



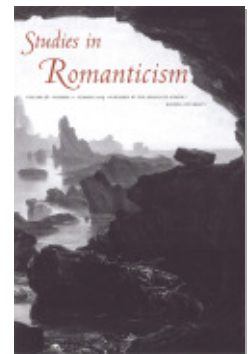
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Coleridge's Experimental Poetics by J. C. C. Mays, and:
Coleridge's Ancient Mariner by J. C. C. Mays, and:
Coleridge's Dejection Ode by J. C. C. Mays (review)

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(Review)

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dents coming to the field. Her discoveries in her readings are often surprising, and sometimes quite humorous, which makes the book both exciting, and a pleasure to read. In short, the book charts brilliantly a way forward for political readings of Romanticism.

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J. C. C. Mays. *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Pp. 287. \$49.99 paper.

J. C. C. Mays. *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. Pp. 267. \$49.99 paper.

J. C. C. Mays. *Coleridge's Dejection Ode*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. Pp. 281. \$69.99.

Three monographs on Coleridge's poetry? Surely this is excessive. How much is there actually to say about his poetry? The canon is so limited. Perhaps a dozen important poems, with particular emphasis on the three supernatural poems ("The Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel"), on all of which there has surely been more than enough criticism. With the completion of the Bollingen edition of the *Collected Coleridge*, ought we not concentrate instead on the critical writings in order to recognize Coleridge for what he essentially was—namely, a failed poet who succumbed to drug addiction and retreated into increasingly impenetrable prose when he wasn't idling away his time scribbling marginalia? Coleridge himself acknowledged his poetic dereliction, declaring to Godwin in 1801 that "the Poet is dead in me" to such a degree that "I have *forgotten* how to make a rhyme," and going so far as to instruct Godwin to say of him after his death that "'Wordsworth descended on him, like the *Gnōthi Seauton* [Know Thyself] from Heaven; by shewing to him what true Poetry was, he made him know, that he himself was no Poet'" (*Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 2, 714; hereafter *CL*). There it is: Coleridge wasn't really a poet. And to the degree that Coleridge the prose writer really concerns us, it is presumably as Wordsworth's critical adjunct, the one contemporary able to elucidate the greater poet's "true" poetry.

This is one version of the "encircling, stifling myth" that J. C. C. Mays attacks—indeed, relentlessly explodes—in his remarkable trilogy on Coleridge's long, varied, and distinguished career as a poet. No English writer's reputation, according to Mays, "has been stuck in such a rut for so long"

(*Coleridge's Ancient Mariner*, 156; hereafter *CAM*). And the contours of the rut are as deep as they are unimaginative, contributing to the now archetypal Romantic myth of the "poet with three poems to his name, otherwise destroyed by metaphysics and drugs" (*CAM*, 155), the "young genius who went off the rails" (*Coleridge's Dejection Ode*, 205; hereafter *CDO*). In the course of disentangling the persistent, unproductive conflation of the biography with the poetry, Mays radically rewrites the narrative arc of Coleridge's life as a poet. Instead of the premise of early success disintegrating into decades of failure and disappointment, Mays positions the famous three as "the poems [Coleridge] wrote on the way to discovering how he wanted to write" (*Coleridge's Experimental Poetics*, 12; hereafter *CEP*) and, in a related register, reads Coleridge's attribution of grand poetic ambitions to Wordsworth not as an abdication of his own, but as the catalyst for him, alternatively, to "use verse to explore his own emotional states regardless of the need to create and hold a public audience" (*CAM*, 94). Mays's Coleridge is a poet who wrote verse at every opportunity, whose later poetry was every bit as vital and as intellectual as his earlier work, and whose versifying was experimental to the end. The challenge for Coleridge's twenty-first-century readers is twofold. First, to learn how to read other poetical works of Coleridge beyond the expectation that they should look and (at least as importantly) sound like the canonical poems: "the dozen better known poems on which his reputation rests are only the half of it; and yet what they share with the remainder is immediately recognizable when you *listen* for it, and carries into remote and unfamiliar places" (*CEP*, 12; emphasis added). Second, to reread the more famous poems in new contexts: to remember, for example, that "The Ancient Mariner" began as a parody of the Gothic, and to read "Dejection" other than as a revision of the verse-letter to Sara Hutchinson (Mays argues that the "catastrophic mistake" that is the verse-letter represents a revision of lines Coleridge had already written; *CDO*, 66).

