

Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. xi + 262. £60 hardback. 9781107068445.

In Book III of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth thinks, through the voice of the Poet, about the relationship between poetry and philosophy, with the latter suffering from the comparison. If, as the Solitary had suggested, poetry deserves ‘smiles / Of scornful pity’ in its attempts to re-create the world, then, the Poet argues, philosophy (‘Herself, a Dreamer of a kindred stock, / A Dreamer yet more spiritless and dull?’ [345-46]) ought to be challenged when it distances us from the world. Poetry does what philosophy cannot or will not do—namely, re-integrate the self into the world through an act of the imagination. This is one possible response to the motivating question of Ewan James Jones’s *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*: as Jones puts it, does the engagement of Coleridge’s poetry with philosophy ‘mean that poetry is merely an unceasing interruption of philosophy--as if verse were restricted to a permanent seat on a council which spoke only in exercising its right to veto?’ (56). The answer offered in this welcome study is resoundingly negative. Extending recent scholarly interest in poetic thinking and in the mutually constitutive relationship between philosophy and poetry, Jones sees the formal features of Coleridge’s verse not as incidental interventions to real philosophical work being done elsewhere, but as ‘legitimately’ philosophical acts themselves.

The central argument, then, is that Coleridge’s verse did more than share or anticipate his philosophical concerns: in the terms of the introduction, ‘it often represented his sole means of thinking in a philosophically significant and original

manner' (4). It is a bold and provocative argument, one that obviously depends on the definition of 'philosophically significant', a phrase to which the study often returns, with varying degrees of elaboration. Jones seeks to demonstrate this significance in a series of highly attentive readings of major poems: the conversation poems, 'Christabel', 'Limbo', and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' with a chapter devoted to each. Coleridge's verse, in this reading, thought philosophically through its 'expressive repertoire' (formal devices), the 'sum of its historical conventions' (genre and mode), and its 'sensuous embodiment' (affective quality and texture). There is throughout an alert critical mind that detects in devices that lack propositional content the kind of discursive or cognitive authority that we typically assign to more systematic pronouncements.

The first chapter, on interruption in the conversation poem sequence, sees interruption taking place in these poems on a number of levels: as a formal device (the hemistich), as compositional process (revision), and as a dialogic process (the interruption of one voice by another). The reading of the sequence as a whole 'reveals an irreducible materiality that Coleridge is thought to have exhausted in his Associationist youth' (6). There are a number of interesting sub-arguments here, such as the analogy Jones develops between the attempted recovery of the sensuous world in both Malebranche and Coleridge, but there are also a few irregularities in this first chapter, such as the strange idea that Coleridge coined the term 'discursive', importing the term into English through Kant (54). The *OED*, which Jones claims credits Coleridge with coining the term, lists, as one would expect, Milton's famous use of the term in Book V of *Paradise Lost* (prominently quoted in chapter 10 of the *Biographia*) and, before Milton, the use of the term by George Chapman and others. But Jones's larger point

about how the conversation poems probe the limits of the discursive/intuitive distinction in Kant is suggestive and supports the argument about the recovery of the sensuous world that runs through the chapter (intuition for Kant operates on the level of sensibility at the same time that it has a formal a priori character).

The second chapter, on rhythm and affect in 'Christabel,' argues that the poem's form—and, indeed, form in general in Coleridge's late philosophy—is inherently and constitutively affective. 'Metre, then, does not "arrange" affect. It itself always is affective' (61). One might think here of Coleridge's remark about 'Thirty days hath September, / April, June, and November, &c.' in the *Biographia*—lines which, he says, have a dubious claim to the title of poetry but which do produce a certain kind of pleasure. But Jones contends for more than a constant conjunction or necessary connection between poetic form and affect. He makes a stronger claim for identification: 'Poetry is passion' (62), 'Forming always is feeling' (63), poetic form 'truly is passion' (73), etc. The rhythm of 'Christabel' is 'finally inseparable from an affect whose similar variability constitutes its philosophical significance' (73). Philosophical significance here consists in how the metrical variability of the poem illuminates Coleridge's conceptions of 'organic Life' and the passions, as expressed in late texts such as the fragmentary essay 'On the Passions' (which Jones is among the first to tackle) and the *Theory of Life*. The metrical reading of 'Christabel' in this chapter is deft and agile, shedding light as it proceeds on features of the poem large and small, from the poem's rhetorical mode of self-interrogation to the curiously Lockean 'Presence Room' of the poem's second part.

