Ewan Jones
reads
Tragic Coleridge
(Ashgate, 2013)
by Chris Murray

In the second of 'Satyrane's Letters', a series of mock-epistles employed to pad out the *Biographia Literaria* (and very likely to distract the reader from that work's structural eccentricity), Coleridge dramatises his characteristic self-division with a spot of theatre. An imagined 'Defendant' and 'Plaintiff' debate—with apposite self-reflexivity—the nature of drama itself, with the former seeking to deny the relevance of ancient tragedy:

> D. […] What has a plain citizen of London, or Hamburg, to do with your kings and queens, and your old schoolboy pagan heroes? Besides, everybody knows the stories: and what curiosity did we feel——
>
> P. What, Sir, not for the manner? not for the delightful language of the poet? not for the situations, the action and reaction of the passions?
>
> D. You are hasty, Sir! the only curiosity, we feel, is in the story: and how can we be anxious concerning the end of a play, or be surprised by it, when we know how it will turn out?
>
> P. Your pardon, for having interrupted you! We now understand each other. You seek, then, in a tragedy, which wise men of old held for the highest effort of human genius, the same gratification, as that you receive from a new novel, the last German romance, and other dainties of the day, which can be enjoyed but once. If you carry these feelings to the sister art of painting, Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel, and the Scripture Gallery of Raphael, can expect no favour from you. […]

It is somewhat odd that Chris Murray's *Tragic Coleridge* does not make direct reference to Coleridge's show trial, so ably does it buttress the central contention of that work: that tragedy (or 'the highest effort of human genius') mattered to Coleridge in ways that distinguished it from all other forms of cultural production. While the *Biographia* clearly rigs the terms of debate in the Plaintiff's favour (for who of us would really hold that familiarity ruins great art?), the clear rhetorical imbalance nonetheless cannot prevent a number of more intransigent questions from emerging. Is the distinction between ancient tragedy and the modern novel or German romance really so cut-and-dried? What is the relation between the passions and sheer curiosity? How *does* a plain citizen of London or Hamburg experience tragedy today? The endurance of such questions indicates that Murray has marked out for himself a promising field of study.

Tragic Coleridge could perhaps best be summarised by the separate ways in which it interprets its stated theme as both substantive and adjective. On the

one hand, Murray takes 'tragedy' as a specific dramatic form, with distinctive historical origins (here seen as 'Classical', which in practice almost always means Greek) and structural devices (*hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, etc.). On the other, 'the tragic' is invoked as a more capacious concept, which might emerge in contexts far beyond drama *per se* (a lyrical ballad, say, or that awkward thing that we call real life). According to Murray's opening definition (although he shrewdly declines to push such specifications too hard), this broader, adjectival tragic comprises 'literature that depicts catastrophe and emphasizes pathos. Catastrophe is misfortune of widespread significance, not solely personal experience' (1). It is the second clause of this definition that enables Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (Murray's own example (6)) to count as 'tragic', insofar as its theme of personal suffering transcends the individual speaker so as to involve a more universal experience.

Murray's argument is far more convincing when it pursues the first of these quarries—tragedy in its substantive rather than its adjectival form. Keeping a grip on the specific generic and historical contours of classical drama enables *Tragic Coleridge* to suggest several undeveloped lines of thought, which subsequent scholarship might profitably investigate further. Murray offers one such suggestive lead by placing Coleridge within the context of a gentlemanly education that often placed surprisingly little emphasis upon Greek tragedy, in comparison to the more humanistic elements of classical culture, or more stolidly nationalistic examples.[1] Eighteenth-century poets such as Gray, Collins and Wharton were in fact fairly unrepresentative in their reverence for Greek culture; and Murray convincingly demonstrates that Coleridge's first real exposure to the force of tragedy came not through Aeschylus or Sophocles (who continued to be taught according to rather stale philological principles), but rather his reading of Schiller's *The Robbers* as an impressionable twenty-two year old (16–17).

