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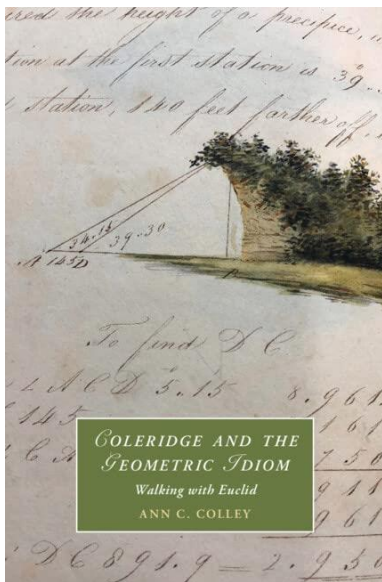
reads

Coleridge and the Geometric Idiom:

Walking with Euclid

by Ann C. Colley¹

IN *COLERIDGE AND THE GEOMETRIC IDIOM: Walking with Euclid*, Ann Colley, SUNY Distinguished Professor Emerita, offers two new ways to think about Coleridge's nature poetry. The first is Coleridge's engagement in a 'culture of walking', which made it possible, Colley asserts, for him to 'absorb and better understand' the natural world (29). This cultural tendency and how Coleridge took part in it is the focus of the first two sections of this book: 'Coleridge Walks: The Measure of the Landscape' and 'Lines of Motion'. Though Coleridge's poor health is legendary, Colley offers a portrait



of a surprisingly active young man, a serious walker, who had a 'sense of freedom and daring exploration' (148), and who regularly tramped the twelve miles from Nether Stowey to Taunton to preach, strode 40 miles to visit Mrs. Barbauld in Bristol, and enthusiastically scrambled alone or with friends through the Quantock hills and alongside lake and seashores. Colley uses Coleridge's notebooks to catalogue his walking tours and frequent solitary rambles; she notes, for example, that despite blisters and swollen feet, he was the first to complete the walk from Keswick to Grasmere by scrambling across the tops of Calfhow Pike, Stylarrow Dod, and Helvellyn. Colley asserts that these walks, which often afforded the young man breath-taking and powerfully physical encounters with the earth

and sky, significantly shaped Coleridge's lifelong appreciation of nature. She also notes how often he refers in these notebooks to his stride, his pace, even his boots, and how frequently he uses them to measure and help him negotiate the landscape over which he was traveling. She suggests that 'it was the specifically recollected rhythm or imprint of his feet moving through the landscape that significantly contributed to the ways in which Coleridge shaped the contours of his nature poems and bestowed upon them a feeling of immediacy as well as a consciousness of an evolving present' (116). She cites as apt examples the rhythms of 'On Bala Hill', 'Life', and 'Lines written at Shurton Bars'.

¹ Ann C. Colley, *Coleridge and the Geometric Idiom: Walking with Euclid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

The second way that Colley asks us to rethink Coleridge's nature poetry is by considering his training at school and university in geometrical forms and reasoning. In chapter three, Colley notes that along with his classical training in verse and prosody at Christ's Hospital School, the young man also spent his last two years attending tutorials at the Mathematical School with William Wales. Wales had been a navigator on Captain Cook's second voyage, and it was he who first introduced Coleridge to Euclid's *Elements*—not only as a method of mathematical reasoning but also as a practical tool for navigating the globe. Though she doesn't offer as much information as I would have liked to see about how, exactly, geometry was taught at Christ's Hospital or Jesus College, Colley notes that a 'Euclidean sense of space' (83) was the norm in these institutions and that Euclid was the primary mathematical text for the first two years at Cambridge. Indeed, as a freshman, Coleridge reported reading mathematics three hours a day. Pointing out how often STC used geometric diagrams and language such as 'steep angle of rock' (53), 'plunging lines' (54), and 'a gibbous Shape, struggling between a Triangle & semi circle' (81) when describing the landscape in his notebooks, Colley convincingly argues for the effects of such study upon Coleridge's thought.

