

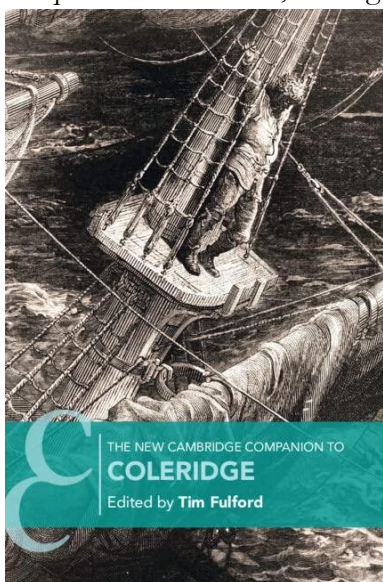
Anya Taylor

reads

The New Cambridge Companion to Coleridge

edited by Tim Fulford¹

TWENTY YEARS AGO, I WROTE A BRIEF REVIEW in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* praising *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (2002), edited by Lucy Newlyn.² I was surprised to see a 'New' *Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* arrive in my mail this month. A check of the list of all Cambridge Companions reveals that Coleridge is the only writer who has the honor of two volumes. By 2002 Shakespeare did get four volumes, but only one is a Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare; the other three focus on Shakespeare and Film, Shakespeare's comedy, and Shakespeare on stage. By 2023, Shakespeare's volumes on specialized topics number fifteen. But Coleridge's unique two is notable, distinguished in the title only by the word 'new'. Both



volumes feature writings by knowledgeable and well-known Coleridgeans. Both cover a range of Coleridge's poetry and prose, though not in similar categories. Both start with an introduction by their expert editors. Both end with a look into the future of Coleridge's influence in time, or an overview of how Coleridge sees historical time.

What distinguishes the volumes as wholes is their preliminary attitude toward Coleridge himself. The opening essays of the 2002 volume emphasize Coleridge's failures and his misery. They echo the mockery of and pity for Coleridge that used to pervade the Wordsworth Summer Conference in the 1980's, where nothing ever seemed to go well for Wordsworth's poor addicted lovelorn sidekick, who left his brilliant insights unfinished, his poems inconclusive, his relationships needy and unfulfilled. This emphasis appears in disparaging phrases in the first two essays of the 2002 volume: Coleridge's personality was 'weak and vacillating'; addicted to narcotics, he suffered from 'obsessive-compulsive disorders'; his essential personality was 'weak, subordinate, dependent'; his essence was 'lack' (7). His language reflects 'an anxiety, a lack of steadiness' (9); 'his chaotic bodily and personal life (increasingly the prey of marital unhappiness, illness and addiction) fractured and dissipated his mental coherence' (13); 'He was a deeply flawed human being, whose lifelong idealism provided him with some kind of compensation for his failings and inadequacies' (13). In a summary of his life this hopeless pattern continues:

¹ *The New Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Tim Fulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

² *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

‘regular collapse into craven dependency and transparent untruth was to become its own predictable constant’ (19). These gloomy assessments at the start of the volume make one wonder why Coleridge deserves even one Cambridge Companion, much less two. They discourage potential new readers from moving on to the excellent essays—by James Engell, Julie Carlson, Tim Fulford, Mary Anne Perkins, and many others—awaiting beyond the barbed threshold.

By contrast, Tim Fulford and his next generation essayists take advantage of the new Coleridge volumes and of books about Coleridge in multiple contexts published in the last twenty years. They have a sense of human sympathy for and connection with Coleridge, get his jokes, appreciate his wide-ranging knowledge, his rhetorical zest, his skillful musicality, his activity, his foresight into the troubles of our own age. Fulford even sees him as ‘woke’—our kin. Fulford’s introduction, ‘A Poet for the Twenty-First Century’, boldly focuses on poetry, climate change, cancel culture and trauma, confessional self-revelation, and Coleridge’s surprisingly un-‘woke’ late ranking of races. Where the 2002 volume has two essays on poetry, this one has five essays focusing on different aspects of the range of his poetry, one on his plays, and one on his metres. Many essays use poems as supportive texts for evidence of their arguments. The introduction itself has a sharply topical analysis of ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and ‘Christabel’. Coleridge is after all a major poet with magnetic skills that are sometimes forgotten in the outrush of pity for his life struggles, similar to those often revealed in our confessional age. For a Coleridge reader who has long admired his prolific success in spite of those personal struggles (‘fighting from his knees’, as Thomas McFarland, a wrestler in early life, described him in ‘Coleridge’s Anxiety’), it is therefore a pleasure to find in this 2023 volume a celebration of Coleridge’s accomplishments as a poet, playwright, political, philosophical, and religious writer, scientist, historian, outdoorsman, and notebook scribbler.

