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reads

Coleridge and the Philosophy of Literary Form

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by Ewan James Jones

IN THIS BOOK DEVOTED TO COLERIDGE'S POETRY (much more than to his poetics), a background motto derives from a Coleridge letter to Thelwall: 'I seldom feel without thinking, or think without feeling' (59). This strikingly original study has a distinctive pedigree, a technical attention to the art of verse widened to questions of thinking in general, together with suspicion of any philosophical appropriation of the 'poetic' which ignores compositional questions, as promulgated by *Thinking Verse* (2011–) and such critics as Simon Jarvis, David Nowell-Smith, and Clive Scott (Ewan Jones has himself published there). An inaugural foray into this field was Jarvis's essay, 'Prosody as Cognition' (1998) and Jarvis's influence can be detected in this book, where Jones shows how consequential Coleridge's use of Pope's heroic couplet is in 'Limbo' or cites the phenomenologist Michel Henry's belief in the self-sufficingness of life and affect, implicitly underlying the arguments Jones has with Coleridge's overt thinking.

This book's basic contention is that poetry (*i.e.* verse) is the most deeply embodied mode and abode of linguistic meaning. For Jones, Coleridge's verse thinks philosophically through its expressive repertoire, historical conventions, and sensuous embodiments. The way we enact what verse is becomes distinctive from prose writing or the philosophical essay, given that the performative essence of poetry develops an experience of temporality through unfolding line, affective state, and emotional pitch of delivery. Jones doesn't focus on a general theory of how verse produces significance in tension with discursive prose, but how this can be seen to be happening in Coleridge's case—the implication being that it is only at close range that such claims can be made at all (and Jones convinces me this doesn't diminish his argument). Essential to his position is that Coleridge's most trenchant verse evidences an irreducible materiality, the world's actuality which never goes away. That's not to imply Coleridge's prose reflections are illegitimate, or that they require the 'reality testing' of actual poetic practice, but Jones doesn't offer any real equality between textual modes and repeatedly sees this poet's verse anticipating insights which are only belatedly glimpsed in his later Notebooks and Trinitarian writing. There is a firm though undogmatic undertow of materialism and historicity here steering Jones away from any engagement with prayerful or religious currents within verse, as distinct from Coleridge's broader sense of the poetic, one might say. The symbolic is seen as neither merely grammatical nor numinous, but unfolding temporally through history. To what extent, though, might the symbol generate its own history, and is this

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ever in the form of a counter-history or even counter-temporality? Is poetry for practical purposes identical with verse? The readings Jones gives us insist on privileging verse-technique as a richer embodiment of meaning, and therefore meaning more. This can be narrowing, if timely. A broader strategy would be to focus on Coleridge's roots in common sensation offering thought and feeling a shared onto-perceptual source as anticipated by the theologian John Milbank in his essay 'A Recuperation of Coleridge' (1987) which is still too little known among Coleridgeans.[2]

In his first chapter, Jones concentrates on the sheer lack of formal features in the Conversation Poems, which paradoxically allows them a philosophically distinct way of engaging with the world. This is achieved through Coleridge's use of hemistich or interruption, forging lines divided but still integral. So, in 'The Eolian Harp' an eroticised interchange of passivity and animation is realised through continuous grammatical, syllabic, and rhythmical modulation. Jones posits a recursive notion of mind through the self-interruptions of verse, reminding us of its origins in *versus*, the turn of the plough. Coleridge appears as on the verge of desperation in 'This Lime-Tree Bower' where such phrases as 'slowly sink', 'richlier burn', 'Live in the yellow light' are read as edgy imperatives. I think Jones is right to sense this undertone but needn't lose sight of the layering whereby such verbs retain their subjunctive signature as modes of 'vivat'. If there is an imperative impatience, the poet's unwilling absence still sounds its own subjunctive wistfulness. In 'Frost at Midnight', 'Sea, hill, and wood' are sounds which demand to be omni-stressed, a sport of staccato chanting. Coleridge's reaching out to feel a material presence where the world seems most deadening requires constant effort, Jones concludes. But could this be because the world can *feel* deadened as such times, which is why immersion in it might still call for the hyper-materiality of subjunctive or prayerful response? I suspect Jones' own critical sense of the material might still be a shade brittle here, even before material embodiment becomes equated with authentic experience. On turning to 'The Nightingale' Jones discerns a synaesthetic glut of syllables, as song 'must forget itself to continue being song' (45). The poem challenges us whether we can truly 'take "song" in its pure singularity' (45). By implication such singularity is scarcely sustainable, and here we might ask whether singularity in so concentrated a form might not glimpse a degree-zero of givenness at once between and beyond itself as well as beside itself.