Colley asserts that mathematical studies, particularly of Euclid's geometry, taught Coleridge the skills of 'attendance, abstraction, and intuition'; and, she calls attention to notebook references where the poet suggests that geometry gave him the power to halt his wandering mind and fix his 'mental eye' (103). Quoting from Coleridge's notebooks, Colley surmises that it was 'steadying' for Coleridge to see 'the woods on the left bank run up into semi circles & Triangles' and it was 'restful' to see the stoniest parts of the fells 'softened down by the semicircular Lines & bason-like concavities' (104). Colley calls attention to how often 'lines of motion' or lineal images can be found in Coleridge's nature poems; she shows, for example, how the argument in 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' is triangular and reminds us of the circularity of the speaker's consciousness in 'Frost at Midnight' and 'Sonnet to the River Otter'. Combining her awareness of Coleridge as both a walker and student of geometry, Colley offers comments on the rhythms and imagery of many other poems as well, including 'Lines: Composed while climbing the Left Ascent of Brockley Coomb, Somersetshire, May 1795', 'Sonnet on Quitting School for College', 'Devonshire Roads', and 'A Beck in Winter'. She asserts that geometric figures made it possible for Coleridge to 'confer a larger sense of spatiality but also to create an impression of unity and to exercise a synthetic power which connected one point line or detail to another' (133).

Colley makes the important point that STC and most of his educated reading audience had been trained to believe that the mathematical study of lines and shapes and theorems brings one closer 'to realising the truth . . . [and to teasing] out the essence of things' (105). The final two sections of the book—'Ars Poetica' and 'Youth and Age: Coleridge and the Shifting Paradigm of Geometric Thought'—explore how cultural awareness of mathematics and geometric forms not only helped the writer to structure his poems, but also to

guide him to an ‘understanding of metaphysical thought as well as the ordering of an external universe’ (101). Such training led him, she asserts, ‘to an apprehension of the purer elements of truth that existed beyond all the static of a shifting, fluctuating, moving sensual world’ (100). After 1810, Coleridge never returned to walk in Cumberland, and his health rapidly failed him; but Colley reminds us that the sedentary writer continued to turn to the geometric idiom in his contemplations of philosophical and religious questions. She cites his use of the triangle to guide contemplation, to work out the idea of Christian love, and to diagram ‘the line of Being’ (152). Colley makes a convincing argument that geometry was a ‘sustaining paradigm’ for Coleridge. She even claims that after reading Thomas Reid’s ‘geometry of visibles’ (164–65), Coleridge supplemented and extended the Euclidean idiom inventing a sort of ‘wild, roaring, ever moving geometry’ (174) in certain notebook passages in efforts to describe complex scenes that challenged his ‘descriptive powers’ (175). Colley movingly closes her study by suggesting that Coleridge’s experiments in ‘living geometric forms’ might be seen as ‘an emblem of the primary imagination that allows the active mind to synthesize disparate parts in order to create a new reality that resides neither in an absolute subject nor in the object’ (180).

Some parts of Colley’s last chapter, discussing students’ mathematics copy books, might have been better placed earlier in the discussion of Coleridge’s own education, and I am not sure all readers will see the relevance of controversies over non-Euclidean geometry that took place long after Coleridge’s death. But Colley’s account and discussion of the poet’s geometrical thought, depiction of Coleridge the walker, and reminders about how mathematics and the human stride are registered in many of his nature poems are learned and thought-provoking. Colley wisely suggests that Coleridge’s notebooks deserve more scholarly attention, and she entices readers by reproducing sketches, geometric squiggles, and diagrams from them along with two beautiful landscapes sketched in Coleridge’s time. Finally, Colley generously supplies passages from Coleridge’s writings to support each claim and on almost every page she offers engaging and scholarly footnotes. Given how young many of the Romantics were when they first started demonstrating remarkable language and thinking skills, it seems a wise move for scholars to investigate their education in school and university, and to consider the poets’ experiences following immediately upon leaving these institutions in their critical studies. Colley’s book is a fine addition to this field of study.