Pondering whether "Coleridge's three most famous poems form the main trunk of his poetical achievement," Mays asks his reader to imagine "a severely pollarded tree, frustrated of its natural development at the very moment it shows the glorious shape it might attain, that can only push out lopsided sprouts and reminders of failed promise" (*CEP*, 97). The pollarded tree is an apt metaphor for our ruthlessly pruned sense of Coleridge's poetry, in which we have unknowingly lopped off what could otherwise thrive and grow as the main branches, leaving only the impotent, dying trunk, and reading everything that is not the anthology poems as but poor, undernourished imitations of them. The narrative of Coleridge's "failure" as a poet confines itself to reading the trunk of Coleridge's poetry (and reading the rest of the poetry in its shadow), and imagines that a more suc-

cessful career would have included more supernatural ballads like “The Ancient Mariner,” the completion of the second part of “Christabel,” and more enraptured, visionary lines after the fashion of “Kubla Khan”—in other words, more of the same. What Mays offers is a deeply-rooted tree, prolific in lush, unexpected growth that ranges from “The Eolian Harp” (an early exercise in “poetic thinking” that catalyzed his poetic experimentation; *CEP*, 60) to the late “Work without Hope” (a late iteration of what Mays comes to call Coleridge’s “sweet new style”), and includes both expected landings (“Frost at Midnight,” “Dejection,” “To William Wordsworth,” to name a few) and heretofore under-read or under-valued poems, including “Love,” “The Ballad of the Dark Ladiè,” *Zapolya* (which, according to Mays’s provocative claim, “situates you exactly where you need to be to read his poetical works at large”; *CEP*, 123), “Fancy in Nubibus,” “The Garden of Boccaccio,” and “Alice du Clôs,” a late poem “worthy to stand alongside the ‘Mariner’”; *CAM*, 165). Mays shares George Whalley’s conviction that “what Coleridge was in the end, he was from the beginning. . . . The conclusion I draw from the late poems is that Coleridge went on developing as a poet, that he knew what he was doing and why, and that much of what he wrote in the later period is not only not a repetition of what he had written before but a defiance of it” (cited *CEP*, 113). To this endorsement Mays adds that “the late poems are not an attempt to breathe fire into a fading coal. . . . They are continuous with the reappraisal he undertook at the time he went to Germany and put in place afterwards. He had a personal need to write verse, not in order to confirm his reputation as a poet or as an additional source of income but, as always, to test where he stood. Verse examines the way meaning expresses itself in sound” (*CEP*, 142). Throughout Coleridge’s life, as Mays reminds us on more than one occasion, his writings in verse don’t represent the fixed products of his mind (Mays pays significant attention to Coleridge’s revisions), but the habitual exercising of his mind. Coleridge not only thought long and hard about verse but, in many significant ways, thought in verse.

As the editor of the *Poetical Works* for the *Collected Coleridge* (published 2001), Mays is uniquely qualified to reconfigure our understanding of the timeline and structure of Coleridge’s oeuvre (in the *Poetical Works*, he assembles 706 texts written between the mid-1780s and 1834), to present the whole body of Coleridge’s poetry moving together, and to demonstrate the continuity between Coleridge’s verse and his thinking. Although the first volume in the trilogy most prominently underscores the formulation “experimental poetics,” all three studies carefully attend to the numerous iterations of Coleridge’s poetic experimentation. In *Coleridge’s Experimental Poetics* (in many ways the critical introduction Mays had decided not to write for the Bollingen edition of the poetry), “experiment” simulta-

