Allison Dushane

reads

Coleridge and the Nature of Imagination: Evolution, Engagement with the World, and Poetry

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

by David Ward

Coleridge and the Nature of Imagination contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the intersections of Romantic-era literature and science through an extended conversation between Coleridge's theory of the imagination and present-day discussions about the nature of the mind.[1] In this respect, Ward's study contributes to a larger body of criticism that pairs Romantic-era thought and the science of thinking inaugurated by Alan Richardson's *Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001) and extended by studies like Michelle Faubert's *Rhyming Reason: The Poetry of Romantic-Era Psychologists* (2009). Readers expecting a historicist method, however, will find that David Ward's approach to interdisciplinary inquiry diverges from these studies in significant ways. Instead of establishing an interpretive framework grounded in existing scholarship on Romantic-era brain science or the scientific discourse established by Coleridge's contemporaries, he begins the book with an observation that I. A. Richards made in his 1960 study of Coleridge: "[Coleridge's work] requires us, if we are to study it seriously, to reconsider our most fundamental conception of man's being—the nature of man and his knowledge."[2]

To commit to such a task, Ward claims, "we should make use of the extraordinary developments in psychology, neuroscience, the study of human evolution and cognitive science that have taken place since Richards wrote" (1). His study reads Coleridge's extended meditations on the interactions between human mental faculties and the rest of the material world through the lens of twentieth- and twenty-first century scientists and philosophers interested in identifying the instrumental roles that language and the imagination play in the evolutionary process. The key concepts and vocabulary of neuroscience and evolutionary biology illuminate the nuances of Coleridge's treatment of the imagination as a transformative faculty in readings that range across his poetry, essays, letters, and notebooks. Ward mobilizes Coleridge's comprehensive treatment of the imagination as a distinct mental faculty, in turn, to make a case for the relevance of literature (via the imagination) to an understanding of the distinct place of the human in the greater scheme of evolutionary nature.

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[2] I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on the Imagination*, 2nd edition, with comments by Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 19 (as cited in Ward).

The first four chapters unpack Coleridge's meditations on the relationship between thinking and human subjectivity and put them into dialogue with present-day understandings of the nature of consciousness and its role in the evolutionary process. Chapter 1 introduces the scientific and philosophical problems presented by what neuroscientists call "qualia," the units or properties that make up the experiences of the senses. The degree to which these fragments of experience, or "feelings," can be communicated lies at the crux of debates about the nature of consciousness. Is consciousness thoroughly material, or is it an immaterial observer of the operations of the body and the brain? Ward points to Coleridge's prescient and eloquent articulation of this problem in the *Opus Maximum*: "But again, what is a Thought? Is this a thing or an individual? What are its circumscriptions, what are the interspaces between it and another? Where does it begin? Where does it end? Far more readily could we apply these questions to . . . the drops of water which we may imagine as the component integers of the ocean" (OM 25).

Throughout the book, Ward links Coleridge's preoccupation with the elusive and fleeting qualities of affective experience to theories in evolutionary biology that posit feeling, the imagination, language, and both the products and the drivers of an ongoing evolutionary process. In particular, the imagination works to continually negotiate between the materiality of the environment, the body and the brain to organize a "self" that can be expressed through language. The "evolutionary approach," however, focuses not only on the role of the imagination in the development of the individual, but on the material evolution of human life itself.[3] Ward is interested in how "literature addresses a constant exploratory commerce between, on the one hand, what is given by the deep past, by our inherited constitution, by the way our brains have evolved and, on the other hand, the world we create or re-recreate in our continuing present" (12).

Individual experiences still play a significant role in this process, and in chapter 2, Ward offers a reading of how the events in Coleridge's life work in tandem with a biological urge "to resolve the paradoxes of multeity and unity" through poetry (22). Chapter 3 opens with Friedrich Schiller's conception of culture as the site of a harmonic balance between the "receptive faculty" (feeling) and the "determining faculty" (reason) in order to trace Coleridge and Schiller's shared interest in the complex interactions between "Mind" and "Nature."[4] Ward returns to a more explicit focus on neuroscience in chapter 4, which discusses the operation of the will and memory in altered states of consciousness in order to explore the role of the imagination in the process of poetic composition. The second half of the book draws on its previous analyses the imagination as a faculty that negotiates between the material and nonmaterial aspects of consciousness to set up more extended readings of

[3] In his formulation of the "evolutionary approach," Ward cites David S. Miall, "An Evolutionary Framework for Literary Reading," *The Psychology and Sociology of Literature: in Honour of Erlud Ibsch*, eds. Gerard Steen and Dick Schram (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001).

[4] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 69 (as cited in Ward).

three of Coleridge's most significant poems: *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, *Kubla Khan*, and *Christabel*. The reading of *The Ancyent Marinere* in chapter 5 is a particularly compelling case for what Ward calls the "evolutionary approach." Ward skillfully dissects the "mood" of the ballad to demonstrate that its linguistic features and rhythmic strategies not only produce specific neurological effects in the reader, but also have "deep roots" in early rituals that contributed to the further development of the complex perceptual centers of the human brain (76). Likewise, his reading of *Kubla Khan* begins with the long history of the "anxieties about imagination and about power" that it dramatizes, linking Coleridge's experiments with laudanum and nitrous oxide to the initial emergence of poetry as an oral performance. Ward's reading of the "nesting and entwined reversals of conventional themes and ideas" in *Christabel* treats these structural features as a reflection of the ways that that sleep and dream-states challenge the boundary between the active will and "inconscient volition" (152).

The conclusion, subtitled "Transformation and Evolution," restates the aim of the study, which is not only to demonstrate how "the work of scientific thinkers and techniques can help us understand what is happening when poets write and readers read," but also to think through the constitutive role that these processes have played in the evolution of the human mind (208). Here, as in the introduction, Ward's explanations of complex concepts are lucid and engaging; however, it is sometimes difficult to track the various disciplinary players in the present-day scientific conversation, who often appear only in footnotes. Coleridge's thought serves as not only the object of the study, but also its organizing principle. Ward's reference to I. A. Richards in the introduction, then, is a fitting signal of the book's primary focus and greatest strength. In *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, Joseph North writes: "The work of literature, for Richards, was to be a kind of therapeutic technology, and the critic was therefore to be something like a doctor of applied psychology, helping us to use that technology to improve our minds."[5] Ward situates Coleridge's preoccupation with liminal states within historical and scientific frameworks in order to draw attention to the emergence of literature as a technology that mediates between the mind and nature. *Coleridge and the Nature of Imagination* advocates for literature as a vital counterpart to science in theorizing the relationship of human beings to the rest of the material world.

[5] Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 29.