Twenty-first century physical materialism enhances the readings of poems as vivacious objects. The five essays on poetry make a dramatic return to the skills of close reading combined with the contextualism that has widened the sphere of our attentions. Felicity James in one of the finest essays ever crafted on the intertwining of Coleridge’s art, life, and friendships, illuminates ‘Coleridge’s complicated collaborative process’ (30), his sociability, his imagining the inner life of others. She unravels the many voices and echoes resounding through ‘This Lime-tree Bower’ such as Lamb’s, Southey’s, and Chatterton’s, as intertwined as leaves and plants. The *Lyrical Ballads* as a larger project ‘should be seen as an act of ‘domestic co-partnery’ with Dorothy Wordsworth, John Thelwall (‘the silenced partner’ of the 1790’s), Charles Lloyd, the editorial work of Humphrey Davy’, even while the collaboration with Wordsworth soon goes awry in power dynamics—‘in words of unmeant bitterness’—between the poets. ‘[C]ollaboration might shade into usurpation or betrayal’ (36–39). James’s thinking expands into a magnificent analysis of *Biographia Literaria* as a larger collaborative project where family connections,

friendly conversations, inclusive critical perceptions, borrowings from others, even a posthumous conversation with Frederick Douglass in the United States declaring that 'a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING' (44) converge. This essay is a must read for any burgeoning Coleridgean.

Two essays on Coleridge's nature poetry, by Gregory Leadbetter and Joanna Taylor, take different tacks on his engagement with and representations of the natural world, with living things merging with the flow of language. Leadbetter sees congruence between nature and poetry in Coleridge's poem 'The Nightingale', where 'the poet and the natural world, the human and the more-than-human, mutually alter[]' each other. Coleridge's 'intimate pairing of poetry and nature presents both as forms of life that create more life, in and through each other' (46). This mutuality relies on a pantheism in the world of nature, which Coleridge describes as a belief 'that every Thing has a Life of it's own, & that we are all *one Life*' (CL II 864 [47]). This one life reveals itself in sounds, 'non-human and preverbal communication' and 'pulsing rhythm running across enjambed lines'; such language 'conjur[es] a sense of non-human agency, an active habitat to which the life of the language responds' (50–51). The one life revealed in sounds of wind, bird song, sedge creates vitality. Leadbetter sees this force as a 'new ecology—still radical today—in which the renewal of language and a renewed relation to the living world are inextricably entwined' (60). Joanna Taylor, by contrast, starts from human aloneness to position the human being outside of the pullulating natural world. The human is in danger of being entangled in a mesh of 'ambiguous identities', caught in 'a rival conflict between the human mind and external nature' (70). A struggle between the two powers ensues. In the resulting dejection, the human person seeks 'a space for the human and non-human to hybridize' but at the risk of destroying individual identity' (74). Such rivalry undergirds the great poem 'Dejection: An Ode', which Taylor reads as an 'exploration of an ecopoetics founded not, like Wordsworth's, on interconnection with the world but on disconnection from it' (73). In this provocative reading of the poem, 'dejection becomes the impetus needed to inspire ecological care' (77). It separates the one life into two, mind and the outside world of things.

Coleridge's use of inherited British ballads and medieval traditional forms in the *Lyrical Ballads* is the subject of Margaret Russett's lively essay. Along with noting the prevalence of such forms, Russett attends to 'the dysfunctions and distortions that reveal the mind's own supernaturalism'. Not only the forms and meters of spells but 'the spells cast by traumatic experience upon the actions and consciousness of the wounded subject' (81) lead to the willing suspension of the will as the mind slips into delusion. Russett makes this connection between metrically mesmerizing sound effects and recurring traumatic memories in the great poems 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel', as well as in the 'thralldom' of literary illusion. She notes 'that Coleridge's observations on poetic power emphasize repetition and the material properties of words, just as occult ceremonies do' (84). Coleridge's poetry has long been called incantatory, stunning, possessing, bewitching,

compulsive, spell binding, enthralling. These powers can arise from traumatic iterability.

