In this book, Gregory Leadbetter maps out an exciting and original approach to Coleridge’s work, particularly his poetry: an approach that simultaneously demonstrates the new insights to be gained by thorough use of the Princeton-Bollingen *Collected Works* and *Notebooks*. The book is impressively well planned. While Leadbetter’s main focus is on the “mystery poems” and the late 1790s – the period, as he describes it, “in which Coleridge’s spiritual and poetic concerns took shape” (5) – each of the nine chapters is written as if the whole of Coleridge’s *oeuvre* were in his purview. A prose passage written in the summer of 1795, for example, can be deftly illuminated by a quotation from a mid-1820s notebook entry. Leadbetter’s discussion of “The Ancient Mariner,” “Kubla Khan,” and “Christabel” is postponed to the last three chapters. By the time a reader arrives at this point, he or she will almost certainly be convinced of the generative power of “transnatural vision” in Coleridge’s poetics (14), and eager to see how the patterns of inner experience and reflection already traced in the first six chapters can be revealed as underlying the structure of these much-studied poems.

Despite his emphasis on the later 1790s, Leadbetter does not take the once-common view that after 1802, Coleridge wrote little that’s worth reading. He recognizes how important the late notebooks, and the often-overlooked 1825 “Prometheus” lecture, have become for Coleridge studies, and he delivers a host of new reasons for re-reading the later writings. An important aim, indeed, is “to establish how the poetics of the 1790s continue in the metaphysics and criticism of
the later Coleridge” (5). For Leadbetter, the crucial link between the 1790s and the later work is Coleridge’s “appetite” for “transnatural vision” (39, 166) and its counterpart in the realm of poetics, the daemonic imagination.

The term “transnatural” and the explicitly transgressive notion of “becoming Daemon” come from a seldom-discussed notebook entry of 1812 (Notebooks 3, entry 4166) in which Coleridge admits to a strange “peculiarity” of his nature, his ability to intuit, as if by “second sight,” a “hidden Vice . . . of the person or persons with whom I am about to form a close intimacy.” And, the note continues, rather than making him turn away, this apparent glimpse of another’s secret “vice” urges him on: “I see it as a Vision . . . not as one given me by any other Being but as an act of my own Spirit.” These acts of his own spirit, he suggests, are “repetitions or semblances” of the Fall of Man, repeating what the serpent promises to Eve in Genesis 3:5 (“you will be like God [or, like gods], knowing good and evil”). Perhaps, Coleridge speculates, other people share this uncanny form of second sight, but never reveal it, from “the apprehension of being feared and shrunk from as a something transnatural.”

What interests Leadbetter about this notebook entry is less its confessional aspect (Poet Claims Psychic Powers!) than the way it interweaves a number of Coleridgean themes and interests, drawing on psychology, anthropology, mythology, and comparative religion. In sum, these interests are 1) the apparently universal urge of human beings to differentiate themselves from nature, not live in harmony with it; 2) the connection between this drive and the desire for forbidden knowledge (“gnosis”) and the power it brings; 3) the treatment of those who aspire to such knowledge as taboo, as feared outsiders; and, finally, 4) how writing of such an experience (in, for example, a poem) may give it “Outness,” distancing it from “the dark Adyt of [his] own Being.” Leadbetter thus takes this 1812 entry as an unusually explicit opening-out of the “drama of becoming at the heart of Coleridge’s writing” (8), an attempt at self-analysis in
which the poet brings to fuller realization the complex mixture of self-empowerment and fear of rejection (“shame & power”) that both enabled and hampered his striving for achievement as poet and thinker.

