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reads
Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts
(Oxford University Press, 2008)
by Morton D. Paley

THIS IS A FASCINATING BOOK whose argument works on several fronts. It inventories Coleridge's knowledge of painting and sculpture, and his viewing of art in England, Germany and Italy; it recounts his acquaintance and exchanges with contemporary artists and theorists of art; it investigates the 'principles' to which Coleridge, as in everything else, was concerned to relate his artistic judgements. 'As ever for Coleridge', writes Paley, 'the ideational precedes the artistic'. Inevitably, the culmination of the book is its engagement with Coleridge's philosophical ideas, although Paley, more than many critics, senses the unbroken line of expressive excitement which runs between Coleridge's poetic and philosophic writing. The visual arts clearly moved him greatly, and Paley's meticulous searching-out of the range of Coleridge's reactions in front of paintings lets us appreciate that his reflective, speculative mode was an elaboration rather than an abstraction from that first, immediate enjoyment. But one of the original and salutary things anyway about Paley's work is that it demonstrates in countless examples that Coleridge trans-values 'abstraction', retrieving it from connotations of the dry and dusty and propelling it into the world-conceiving and plastic imaginings of metaphysics. Abstraction need not be the anti-dramatic principle attacked by Hazlitt but could, when self-conscious enough, flip from signifying incomplete ideological closure to inviting an open-ended and mobile view of the world because grasped in so confessedly sketchy a form. Paintings seemed peculiarly capable of stimulating Coleridgean speculation or abstraction of this sort. To Coleridge the poet paintings threw down the challenge of *ekphrasis*, or how to produce an adequate verbal translation of visual accomplishment; for Coleridge the philosopher the same challenge led to his modern-leaning and recurrent meditation on the extent to which a use of language might itself constitute a sufficient philosophical explanation. The portrait, on the other hand, taken as a picture of recollection—'the abstract of the personal'—rather than of a captured single moment, reversed this convolution and showed painting emulating a literary comprehensiveness.

How competent a connoisseur Coleridge was when he first began to refer to the pictorial arts is the first question addressed by Paley's book. He certainly made mistakes, Paley's scholarship uncovers; but, with what was to grow into a passion for plagiarism, his own and others, he was soon joining in questions of attribution and provenance with enthusiasm. Coleridge was early taken with the idea of the collector behind the collections to which he gained access. He gave a comical account of a Göttingen eccentric, G. C. Beireis, 'full of himself', whose self-esteem a mischievous Coleridge found impossible to outdistance with his own exaggerated compliments. Payne-Knight is fancifully likened to one of his own bronzes. Sir George Beaumont, patron and decidedly amateur painter, is more difficult. Deference and obligation compete

with honesty, and Coleridge's typically creative solution is to treat Beaumont's unexceptional art as an opportunity for '*Translations*', and so, by implication, for an experiment in *ekphrasis*. 'Without drawing I feel myself but half invested with language', he had famously said, but Beaumont's pictures must have let him probe the question of relations between the arts without this disadvantage becoming too oppressive. As Paley notes, Coleridge's ideas here must come not from the 'Sister Arts' tradition, but from a new way of thinking. Later, he could have found fullest exposition of this alternative in Schelling who concluded his Jena period with his lectures on the 'Philosophy of Art' of 1802-3 (so almost simultaneous with Coleridge's Beaumont translation project). Schelling's lectures were attended by Henry Crabb Robinson who took notes. The editor of the surviving notes, James Vigus, remarks on the 'thematic relevance' here and calls Crabb Robinson's apparent failure to show them to his friend Coleridge 'a missed opportunity'.[1] Coleridge's vicarious brilliance at the cutting edge of German philosophy, rather than plodding plagiarism, has by now surely become the knowing reader's object of appreciation. In writing about Beaumont's art, Coleridge could reproduce its creativity in a different form, thus offering a commentary not on Beaumont's pictorial subjects but on creativity itself. The passage from one art to another exposed, as Schelling claimed, an *absolute* identity indifferent to distinction between different art-forms, at the same time enlightening us further about the *human* use ('the imaginative root', Paley calls it) of such divisions.[2]

Paley has a separate chapter on Italy, for which he has done exhaustive research to produce a detailed account of Coleridge's actual and possible artistic viewing on his journey back from Malta—in effect his 'grand tour'. Companions, guidebooks and correspondents are thoroughly investigated, and the considerable scholarship involved always remains vivid. In Rome, Coleridge met great intellects like Wilhelm von Humboldt, but also, most importantly for Paley, Washington Allston. It was always going to be interesting to see which portrait of Coleridge might be chosen by Paley to grace the cover of this book. Had one read it, though, it would be quickly seen that there was no contest. Coleridge's personal involvement with Washington Allston, whose early, unfinished Italian portrait of 1806 is in fact the one Paley uses, provoked the most practical of Coleridge's otherwise incorrigibly cerebral involvement in the art of his own time. Only Coleridge's prescient and perhaps better judged advocacy of William Blake is comparable. He championed Allston, went off those like Benjamin West whom he saw as standing in Allston's way, and deployed his full vocabulary of philosophical aesthetics in order to support the American's art whenever he could. Paley had already sketched the relationship between the pair in his earlier book, *Portraits of Coleridge*, but here we are given a full account in the Updike-sounding chapter, 'Allston Redux'. In Allston Coleridge met someone whose work could draw

[1] Henry Crabb Robinson, *Essays on Kant, Schelling and German Aesthetics*, ed. James Vigus (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, Critical Texts, Vol. 18, 2010), 140.
[2] F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-61), I/5, 459.