From such magical power Karen Swann turns attention to the later poetry where power seems to collapse. Hopelessness is the starting point, as aloneness was in Joanna Taylor's essay. In a superb three paragraph introduction, Swann explores what lateness is: poetry after 1820 (and some going back to 1802) 'understands itself as belated, as coming after the outliving of hope, promise and love. After Coleridge I call this late work "work without hope"' (226). Swann focuses on individual poems, some mystifying, some with 'a provisional, fugitive quality' (225), some distraught. Friendship groups from the past are reconfigured and echoed, particularly in the intricately examined poem 'The Alone Most Dear' (232–40) and the scraps of themes that make up 'Imitations of Du Bartas Etc' (232). But some late poems are comical, some communal and chatty, befitting a man writing and talking amongst friends of many ages in several households. The intensity of the earlier love poems has waned or turned avuncular. 'The Improvisatore, or, "John Anderson, My Jo, John"', comes to life in the context of Coleridge's late communities of younger women and men, and of contemporaneous letters to Thomas Allsop and Susan Steele, both ripe for romance. The poem and the letters urge these young people to guard their souls from unworthy partners, wisdom learned from his own life and generously shared. In advising Allsop and Steele to cherish their integrity and not pollute their persons in unbreakable unions, Coleridge's poem urges free agency. The fact that Susan Steele rejected both the suitors whom Coleridge warned her about suggests that his words were not feeble and he was not 'a has-been' to these young friends. Though age and lost love have taken a toll, the old poet cares for the future happiness of others, and fosters their independence and fulfillment.

Undergirding all the poems is metre, as Swann asserts in her second paragraph. Scholars of Renaissance literature, such as George T. Wright, Angus Fletcher, John Hollander, and Christopher Ricks have long been adept at studying the interactions of classical and Anglo-Saxon metres and their crafted melodiousness. Such practiced discipline was not commonly credited to the Romantics until the 1990's, when Emerson Marks, Brennan O'Donnell, and I turned to focus on Coleridge as among the most purposeful practitioners of verse as verse in his era, and Jane Stabler turned her keen ear to Byron's rhythmic skills. This interest was eclipsed by enthusiasm for new historicism and other 'topics', as opposed to skills. Now metre has resurfaced as a central and complex power. In this volume Ewan Jones follows up several fine earlier essays on metre in poetry by Coleridge and Shelley with the assertion: 'a strong case [can] be made for [Coleridge] being *the* single most significant theorist and practitioner of metre in the history of English verse' (97). Jones makes a stirring case that to hear and discriminate these varying sounds is 'to honour the world' (101). With humor and affection for Coleridge, he shows that he is a 'firm but gentle guide to Greek and English metrical stress and quantity'. Clarifying metre to his children, Coleridge proves that 'the father becomes so

much more than a dactyl' (103). This essay is essential reading for a reviving study of craftsmanship in Romantic writing.

The accumulation of poems of different kinds and the centrality of his knowledge of the workings of verse obliterate the idea of Coleridge as a failure. All the more so when we read how successful his plays were on the stage and off of it. Michael Gamer and Jeffrey N. Cox, collaborating together in a Coleridgean way, establish the facts about Coleridge's theatre history, and the frequency with which his plays were performed and praised. His play 'Remorse' (1813), against the background of the bloody Peninsular War, played 200 performances and cashed in. Influenced by Schiller's 'The Robbers' and Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions* (1812), and fueled by rage at Napoleon, the play 'had the longest run of a tragedy in the still young nineteenth century' (121). He worked with the musical impresario Thomas John Dibdin (a Sondheim precursor who deserves a study of his own) on 'Zapolya', which played for ten nights (128). Other plays from 'The Fall of Robespierre, an Historic Drama' (1794) to 'Osorio', an early version of 'Remorse', explore the interplay of public terror and private retreat.