neously denominates something as comprehensive as Coleridge's "openness to learn and his resistance to prudence and the shut mind" (*CEP*, 9) and something as specific as his "project to renew the underlying principles of Greek and Latin prosody" (*CEP*, 11). It is a matter of exploration, of determining what can (and cannot) be achieved in verse, and is often inflected by Mays in terms of failure, or "unsuccess." In this regard, "The Ancient Mariner" fails (as is the case with so many other important poems of Coleridge's, including "The Eolian Harp," ever an important point of reference for Mays), as is evident in his numerous revisions to it over the years: "The word 'fail' might seem strong for a poem that so evidently pleases and intrigues its readers as the 'Mariner,' yet it misrepresented Coleridge's intentions insofar that he had to revise it in such a manner and to such an extent that he left it in a state of self-contradiction" (*CEP*, 111). What is vital about these "unsuccesses," especially during the 1790s, is that they instilled in Coleridge a sense of the need continually to re-examine and renew his sense of what he expected from his poetry. In *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner*, "experiment" again does double duty, as Mays uses this term (properly a trope in his handling) to underscore both the fact that "Mariner" was written at a moment of significant change in Coleridge's life, "reflect[ing] ideas and attitudes with which he was becoming dissatisfied and the beginnings of the alternatives which replaced them" (*CAM*, 7) and, more specifically (and prosodically), Coleridge's exploration of the possibilities provided by the ballad as both a genre and a meter / stanza: "the poem was for Coleridge a playground of experimentation. He never put so much metrical variety into another single poem, at the same time absorbing this variety so the result appeared natural" (*CAM*, 34). In a similar vein in *Coleridge's Dejection Ode* (in which he very much completes the argument initiated and developed in the previous two monographs), Mays reads the ode as both a test and a discovery, one in which Coleridge invented new technical means to think through (and versify) challenging personal circumstances at the same time as he expanded (Mays revises this to "exploded") the repertoire of the form he inherited. For Mays, "Dejection" is the poem that "cleared the way ahead through the second part of [Coleridge's] career," due in large part to what he calls (drawing thoughtfully on Dante in doing so) Coleridge's "sweet new style," a renegotiation of the "mechanics of poetry" that enabled Coleridge to make an argument (about the victory of hope over dejection) the validity of which "rests on the quality of the verse" (*CDO*, 2). Mays's passing observation that he is writing "the story of [Coleridge's] style" (*CDO*, 73) holds true for all three of his monographs. One of the great strengths of this trilogy is Mays's keen sense of Coleridge's style, even more a matter of the ear than of the eye. For Mays, "style" carries far more weight than might be implied by man-

ner or voice. It denominates Coleridge's thinking about the ways in which poetry is made, and is integral to his experimentation. (See for example Mays's claim about "Dejection," that Coleridge had to "project beyond himself an understanding of the situation in which he found himself in order to write in a style whose purpose was contained in the style itself"; *CDO*, 72.) According to Mays, "style" is the truest measure of the writer's self; it denominates the way in which the movement of Coleridge's words provides the final measure of their meaning.

Coleridge's style is nowhere more legible than in his lifelong preoccupation with prosody. It is under this seemingly technical yet absolutely necessary and capacious heading—encompassing meter and rhythm, rhyme and sound patterning, lineation, stanzaic form, et cetera—that Coleridge's experimental poetics are most legible. Prosody, according to Mays, "is where Coleridge's thinking about poetry begins and ends. . . . Prosody plots the way the mariner's ship tacks and veers" (*CEP*, 40). Prosody is also absolutely central to Mays's thinking about Coleridge. Proceeding from the premise that "Coleridge's attempt to forge a style adequate to his needs came to center early on metrics" (*CEP*, 9), Mays provides significant, consistently insightful attention across all three monographs to such concerns as Coleridge's commitment to renewing the underlying principles of Greek and Latin prosody in English, his interest in classical scansion, his experiments with stress meters, his adaptations and appropriations of meters and rhymes from the shorter poems of Spenser and Milton (in his reading of "Dejection," "Samson Agonistes" is a key point of reference, specifically the choruses), his expansion of the possibilities of all the literary forms and genres he inherited, and his abiding interest in such local matters as trisyllabic substitutions, inversion, and secondary accents, to name but a few representative concerns. (See for example *CEP*, chapter 3, "Matters of Style," *CAM*, chapter 2, "What Does the Poem Do?" and *CDO*, chapter 4, "The Sweet New Style.") Mays's reading of "The Eolian Harp" emphasizes the numerous elisions that in turn reveal Coleridge's "anxious concern to maintain regular syllabic scansion while he is put to all manner of shifts (brackets, different sized capitals, exclamations, italics) to communicate a different, speaking rhythm" (*CEP*, 69), which argument he extends to "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison" as Coleridge's other truly experimental blank verse poem. After writing so much meditative blank verse in the mid-to-late 1790s, Coleridge conspicuously turned to rhyming patterns of verse, for a new field of experimentation, another attempt to forge a style adequate to his needs.

