarism and Hobbes' naturalism, she conceives of the will as a type of quasimechanical, efficient causation, a "last appetite" susceptible of being derailed by the competing (and supposedly equivalent) causal force of sundry stimuli.

To take that view is to get elementally wrong Coleridge's, in essence, Augustinian understanding of the will as inherently divided in ways of which human beings may in turn grow uniquely conscious. To be sure, Timár's contention that addiction poses one of the most powerful threats to Coleridge's (Kantian-Christian) idea of the human is entirely true on the face of it; and Coleridge for one would have agreed with it. Indeed, no other writer of his time seems more inclined (and gifted) when it comes to scrutinizing the subversive impact of wayward habituation and material addiction on his very humanity. Yet precisely in making that impact the focus of his phenomenological analyses, Coleridge also secures a far more complex account of the human person: namely, as distinguished not by immunity from dehumanizing material forces forever impinging on one but, rather, by an insistent awareness of the corrosive effect of outside stimuli. Put differently, Coleridge's conception of the will cannot adequately be grasped unless seen in constant, agonizing proximity to his account of conscience.

The Stoic notion of *akrasia*, so vital to Coleridge's phenomenology of

the human (yet oddly absent from Timár's account) names not just a pathological mechanism but, crucially, our concurrent *awareness* of that very fact. It is precisely in what Coleridge calls the "mysterious diversity between the injunctions of the mind and the elections of the will" (*Aids to Reflection*, ed. Beer, 349) that the human reveals its distinctive character. To be sure, there is a brief reference to Mary Ann Perkins's work and a perfunctory acknowledgment that, "of course, Coleridge's ideas on religious and moral development are deeply intertwined" (27). Such occasional, passing acknowledgment of the Platonic, Stoic, and Augustinian sources of Coleridge's anthropology notwithstanding, Timár seems content to frame Coleridge's struggle with the nature of human agency in exclusively modern, naturalist, and (in tendency) reductionist terms: viz., as a matter of competing (efficient) causes. Yet to ignore Coleridge's distinctly Augustinian anthropology is to set up a straw-contest between a (supposedly) mechanistic will inevitably defeated by equally mechanistic, "foreign and artificial" stimulants. What this view, which largely predominates throughout Timár's book, fails to acknowledge is the clear distinction between the species-concept of the human *being* and the incommunicable reality of the human *person* as phenomenized by the dialectic of will and conscience. That the latter should have preoccupied Coleridge throughout his career has to do with the fact that the phenomenology of the human is distinguished, precisely, by an underlying awareness, however agonizing, of that very conflict between volition and stimuli.

Ultimately, the distinction at issue pivots on Coleridge's understanding of conscience, a term that does not receive significant attention in Timár's account. Indeed, her reference to Coleridge's notion of conscience, "an overpowering, ghostly figure" said to "evoke a sense of guilt" that has the human individual "await some (endlessly deferred) redemption" (44) seems faintly dismissive. And yet, Coleridge's poetry, letters, and notebook entries furnish overwhelming evidence that, for him, the pangs of conscience were consummately real, not ghostly, and that what renders his sense of the human at once indelible and precarious is precisely this lifelong wrestling with the real presence and insistent calling of conscience. In the event, Timár's juxtaposition of Kant and Coleridge gets us close to the key point, but ultimately fails to clinch it. Thus she remarks how Coleridgean conscience "reverses Ball's supposedly Kantian scheme: rather than acquiring the capacity for law-giving that stems from within, the individuals become subjected to the gothic spectre of an authority, which cannot be 'subdued'" (45). True, indeed, provided we bear in mind that in Coleridge's phenomenological accounts of conscience and remorse, this "within" cannot be quarantined—as Kantian "autonomy" rather too confidently implies it can—from its transcendent, divine source. James Vigus's fine study of the

Platonic Coleridge (not referenced) would have helped Timár see how deeply Coleridge's reading of Kant was influenced by Platonic thought.

In Part 3 of her book, Timár addresses Coleridge's conception of habit "as a partial solution" (107) to the "opposition between freedom and compulsion, will and stimulatability, agency and passivity." Yet just as this list of seeming antinomies occludes the possibility that they themselves might be both the source and focus of self-awareness, so Timár's preemptive characterization of habit as "mechanism" or "mental automatism" (107) initially seems to bias her analysis in favor of a naturalist explanatory scheme. Happily, the discussion that follows offers a more nuanced account that greatly benefits from Timár's close adherence to Coleridge's supremely perceptive discussion of habit in relation to volition in his *Opus Maximum*. While somewhat counterintuitively looping back in her concluding chapter from Coleridge's final work to his early poetry ("Effusion xxxv"), Timár gradually acknowledges the deep nexus between habituation and love in Coleridge's thought. As Coleridge's *Opus Maximum* famously argues, the origins of habit, and the stability of our affections and mental economy that it promises, are to be found not at all in mindless repetition but, on the contrary, in the loving and steadily deepening psychophysiology of the mother-child relation. It is this markedly *interpersonal* and dynamic, rather than solipsistic and mechanical, quality that shows habit to be the very matrix underlying rational and responsible human agency, far from the alien and mindless "automatism" supposedly vitiating it. Though Timár's analyses here could have been presented with greater conceptual force and clarity, their drift away from her initial, naturalist commitments toward a more open and reflexive hermeneutics of human agency is to be welcomed. A broader scope of reading might have allowed her exploration of habit to benefit from adjacent discourses, theology in particular, such as Félix Ravaisson's *De l'Habitude* (1838) and Maurice Blondel's *L'Action* (1893).

Now and then, the argument of this promising first book is thrown off course by implausible generalizations, such as: "modernity is most often associated with the second half of the 19th century" (3), or the oddly counterintuitive claim that "Adam Smith's theatrical conception of sympathy (Marshall) keeps the boundaries between self and other intact" (54). Likewise, the pacing and organization of individual chapters also could have been more effective, with several of the book's sections feeling oddly truncated. Thus a bare six pages on "Cultivating Reason and the Will" can only skirt the richness and complexity of Coleridge's vast body of writing on this very subject; likewise, Timár's five-page chapter on "The Shaping Spirit of Education" does not significantly advance our understanding of the issues beyond the promising observation that Coleridge's "conclusion

that the ‘natural’ growth of our ‘humanity’ needs to be induced and guided by the active, human power of education, [itself] bound up with the power of the (God given) *human* imagination, or ‘esemplastic’ power” (34).

Finally, one might encourage author and publisher to make more of an effort to proofread before printing: “Köngigsberg” (4); “the treats the affections” (5); “Albrech von Haller” (7), “*persona exemparis*” (28), “Lockeridge” (114); “willkuhr” for *Willkür* (115), etc. Despite these shortcomings, Timár’s study succeeds in highlighting aspects of Coleridge’s uniquely complex and profound reflections on human agency, education, imagination, and how our grasp of these issues remains perennially suspended between empirical and transcendent frameworks.

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