As Murray astutely notes, 'it is peculiar that Coleridge fixates upon the sort of man he imagines the playwright to be rather than tragedy itself'; and this tendency to focalise tragedy through the individual, rather than to concentrate upon broader social or cultural concerns, characterises much of his subsequent borrowing from classical drama. In a chapter entitled 'The Catastrophes of Real Life', Murray wisely shies away from Coleridge's personal, increasingly mournful circumstances (opium, frustrated love and all the rest), in favour of his journalistic (if hardly impartial) responses to contemporary current affairs.

[1] Though there is ample evidence that Coleridge himself encountered Greek tragedy as a young man. 'In my first Term', he writes of his truncated Cambridge career, 'and from October till March, I read hard, and systematically. I had no acquaintance, much less suitable, (i.e.) studious, Companion in my own College. Six nights out of seven, as soon as chapel was over, I went to Pembroke, to Middleton's (the present B. of Calcutta) Rooms—opened the door without speaking, made and poured out the Tea and placed his cup beside his Book—went on with my Æschylus or Thucydides, as he with his Mathematics, in silence till 1/2 past 9—then closed our books at the same moment—the size and college Ale came in—& till 12 we had true Noctes atticae which I cannot to this hour think of without a strong emotion…' (CL V 192–93). Murray's account would certainly have benefitted from making use of such concrete references. My thanks to Graham Davidson for pointing me to the above letter.

Two rather lugubrious incidents prove particularly revealing in this case: the public scandal surrounding Mary Robinson, whose unwitting marriage to a bigamist imposter resulted in the latter's hanging (67–69); and John Walford, a charcoal burner whose execution for having murdered his wife became a similar *cause celebre* in 1789 (49–50).

In both cases, Murray's analysis offers more than a detection of vaguely tragic overtones. Rather, Coleridge's essays for *The Morning Post* on Robinson's plight, much like his private response to Walford's crime in a letter to Thomas Poole, demonstrate a consistent tendency to interpret spectacular outrages according to codes derived from classical tragedy. Robinson becomes a sacrificial victim, approaching Medea in both her suffering and grandeur; as Murray crisply notes, 'Coleridge decides that it better suits his purpose of evoking pathos to present Mary as a remarkably attractive woman' (68). Walford, meanwhile, becomes a necessary scapegoat, lured by the wife whom he subsequently murders from his true love; his corpse was—unusually for the time—put on public display, given the perceived severity of the crime. The grisly relish of such a spectacle more than justifies Murray's use of the French critic René Girard, whose *Violence and the Sacred* finds ritual catharsis to endure (in however trace a form) in what we like to call modernity. It is perhaps revealing that *Tragic Coleridge* finds it easier to identify this afterlife of sacrifice in Coleridge's response to actual events, rather than in his most significant works. Murray seems to equivocate, for example, over just how fully we can read the 'Rime' or 'Christabel' in the strict terms of Greek tragedy—does the Mariner's unaware blessing of the water-snakes amount to *anagnorisis*, for instance, and if so, of what? Can we really say that either Christabel or Geraldine possess a 'fatal flaw'?

The difficulty of such questions suggests one motivation for Murray's comparative preoccupation with Coleridge's tragedies 'proper', namely, *The Fall of Robespierre*, *Osorio* (later *Remorse*) and *Zapolya*—critical attention to which is welcome indeed. At times Murray's suggestive readings come under undue strain from the need to prove that Coleridge's work 'was' tragic: comparing *Osorio* and *Remorse*, for instance, he states accurately that '[i]f *Osorio's* final speech reveals a radical Coleridge enthused with revolutionary energy, the conclusion to *Remorse* contains palpable regret that sacrifice has yielded disappointment rather than political reform' (42). Yet neither the earlier faith in progress nor the later 'disappointment' sounds to my mind particularly 'tragic'. The thorny question of how tragedy exists in light of the Christian notion of atonement and projects for social improvement is surely the moment at which thinking should begin; too often, however, Murray simply curtails his analysis by turning to another text that supposedly better exemplifies the tragic. *Zapolya*, for instance, is taken to be 'a successful synthesis of music and comedy with the tragic tradition' in comparison to earlier works (quite a claim), only for us to find a mere four pages of discussion of that work (112–116). It is precisely because I think Murray right to insist upon the centrality of Greek tragedy for romanticism, that I wish he had engaged more directly with what

