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reads

Coleridge's Experimental Poetics

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

by J C C Mays

JIM MAYS'S REMARKABLE EDITION OF Coleridge's *Poetical Works* appeared in 2001, more than ten years ago. It contained much new material. Yet it is surprising how little the parameters of critical discussion of the verse have altered since then. Mays's new book provides not only a radically new way of reading Coleridge's verse that makes sense of his entire poetic and dramatic output, but also recalibrates the relationship of the verse to the prose works, and argues that the orthodox view of his career prevents a just appreciation of Coleridge's poetic project.

The Bollingen edition, unlike the Cornell edition of Wordsworth, did not seek to establish or consolidate any one critical point of view. As Mays says here, the specifications for editing the *Poetical Works* were 'comprehensive but intellectually simple'; the task was simply to print everything in verse he could find. Now, ten years later, in *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics*, Mays has written in a volume of criticism a much expanded version of the introduction he did not write earlier. He wrote it, he tells us, to answer for himself what he calls a primary question: in the light of the sheer profusion of verse, 'Can one say of Coleridge's poetry that it has a distinctive style?' The answer he provides is quite unexpected. In brief, he rejects a reading of the verse as versified prose and dislodges any view based around a narrow selection of what he calls 'the famous three' with a small, unchanging supporting cast. Instead, he locates the quintessential Coleridge not in a few familiar poems, but in a distinctive emotional quality running through all his characteristic work, which was all written out of the same emotional nexus. The poetry is experimental in the sense that it was written to test new ways of dealing with Coleridge's perennial problems.

One of the really distinctive aspects of the view of Coleridge's verse put forward here is that Mays views it through the lens of experimental Modernist and Post-modernist Anglo-American poetry rather than of academic criticism. He seeks to clarify what Coleridge was doing by reference to poets such as Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Susan Howe, and Catherine Walsh. However, the discussion is solidly grounded in Mays's unrivalled familiarity with the texts of the verse. This, together with his mastery of the reception history of Coleridge's verse and his personal acquaintance with many of those who created Coleridge studies in the Twentieth Century, gives his book a highly distinctive flavour. Mays gathers together the noble living and the noble dead in a way which suggests that he is utterly beyond caring about trends, fashion or academic reputation. There is an idiosyncratic yet first-hand freshness to the writing. He was there.

He sets out what he sees as the three main stages in the development of the prevailing orthodoxy and shows how they all share the same biographical reading of the poetic career. The first stage lasts from Coleridge's time at Christ's Hospital all the way through to the Eighteen-sixties: from prodigy to sage. During this period, amid the controversies surrounding his politics, his personal life and his plagiarism, the poetry is gradually sidelined in favour of the later theological works, especially *Aids to Reflection*, as Coleridge becomes J S Mill's 'seminal mind'. So far, so familiar. However, the next stage of his poetic reputation, lasting from the Eighteen-sixties to about 1910, is far less well known. Mays shows how such figures such as Pater, Swinburne and Watts-Dunton turned away from high-Victorian earnestness to redefine Coleridge as an essentially fin de siècle writer in which the supreme value of the verse is located in its 'faery' elements and particularly in its 'pure' music and metrical experiments. *Christabel* here becomes the key poem. This stage, less familiar to most readers, lasts until the beginnings of Modernism when I A Richards set in train Practical Criticism (itself a term drawn from Coleridge), which became the New Criticism in America and dominated until the rise of theory, coinciding with the institutionalisation of literary studies. Coleridge, particularly the Coleridge of *Biographia Literaria,* became a kind of *eminence grise* during this period, which produced the modern editions of the Notebooks, the Letters and the Collected Works.

Each of these three stages is approached partly through a close examination of the numerous published selections of Coleridge's verse. Mays has consulted more than a hundred such selections and it is this level of detail and painstaking scholarship wherein much of the authority, and fun, resides. He is just as likely to quote a remark made in the Introduction or Notes to a long forgotten selection or school edition as he is to quote a celebrated figure. He shows how it is poets who have consistently made the most interesting selections and James Fenton's recent Faber edition receives a particularly positive examination in this respect. But he also shows how there is a tendency always to return to the same narrow selection of verse, reflecting the received, familiar biographical trajectory of a brief burst of youthful inspiration followed by long years of poetic failure.

Having traced the development of the reputation with a fascinating examination of deeply unfashionable names and a library-full of neglected material, Mays then begins a new assessment of the verse and drama. As he says, 'If the controlling paradigm of failure disintegrates before the overwhelming evidence we now have before us, where does this leave the poems?' He suggests that Coleridge uses poetry throughout his life 'to explore a level of truth that underlies the prose.' Far from versified prose, the poetry is essentially 'an entry into another world', a world which precedes conceptualisation. This world is where thought and feeling intersect and he suggests that for Coleridge, poetry was uniquely able to explore and enact those areas which lie below or before conscious thought and, furthermore, that for Coleridge the essential preoccupations of those areas never changed.