In the second chapter, Jones argues that poetry interrupts transcendental philosophy through the former's technical and formal resources, involving a critical sedimentation and contestation from within a wider history of use and convention. Coleridge's own thinking confirmed this in his later turn away

[2] For Milbank's Coleridge, empirical layers of perception irreversibly overlap with modes of intuition and apprehension. A sense of the role of linguistic creativity in particular was already emergent within empiricism. Knowledge, for Coleridge, therefore, is always more than representation, being the outcome of an inscrutably direct apprehension of inexhaustible 'outerness'. Only within religious language can meaning securely tie us to concrete forms which of themselves connect to projections of transcendence.

from idealism towards a greater concern with questions of 'life'. Jones now reads 'Christabel' for its 'highly self-conscious metro-rhythmical composition' (58), resisting separation into active or passive states. And Jones rejects the notion that when metre comes into contact with passion, each pre-exists the other. They have no absolute identity but only conjoin under particular conditions. Transcendence and abstraction are both offside within these privileged moments of coinciding identity. I would query, however, whether such fusings of affective actuality don't at the same time precipitate back into their elements, *i.e.* metre and passion. This would allow for the simultaneous over- and under-shooting of such productive moments that no longer pivot on a uniquely contingent ontology but are allowed to drift towards crystallizations also constituting horizons. That would suggest a poem not wholly reducible to singular event (despite all the sedimentation it bears with it), though certainly participating in 'strange mutual insurgences' as John Milbank would say. This would be another way poetry 'thinks', but not wholly in terms of singularity and difference.

In his next chapter, Jones ambitiously pursues 'passion' as far as associating it with Coleridge's predilection for punning, a linguistic form at once arbitrary and unstable. Jones avoids reading the pun as simply a subversive, endlessly proliferating contamination, reminding us that semantic polyvalence can't of itself account for the deeper effects of pun. Rather, Coleridge will deploy the pun to unite exuberance of mind and high seriousness, though he moves to combining revisited allegory with compositional wit. Whilst not referencing one of Coleridge's most resonant puns which sees 'at-one-ment' within 'atonement' to convey his sense of the *lux Christi*, Jones offers us virtuoso readings of some later poems in which allegorical figures slip into punning on their own names. In 'Constancy to an Ideal Object' the over-determination of 'Hope' and 'Despair' suggests, 'by omission, a singular human pain that cannot name itself as such' (127). As such, the verse voices 'intentionally defective allegories' (127) or excessive personifications that slide across each other. In 'Limbo' closing capitalised phrases like 'Lip touching Lip ... Bust and Limb' set within rarely used heroic couplets, suggest a ghost of wordplay on the poem's own title. Such readings are not offered gratuitously, and Jones acknowledges that attention to irreducible particularity doesn't in itself 'make for a systematic philosophy or even a convincing phenomenology' (145). Jones' readings imply that criticism can only paraphrase the non-coincidences or potentially redemptive juxtapositions occurring in a body of verse, and as such, critical writing bumps up against its own problematic poetics. There is always the danger that close readings remain impressionist or opportunist, so everything depends on a critical poetics being able to witness to connections that can't be abstractly demonstrated. Or, one might say, poetry's inability to name cognitively never reduces it to voicelessness, which is how it retrieves thinking.

In his final chapter, Jones reads Coleridge as binding the symbol to the tautological, or 'its cognate, the tautegorical' (146). For philosophy, the tautological character of logic is its only available means of knowledge,

however much Kant tried to overcome that. Jones offers an important qualification, suggesting we shouldn't regard tautology as isomorphic, or identical *to* identity, since repetition within language becomes modification, which for Adorno was already dialectical. Jones then embarks on a bold reading of *The Ancient Mariner*, in which the slaying of the albatross arises from frustration with the finite, tautological aspects of the natural world, a world that, having already anticipated the event, then becomes fatal to singularity. The poem's experiment is to discover how blank repetition might yet generate difference or even save the Mariner. As the Life-in-death figure looms, Jones sharply comments that Coleridge's attempts to produce a working notion of symbolism has not prevented him from producing a 'diabolic parody of it' (179). But doesn't the search for difference for its own sake become equally demonic? For Jones, the Mariner's world's barely submerged tautology is never direct enough to find confirmation in the auxiliary 'is', however pervasive that 'is' as essential grammar. I think this is a fair judgment of the 'moment' of the ballad, which dreads a world without any horizon of ontological gift (gestured towards in the closing procession to the kirk), but which might have prompted Coleridge to 'think' in other ways than verse, despite the limping nature of quasi-propositional discourse. My main doubt about this brilliant (and at times remarkably delicate) reading is whether the tautegoric can be read as a derivative of tautology in general. The two terms are undoubtedly cognate, but Coleridge's own neologism retains the mediating distinctivity of symbol, however consubstantial with ultimate horizons. The tautegorical in this light has already intervened dialectically in the mutual reductiveness of identity *contra* difference, perhaps anticipating Paul Ricoeur's invocation of an 'ipse' neither 'idem' nor 'alter'.