In his analysis of "The Ancient Mariner," Mays foregrounds Coleridge's modifications of "Latin quantity (regularly measured long and short vowels) with considerations of tone derived from Greek accent (rising or falling

pitch) in particular” (*CAM*, 30). In doing so, Coleridge introduces considerations of tone into English prosody (in which rhythm and stress otherwise play the predominant roles). The result is a variable and highly supple ballad meter, “verse lines where the number of syllables varies considerably and the position of the beats controls the pace and other values of what lies between them” (*CAM*, 30–31). In a similar vein, Mays reads “Dejection” as an experiment both in expanding the range of classical measures available to the English poet, and in modifying the length of syllables by accent and pitch (*CDO*, 76, 79). He draws on Milton’s prose introduction to “Samson Agonistes” to explain the metrical irregularities which Coleridge develops, such as “*apolelymenon*, meaning ‘freed’ (from the restraint of firm stanzaic pattern) and *alloeostropha*, meaning ‘of irregular strophes’” (*CDO*, 79–80). It is apropos “Dejection” that Mays offers his most detailed consideration of the centrality of rhyme to the ways that Coleridge understood verse (not merely exact, single end-rhyme, but anaphora, epiphora, half-rhyme, consonance rhyme, contrast rhyme, as well as secondary- and tertiary-stress rhyme), and offers a lovely reading of Coleridge’s stanzas in the ode not as empty rooms waiting to be filled, but as “already small mobile strophes—Greek ‘turnings’—within themselves” (*CDO*, 81). Finally, Mays engages “Christabel” on numerous occasions (not surprisingly), reminding us of its unavoidable yet uncertain position as the centerpiece in a “revolution” in English metrics, and the furthest reach of Coleridge’s technical experimentation (however one chooses to read its Preface: Mays notes that “Coleridge’s position was no less experimental and no less important for not being as revolutionary as his admirers like to think”; *CEP*, 191). He is particularly interested in how Coleridge manipulates sound in “Christabel” (and elsewhere, notably “The Ancient Mariner” and “Dejection”), observing via Swinburne that Coleridge’s “handling of sound . . . was magical because it communicated meanings that were otherwise not there” (*CEP*, 27) and that, according to Coleridge, “the ‘Christabel’ metric was designed to register subtle shifts of feeling” through the “‘sweetness’ and fluency of the versification” (*CAM*, 64).

Nor does Mays confine himself to the canonical works in advancing his argument regarding the centrality of prosody to Coleridge’s experimentation. “Absence” is cited for its early exploration of trisyllabic substitution, while “The Songs of the Pixies” commands attention for the number of acephalous lines it features (*CEP*, 68). A repeatedly significant poem for Mays (to which he turns and returns in each monograph) is “Alice du Clós: or, the Forked Tongue,” a ballad from the late 1820s, “unlike any other poem Coleridge wrote,” in which Coleridge further extends the variations on the ballad stanza with which he began experimenting in “The Ancient Mariner,” not least through new combinations of the rhyming schemes he