seem to be direct refutations of its significance—as when Wordsworth, for instance, writing in his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', declares a preference for the Bible, Milton and Shakespeare over Greek tragedy, because 'the anthropomorphitism of the Pagan countries subjected the minds of the greatest poets in those countries too much to the bondage of definite form.'

Wordsworth's statement is significant because it trains attention not only upon the vague question of influence (which young poet read which Greek tragedies), but rather the far more dynamic and specific question of form: of how a social attitude to sacrifice and purgation might enable (or constrain) artistic modes of expression. Beyond some fairly rudimentary discussion of the disruption of classical unities, there is too little of such analysis in *Tragic Coleridge*. Such an oversight matters, because Murray's analysis is at its least convincing when it moves from tragedy as a mode to 'the tragic' in its looser sense. *Zapolya* stands as a case in point: within those four pages of analysis, we move from a somewhat cursory analysis of the play's structure, to the closing declaration that '[t]he whole experience of staging plays typifies how Coleridge dramatizes himself as an embattled, tragic character who triumphs over adversity. He undergoes a melancholy struggle to have *Remorse* staged at all after the disappointment with Sheridan' (116). It is hard to see how by the end of this passage 'tragic' means anything more than 'a bit sad'; and the stock association of romanticism with melancholy shows precisely why it is important to have a more thoroughgoing distinction between forms and means of suffering.

This capacious understanding of tragedy is more pronounced toward the book's end, and particularly in the chapter 'The Tragic Sage', where it remains unclear whether Coleridge's self-identification with Cassandra amounts to much more than a wounded sense of rejection. Here Murray makes his grandest claim, that the Imagination itself (that most Coleridgean of conceptual innovations) is essentially 'the tragic organ' (137). It is so, he contends, because the suffering that we see in a Greek tragedy necessarily engages the sympathetic faculties. Coleridge himself, as readers of this journal well know, made much of the fact that the Imagination was similarly a means of projecting a subject into the minds and feelings of another: therefore it is necessarily tragic. But to paraphrase Coleridge's own book on formal reasoning, just because ebony is black it does not thereby follow that black is ebony (*Logic* 88). As Murray himself concedes, the notion of sympathy issues from a variety of often very un-tragic sources, ranging from Francis Hutcheson to Adam Smith. Here as elsewhere, the self-imposed requirement to prove the pervasiveness of tragedy in all aspects of Coleridge's thought only voids the concept of all real significance. There is an ocean of difference between such analysis and Murray's earlier, careful tracing of the way in which Coleridge's immersion in *Medea* subtly conditioned his journalistic and literary output.

I am a touch unforgiving about what I call Murray's more capacious employment of 'the tragic', but precisely *not* because I think we should all hold to a firm, historical sense of our terms. Indeed, I find him absolutely justified,

in the opening to *Tragic Coleridge*, in countering George Steiner's famous claim for the impermissibility of modern tragedy (2–4). As Murray points out, Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* holds a reductively uniform understanding of genre, according to which any historical alteration necessarily invalidates the mode *in toto*—whereas surely some of the most powerful and unsettling historical conventions perpetuate themselves precisely by departing from their own example. (Steiner would struggle to explain the sheer power and originality of Robert Icke's 'domestic' *Oresteia*, which as I write this is about to transfer to the West End.) How tragedy touched Coleridge's contemporary situation is a question that matters because of, and not despite, our own further historical remove; just as Greek tragedies continue to matter to us. *Tragic Coleridge* leads the way in thinking how the conventions of classical drama relate dynamically to changing forms of social experience and human suffering. That it does not quite complete that journey should only be an incitement to future thought.