So far, I have attempted to describe some of the many resourceful readings of verse in this book, but, unsurprisingly, it also contains much philosophy. In his closing 'Coda', Jones brings in two overlooked theorists, Suzanne Langer and Kenneth Burke. They both consider the symbol as a distinctive means of thinking, not just a linguistic function or artistic convention. Langer, for Jones, extirpates too much the historical, and so how the non-discursive artwork produces conceptualisation is never made explicit. For Burke, on the other hand, symbolic acts are socially embodied: they not only reflect things symbolized but also, to a degree, transcend them. Whereas Burke is alert to the interpenetration of sound and sense within the lexical unit, Jones would have him go further, to include line and stanza, metre and rhythm, as also constituting meaning.

Many other thinkers make their appearance throughout this study, including Kant, Schelling, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty as well as Michel Henry. More unusual is the inclusion of Malebranche, whose deep-seated ambivalence to sensuous experience involves an unfolding process rather than a contradiction, which helps us to see something similar within Coleridge's philosophy and verse. For Jones, however, Malebranche never gets beyond a fideism seen as a reaction to the finitude of material existence that necessitated a reactive faith in the first place. For Malebranche, only God can join sensation to idea, and thus

there is no mediating process similar to the 'plastic nature' that spoke much more to Coleridge's naturalist side (though Cudworth is not mentioned).

At the close of this study, Jones sets himself one final hurdle derived from the very intensity of his previous close readings of Coleridge's verse: if our experience of a poem is constituted by uncertainty over how we stress a line or whether we should laugh or not at a pun, this must countermand any self-sufficient formalism. So, what if 'Coleridge's writing never did only imply "the autonomous and autotelic nature of the single lonely poem"?' (199; quoting Frank Lentricchia). Jones insists that Coleridge never did have such a poetic in mind, and so for readers it is the uncertainty about our experience of a poem that actually constitutes the poem for us. A minimalist claim, it would appear, but for Jones this means that such faded terms as 'organic form' or the 'symbol' can be defended for their irreducibly critical dimensions: it is the very superficies of verse form that allows it to realise a linguistic body of thinking in depth. In a way, he proves that the mechanics of verse constitute in the only way possible verse's deep 'organics'.

This is a conclusion well worth spending time with, and Jones argues for it with great subtlety, alert qualification, and learning throughout his milestone analysis of Coleridge's poems. Given such a powerful insight, there is a price to pay, in that a degree of over-reading of the verse is inevitable, resulting in a correspondent under-reading of Coleridge the philosopher. This is both a strength and a weakness within the concentrated, high-focus readings Jones produces. It's a pity he hasn't found space to spar a little with such 'philosophical' Coleridgeans as Jeffrey Barbeau, Murray Evans, Douglas Hedley, and James Vigus, among others, though some material is too recent to overlap with this book. In *Platonic Coleridge* (2017), a recuperation of Coleridge's Platonic (rather than Neoplatonic) roots, Vigus suggests that for Coleridge intelligible poetry might end up justifying wild philosophy, or, knowing its own ignorance, a poetic philosophy leaves things unsaid, something an over-sophisticated verse-technique might preclude. Evans demonstrates, in *Sublime Coleridge*, (2012), how Coleridge's often transitional, groping patterns of argumentation in *Opus Maximum* deliberately probe beyond logical self-sufficiency illustrating his account via an analysis of a Brahms *Intermezzo*. The intrepid light-footedness of Jones' own 'Coda' is not so far away from this, but he precludes negotiating the ranging of poetry through and around/beyond verse-form, which foreshortens his own critical poetics while defining it. So the broader canvas of J. C. C. Mays' *Coleridge and the Experimental* (2013), with its feeling for a much greater over-lapping between the poetics of verse and the poetics of formal thought, serves as a useful counter-weight. Mays sees an experimental element traversing all types of Coleridgean writing, allowing for poetic failure as well as prose transition, and so avoids over-privileging verse as such (though without the microscopically embodied readings Jones offers). For no lover of Coleridge's verse should want to be without this wonderfully illuminating and instructive book, which is courteously, indeed expressively, argued, and now that it is happily available in paperback, deserves the widest possible readership.