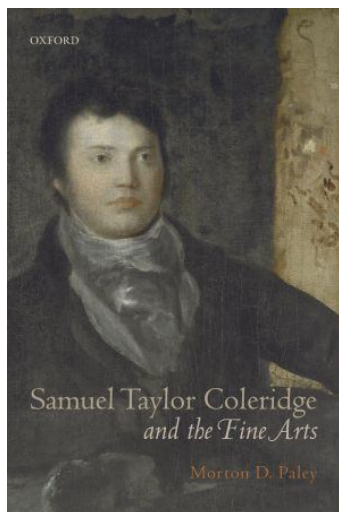


## BOOK REVIEWED

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### *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts*

By Morton Paley



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Review by

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In Richard Holmes's *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, the second part of his Whitbread award-winning biography of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Holmes reports that as Coleridge fled the Lake district and troubled relationships with Wordsworth and his circle on the way to London in 1810, he stopped in at Bolton Abbey and, going on, "admired a painting by Ciro Ferri at Stamford, 'The Marriage of Boas and Ruth.' The tender figure of Ruth, languorously lying in a pale blue silk dress with her mass of auburn hair tied up in a band behind her head, inevitably reminded him of Asra" (Holmes 213) -- Asra, of course, being Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister in law for whom Coleridge had an obsessive love. This one paragraph is all of the description we get from Holmes. In contrast, in his recent *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts*, Morton Paley perceptively works this remark into a lengthy discussion of a painting by Washington Allston which Coleridge actually suggested the eventual title for, *The Sisters*. In a brilliant synthesis of details, obsessions and observations -- taken from Allston's letters, Thomas De Quincey's "Reminiscences," Coleridge's diaries and letters, and a poem by Coleridge called "To Two Sisters: A Wanderer's Farewell" -- Paley explicates the attraction that Ferri's painting held for Coleridge, and draws our attention to the resemblance between the figures in Ferri's painting and Allston's:

One further element of Coleridge's response to *The Sisters* is worth mentioning in the light of Kathleen Coburn's hypothesis that Coleridge was reminded of Sara Hutchinson's 'glowing light, reddish-brown hair' by Ferri's *Marriage of Ruth and Boaz* at Burghley House. A comparison of Ruth in Ferri's painting and the light-haired woman in Allston's shows remarkable similarities of mien, hairstyle, and costume. If Ferri's Ruth, depicted in profile, were to half-turn her head toward the viewer, she would indeed

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have a sisterly resemblance to Allston's figure. This resemblance as well as the ones previously discussed, must have struck Coleridge when he suggested *The Sisters* as a title. Knowing the importance of two pairs of sisters in his friend's life, Allston was evidently glad to fulfil his request. (124-5)

How Coleridge's responses to artworks reflected his psychology is certainly fascinating; but the intent of the first two chapters of Paley's study is to explain how Coleridge went from being, according to William Hazlitt, relatively ignorant about " 'pictures' " (1) to being ready in 1806, upon his return from Europe, ready to give a series of lectures on the subject of the Fine Arts at the Royal Institution in London. We learn in "Initiation" that on the eve of Coleridge's departure to Malta in 1804, he was able to see the collection of George Beaumont, which, Paley theorizes, was a sort of epiphany. Their collection included Rubens's *An Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen in Early Morning*, Claude Lorraine's *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*, and Richard Wilson's *The Destruction of Niobe's Children*. Beaumont took Coleridge to James Northcote's where he saw Veronese's *The Vision of Saint Helena* as well, which he was in raptures over, writing Southey "That is a POEM indeed!" (14). In tracing the provenance of these pieces, Paley weaves in fascinating and affecting facts such as that this particular copy of *The Destruction of Niobe's Children* in Beaumont's collection, which he donated to the National Gallery, was itself destroyed in World War II "by enemy action" (13), and reminds us that Oscar Wilde was later to be enraptured by painting, praising it in "The Critic as Artist" (Paley 14).

Paley, then, is not just going over well-known ground; he is synthesizing and expanding on details that have been passed over in earlier studies. The wonderful readability of Paley's prose and the fascinating detail which he provides belies the immense scholarship which lies behind his account of Coleridge's visits to various collections or private homes to see these important artworks, because, of course, many of the private collections have since been dispersed, which requires investigation as to where the pieces might now be, what their current titles are, and what their provenance actually is. It is also an illuminating account of the status of fine art in the first half of the 19th century, retracing, as it does, what would be involved in a connoisseur's attempt to view great works of art, both in England and on the continent. The chapter "What Coleridge Saw" does just that. In Burghley House he saw *The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth* previously mentioned; at Corsham Court in Wiltshire one work that intrigued him so much that he did an elaborate diagram of, according to Paley, was Tintoretto's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (80); and in Karl and Elizabeth (or Eliza) Aders's extensive collection at Euston Square he saw an early 17th century copy of an altarpiece from Ghent, *The Adoration of the Lamb*. That Coleridge's poetry interpenetrated his love for art is demonstrated by the fact that he wrote "The Two Founts" for Eliza Ader, which Paley calls "one of his most beautiful later poems" (84).