worked out in "Christabel" (*CAM* 208, 215). Along with poems such as "Last Words of Berengarius," "The Garden of Boccaccio," and "Work without Hope," "Alice du Clós" (an "unacknowledged masterpiece of style"; *CDO*, 65) clinches Mays's claim that the poems Coleridge wrote after "Dejection" are "poem-by-poem more varied, attractive, and *penetrating* than the corpus up to the 'Ancient Mariner'" (*CDO*, 178). In all of these poems, Mays underscores the virtuosity and the continued daring of the technical experimentation. So, for example, while "Work without Hope" (1827) may at first capture our interest as an inverted sonnet, the more interesting issues it raises go beyond questions of how the parts come together, how it works as a poem, to "prompt questions about what such work is for" (*CDO*, 210). (Celebrating Coleridge as the "greatest master" of "pure poetry" in English, Leigh Hunt singled out "Work without Hope" for praise in *Imagination and Fancy* [1842], marveling at its "perfect style,—unsuperfluous, straightforward, suggestive, impulsive, and serene. . . . What work had he better to do than to write more?"; cited *CDO*, 211). Mays demonstrates time and again, and to great effect, the extraordinary role—oft-cited but rarely if ever substantiated to this degree—that Coleridge played in shaping English prosody.

Central to Mays's argument that "the understanding of Coleridge's status as an experimental poet rests on his prosody and his metrics" (*CEP*, 189), and a critical matter which he probes across all three volumes, is a singularly valuable Coleridgean coinage: "poematic." Though Mays doesn't offer one discrete definition of this term, its repeated appearance throughout his studies calls for his readers' close consideration. Mays often characterizes Coleridge's poems as "poematic solutions" or "poematic resolutions" of themes which the poet is exploring, treating the poems as "tests" of ideas, attitudes, and suppositions. The poematic is specific to the machinations of verse (as opposed to, say, conversation or prose or a lecture). It is not necessarily a method per se, but a variety of means (often technical and prosodic) available to the poet writing in verse, with which the poet can think more precisely in verse. Thus it is that Mays situates "The Eolian Harp" as an attempt to reconfigure the limitations and possibilities of the eighteenth-century ode: "One might compare the way Collins modified the strict Pindaric pattern by moving the position of the epode to a position between strophe and antistrophe, where it became an interval of repose (properly a mesode), in order to achieve similar poematic effects" (*CEP*, 58). In this regard, the poematic names a poetic solution (even when the problem is not confined to poetics). Analyzing Coleridge's thinking about the imagination over so many years (complicated in 1815 by Wordsworth's "Preface" and "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" for the collected *Poems*), Mays distinguishes between the *Biographia Literaria* and the

“Ancient Mariner” as, respectively, a “critical” and a “poematic” consideration of the problem (*CAM*, 50). His inflection becomes clearer when he later writes of the “Ancient Mariner” (while addressing its ambiguous relation to its imagined reading public) as a “search, by technical means involving sound, for meanings obtainable only by experimental means” (*CAM*, 88). The critical term here is “means,” understood technically and experimentally in relation to prosody, the essential “means” of Coleridge’s poetry. The poematic comes immediately into the foreground in his study of “Dejection,” which Mays describes as a “poematic solution” to ideas and problems Coleridge had been brooding over for some time and which, by 1802, had reached a critical stage (*CDO*, vii). Mays continues: “The word ‘poematic’ is crucial here. The solution rests on it because, in Coleridge’s understanding, the test had to be fundamental and all-encompassing: a test of whether deep, barely understood instincts, and his thinking about them, were self-deceiving or rang true. The Ode, then, is not only a poem of discovery but also a test of veracity” (*CDO*, vii). Although Mays does not here define “poematic,” the importance of this concept, this possibility, to his analysis is immediately legible. The emphasis is again on poetic experiment through poetic means (“a poem of discovery”) but in this case the stakes are higher, more comprehensive: the “test” is not confined to poetic convention (as was the case with the “Eolian Harp”), but bears on deeply personal instincts and convictions that range beyond technical experimentation. As Mays repeatedly observes, Coleridge exercises his mind through writing verse. In “Dejection” (importantly for Mays *not* in the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson), Coleridge is attempting to reach a resolution, “to find a way to draw the pieces together—the pieces involving his person, principles, thoughts and feelings.” Critically for Coleridge, “the way he envisaged things, the only solution lay within the poem”—that is to say, the only solution was a poematic solution (*CDO*, 12).

