Adam Roberts[1]

reads

Coleridge's Dejection Ode

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

By J. C. C. Mays

J. C. C. MAYS, PREEMINENT COLERIDGEAN EDITOR AND SCHOLAR, here gives us an entire book about *Dejection: an Ode*. It's not the first time he's done this kind of thing. A couple of years ago he published *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Of course, we might think that the *Mariner* is one thing, *Dejection* another. However important a poem, it is hardly on the same scale or as fecund of interpretation. Even bringing the 'Verse Letter to Sara Hutchinson' into the equation (and Mays makes a spirited case for not reading this as a preliminary or immature version of the finished ode) one might wonder whether there's enough 'in' the Dejection Ode to merit a whole-book reading. Mays doesn't duck this question. His opening chapter is called 'The Case To Be Made', and he concedes that 'other poems may hold more attraction for those reading Coleridge for the first time' whilst still insisting that the Dejection Ode 'rewards attention to an equal extent, although of a different kind' (2).

Mays reads the poem in terms of its 'public' style, its literary allusions and references, by analysing form and imagery, and by situating it in Coleridge's intellectual struggles between Kantianism and Neoplatonism; but above all he is attentive to the poem's complex and eloquent structures of feeling. Quoting Coleridge's judgment on *Paradise Lost* that 'every word is to the purpose; there are no lazy intervals, all has been considered & demands and merits attention', Mays applies the same principles to the Dejection Ode, with all the benefits of thoroughness and the dangers of plodding superfluity such an approach implies. Rhyme-schemes are mapped out, etymologies of individual words are excavated, and the reader is taken step by step through the whole work.

One thesis of the book is that 'Coleridge wrote Dejection Ode [sic] in a new style that built on lessons learnt from writing his three great mystery poems' (197)—*Mariner*, *Kubla Khan*, and *Christabel*, that is. For Mays the poem is both a carefully worked aesthetic artefact and 'a test' of something 'fundamental and all-encompassing': specifically 'a test of whether deep, barely understood instincts and his thinking about them were self-deceiving or rang true' (vii). His account of the poem's philosophical and intellectual cross-currents, in his eighth chapter, though dense, is convincing, and Mays is especially good on Coleridge's ultimately unsuccessful attempts, in this poem and elsewhere, to bring his Kantian and his neo-Platonic instincts into some kind of unity.

It is important to Mays that we understand how to apprehend the poem's potent emotional charge. His argument here, developed from his earlier

---

[1] Adam Roberts is Professor of Nineteenth Century Literature at Royal Holloway University of London. He is the author of numerous creative fiction and nonfiction works, including new scholarly editions of Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and *Biographia Literaria* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Roberts is currently completing a monograph study, *Coleridge's Latin*.

Coleridge's Experimental Poetics (2013), is that Coleridge's poems work by a particular kind of 'objectification', one that 'accommodates—not refuses—emotion'. He adds that this 'can be misconstrued by a reader looking for feeling in the bargain basement' (5), which strikes me as slightly haughty position to adopt. Say the Dejection Ode moves me (it is, undeniably, a very moving poem) but moves me for what Mays considers the wrong reasons: can my basement tears be thus dismissed? Still: Mays reading of the emotional through-line here is nuanced, attentive, and cumulatively powerful, and his take on the Ode as embodying 'a self-defeating, self-conquering transcendental aesthetic within a larger scheme that is not Kantian' will need to be taken into account by all subsequent critics of the work.

Some of the arguments here are more convincing than others. Mays argues forcefully that we need to disentangle the 'Verse Letter to Sara Hutchinson' from 'Dejection: an Ode', and not, as most critics nowadays tend to, see the latter as a more refined version or variant of the former. This is persuasive, although I found it harder to agree with Mays' assertion that Coleridge composed 'elements' of the 'Ode' *before* he wrote the Verse Letter (he points out that George Dekker made a similar argument in 1978). Mays finds the poem's 'oxymoronic title'—'aligning a subject for lament with a song of praise'—very significant of Coleridge's search to achieve 'positive Negation'. But the eighteenth-century is absolutely littered with poems called 'Melancholy: an Ode' or 'Lamentation: an Ode' (indeed the *Gentleman's Magazine* actually published a poem called 'Dejection: an Ode' by 'the Reverend J. Black' in 1786). Larger historicising or generic-genealogical contexts are not part of Mays' purpose here: there's nothing on the long history of the Ode as a form, and only glancing references to Pindar, Horace, and the rich neoclassical traditions of odic composition in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century. Mays is fonder of a different, less chronologically comprehensible kind of literary context. So, for example, several pages are given over to an analysis of Charles Morgan's forgotten novel *The Fountain* (1932) on the slender basis of some Coleridgean epigraphs. This feels egregious, as does an excursus on certain textual cruces in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, offered as explicatory of the difficulties of textual exegesis in Coleridge's poem.

Nor is Mays interested in the broad currents of literary theory. Paul de Man is brought on stage only to be dismissed, with slightly ponderous academic levity, as an 'American Boa-Deconstructor' (174). It seemed to me that a sprinkling of de Man's 'Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image' essay might have added nuance and complexity to what turns out to be a rather simplistic conception of the poem's 'images' and 'symbolism', itemised in chapter 6: 'in the image patterns of the Dejection Ode, light is associated with Joy' (122) and so on. I appreciate that many, and perhaps most, Coleridgeans will be happy Mays avoids entanglement in the thickets of Theory and will warm to Mays's humane appeals to 'feeling' and transcendence as the idiom of this poem. Some readers, though, may find such appeals less common-sensical than Mays appears to think they are. But even a critic from a different 'school'

to Mays will recognise that he is trying to express something very important. This is a much-loved poem, and it is very much to Mays' credit that he both takes that love seriously and tries to get behind it.

Mays' prose varies from the elegant to the stiff. Discussing Ernest de Selincourt's unearthing of the previously unknown 'Verse Letter to Sara Hutchinson' in 1937 we're told that 'World War 2 followed soon after the discovery' (33), rather implying a cause-and-effect that, if true, would startle the historians. Mays is fond of argument by analogy, which is sometimes less illuminating than he perhaps hopes: I can't say the sentence 'the role played by grammar in the Ode is simultaneously cradle and driver' (87) left me much the wiser. His close readings mix insight with what risks becoming a less-inspiring repetitiveness. On the one hand I hadn't previously noticed that after the title (*dejection* derives, as Mays notes, 'from Latin *de-*, down, plus *jacere*, throw' with the added wrinkle that the de- prefix 'also has the function of undoing or reversing the action of a verb, as in, for example, English "deface", "defame", "defrost" etc') the only other 'de-' word in the poem is 'delight' in line 119. That's interesting, as is Mays's suggestion that the 'old moon in the new moon's arms' of the poem's epigraph evokes a *Pietà*, for instance of Mary holding the body of the dead Christ. Other observations are less deftly rendered. Characterising the ode sonically in terms of the 'playing-off against each other' of '"oh," "ow" and "oo" sounds' (101) seems to me to bring a monkey into the room of this resonantly sonorous poem, and some of Mays' close reading is more descriptive than analytic: '"But now" is succeeded by "But oh!" and is followed by a third sentence which begins "For not to…" Line 83 ends with a comma not a period' (91).

In a key respect, though, Mays absolutely cannot be faulted. At all points in this book he is clear that the poem, in its continuing ability to touch and move us, is the thing that matters. There is real value in a critic as knowledgeable as Mays recording, even at this length—perhaps, especially at this length—his personal reaction to this work. Certainly it is impossible to read this book and not come away with a much richer grasp of Coleridge's great Ode.