

Between Addiction and Cultivation: Coleridge's Modern Turn

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

A Modern Coleridge discusses the concepts of activity, free will, autonomy, and agency in light of Coleridge's compelling notion of humanity, which lies at the basis of and forms the culmination of his modern thought. Timár employs well-known and much-debated Coleridgean categories such as cultivation, addiction, and habit (whose prominence is immediately clear from the volume's subtitle) to discuss how the interplay between will and suspension of the will hinges on them as it shapes and systematically complicates Coleridge's poetic vision from his early writings to the fragmentary reflections of his late production.

Timár examines the topic of will and the suspension of the will in conjunction with cultivation as a crucial question in Coleridge's aesthetics of education, referring to both the individual and the nation. Indeed, cultivation (as humanity's cultural development) proves to be instrumental in nation building. With this in focus, she offers an ingenious analysis of the consonances among Wordsworth's "Peter Bell" and Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" and "The Appeal to the Law," the latter of which revolves around the figure of the British governor of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, to whom Coleridge served as a secretary between 1804 and 1805. Such a reading reveals Coleridge's theories on and preoccupations with education; in his view the only possible cultural development is what results from active agency and free will. Education, so presented, is then the highest expression of will, whereas addiction, as its counterpart, becomes the quintessence of the absence of the will, of a silenced consciousness.

Addiction and habits are discussed in the second and third parts of the volume, respectively. Addiction is presented as a catachresis that is able to capture the different aspects and deviations of modernity, especially in terms of the mind's stimulability. Coleridge questions the advancement of technology and its repercussion on moral, political, and social grounds. For instance, the craving generated by the emergence of print and the subsequent success of novels, which are responsible for the intoxication and digression of the mind. Coleridge's distaste for novels is well documented, to him the kind of reading that a novel involves is not an active one, because the reader

falls into a sort of trance that abjures any act of the will. As a consequence, the will is less and less potent, indeed the de-humanizing repetition and psychological dependence that such a form of reading implies turns the mind into a machine and paves the way to the worst kind of addiction; that is, the one that inhibits the formative power of the conscious will.

Addiction and habits also describe by what means the individual relates to him/herself and to the others. In this regard, "Kubla Khan" offers a good paradigm of the kind of addiction and intoxication that occur when opium is no longer treated as an anodyne but changes its function from a painkiller used to treat a medical problem (such as Coleridge's physical pain) into a poison or a stimulus for those craving pleasurable sensations. Remarkably, in placing the poem in context with its various stages, Timár discusses how Coleridge's later introductory note to the poem signals the desire to establish a social and a cultural distance between the poet and the "mob," between a medical use of opium (as a tranquillizer) and an addictive one (as a stimulant), which eventually leads to devastating consequences. Thus the 1816 version of "Kubla Khan" reveals Coleridge's newly conservative approach to addiction, which, Timár argues, "serves as a warning sign that the author produced something he did not want to produce" (96). In particular, the introductory note, by presenting an account of the author as he reads Purchas's *Pilgrimage*, signals the risks of addiction and intoxication that certain kinds of reading (analogous to the reading of novels) can produce. Notably, Coleridge combines the fictional image of the author, who needs to take an anodyne in order to relieve his pain, with that of the author, who is transported into the realm of an intoxicated imagination as a result of his reading. In both cases the agency of free will is completely compromised. This is a clear example of how addiction and intoxication prevent the individual from generating willful acts of the mind that are vital for the correct functioning of the faculty of imagination. As a result, the "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Coleridge 189) turns into an impersonal mechanism that deprives the subject of his own humanity. As Timár contends, the creative repetition actuated by imagination when contaminated by addiction and intoxication becomes a bad habit, very different from the proper and virtuous habits that "can work without the constant interference of the will" (20). Further, shifting the analysis of "Kubla Khan" to a meta-textual level, it could be argued that the poem itself serves as either a "stimulant" or a "tranquillizer" depending on the reader's approach and educational interest; this is

consistent with Coleridge's notion of cultivation and its deviant (negative) form represented by addiction.

Following a thematic rather than a chronological arrangement, the last part of the volume becomes entirely devoted to (mental) habits, where Timár presents a captivating study of "Dejection: An Ode" (notably the only poem in which Coleridge employs the word "habit") in the context of a notebook entry, of a biographical reference on his controversial relationship with his mother (and in more general terms on the mother's love as the mediator of God's), and finally of his most compelling unfinished work *Opus Maximum*. Among Coleridge's texts, "Dejection: An Ode" is probably the one that best addresses the question of habit, whereby it becomes the unceasing "desire of desire," "a desirelet," or even a "relic of desire" (128). Indeed, by raising a false form of desire, habit turns into a Derridean trace, whose material existence is forever lost. Such a ghostly desire inhibits "Fruition" and "Active Consciousness" and turns the subject into an automaton. Timár convincingly argues that "Dejection: An Ode" exemplifies the difference between good and bad habits: in his reading, good habits are primarily grounded on love, which connects to Coleridge's biographical experience and his troubled relation with a mother unable to love her son. The sense of absence that pervades the text becomes a catalyst for a habit which is first referred to as "abstruse research," then is associated with opium, and finally with the kind of suspension of the will produced by the respect of the Law. Paradoxically, in order to overcome the addiction to and the consequential habit for opium, Timár contends, Coleridge needs to accept the outer form of mental coercion given by the Law, which suggests that by no means can the will be free. In this regard, "Dejection: An Ode" dramatically presents the reader with a psychological conundrum: although the physical and mental emancipation from opium could assure the restoration of free will, on closer examination, the awareness of the Law in oneself generates another form of addiction and habit. In other words, there is no way out for the subject, who cannot escape the loss of desire and the impossibility of Fruition, which is turned into a fancy, a mere illusion. This, however, is not a completely negative condition. As Timár argues, Coleridge's aim in his modern conception of education via cultivation is to "turn the workings of free will into the automatism of habit while maintaining the illusion of free will" (2), which sheds new light on the poet's attitude towards addiction and habits.

Timár closes her study with a comparative analysis of "The Eolian Harp" and its early version, "Effusion XXXV," in which addiction and habit

lead to a positive and, therefore, effective process of cultivation. These two are very different versions of the text, especially from a religious perspective: in Coleridge's words, "Effusion XXXV" expresses a form of "heretical pantheism," whereas "The Eolian Harp" a "conservative, orthodox Anglicanism"; nor are they meant to be completely superimposable, in other words "Effusion XXXV" does not naturally conflate into "The Eolian Harp." In Timár's fascinating perspective, such an impossible convergence generates a peculiar interplay between the two texts, whereby they display a process of cultivation based on three stages: "intoxication," as a form of spiritual fall, "conversion," as a form of self-reflection, and "redemption," as a form of reconquered love. The dialogic relation that Coleridge establishes between these two versions of the poem seems to lead to a kind of (Hegelian?) *Aufhebung*, whereby the triadic configuration of cultivation, addition, and habits generates a successful process of inward development that the poet defines as *Bildung*.

Timár's *Modern Coleridge* is certainly a well-researched and thought-provoking study with a very original focus on Coleridge's (sometimes unexpected) modernity. It is a rare book in that it effectively combines historical context with multifarious pieces of Coleridge's works, offering new insights into the author's epistemological approach to poetry and life in general.

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Work Cited

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