Two essays that sound like poems themselves point to Coleridge's acute senses of sound, space, kinetics, haptics, and general sensuous attentiveness as he walks and records in his notebooks his actions and thoughts of the moment. Alan Vardy, a serious walker himself, captures the vivid particularity of Coleridge's observations and movements while fell-walking for days at a time—51 miles in a day's stroll from Nether Stowey to Linton (130). Vardy writes, 'Coleridge's speech provided the rhythmic beat propelling them forward' (130). A Coleridgean remark noted by Nicholas Halmi (211) confirms this connection between talking and walking: 'I believe the corporeality of *thought*—namely, that it is motion' (CL I 137–38). Vardy describes Coleridge 'running out bare-headed to enjoy the commotion of the elements', lying next to Dorothy Wordsworth 'sidelong on the turf', sharing her 'intense visual acuity', 'joy', 'elation', and 'pleasure' (131–33). Vardy discerns 'a fundamental pattern in Coleridge's walking, the practice of taking things in as an almost ecstatic reverie, followed by intellectual distancing in which he takes the measure of things experienced or his personal experience more broadly' (134). He discovers the word 'side peeps' for glimpses that occur spontaneously and stick in the brain; he and Dorothy share immediacy and wildness. Walking for Coleridge brings 'an immersive sensual experience, surrounded by sounds as much as expansive view' (137). Vardy echo-locates Coleridge's head moving and ears cocked, gazing with protuberant eyes, as he survives vertiginous plunges and escapes by chimneys of rock (139). He cites Coleridge on 'fantastic Pleasure, that draws the Soul along swimming through the air in many shapes, even as a Flight of Starlings in a Wind' (140).

Tom Owens, too, writing about the *Notebooks* themselves, finds physicality and speedy movement. He captures a singular keen attention in entries in the instant or aftermath of a sensation or observation. Owens describes how the language quickly mediates the experience and the idea; even punctuation

‘structures the abruptly shifting rhythms of a refractive delight in language which preserves both the momentary scene itself and the momentum of Coleridge’s mind as he tracks its unfolding’ (144). Owens sees that as he ages Coleridge seeks coherence rather than multifariousness and likeness over difference: ‘a paucity of illustration correspond[s] to the increasing stasis of Coleridge’s actual life’ (154). Owens plays wittily with Coleridge’s term ‘fly-catcher’ for the *Notebooks*. For a fly-catcher can be a spider, whose net accepts everything that is stuck in it; a bird, who chooses; or a trout, who ‘glide[s] down the rivulet of quiet Life’ (158). He demonstrates that ‘the dimensions of Coleridge’s intelligence, by turns fixed and free, straddled arachnid and avian poles’ (158).

As the volume moves into analyses of Coleridge’s major prose works—his political writings (in chapter 2), investigations into science and pseudo-science (chapter 11), religious forays (chapter 12), literary lectures and criticism (chapter 13, with *Biographia Literaria* already discussed as a collaborative venture in James’s chapter 3), philosophies (chapter 14), and his long view of history (chapter 16)—readers are awed by the poet’s range and productivity. Several of these chapters involve the tracking of a trajectory from materialism to spirituality, understanding to reason, pantisocracy to guidance by an elite clerisy—a difficult task, as Coleridge often circles or spirals backward or around, returning and reassessing.

Jacob Lloyd’s essay on ‘Coleridge’s Politics’ provides a clear guide to Coleridge’s changing views, which adapt to changing world conditions such as the increasingly relentless terrorism of Napoleon, a man of the people who himself changed into a murderous autocrat. Lloyd’s evidence shows that Coleridge’s shift from Jacobinism came quickly, recanting and sometimes disguising his views, to snap the squeaky trumpet of sedition. By 1800 he was already grateful to have a king: ‘Coleridge’s later royalism may have derived from his fear that republicanism and democracy could easily degenerate into military dictatorship, as he saw happening under Napoleon in France’ (17). Quite soon pantisocracy, which shared individual property within a small group, gives way to property as a foundation of government. Even taxation has a virtue: ‘money spent maintaining the armed forces in the war against France provided employment and incomes to British subjects’ (19), whereas peace and lower taxes brought economic depression. Lloyd shows that Coleridge ‘saw political progress as something bestowed from above, prompted by feelings of benevolence, not something to be achieved by agitating the masses to direct political action’ (23). Coleridge asserted the importance of free agency, personhood, rights and duties, under a constitution and national church led by an elite clerisy (27–28) and fostering unity of purpose. His ideas influenced humanistic political advocacy into the nineteenth century and ‘later ethical critiques of capitalism’ (28).