The third chapter, on 'Limbo' and the philosophy of the pun, places Coleridge's attempted legitimization of the pun in two important contexts: eighteenth-century biblical

exegesis and the satirical verse of Donne, Pope, and others. The chapter begins with a 'brief recent history of the pun' that extends through Joyce, Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida. The pun, Jones argues, underwent a major transformation in the late eighteenth century, when it begins to register a new, troubling awareness of historical contingency. Coleridge 'attempted to reconcile the philosophical and religious significance of wordplay' (115), as pursued in the biblical criticism of Michaelis and Herder, with the traditions of English wit and allegory. The chapter is especially good on Coleridge's wavering, equivocal readings of Donne, which reveal some of the same problems of metrical variability and affect that emerged earlier in the context of 'Christabel'. But it is Pope, not Donne, that 'Limbo' most closely approximates in this reading. 'For when "Limbo" truly becomes the poem we recognize as such, it moves from prose into a heroic couplet form that Coleridge almost never employed' (131). In attending to the compositional history of 'Limbo', Jones demonstrates how the poem began as an engagement with the varieties of wit. Laughter here is a 'cognitively significant act' (145), and 'Limbo' is the closest Coleridge would come to a defense of punning he could never quite complete.

The final chapter, on 'The "Rime" and the tautegorical symbol', argues that the celebrated Coleridgean symbol is inherently tautological. Wittgentstein's redemption of tautology—in which 'far from standing for fallacious reasoning,' Jones argues, 'tautology becomes a rigorous logic's signature and procedure' (149)—is enlisted in support of the claim, and the ensuing discussion of tautology in Leibniz, Kant, Adorno, and Lyotard is compelling. One might add that Schelling, who Jones notes introduces *Tautegorie* into German, is also relevant in this context in more doctrinal terms, as the system of identity

that he formulated in the first decade of the nineteenth century was at bottom an attempt to demonstrate that $A = A$ (one of the problems of Coleridge's *Logic*, as Jones notes): Schelling's system begins with the assertion of the unity of thought and being, the self-identical 'Absolute', and then presents nature as a differentiated system within which this unity is maintained. This is in many ways the philosophical problem of the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', a poem, Jones contends, that turns tautology into a poetic resource. It is a poem in which 'the subject encounters only itself' (169). The various repetitions of the poem—linguistic, metrical, diacritical, structural—point to an underlying principle: 'the acceptance of the identical, of a world that we set sail to vary or avoid' (186). Tautology veers close to mere repetition here—and the jump to a thoroughly tautological notion of the Coleridgean symbol requires greater explanation—but Jones inhabits the poem nicely and is, as elsewhere, a keen observer of its strategies and effects.

A coda on 'the philosophy of poetic form' connects the study with the work of two thinkers who conceived of the symbol as a distinctive means of thinking: Susanne Langer and Kenneth Burke. The emphasis on music in Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) provided one model of the cognitive operation of formal devices, but it would be Burke who would offer a more historical philosophy of symbolic action in works such as *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1973). Insofar as *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* 'has focused upon the ways in which Coleridge thinks significantly, and philosophically, through poetry's distinctive technical repertoire and accumulated conventions' (197), it represents an extension and a modification of the Burkean project. And it largely succeeds in being such, even if phrases like 'philosophically significant' or 'legitimately philosophical' are left, at times, to do too much of the rhetorical work

(significant for whom and for what reasons? under what conditions of legitimacy?). Still, the considerable strengths of the book—sensitive, sustained close readings that move fluidly between forms and ideas and that unfold with an impressive range of reference—make this an important contribution to Coleridge studies and to the new formalisms that continue to take shape.

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