Paley's second chapter, "Italy," traces the important friendship that was forged between Coleridge and Washington Allston. In this chapter, we follow not only Coleridge's continuing quest to see artworks, but also what an American artist like Allston, or English artists like John Flaxman, and the Scottish painter George Augustus Wallis, did while in Italy to broaden their own knowledge and reputations. Importantly, it also shows us how Coleridge worked to broaden his

own knowledge and obviates just how much he took advantage of every opportunity to view important collections and artworks. In years when the first great public museums and exhibitions were first coming into being, it is interesting to follow Coleridge's quest after great artworks in both public and private collections, which he did both in Italy and back home in England. Coleridge, like George Beaumont as an artist himself, might be viewed as a talented amateur in terms of his status as art critic, but as Paley points out in his first sentence, Hazlitt, starting from the same point of general ignorance as Coleridge, shaped himself into the leading art critic of the day. Coleridge took his own mission so seriously, Paley reports, that he developed a system for viewing paintings:

By the second entry he had worked out a notational system of five simple signs by which he or his imagined reader could navigate the pictures. A would mean the right hand of the picture, B the left. A vertical sign like a capital I would denote the sideline of the picture frame, while the same horizontally would mean parallel to the lower frame, while the same horizontally would mean parallel to the lower frame, or with the addition of a small crossbar in the middle parallel to the upper frame. . . . (19)

Not surprisingly, Coleridge supplemented this graphic representation with verbal in an attempt, as Paley points out, to represent the picture as exactly as possible (18-19).

So much of Coleridge's reputation, even today, rests on calumny and generalizations which are to one degree or another unfair to him, that an *appreciation* of his capabilities is particularly welcome. Elizabeth A. Fay, in her *Becoming Wordsworthian*, points out that received opinion, from the grand theories of modern critics like Geoffrey Hartman, M. H. Abrams, and Paul de Man, on top of the flattering opinion of Wordsworth from his first great proponent, Coleridge himself, has it that we "accept that Wordsworth was the strong partner and Coleridge the weak, albeit Coleridge's imagination and genius were rich enough to fertilize that strong ground" (14). Paley makes it clear in "Italy" and "Allston Redux" that Coleridge's friendship with Allston was formative for both. Too often Wordsworth and Coleridge are taken as inseparable, and Wordsworth judged as the sole arbiter of Coleridge's worth. Allston had a high opinion of Coleridge, and like so many others (Wordsworth himself, and Coleridge's nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge), he compared Coleridge's conversation to a (over?) flowing river:

He used to call Rome the *silent* city; but I could never think of it as such, while with him; for meet him when, or where I would, the fountain of his mind was never dry, but like the far-reaching aqueducts that once supplied the mistress of the world, its living stream seemed specially to flow for every classic ruin over which we wandered. . . . I am almost tempted to dream, that I once listened to Plato, in the groves of the Academy. (32)

Paley's examination of Coleridge's formal and informal discourses on the fine arts, discussed in Chapters 5, "Coleridge on the Fine Arts" and 6, "The Principles Common to the Fine Arts," shows Coleridge to have had decided, and sometimes eccentric, opinions. He disliked or discounted many of the luminaries of his age, like Benjamin West and also ignored two of the greatest painters of the age, Turner and Constable, which is "baffling" (175) to Paley. Coleridge was

not afraid to disparage works by two successive Presidents of the Royal Academy, West, as aforementioned, and Sir Joshua Reynolds. William Blake, who critiqued Reynolds and his theories about art often, would have been pleased at Coleridge's daring, and Coleridge was, in fact, an early appreciator of Blake. Paley sums this up: "Coleridge has the distinction of writing by far the most valuable contemporary appreciation of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* . . ." (188). He disliked an artist usually thought of as contiguous with Blake, though, Henry Fuseli.

Since the issue of the influence of German philosophy on Coleridge's aesthetics has been so much debated elsewhere, Paley does not dwell on this controversy, but quotes Coleridge's writings from *The Friend*, and transcripts of his Lectures on Literature and Lectures on Philosophy, and his Lectures on European Literature, Lectures on Shakespeare and Education. More subtly, Paley examines Coleridge's aesthetic vocabulary in an appendix to show that the poet knew how to employ specialized terms, and elsewhere points out that Coleridge contributed an aesthetic term to the English language: "statuesque" (137) -- but corrects the *OED* on when Coleridge first coined the word (Paley 137) (not 1834 but actually in a letter of 1799).

Although *Coleridge and the Fine Arts* contains no color plates at all, there are 28 black and white reproductions of very good quality of many of the artworks discussed. Paley's book started out as a lecture at the University of Bologna on the subject of Washington Allston and Coleridge, but it is a considered and careful account of exactly what its title promises, Coleridge and the Fine Arts. Paley's achievement, like Coleridge at his best, is to make his meticulous scholarship and knowledge appear seamless, and in explicating so carefully this underexplored area of Coleridge's life he gives us a new way to appreciate Coleridge. In addition, his study is useful in delineating the place of fine art in English culture in the early 19th century, and the life of English and American artists and intellectuals in Italy. Although it could be considered a specialized study of Coleridge and an isolated aspect of his life, Paley links the topic to general Romantic principles, and *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts*, while by no means facile, is at the same time readable and relatively jargon-free, qualities which, sadly, are increasingly difficult to find in academic studies.

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