

**Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp.242. £65. ISBN 9781107068445.**

**Michael Tomko, *Beyond the Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith from Coleridge to Tolkien*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. 171. £28.99. ISBN 9781780937304.**

These two books both attempt to deal with Coleridge's multi/interdisciplinarity in striking different but equally profitable ways. Ewan Jones aims to consider 'the philosophy of poetic form' in order to engage with 'the specifically formal, sensuous or conventional elements of Coleridge's verse' because, he contends, 'poetry should be able to argue its own necessity' (2) – which is to say, Jones considers how Coleridge's various philosophical engagements enrich his verse and extend and explore his philosophical concerns. Poetry is the primary partner in the relationship, and the argument is played out substantially through prolonged, erudite and compelling readings of the conversation poems, *Christabel*, 'Limbo' and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. That Jones sticks to major canonical poems (with the exception of 'Limbo', of course) is part of his project: recasting them in and examining them from a philosophical perspective reveals something new about them, because 'the more nuanced account of Coleridge's philosophy that we now possess enables us to re-examine many presuppositions that apply to his poetry; but also, and just and pertinently, the extent to which that poetry shared or anticipated his philosophical concerns' (4). A central concern here is that 'Coleridge's verse thought philosophically through its expressive repertoire, through the sum of its historical conventions, and through the nature of its sensuous embodiment' (4) and the chapters are accordingly focused on instances where Coleridge's verse 'thinks philosophically in a manner that philosophy proper cannot (or could not for Coleridge)' (5).

The first chapter assesses the role of interruption in the conversation poems by teasing out the ways in which 'the hemistich or 'broken' line, which the caesura or other graphic punctuation produces, mak[es] a unit that is divided yet which remains in some sense integral' (13), as well as how this formalistic feature explores tension between materialism and idealism (the former 'interrupts' and anticipates the latter). Jones concludes that the conversation poem 'concedes' that 'a non-reactive passivity' is 'necessary for the material world to feel like a world at all' (55). The second chapter concentrates on poetic metre and the principle of affect. Jones traces 'contemporary debates over the relation between metrical form and feeling' before offering a succinct genealogy on the transformation of passion across the eighteenth century. An extensive reading of *Christabel* ('Coleridge's fullest realization of the relationship between affectivity and poetic form' (73)) is then offered along with a fascinating reassessment of Coleridge's late theory of 'Life' in light of his short essay 'On the Passions', which Jones contends reveals that 'any dynamic conceptualization of organic form must also be affective' (87).

The third chapter revives the marginalized poem 'Limbo' as the centerpiece of an argument about how 'Coleridge's conceived a philosophical significance for the pun that would sublimate (if not necessarily transcend) the comic' (108), which involves placing him 'within [the] less familiar context' of satirical verse (109). After a history of the pun (including Pope, Heidegger, Joyce, Lacan and others), Coleridge's engagement with it is discussed in relation to his 'attempt to recover a pre-tradition of sacred paranomasia' (116). The pun is then read in relation to 'the mode of allegory' – which Jones argued can be 'intentionally defective' – and the 'formal tradition of witty couplet writing' (120) which leads to a reading of *Limbo*, as a poem incorporates aspects of both. The final chapter traces

‘Coleridge’s attempt to conceive linguistic coincidence in a more emphatically positive sense’ by discussing tautology and the Coleridgean symbol. First, how ‘tautology comes to represent an epistemological threat’ and a ‘potential resource’ to Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy is explored, considering Coleridge’s concept of ‘tautegory’ and his neglected *Logic*. A fascinating account of Coleridge’s influence on Hyman Hurwitz and Hebrew poetics gives way to a persuasive reading of the *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which argues that the poem inherits ‘Kant’s modern epistemological dilemma: that knowledge would be but an adumbration of its own precepts, in the course of which the subjective encounters only itself’ (169).