For Mays, the poetry is always deeply rooted in something which happened before Coleridge left home for Christ's Hospital. Mays suggests that it is the childhood experience of loss and an allied withdrawal into imaginative literature, both sketched in the autobiographical letters to Poole of 1797-98, which provide the key to what he calls a 'recurring trauma' of 'absence', which is where the verse generally begins. As a result, although the materials and the cast of characters change, there is a deep consistency in the underlying structural and emotional patterns of the poems. The childhood withdrawal into dreams, and the discoveries and the destructive powers thereby revealed, lies behind the basic pattern found in so much of his verse: unhappy solitude, followed by a voyage out and ending with a return, which Coleridge himself in his note to the revised ending of *Frost at Midnight* called, 'the rondo or return'.

Mays does not provide exhaustive evidence for this view of the biographical and psychological origins of Coleridge's verse. Readers will perhaps have to wait for his forthcoming book on Coleridge's father for this. Some will argue that he is merely replacing one biographical reading with another. However, what makes Mays's treatment so compelling is the next stage in his argument. Instead of allowing a biographical reading to 'explain' the verse, he concentrates on how, for Coleridge, meter and rhythm are central preoccupations, because it is in these aspects of verse that mind and body meet, and, for Mays, Coleridge 'is more interested in the integration of body with ideas rather than with ideas in themselves.' The manuscript essay by Coleridge *On the Passions*, published in the *Shorter Works and Fragments* volume of the *Collected Works*, is a key text here, but Mays also discusses in detail the significance of the competing claims of classical prosody and stress-based meter in Coleridge's verse. The great problem with this argument is that so few of Coleridge's readers now have any first-hand experience of verse based on 'quantity' because of the long decline of Classics in schools. Nothing can really compensate for this, but Mays helpfully compares Coleridge's sense of the underlying structure given to verse by a meter based on 'quantity' with the unseen skeleton in a human body; we do not see it but we know it is there, holding everything in place. By contrast verse based on speech stress is 'felt on the pulse'. The gradual emergence of a style based on a mixture of these two principles, is traced with great delicacy and care. *The Eolian Harp* is presented as a breakthrough work and the Conversation Poems are examined, not in terms of their thought, but for the way in which Coleridge discovers in writing them a manner and meter which allow him to dramatise the relationships with himself and others. As Mays says, Coleridge's writing 'is not so much the product of his mind as the exercise of it'. He also suggests that Coleridge's manner of reading verse aloud, described by Hazlitt and others as 'full, animated, varied' and a 'chaunt', was designed to heighten the 'quantitative' metrical substructure rather than to iron it out. He compares it to the manner of Yeats or Pound, available in recordings, which to modern ears sounds exaggerated and mannered. Interestingly, James Fenton makes a very similar point in his brief manual of verse, *An Introduction to English Poetry,* where he

castigates the flatness of the delivery of many contemporary poets when reading their own work aloud in the misguided belief that the level of authenticity is in inverse proportion to metrical emphasis.

The first three chapters re-orientate the reader entirely and prepare for a detailed reading in subsequent chapters in the terms outlined above of the 'famous three', of the plays, and of the later verse including the 'squibs' and satires. There are many brilliant insights into familiar material and neglected pieces. For example, he suggests that *The Ancient Mariner* be read as essentially the original 300-line spoof of the Gothic Ballad, subsequently distorted by later expansion, revision and the addition of the gloss. Conversely, he also explains why so many of Coleridge's revisions, unlike Wordsworth's, are so successful, even when done years later. He also suggests how the view of Coleridge's poetic career as a failure is based on a misunderstanding as to what he was doing in his poetry; instead of trying and failing to write more poems in the manner of *The Ancient Mariner* or *Christabel*, Coleridge was constantly experimenting with new metrical forms and new ways of treating the same material in order to enter a space where body and idea meet. He did not repeat himself; his readers have simply failed to follow him in his explorations.

There are losses as well as gains in this view of Coleridge's verse. Many will find the focus on sound and meter too specific and too limiting, even if they are sensitive to the emotional world thus revealed. Mays freely admits this. Perhaps the majority will find the separation of the poetry from the politics and quotidian life puzzling and debilitating. The rejection of the visual elements and the turn away from symbol will remove for many precisely their way in to the poetry. Mays examines in fine detail but, ultimately, more or less dismisses the long and rich tradition of the illustration of Coleridge's poems in printed editions along with other pictorial interpretations as fundamentally wrong-headed. So be it. The fact remains that in this study, Mays for the first time since the *Collected Works* became available and thus for the first time ever, has found a place for the poetry that makes sense of all of it *qua* poetry and suggests that its relationship to the prose works is not marginal or merely for beginners before they graduate to the 'real' Coleridge of the Notebooks, *Biographia* and the late prose, but should be seen as a parallel project touching on his deepest preoccupations and essential self. Whereas the majority of his prose works are of historical interest only, Coleridge's verse is read here as of vital interest to anyone with a vital interest in poetry. For this reason, along with its very many incidental felicities, this is an exhilarating as well as a fascinating book.