One danger of this approach is that it could mean imposing the preoccupations and thought-structures of the older Coleridge on poems written in an earlier phase. But Leadbetter has prepared his ground carefully. In chapters 1-6, he shows how consistently the later writings, especially the notebooks, unpack and develop the themes, imagery, and psychological states laid out in the poems and prose works of the 1790s. This strategy yields rich results, not only showing how the mystery poems dramatize “self-realization in daemonic form” (185), but also illuminating the advances and retreats of Coleridge’s intellectual life: the intellectual needs that drove him to embrace the apparent freedom of Unitarianism only to leave it behind as another form of orthodoxy; to enter into a close friendship with William and Dorothy Wordsworth but then distance himself from the Wordsworthian project; and eventually, to develop his own theory of words as themselves things of power, in opposition to the Lockean view that they simply represent sense-objects.

In his first three chapters, Leadbetter outlines the peculiar ambiguities inherent in the notion of “self-election” – that is, of willingly putting oneself under “influences beyond the mind’s deliberate control” (48). It is important for Leadbetter’s case that this should be a consciously chosen step. Coleridge is not to be considered a hapless victim but something more like a bold experimenter, a pioneer. What he said of Milton could be said of Coleridge himself: “all that could lift and swell his intellect, became his daily food” (qtd. 46). “Self-election,” Leadbetter remarks, “is achieved by directing the organic processes of mind and body to the object which they will ingest, thereby actively shaping the self” (46). The intellectual “food” Coleridge consumed tended to be of an arcane and heterodox kind. In the Bristol period,
Coleridge had suggested to his predominantly Unitarian audiences that humankind’s “progressiveness” depended on the restlessness of its imagination, awakened by its own “discontent” (qtd. 23). But Coleridge sought to probe ancient sources in ways that went well beyond the Unitarian agenda.

The problem with Coleridge’s quest for this more arcane knowledge, Leadbetter argues, is that he saw it, or was taught to see it, as a forbidden pursuit, indeed as “a threat to the religion into which he was born” (10). Many of Coleridge’s contemporaries, from Edmund Burke and Bishop Samuel Horsley to Wordsworth and Barbauld, warned of the dangers attending metaphysical enquiry, even associating it with the satanic. This prompts Leadbetter, plausibly enough, to argue that Coleridge saw a connection between the pursuit of “invisible realities” and the ancient myth of the Tree of Knowledge. The narrative of the Fall, in this interpretation, “operate[s] as a myth and psychological metaphor for the existence of humankind’s self-creating potential” (50). Such a reading of the third chapter of Genesis is indeed recognised in modern biblical scholarship: according to Calum M. Carmichael (“The Paradise Myth: Interpreting Without Jewish and Christian Spectacles,” *A Walk in the Garden*, ed. Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer [Sheffield: JSOT, 1992]), the doctrine of the Fall is “a later, pious understanding” (Carmichael 47). But while Aquinas and other medieval theologians warned against curiositas as a vice, Coleridge--as Leadbetter reads him--was “closer to a heterodox idea of the Fortunate Fall, which emphasizes the progressive role of the restless, originative imagination” (78).

At a later point in the book, this Promethean notion of humanity’s “self-creating potential” is reintroduced as a key element in Coleridge’s idea of poetic vocation. Taking his terminology from chapter 23 of *Biographia*, Leadbetter argues that for Coleridge the true poet is “a pioneer in the most ‘dazzling’ form of ‘intellectual power’: the act of demonstrating ‘superiority to the invisible world’” (157). Such emphasis on “power” and “superiority” almost
seems to make Coleridge proto-Nietzschean. While Leadbetter does not mention Nietzsche, he defines the Coleridgean poet as one who ventures fearlessly into realms of psychic danger to protect the rest of humanity from their debilitating fears and bring them empowerment as spiritually mature beings. As a rendering of the poetic persona, this is convincing. As a summary of Coleridge’s thought overall, it is much less so – a point to which I will return.

