Anita O'Connell

reads

*Coleridge's Play of Mind*

(OUP, 2010)

by John Beer

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JOHN BEER'S RECENT BOOK, *Coleridge's Play of Mind,* is not the examination of a particular theme that might be expected from the title, but rather, as suggested on the back of the dust jacket, a series of biographical sketches. Yet it is not a definitive biography either. Beer seems—perhaps rather playfully himself—to follow Coleridge's own style, meandering through interesting points in his life, dipping into detailed critical examinations of his thought and on through biographical stories with remarkable familiarity and ease. The style is reminiscent of Keats's account of Coleridge: 'I walked with him at his alderman-after-dinner pace for near two miles [during which] he broached a thousand things' (April 1819). The book's fluidity reflects Coleridge's variety and changes of mood and mind. Reading it is rather like sitting down with Beer, listening to the stories of a lifetime of study on Coleridge.

The first few chapters on Coleridge's youth and playfulness are themselves playful and lighthearted, relating random stories from his childhood. They skip 'sportively' through the years on which many would focus, with the writing of his most well-known poetry summed up in just eight pages. Yet as the book delves deeper into Coleridge's life and thought we soon find ourselves in the midst of detailed examinations of Coleridge's thinking. Beer moves effortlessly through quotations from across Coleridge's oeuvre, presenting familiar and less-familiar passages in a fresh, new light. Not confined to the exhaustive aim of a definitive biography, *Coleridge's Play of Mind* provides new angles where least expected. Chapter seven, for example, claims as its title 'Wordsworthian Naturalism and Coleridgean Sublime.' In a biography one might expect a well-rehearsed overview of the relationship of the two poets or, given the title, their difference of style. However, taking these as his starting point, what is presented instead is an examination of Coleridge's literary criticism and an attempt to understand what it was that Coleridge most appreciated in poetry and why. He traces Coleridge's shift from admiration for scientific poetry to the sense of 'one Life' in the Hebrew Psalms and on to a belief that 'To write from deep conviction [was] the best way to achieve the sublime' (101). Likewise when Beer confronts the charge of plagiarism, he provides a wider background and expert knowledge of the similarities, differences and dates so that a topic that is quite familiar to Coleridge scholars is presented interestingly and succinctly.

What Beer seeks to provide is a perspective on Coleridge, the man, through an examination of his biography, his opinions, thoughts and interests. He ties together strands and statements from throughout Coleridge's works to give us a new and intriguing view of the breadth and diversity of Coleridge's thought. Underlying much of the book, Beer attempts to understand Coleridge's

struggle with issues of morality. After *The Ancient Mariner* Coleridge sought to move away from what he saw as a poet's, particularly his own, need to moralize. Yet, Beer argues, morality was intensely important to him when he married Sara Fricker from a sense of duty and when, following John Wordsworth's death, he felt strengthened by Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty.' Beer's aim is not to understand the works so much as to understand the man who wrote them. Because of this, however, the book's findings are at times speculative.

Throughout *Coleridge's Play of Mind* Beer examines much of the major prose works including *The Statesman's Manual, The Friend, The Watchman, Biographia Literaria, Aids to Reflection, Opus Maximum* and his lectures, letters, marginalia and notebooks. He acknowledges the benefit of the *Collected Works* for such studies and makes full use of the volumes. The breadth of knowledge displayed from across these works is impressive and Beer helpfully draws together strands of thought written at the same time that are scattered throughout the different volumes. What emerges from this study is a portrait of Coleridge's exceptional diversity. However, in attempting to demonstrate that poetry was merely one facet of Coleridge's writing and that his most famous poems were only part of a few years in a long life, Beer risks obscuring the role of Coleridge's major poetry in his life altogether as well as his achievements as a poet. In a review for *Times Higher Education* (20 Jan 2011) Christoph Bode notes that poems 'are cited merely as "evidence"'—they become vehicles to discover strands in Coleridge's thought. And these, I would add, are at best odd lines from minor poems or notebook entries written in verse. It is strange that his major poetry and the role that writing poetry played in his life should have been so decidedly cut out of the narrative.

Beer is at his best when focusing on Coleridge's conceptions of the mind, his engagement with German thinkers, especially A. W. Schlegel, and his literary criticism. The chapter on Coleridge's Shakespeare lectures is of particular interest, as it attempts to place Coleridge amongst other Shakespearean critics in terms of originality as well as to reveal the qualities that Coleridge most admired and aimed for in his own writing. Beer examines Coleridge's interest in Shakespeare's protean selflessness as an author—the ability to project himself 'into the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly & strangely different from [his] own' (CL II 810). Studying Shakespeare over many years, Coleridge was most struck by his diversity and ability to relate to so many different situations and emotions—in Coleridge's words, his 'myriad-mindedness' (161).

Beer's examination of Coleridge's admiration for Shakespeare's 'myriad-mindedness' is particularly apt in this study, for this is the primary quality that Beer seeks to portray in Coleridge himself. The book as a whole moves swiftly through Coleridge's life and works, dipping into detail here and there in order to highlight various interests and thoughts. Following Coleridge's own myriad-mindedness in style, *Coleridge's Play of Mind* is a wide-ranging biographical portrait of Coleridge's diverse mind.