

Blabber Mouth

Charles Marowitz

*COLERIDGE: DARKER REFLECTIONS,
1804 - 1834*

Richard Holmes

Pantheon

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The most devastating comment on Samuel Taylor Coleridge was probably made by Max Beerbohm in his deadly cartoon entitled "Coleridge Talks On." There we see the great poet and mystic-philosopher seated at a dinner table, his head bent, chasing down some elusive, metaphysical subtlety, while ten guests with petrified yawns on their faces lie racked together in a stupor of boredom.

"Above all things I shunned as I would shun a pestilence," said an early disciple, Thomas De Quincey, in 1837, three years after Samuel's marathon soliloquy had finally come to rest,

Coleridge's capital error which through life he practiced, of keeping the audience in a state of passiveness.... This eternal stream of talk which never for one instant intermitted, and allowed no momentary opportunity of reaction to the persecuted and baited auditor, was absolute ruin to the interests of the talker himself.... [T]he poor afflicted listener... returned home in the exhausted condition of one that has been drawn up just before death from the bottom of a well occupied by foul gases; and, of course, hours before he had reached that perilous point of depression, he had lost all power of distinguishing, understanding or connecting.

Madame de Staël put it more succinctly. "*Avec M. Coleridge, c'est tout à fait un monologue.*"

***Some people create masterpieces, and
some people are masterpieces.***

But Beerbohm's was a brittle wit and the

man himself something of a dandy, and so it is understandable that his mind might wander during a Coleridgean discourse, and De Quincey, a very early disciple, so tanked up with opium himself, is not the most reliable of judges. Madame de Staël, however, is usually right on the money, and, in fact, there are innumerable witnesses to attest to the fact that once Coleridge got going, there was no stopping him. But there were just as many who, far from complaining about "the foul gases," were mesmerized by the eloquence and riveted by the mixture of encyclopedic knowledge, literary whimsy, and stratospheric imagination.

Richard Holmes, in the second part of the massive Coleridge biography entitled "Darker Reflections," clearly implies that our celebration of Coleridge owes more to the magnitude of his mind and the complexity of his character than the weight of his oeuvre. Apart from a handful of poems ("The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," "Kubla Kahn," "Dejection: An Ode," etc.) and books (*Biographia Literaria*, two volumes of *The Friend*, and *Aids to Reflection*), one has to measure the greatness of the man more from his jottings (four double volumes of *Notebooks*) and his recollected aura than any tangible works of art or criticism.

Being "a talker," Coleridge's most natural outlet was the lecture-platform, and from the remains of his talks on Shakespeare, philosophy, and literature, it is clear that here he sucked up the ether and exhaled ambrosia. A lecturer is *supposed* to be set apart from his public and expected to orate, theorize, and intellectually perambulate, all of which the writer did with ease and to astounding effect.

But more riveting than his opinions or his theories (many of them anticipating Freud, the New Critics, and even certain modern scientists) was the emotional quagmire bubbling inside the man. Enamored of

his much-fantasized Asra but never consummating his passion; championing Wordsworth, whom he revered and was then callously alienated from; imprisoned in an airless marriage to a wife who would whittle him into domesticity and from whom he took every opportunity to be separated; doting on his favorite son Hartley in whom he saw an homunculus of himself and then having to suffer the agony of loss when the son, revealing the intemperate traits that paralyzed the father, abandoned Coleridge in his early manhood just when the writer most needed the filial support—these personal disasters coupled with finagling publishers, scabrous critics (like William Hazlitt), and the ever-grinding poverty created a pressure that virtually no nature could withstand. The opium-taking became the double-edged sword that both enabled him to cut his way through the spiritual flak of his life and simultaneously sapped his energies but, from all accounts, never weakened his mind. To the end of his days as the Sage of Highgate, Coleridge could hunt down the universal in the particular and make constant connections between the tangible world and the deeper mystery from which it sprang.

Holmes is lenient on Coleridge the plagiarist; the man who paraphrased and pilfered the ideas of Schlegel, Schelling, and Jean Paul Richter and became the leading exponent of German mysticism in England, but articulated ideas do not move from one thinker to another by osmosis but through verbal appropriation, and though one can admire Coleridge's elucidations and enhancements of the German philosophers, the resemblances remain too striking merely to brush under the carpet. Nevertheless, Coleridge's greatest asset was that

fecund, constantly improvising intellect. When his work is taken as a whole, as with Shakespeare, the plagiaries vanish in the flames generated by the more creative artist.

But the question of his "artistry" remains unresolved even after 622 pages of Holmes's hagiography of the poet, the critic, and the mystic. Should we throw laurel wreaths on the tomb of the "lake poet," the fastidious critic, and the finicky philosopher, or merely applaud a first-class mind that bruted masterpieces but never really delivered them? That Coleridge could be a bore seems to me incontestable. I



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would hate to find myself at a dinner table with STC on my right and absolutely no one on my left. And even in the most original literary explorations, there is something about a digressive manner which is ineluctably tedious. But what Holmes's magnificent biography makes

crystal clear is that when a man has a caste-of-mind like Coleridge's, the emanations themselves are often as inspiring as those gleaned from a perfect artifact. Some people create masterpieces, and some people *are* masterpieces.

The research here is like a meticulously executed root-canal job, and the empathy of the biographer for his subject makes this one of those symbiotic masterpieces where, forever after, one will see the subject through the eyes of the man who journeyed through the aeries of heaven and the labyrinths of hell to capture and reveal his spirit.

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