

J.C.C. Mays, *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 287. £55.00. ISBN 9781137350220.

This monograph very much exists in relation to Mays' enormous editorial effort on the poetry volumes of the Bollingen Collected Coleridge. Revisionary work since, for example, Morton D. Paley's *Coleridge Later Poetry* notwithstanding, it is still relatively unusual to find any post-1802 texts so fundamental to a study of Coleridge, let alone some of the more obscure highways and by-ways tracked by Mays: translations, metrical experiments, epigrams, and so on. It is quite obvious that he wishes to give credit to the fullness of the poet's achievement, as explored and archived in Volume 16. Nevertheless, it is also intrinsic to the conceptual argument presented here that the notion of a watershed – a division into a gilded youth and sad, sterile decline – is revisited and challenged.

In essence, Mays contends that a remarkable consistency drives Coleridge from his earliest work, across the canonical staples ('Mariner', 'Christabel', 'Kubla Khan', the conversation poems), and onwards throughout his later career. Certain ambitions for poetry may have been abandoned or turned over to Wordsworth, but other problems (such as the reconciliation of opposites, or the problem of work-without-hope) find the poet returning to find new formal engagements and solutions. This continued vivacity – which Mays terms experimental – is related to a demarcation of poetry as a provisional or hypothetical space, a sort of 'what if' language game bound by its own rules and set off from the world: 'verse as a kind of memory theater in which a small cast of actors rehearse what is in the end the same plot over and over again in a variety of ways' (43). This not only helps mark out Mays' interpretation, in particular, of how the famous supernatural verse works, but also leads him to partition his own method away from the directly biographical on the one hand, and the historicist on the other. The former – highlighting distance, irony, and a reflexively speculative cast to the work – is certainly in tune with current criticism; the latter, obviously, less so: Mays' contexts, when invoked, are more textual and literary than material or political.

One key claim made repeatedly is that the poetry – especially the late poetry – does something that the philosophy (usually taken, of course, as Coleridge's central calling after the 1810s) cannot do. This is to trace a level of affect that lies just below explicit articulation, underwriting Mays' interest in the passions (and in the manuscript essay on the passion of 1828, which he considers fundamental) and in large, apparently allegorical formations like 'Love' and 'Hope'. The sense that such experience of feeling is defined precisely through being barely there, or just beneath language, also intertwines with the study's interest in prosody. Foregrounding this not only subtly repositions 'Christabel' as central (as a pioneering experiment in ballad meter) but makes the creative interplay between 'syllabic' and 'accentual' (and, by extension, the rationalized and the rhythmic) a key point in both formal and philosophical terms: 'sound and rhythm were the driver; the visual grid of Classical scansion was the liberating constraint without which sound can descend to animal cries of tie itself in knots' (71).

Although much recent work has been done on prosody, especially in Victorian Studies – and it is self-consciously a Victorian poet's poet, such as Swinburne's Coleridge, that is being returned to view here – this emphasis is typical of the way that Mays' book is distinctive. Its commitment to close-reading and prosody, as mentioned, is striking. Its interest in elements of the oeuvre often overlooked – be those translations, dramas, comic verse or fragments – is unusual. It is clear that the book's view is long-range: the Victorian interest in 'Love', 1890s school editions, or I.A. Richards on Coleridge are more prominent than recent critical battles. Its index is wonderfully idiosyncratic, with 'Ramus on "hearing" Classical scansion' sitting alongside 'theater: stage-situation creates a shared act of self-

consciousness' and 'style, some aspects of'. Opting for none of the current modes which seem to constitute current Romantic scholarship – fine-grain historicism, book history/networks, late theory – Mays' voice is refreshing in being individual and, through a fitting reconciliation of opposites, rather innovative in its very traditionalism.

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