Book Reviews
Editorial
Jeffrey W. Barbeau

John Beer, Visionary

Shortly after I arrived at my first Coleridge Summer Conference in 2002—and having just finished my doctoral studies—I found myself in a narrow hallway, face-to-face with Professor John Beer. This wasn't exactly how I expected my first encounter with the great Romanticist to occur, but there I was, outside my newly assigned dormitory room at what was then called Cannington College, stumbling to avoid luggage as John and Gillian made their way around me, through the dark corridor, to the room directly beside my own.

Outside the building, I trembled with excitement and grabbed a fellow newcomer I'd met on the ride from the station to share news of my encounter. John Beer's work had long been familiar to me. I admired his magnificent edition of *Aids to Reflection*, but also his many other works on Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Romanticism. At the conference, I discovered a man of warmth and acumen, and in later years I would find that he was also exceedingly generous with his time and a willing advocate for junior scholars. When I called home to share news of the conference, I burst with enthusiasm over my unexpected meeting in the hallway.

As the tributes in this edition of *The Coleridge Bulletin* indicate, John Beer's contribution to Romanticism generally, and Coleridge studies specifically, are many. So it seems especially fitting that a few passages from his books are excerpted here as reminders of his style and perceptiveness. In reviewing many of his works, I found myself recognizing over and over again how often he wrote, in the most lucid and prescient prose, on themes that set the agenda for the field.

On Coleridge as a visionary thinker:
"It is perhaps idle to look for an 'essential' Coleridge. 'Essentially', he was the lifelong pilgrim towards truth; 'essentially', also, he was the inspired poet of the brief *annus mirabilis*. But if one is looking for an enduring *persona*, one may perhaps find it somewhere between the two—in those moments of insight which characterized him all his life. In this character, fallen angel and questioning pilgrim merge into a new figure—a figure which, though excluded from the Penetralia of the universe, is sufficiently aware of harmony to have a sense of being near the inner shrine."[1]

---

[1] J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 295.

On Romantic fragmentation:
"The double acknowledgment that Romanticism fosters within itself an impulse to unity which can never in fact be realized may indeed constitute its ultimate paradox, at least in its own time—a paradox intensified when the ideas of unity thus fostered have proved powerful enough for their thwarting to be greeted as invalidating the whole concept. Such a response is, however, inappropriate. What is needed is rather a revised view of Romanticism which no longer expects it to be readily graspable as a defined entity but sees in it … a site of questioning. We need to look behind the positive achievements of the age in which it grew up, similarly, to discover the tensions and fissures that coexisted with its positive achievements, all the more so since it is these that have survived most powerfully into our own time. As writers of the twentieth century, lacking the optimism of their predecessors, have come to see less and less unity in their culture, the fragmentary, the sign of a dislocatory force subsisting below the surface of all human aims and aspirations, has achieved more momentous status."[2]

On Forster's *A Passage to India*:
"To claim, with Kenneth Burke, that its point of view is 'designed to evoke in the reader a mood of ironically sympathetic contemplation' is perhaps to come as close as one can to an inclusive formula; but it is also to miss the point. For the sense of irony, the sympathy and the contemplative moods that are evoked refuse to remain yoked in a passive mode: they rise up in the reader's mind as active powers, causing further questionings, probings and cross-linkings. … In writing it, Forster showed what is possible when an artist lays himself open to the widest number of patterns of interpretation and leaves each to flourish, while exercising in addition the control that is requisite to the fashioning of a work that is expected (as he once point out in a moment of humorous deprecation) to 'tell a story'.[3]

On Blake's outlook on the world:
"The single-mindedness and determination with which Blake pursued his unusual view of the world was in certain respects idiosyncratic, yet the reader who engages with it will discover that it carries rewards of its own, particularly for those who are attracted by its combination of imagination and energy. When one is puzzled by a piece of text or by an unusual design, it is often helpful to ask whether a point of imaginative illumination or a moment of energy is prominent. These can take many forms. To repeat they may be simply stylized, as when a figure with long, flowing locks of hair is connected with imagination, while one with closely coiled curls is seen to express energy. Vision and energy may sometimes work in alternation, as with some of the

[2] John Beer, "Fragmentations and Ironies," in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer 234–64 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 247–48.
[3] John Beer, "Conclusion: *A Passage to India* and the Versatility of the Novel," in *A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. John Beer 132–52 (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1986), 152.

lyrics in *Songs of Innocence* that find their counterparts in *Songs of Experience*. It is in the interplay of the two qualities, however, that Blake's complexities are often at their most active."[4]

On the influence of Coleridge's philosophy:
"His was a mind that turned away from tight formulations. The establishing of a system that would have been enough to make the reputation of another man was not for him, even though he could examine acutely such systems when formulated by others and even claim to reconcile them within a more comprehensive pattern. He was at his best when paying attention to the larger workings of his own psyche. While endorsing contemporary respect for the human will he knew from personal experience how unreliable a resource it could be."[5]

On Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*:
"For Coleridge, the mystery of life's continuance in the night's stillness is akin to the mystery of watching a sleeping person who gives no outward sign that his or her mind is at that moment vividly peopled by a dream. In this poem, moreover, the strangeness of the sense is sharpened by the fact that the only human being present with him is his baby son, Hartley, the workings of whose consciousness would be partly hidden even if he were awake, so that they are now, as it were, doubly inaccessible."[6]

One last item, which seems particularly appropriate to understanding John Beer, no less than Blake:
"It is a germane feature of Blake's own mental honesty, as with his desire to rouse his fellows to think for themselves, that he does not attempt a refutation of the writers with whom he disagrees. If there is a positive energy or illumination to which he can respond, he will respect that, while subtly subverting those elements he believes false."[7]

Reviews
In the current issue, we have reviews that cover a range of topics. Eugene Stelzig ably takes up Richard Holmes' latest autobiographical study, *This Long Pursuit*, treating readers to a capacious exploration of Holmes' several decades of biographical and autobiographical travels, and Paul Cheshire considers the relevance of Coleridge to modernity in an analysis of Andrea Timár's *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits*. Readers will note that several recent books in Romantic studies have weighed the influence of Methodism on the literature of the period (including several on Blake and Wordsworth, in particular), so Stuart Andrews' meticulous consideration of Helen Boyles's

[4] John Beer, *William Blake: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 106.
[5] John Beer, *Romantic Influences: Contemporary, Victorian, Modern* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 165.
[6] John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 136.
[7] Beer, *William Blake: A Literary Life*, 56.

Romanticism and Methodism will prove a helpful guide to those interested in the state of the conversation. STC, of course, never embraced the violent radicalism of the French Revolution, still, in what may amount to an apostasy of sorts, he later worked assiduously to distance himself from radical politics, as Katy Beavers explains in a review of Björn Bosserhof's *Radical Contra-diction*. Finally, Justin Shepherd takes a look at a recent book published by The Wordsworth Trust on Professor William Knight, revealing how an otherwise 'typical' Victorian Wordsworthian led a surprisingly remarkable life.

New books in the field are constantly appearing. In upcoming issues, we are planning reviews of several works of particular interest:

- Philip Aherne reviews *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability* by Emily Stanback
- Brennan O'Donnell reviews *Romantic Marks and Measures* by Julia Carlson
- Aimee Barbeau reviews *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason* by Timothy Michael
- Jonatan González reviews *Petrarch in Romantic England* by Edoardo Zuccato
- Frederick Burwick reviews *Coleridge and Cosmopolitan Intellectualism, 1794–1804* by Maximiliaan van Woudenberg

We look forward to seeing more works by members of the Friends of Coleridge on Romantic studies in the future!