

Chris Murray, *Tragic Coleridge*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 194. £60. ISBN 9781409447542.

The theatre has a central role not only in Coleridge's works and intellectual development, but also in Coleridgean studies. The pages he dedicated to the analysis of Shakespearean theatre, for example, contain one of the most original and compelling theories elaborated by the poet, that of *dramatic illusion*. However, although many studies have been dedicated to what Coleridge wrote *about* theatre, the studies that deals with the plays he wrote are very few and, as Murray writes, 'based primarily upon their relevance to his writings in other forms' (95).

Tragic Coleridge contributes towards filling this gap, dedicating specific attention to Coleridge's plays, considered 'in their own right' (95), but at the same time analyzed in the context of a research about the role of the *tragic* in Coleridge's productions.

Before analyzing this role, Murray deals with the difficult task of managing ambiguous notions such as those of *Romantic tragedy*, *tragic Romanticism* and *tragic* in general. He proposes to abandon the notion of *Romantic tragedy* and to adopt that of *tragic Romanticism*, 'to signify literature in the spirit of Classical tragedy' (1). Even so, the *tragic* concept remains problematic. The author proposes an extensive definition: *tragic* is the 'literature that depicts catastrophe and emphasizes pathos. Catastrophe is misfortune of widespread significance, not solely personal experience' (1). Murray refuses to identify the term *tragedy* with a canon of plays. He rather prefers to 'cultivate a *sense* of tragedy, comparable to a sense of irony' (3), because 'tragedy', Murray claims, quoting F.R. Leavis, 'is something you will have to *invent* for yourself' (3).

Such a wide definition, as every wide definition, risks being epistemologically inadequate, because it potentially applies to a infinite range of phenomena. Murray prevents this risk thanks to a close textual analysis that shows how tragedy functions in Coleridge's works, in which, Murray argues, a theory of tragedy is absent, but there appears instead a tragic conception of life, because 'an impulse to seek redemption in crisis is common to many of his creations in various forms' (9).

The author analyzes first of all Coleridge's background, searching for the influences that could have formed his *sense of tragedy*. The author concludes that, notwithstanding the presence of authoritative scholars of Greek tragedy in Cambridge, that 'Coleridge's engagement with tragedy was entirely self-determined' (17). After this discovery, however, his sense of the tragic was certainly influenced by his time in Germany, where he studied under one of the greatest classicists of his time, Christian Gottlob Heyne.

In Coleridge's poetical works the above-mentioned sense of the tragic assumes the form of transgression and suffering, often associated with the supernatural. A perfect example of this is offered by the figure of the *Ancient Mariner*, whose suffering is in consequence of an involuntary transgression. This dynamic is typical of Coleridge's sense of the tragic, that often assumes the form of a 'catastrophe as consequential to acts that are unintended by those who perform them' (28).

After examining the role of the tragic in Coleridge's poetry, Murray examines Coleridge's reading of real events as tragedies. The section of this analysis dedicated to the way in which Coleridge deals with the Buttermere scandal is particularly useful to understanding the specific characteristics of the poet's *sense of tragic*. In 1802 a waitress married a gentlemen calling himself Alexander Augustus Hope, but some weeks later he was revealed to be an impostor, bigamist and a forger named Hatfield. Murray juxtaposes Coleridge's account of the

scandal in a series of articles for the *Courier* and the *Morning Post* with Wordsworth's account in *The Prelude*. While for the latter the incident is a private matter, a personal tragedy that struck Mary Robinson, Coleridge 'renders the incident tragic with the insistence that its importance is not solely personal but public and exemplary' (68). 'By broadening the scope of the incident from Mary's life to imply that the entire nation is affected', Murray adds, 'Coleridge presents Hatfield's crime as a phallic intrusion to spoil a virgin community rather than the deception of one woman alone' (69). As we have seen, this is a central feature of Coleridge's sense of the tragic, one that we can find also in his tragedy *Osorio* and in his two plays intended for the stage, *Remorse* and *Zapolya: a Christmas Tale*. This tendency to universalize, Murray argues, is a strategy to justify suffering within a greater context of redemption, to search for benefits that can arise from misfortune and this, in conclusion, is Coleridge's use of tragedy. A close analysis of this use is the main contribution of *Tragic Coleridge*, a book that, through the examination of a specific and quite neglected aspect of Coleridge's work, sheds light on different fields of the poet's production.

Gabriele De Luca
Università di Pisa