In an 1823 marginalium occasioned by an editorial note on Milton’s *Comus* (in Thomas Warton’s 1791 edition, *Poems upon Several Occasions*), Coleridge writes:

If I wished to display the charm and *effect* of metre & the *art* of poetry, independent of the Thoughts & Images—the superiority, in short, of *poematic* over *prose* Composition, the poetry or no-poetry being the same in both—I question, whether a more apt and convincing instance could be found. . . .

(*Marginalia*, ed. H.J. Jackson and G. Whalley, 3, 897)

Poematic, then: the charm and *effect* of meter (for Coleridge, never super-added but integrally organic to the language of verse, the product of a

“spontaneous effort” in the mind) and the *art* (the artifice, the technique) of poetry. The poematic names the specific means and possibilities provided (first and foremost) by writing in meter, and by extension all the technē involved in the writing of verse. Poematic writing is superior to prose writing for Coleridge because of the effects (rhythmic, aural) created by writing in metered language. It is more arresting; it commands more attention; it engages the ear. Mays then develops this distinction to inflect the poematic in terms of the beneficial effects Coleridge attributed to the practice of writing in verse—namely, as a specifically poetic means of testing ideas and possibilities, and achieving (poematic) solutions. Coleridge’s repeated attempts to find and refine a style adequate to his needs invariably involved considerations of “the *effect* of metre & the *art* of poetry.” That is to say, Coleridge explored as well as demarcated the terrain of his writing poematically.

As Mays demonstrates across the arc of his remarkable trio of books on Coleridge’s poetry, experimentation is the continuous principle underlying all of his poetry. With the critical context provided by *Coleridge’s Experimental Poetics*—which simultaneously makes the case for the non-canonical, older writings and brings to the fore Coleridge’s boundless thinking and writing about prosody—Mays offers sustained, highly nuanced readings of two of Coleridge’s most significant and experimental poems in the two monographs that follow. In *Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner*, he rejuvenates our understanding of Coleridge’s most celebrated poem through recontextualizing it in relation to both Coleridge’s other poetry (notably “The Ballad of the Dark Lady” and “Alice du Clós”) and his critical writings in the *Biographia*. In doing so, he also reveals the importance of Coleridge’s experimentations in the course of writing it (with regard to ballad stanza and meter, sound patternings, generic conventions), as Coleridge “discover[ed] things he barely suspected he knew” (*CAM*, 43). Having learned how to write it, he learned how to move beyond it and write other kinds of poetry. In a not altogether different fashion in *Coleridge’s Dejection Ode*, Mays reads the poem as leading the way to the second half of Coleridge’s career as a poet. Poematically, it served as a test, a test of the limits of Coleridge’s ideas and preoccupations at the time it was written, and of the ability to control those challenges in verse. Arguably Coleridge’s most highly-wrought poem (intellectually as well as prosodically), and not necessarily as accessible as other poems in the Coleridge canon, it offers the first expression of the “sweet new style” that, according to Mays, characterizes Coleridge’s mature style.

Concluding his analysis of “Dejection” (and thus his trilogy on Coleridge), Mays cites a remark from the *Table Talk*: “If you take from Virgil his language and metre, what do you leave him?” (*CDO*, 218). As Mays

observes, it is a stark judgment. But it also points to one of Coleridge's own particular characteristics, one which is integral to his achievement as a poet and which he shares in important ways with Virgil. In another letter to Godwin from 1801, Coleridge wrote that "I have received, & I hope, still shall, great delight from Virgil, whose versification I admire beyond measure, & very frequently his Language" (*CL* 2, 743). Well beyond the strict sense of the poematic, Coleridge *is* his language and his meter—he is his versification. One can no more take from Coleridge his language and meter than one can strip Virgil of his. All present and future readers of Coleridge's poetry will be indebted to Mays for having so thoroughly and incisively taken the *measure* of the language of Coleridge's poetry in these three extraordinary studies.

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