A richly suggestive chapter on “Osorio and the ‘Poetry of Nature’” – one of the best treatments yet written of that difficult play – serves as a bridge between two other chapters: chapter 4, on the increasing divergences between Coleridge and Wordsworth, as Coleridge’s “unnatural’ proclivities” (70) became apparent to his friend; and chapter 6, on “poetic form, content and purpose” (136). Osorio, Leadbetter argues, is at one level a play that “represents both the isolation and the accommodation of the outsider ‘feared and shrunk from as a something transnatural’” (103-04). Albert, Osorio’s brother, thought to have been drowned at sea, has returned in Moorish disguise. Though innocent, he is a philosopher “versed in herbal and magical lore” (107) and therefore an outsider in a country dominated by the Inquisition. Through the device of the tableau, Albert exposes the rampant corruption in the state and church, and in this way – as well as through his “sexual and social accommodation” with his lover and “psychic twin” Maria (109) – he is eventually able to throw off his disguise and be reintegrated into the healed body of the state. As Leadbetter points out, however, Albert’s upward trajectory as the returned exile is shadowed by the fate of the “lost youth,” the boy of “The Foster-Mother’s Tale,” who has disappeared without a trace into the wilderness of America.

Within the framework suggested by his reading of Osorio, Leadbetter develops an intriguing interpretation of the conversation poems, seeing them as already tending towards an unWordsworthian, daemonic form of intercourse with nature, moon-haunted and magical: an intercourse that would culminate in the figure of Christabel going by stealth into the midnight
wood. Noticing a number of intertextual allusions and correspondences among Osorio, “Christabel,” “Kubla Khan,” and the conversation poems, Leadbetter argues that “The Nightingale” is Coleridge’s attempt to reconfigure his “commune with William and Dorothy” through the kind of magic associated with the figure of Albert (120). The chapter ends with a provocative analysis of the thirteen-line fragment “Melancholy,” a curious piece of gothicry which, as Leadbetter points out, unites several of the preoccupations more fully realized in “The Nightingale” and the mystery poems: the crumbling of the “old religious order” (131), the idea of a latent power in nature to which only initiates can gain access, and – most of all – the embodiment of the poetic imagination in the eroticised figure of the sleeping woman, into whose ear a serpentine form utters its secrets (133).

These six chapters, with their wide-ranging analysis of Coleridge’s poetic theory and practice, enable Leadbetter to open up the three mystery poems in ways that are refreshing and innovative, while drawing on – and sometimes dissenting from – the work of previous scholars. One of Leadbetter’s primary interests throughout is the question of how poetry affects the consciousness of its readers: how, indeed, it induces in the reader a process of “becoming” that is analogous to the “drama of becoming” experienced by the Coleridgean poet. Leadbetter here takes up ideas first put forward by Kathleen Wheeler. Recalling the “provisional” Coleridgean psychology he has previously outlined, a model that “combines activity and passivity, in the willing exposure of the self to forces greater than it could control” (167), Leadbetter productively links this model with the well-known passage in Biographia where Coleridge says the reader “should be carried forward . . . by the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey” (qtd.14). If poetry, ideally, “should play upon and draw out its readers’ latent imaginative freedom” (15), the mystery poems can be seen as the supreme Coleridgean examples of such play of mind, seducing readers for their own good.
Consistently with his wish to see the mystery poems as myths of “the origins and release of poetic power” (183), Leadbetter is alert to all the ways in which they both enact and draw the reader into “the willing exposure of the self to forces greater than it could control.” My only hesitations about Leadbetter’s analysis – if I have any at all – spring from this point. It is clearly crucial for Leadbetter to argue that all three poetic surrogates – Christabel, the Mariner, and the inspired poet of “Kubla Khan” – are willing participants in their subjection to transnatural influences, all prototypes of the “self-election” that opens the psyche to daemonic powers. Certainly it is hard to argue that the poet of “Kubla Khan” is anything other than a willing participant in this transformation. But it is not so clear that Christabel and the Mariner choose to subject themselves to transnatural forces. Leadbetter reads the shooting of the albatross as “an implicit rebellion against the terms on which the crew adopt the bird, and a willing provocation of the unknown” (169). He makes much of the way the crew “superstitiously” turn the albatross into a Christian soul and then blame the Mariner for his act. But to argue that the Mariner chooses to provoke unknown transnatural forces so as to “differentiate” himself from shipmates who nonetheless joined him in hailing the bird (“We hailed it,” he says) seems to overwrite the suggestive sparseness of the text, to overstate the case for seeing the Mariner as a rebel against pious conformity. Nothing in the Mariner’s account suggests choice or intention: the act is represented as unreflecting, as quite literally thoughtless, not as a way of mocking the superstitions of his shipmates and still less of provoking unseen powers. In every sense, he could not have known what he was doing.