Kurtis Hessel tracks the devolution or development (depending on one’s point of view) from Coleridge’s excitement at Humphry Davy’s scientific discoveries of gas to the absorption of science into an overall view of divine

design. Science has a trajectory, too, as it moves from discovering chemicals to fitting those discoveries into belief, ‘fulfilling his religious vision scientifically’ (161). He ‘venerated [Joseph] Priestley because his scientific studies were inextricable from his metaphysical beliefs and informed by his Unitarian faith’; his opinion reverses as he recognizes Priestley’s ‘rejection of Jesus’ divinity’ (163). By 1823 he is calling Davy an alchemist. In the 1820’s Coleridge jumps into the debate about the nature of life being waged between William Lawrence and John Abernethy. Hessel reveals the continuity between Coleridge’s earlier syncretism and his later ‘Theory of Life’: ‘Coleridge proposes as the central law of life “the *power* which discloses itself from within as a principle of *unity* in the *many*”’ (171). Hessel connects these principles with Coleridge’s ‘Essays on Method’, which asserts that scientific experiments ‘must achieve “unity of principles through all the diversity of forms”’ (172). Science is not a separate discipline for Coleridge; it should ‘be consonant and eventually metaphysically intermingled with religion and philosophy’ (174–75). Hessel’s word for this coherence is ‘consilience’.

Jeffrey Barbeau’s chapter ‘Religious Coleridge’ is at the converging point of these essays and ones to follow, which all point toward a spiritual goal. Inspired by his recent wide-ranging edition, *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion*³, and by the rigor of Mary Anne Perkins’ essay on the Logos in the 2002 *Cambridge Companion* (187–99), Barbeau expands the usual options in Coleridge’s religious choices. No longer just the shift from Pantheism to Trinitarianism first illuminated by Thomas McFarland,⁴ but Hinduism through Sir William Jones and Charles Wilkins, Islam, Judaism, and evangelicalism also enrich his search for meaning. Coleridge was an ‘inflammatory’ (180) dissenter pressing for reform of the established church, ‘preached in Unitarian chapels’ (181), learned from biblical criticism of German theologians, and was grabbed by the ‘giant’s hand’ of Kant (183). Barbeau traces the wavering development of his complex faith with sympathy. He credits Coleridge’s late return to the sacrament to ‘an increasing need for embodied participation, a strong sense of the power of evil and an unrelenting distrust of the sinful weakness of his character. Nature—that is human nature as well as the object world, he remarked in 1830—was the “devil in a strait waistcoat”’ (186). The late *Aids to Reflection* (1825), which also contemplates questions of origination and originality, showed him ‘to be a truly pioneering thinker’, influencing American transcendentalists (188–90).

Also revealing unity in multiplicity, continuity, and coherence—‘consilience’—is the well-organized and information-packed ‘Coleridge the Lecturer and Critic’. Charles Mahoney precisely connects the 1808–12 lectures on Shakespeare, which inductively examine texts, with the literary (and ultimately psychological) principles that emerge soon after in *Biographia Literaria* chapter 13 (1815), the fulcrum of his investigations. These two sources are