Michael Tomko addresses Coleridge’s almost infamous aesthetic concept of the suspension of disbelief that has long since been converted into a cliché. It is an odd critical deficit of Coleridgean scholarship that, given its ubiquity, the idea of ‘our acceptance in art of the most fantastic worlds whose premises, actions or outcomes we would question or reject in reality’ (1) has not been fully explored. Tomko argues that ‘the “suspension of disbelief” in tandem with “poetic faith” means much more than its current connotation of a begrudging toleration of the fabulous’ (2). Building on recent scholarship that has placed Coleridge in a theological context, he discusses a “postsecular Coleridge” who offers a literary theory that fully engages the human faculties of both faith and reason and thus enables a rich aesthetic encounter while remaining politically responsible’ (3). After a brief discussion of elements that the phrase ‘that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith’ contains, and the questions it raises through a consideration of *The Tempest*, the book focuses on three main points: that ‘the general understanding of Coleridge’s formulation as a moderate “going along” is not adequate’; that Coleridge’s understanding of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ underpin the phrase, which needs the ‘whole person’ to ‘invest’ in the ‘artistic performance’ to access ‘experiences otherwise unavailable’; and, finally, whilst such behavior ‘leaves the audience exposed to ideological domination’, an ‘engaged commitment’ with art is possible through what Tomko terms as an implicit ‘willing resumption of disbelief’ (14).

The first chapter argues that the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ is such a necessary and vital concept because ‘avoiding or banishing literature’s wondrous effects would lead to a life devoid of affect and insight’ (19, 20). Tomko traces memorialism, ornamentalism and monumentalization in the Romantic ‘culture wars’ as a context for reading Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ as a poem that ‘defuses a potent aesthetic encounter before its effects can take place’ (30); he then considers the work of Jerome McGann’s and Terry Eagleton as a way of assessing the implications of ‘critical iconoclasm’ (33) and the need for ‘critical vantage’ (37), with a brief discussion of Tolkien and recent New Historicist critics as a potential solution to the problem of ‘maintaining aesthetic effects in the face of a critical methodology designed to circumvent those effects’ (41). Coleridge’s theory offers a true solution, for ‘a volitional relaxation of the faculties that are concerned with judging what is true and what is good’ allows for an ‘engaged’ aesthetic experience ‘that remains at liberty’ (49). However, there are limitations: it is ‘overly passive and accords lethargy of the always right, ever-justified customer’ (58).

The second chapter posits that the resolution to these limits is itself found in the concept of ‘poetic faith’, initially through a lengthy consideration of Coleridge’s thoughts on Shakespeare and in light of Richard McCoy’s book *Faith in Shakespeare* (2013), contending that the concept is ‘active’, ‘collaborative’ and ‘produces a desirable, vital influence’ (69). Tomko then succinctly sketches out Coleridge’s ‘fiduciary epistemology’ (85), discussing how faith is aligned with the ‘form of reason itself’ (82), and that it ‘supersedes belief’ (84). Coleridge’s thoughts on hermeneutics is used to argue that poetic faith ‘allows for an aesthetic experience of “intuitively beholding” a work as within a dramatic model of reading

in which audience members actively engage all their faculties to fully enter into its experience' (96, 97). Finally, the third chapter argues that Coleridge's aesthetic maxim 'does provide a model for continued rational query and challenge even as a full investment in the aesthetic illusion is made' (112, 113). After discussing the relationship between faith and doubt in theology and literary theory, Tomko argues that 'the reader or inquirer must proceed *as if* he had faith in the writer' (121), which can be figured as a 'willing resumption of disbelief' that 'remains a power within the reader' (123). Coleridge's review of Charles Maturin's play *Bertram; or The Castle of St. Aldobrand* (1816), in which Coleridge fails 'to follow through with his own *method* of dramatic criticism' (126) is examined, and the chapter is brought to a close with a complex consideration of how Tolkien addresses the power and potential duplicity of rhetoric, asserting that 'discerning when to resume disbelief requires a step beyond literary theory' (140). Both of these books demonstrate the sheer range of Coleridge's reach – Jones concentrates on his investment in the history of philosophy; Tomko on the implications of his aesthetic ideas for literary theory – and improve our understanding of just how subtle and essential Coleridge's interdisciplinarity is for anyone who wishes to engage thoroughly with his thought.

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