Similarly, Leadbetter argues strenuously that Christabel goes into the wood to pray because she is consciously rejecting conventional piety by nurturing an erotic secret; and that this act, which initiates her meeting with Geraldine, is willingly transgressive: “Christabel willingly exposes herself to the hidden dimensions of her own curiosity” (208). But this reading
makes Christabel a more purposeful transgressor than the text actually suggests. (For an alternative and more sensitive interpretation, not mentioned by Leadbetter, see Anya Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law Against Divorce* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2005], chapter 5.) If she is rebelling against the restrictions of Sir Leoline’s regime, it is a timid kind of rebellion; or rather, like the Mariner’s, it is a rebellion whose consequences are massively disproportionate, like the act of a child poking a sleeping tiger with a stick.

Leadbetter’s study is based on the premise that Coleridge was from first to last a heterodox thinker, his imagination too restless to be confined within the bounds of monotheistic religion. It is hard to quarrel with the productive ways in which Leadbetter develops this premise. He brings the poetry and the metaphysics together more convincingly than many of those who see Coleridge otherwise, as one who – after dallying with various heresies – found his way to a settled, orthodox faith. But in his determination to see Coleridge as the born outsider, and to cast religion as the restrictive mesh from which he was always struggling to disentangle himself, like a moth caught in a web, Leadbetter overlooks one persistent theme of the notebooks, letters, and published prose: Coleridge’s emphasis on community (political as well as religious), and the frequent expression of his own need for “redemption,” the spiritual form of reintegration into community. To thoroughgoing sceptics, of course, the craving for “redemption” is merely evidence of psychological damage caused by a religious upbringing. But that is merely to reformulate the problem in different terms.

Coleridge’s acute sense of the need for community is connected with everything Leadbetter discusses: the “self-election” of the seer-poet; his access to esoteric knowledge; his consumption of psychotropic substances; the fate of the transnatural being whose godlike powers are admired by others, but also feared. Leadbetter objects to the use of the term “evil” (when, for instance, Laurence Lockridge uses it in his discussion of the 1812 notebook entry) as too
theological, viewing the daemonic imagination through Christian spectacles. So be it. But cultivating extreme mental states, with or without the help of drugs, entails real risks, as Coleridge knew better than most. If the resulting sense of power and exceptionalism finds no creative outlet, it can rapidly become toxic to the self, and to others. This will remain a problem and a potential tragedy whether there is a viable Christian response to it or not. The “self-elected” individual may turn out to be a healer, “carrying everywhere with him relationship and love,” as Wordsworth describes the poet; or he may become a fanatic, a sadist, a dictator. This is why the dark undercurrents in romanticism were so devastatingly critiqued by Melville, Conrad, Thomas Mann, William Golding, Doris Lessing, Günter Grass, and others who saw, or foresaw, some of its consequences. None of these writers can be accused of pious conformity.

One certainly wants to cheer on the description of Coleridge as “a writer capable of re-educating humankind from the inside out, after any number of ideologies, religions, and political orders have crumbled, or even resurged” (5) – but not quite on Leadbetter’s terms. He has demonstrated, persuasively and insightfully, what a post-Christian reading of Coleridge might look like. But even if one chooses to ring-fence Coleridge’s religious commitments, such a reading still needs to register his strong sense of community and human relationship, which, like his pursuit of the “daemonic,” is a recurring theme, not only of the conversation poems and the “Rime,” but of all his work.

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