³ *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion*, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁴ Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

summarized in the *Principles of Genial Criticism*. As Mahoney declares: ‘Coleridge the lecturer made Coleridge the critic possible’ (192). In over a hundred lectures Coleridge often turns to Shakespeare, ‘the poet, described in ideal perfection’ (197), for examples to formulate the true principles of poetry. These principles were established in the unity of reason and understanding in the plays and transferred thence to the mind that created the play. From the inductive discoveries of unity in the plays, often adumbrated in the first scenes, Coleridge moves to ‘the deduction of the Causes from Principles involved in our Faculties’, in the *Biographia* (199), pivoting between induction and deduction. Here the central exemplar of the poet is Wordsworth, however salient his foibles. Mahoney locates the four qualities of Coleridge’s criticism: depth of thought; practical criticism including form, metre, diction, and elements of ‘close reading’; organic unity; ‘just and genial criticism’ celebrating the beauties of a work of art (207). Praising Coleridge ‘as one of the greatest critics in the English tradition’, Mahoney emphasizes ‘the dynamic interpenetration of reason and imagination that characterized his genius, that “sublime faculty” which he shared with Shakespeare, “by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on”’ (207–8).

Linking principle and practice, matter and mind, Nicholas Halmi scrutinizes the arc of Coleridge’s philosophical positions from Priestley to Spinoza to Kant and Schelling, with frequent revisitations to defend the piety and wisdom of Spinoza. Halmi’s clarity on difficult issues is admirable. He describes Coleridge’s struggles with materialism: ‘Coleridge’s rejection of Priestleyan materialism marks the beginning of what was to be a lifelong challenge of reconciling an attraction to monism, as a solution to the problem of dualism, with an insistence on metaphysical libertarianism—that is, the supposition that humans are capable of choices that are neither causally determined nor random, and that they are therefore responsible for those choices—as the solution to the problem of evil’ (215). Seeking in Spinoza ‘a possible loophole for free will’, Coleridge was unable ‘for three decades either fully to accept or fully to reject the Dutch philosopher’s monism’ (217). Similarly, ‘Coleridge sought interpretively to mitigate what he found unpalatable in Kant’s critical philosophy, both by extracting hopeful signals from it and by reinterpreting some of its central concepts’ (218). Halmi shows Coleridge tinkering with the words of these great philosophical predecessors in order to be able to live with their conclusions. Halmi’s concluding paragraph offers us a magnificent parallel sentence that compresses Coleridge’s philosophical dilemmas: ‘Critical of a blind faith, he sought to anchor his religion in philosophy; fearful of succumbing to a pantheistic monism, he sought to anchor his philosophy in religion; conscious of the limits of discursive thought, he appealed to the imagination to make the truths of reason intuitable’ (222).

In the light of Coleridge’s desire to believe in free agency, personhood, individuality, and choice, it is not surprising to glimpse in Coleridge’s view of history the shadow of a great man theory of history. Tom Duggett, writing

from China, gives a broad vista in world affairs, as Coleridge similarly saw history unfold from his diplomatic perch in Malta. Adjacent to the peninsula where England would soon be involved in the six-year Peninsular War against Napoleon's invading troops, Malta gave Coleridge a wide perspective on past, current, and future shifts in power. Coleridge was in search of a 'principle or leading intention', 'a surview of the whole', rather than a mere chronicle of striking events (246–47). He writes that he 'endeavored to discover in past history the event, that most nearly resembled it[;] . . . I conjectured that the result would be the same or different'. He felt himself to be 'armed with the two-fold knowledge of history and the human mind' (247), and thus able to calculate, as Edmund Burke did, the likely course of events. Pairing past historical events and figures, modelled on Plutarch's *Lives*, Coleridge links leaders across the centuries in comparison essays that reveal similarities in character and context. He writes his insightful essays on France and Rome, Napoleon and Roman generals, often focusing on the defeats of Napoleon on the Iberian Peninsula and then in freezing Russia (252). Biography and 'Lives' play a role, as do virtues such as heroism, strategy, and courage. Coleridge identifies the man of history as one who has 'sedulously sharpened that eye, which sees all things, actions, and events, in relation to the laws that determine their existence and circumscribe their possibility' (*BL* I 192 [248]). Foresight and fore-thought require an accurate memory of the past based on authentic documents.

Fulford's collection is carefully chosen, illuminating, and fresh. The writing throughout is vivid with lively quotations from Coleridge, commentary direct and not arcane, with no tedious jargon or distracting theory. The entries appreciate their subject and know him in detail. I am hoping the book launches new Coleridgeans in colleges and universities throughout the world, and that those lucky students of this good and wise poet can find jobs from which to spread their closely reasoned enthusiasm.