from him a pleasingly self-conscious articulate response, and about whom he could be more solicitous than about his own intermittently parlous state of health. Coleridge's rhetoric of encouragement, though, remains saturated in his own interests, often relentlessly metaphysical in their pursuit of the expression in Nature of an Absolute authority, a higher utterance which the artist of genius aspires to repeat. Ultimately, Coleridge steered his commendations of Allston towards this philosophical matrix in the belief that to declare Allston's artistic fit with such an orientation was the greatest compliment he could pay him. So, as Paley demonstrates, while the *Annals of the Fine Arts* remarked that 'Allston's powers lie in the abstract poetical part of painting, and not in the expression of the human passions', Coleridge's much grander sense of the 'abstract' elides this difference and turns Allston's art into a model of expressiveness itself. He can tell Allston that to 'you alone of all our contemporary Artists does it seem to have been given to know what Nature is… in the life of Nature revealing itself in the Phaenomenon, or rather attempting to reveal itself'. Since phenomena are also what we know as natural, Allston's art must be leading us to see the infinite repeated in the finite, that repetition central to Coleridge's most crucial formulation of a primordial imagining which 'struggles' to be recovered in artistic production.

To characterise the 'Poetry' of which Coleridge thought, in his essay 'The Principles of Genial Criticism' (1814), all the Fine Arts were 'species', raises questions which have intrigued philosophers from Coleridge's fellow Romantics in Germany through to near contemporary aestheticians such as Theodor Adorno and Jean-Luc Nancy. Adorno insisted that there was no 'art' to which the arts could be reduced, and Coleridge speaks the language of Romantic theory in which this aesthetic deregulation was first established.[3] Artistic non-identity with anything means that we can only describe art from the inside, by poeticising it, artfully. This realization is what Paley has Coleridge call 'abstraction'. Paley reminds us that the aesthetic organicism Coleridge shared with A. W. Schlegel modelled a 'life' outgrowing any definitive description, occurring in all the different expressive levels detailed by the *Naturphilosophie* in whose idiom Coleridge happily if polemically often spoke. His famous contrast of copy and imitation is usefully linked in Paley's final chapter to this scenario. The 'difference' inherent in imitation as opposed to the 'identity' pretended to by a copy actually evokes an anterior identity which we can only repeat in contracted or abstract form. Paley quotes from the entry (CN III 4397) in Coleridge's notebooks his view that 'the Artist may take his point where he likes—provided that the effect desired is produced—namely, that there should be a Likeness in Difference & a union of the two—*Tragic Dance*'. He most usefully notes that Coleridge's tragic dance must be referring to the Greek Chorus, and so to that standing aside from or *parabasis* essential to German ideas of art from Jena onwards, in which the reflective, critical dimension which the choral commentary built into the work of art

[3] T. Adorno, 'Kunst und die Künste', *Ohne Leitbild: Para Aesthetica* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), 158-182; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford University Press, 1996).

necessarily frees speculation to move on to other comparisons, instances, recreations.

Paley shows that Coleridge runs big modern ideas like these alongside the staple of British eighteenth-century aesthetics, disputing applications of the terms 'sublime', 'beautiful', 'picturesque', 'Gothic' and so on. Some of Coleridge's arguments here remain local, but at important points, Paley demonstrates, they can join forces with Coleridge's philosophical resources for identifying in generic differences a cumulative artistic endeavour to evoke an identity grandly indifferent to their distinctions. Coleridge's description of the Gothic cathedral is described by Paley as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, because, in Paley's apt quotation from a late notebook,

> No man can be a philosophic Critic of the Fine Arts who has not yet come to understand WORD in sensu generalissimo, as an organism of sound & forms objectively-subjective. A grand strain of Music, a Cathedral, a painting of Michael Angelo are in this sense *Words*, and to him each integral part a vowel or syllable… of the whole Verbal World[.] (CN V 6728)

Coleridge wants to hang on to the idea of the great cathedral as the 'Capital (Gr. *par excellence*) of the whole Verbal (i.e. objective-subjective) World', but in this language an infinite conversation can take place in which the non-identity of any particular utterance with the whole enhances our continuing sense of the larger articulacy to which it nevertheless contributes and partially constitutes. Full expression would be the Logos, an originary 'WORD' combining for Coleridge religious and logical inaccessibility. We live among its repetitions, at best conscious of this unconscious voicing—'in every work of Art the Conscious is so impressed on the Unconscious, as to appear in it', he wrote in the manner of Schelling in an 1818 notebook quoted by Paley (CN III 4397). For Schelling, though, this art was thus liberated to enjoy its future incarnations and reproductions as the increased consciousness of what had been there all along, but unconsciously. Consciousness of its unconscious encouraged us to step aside from any individual work of art's own apparent iconicity to enjoy and creatively explore new versions, new possibilities. This is perhaps the silent meaning and 'main result' missing from *Biographia Literaria*, connecting Coleridge's most famous metaphysical utterance with the poetry which this book shows that he envisaged for all the arts: something systematically incomplete and always repeatable in another form. Sometimes, Coleridge's advocacy recalls the progressive, universal poetry of the *Frühromantiker*, at other times the achieved monolith of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* he seems to propose for Wordsworth's *Recluse*. *Biographia Literaria*, though, characteristically culminates in the 'WORD' of which both can be '*Words*'.[4]

[4] See BL II 247-8. I am grateful to James Vigus for discussion here.