“Christabel” has already represented a crucial transformation for more than one critical history of meter. According to George Saintsbury’s *History of English Prosody*, Coleridge’s poem almost single-handedly recovered for English verse the expressive variety that neoclassicism had submerged.¹ T. S. Omond, writing in a more temperate register, nonetheless reserved for it no less significance, stating that “[b]y the gradual adoption of [the] principle [of “Christabel”] our verse, and later our theories of prosody, have been revolutionized.”²

This essay will nonetheless argue that certain elements of “Christabel” have continued to elude criticism, and that these elements usefully supplement—or, where necessary, challenge—prevailing accounts. In order to demonstrate this, I neither undertake a normative scansion of “Christabel,” nor seek to identify the optimal metrical method to read it (the poem has been taken both to prove and to disprove the objective veracity of “the English foot”).³ I shall read closely Coleridge’s verse not to show that it “is” quantitative, accentual, syllabic, or accentual-syllabic, but rather to identify key moments at which its potential vocalization is significantly plural. This plurality is significant, I contend, for the relation it bears to what Coleridge’s Preface calls “some transition in the nature of the imagery or passion.”⁴

In so doing, I reorient Coleridge’s prefatory emphasis on “metre” toward rhythm, by which adjustment I seek to identify several features of our experience of the poem. Firstly, where the Preface to “Christabel” identifies syllabic variation as its fundamental working principle, I propose to focus primarily on the beat that it relegates into comparative insignificance.
Secondly, this apparently simple notion of “beat” is in fact more complex and more various than familiar metrical terms such as accent, ictus, or arsis might suggest. It is well known that Coleridge dragged his feet with “Christabel” rather more than was usual even for him, only publishing the poem in 1815, more than a decade after his composition and series of famously magnetic recitations. Perhaps this unusual publishing history explains why his Preface appears so keen to describe the ensuing poem as a kind of printed script or transparent cue that the reader would only need see in order to know how to scan correctly (to perform as Coleridge himself once had).

But the typographical rendering of “Christabel” fails to corral a wider range of possible rhythmic vocalizations. The question of how or whether we emphasize a beat is at once open and directed: open, given the metri-cally indeterminate nature of so many significant syllables, directed, given the accumulating experience of rhythm over the course of the poem. This accumulating rhythmic experience goes beyond the sort of foot-based analyses that the Preface might suggest. At the same time, however, it never fully transcends meter; for if “rhythm” is the variety of possible vocalizations that we might choose or feel ourselves compelled to make, some of the most compelling conventions that recur throughout the poem are, precisely, metrical.

This simultaneously open and directed rhythm is precisely what makes “Christabel” significant not only for the history of prosody, but for the relation between verse form and philosophical thought more largely. In the second section of this essay, I will claim that the manner in which we vocalize the poem engenders a historical reflexivity; and that this reflexivity enables us to rethink the category of rhythm, whose recent critical re-discovery has often proceeded on an excessively ahistorical basis. Lastly, I contend that the experience of voice as both constitutive and reactive proves philosophically significant: insofar as Coleridge contributes to the theorization of affect not through the medium of philosophy proper, but by writing verse whose rhythm resists the separation into active and passive states.

Having tiptoed around the Preface in this preamble, it is as well to cite Coleridge’s metrical claims in full:

I have only to add, that the metre of Christabel is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each lines the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four. Nevertheless this
occasional variation in number of syllables is not introduced wantonly, or for the mere ends of convenience, but in correspondence with some transition, in the nature of the imagery or passion.\textsuperscript{5}

Having been prepared so consciously for what to expect and how to understand it, what then happens at the start of the subsequent Part One? Very little, in narrative terms, but this apparently negligible action responds to and unsettles the Preface’s metrical assertions. (The most obvious trespass, as even the earliest readers of “Christabel” noted, is the four-syllable third line; but this does not directly concern me here.) Fresh from Coleridge’s assertion of a regularity of accent, we come immediately across a reverberation of sound:

’Tis the middle of Night by the Castle Clock,
And the Owls have awakened the crowing Cock;
Tu—whit!—Tu—whoo!
And hark again the crowing Cock,
How drowsily it crew.

Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,
Hath a toothless mastiff Bitch;
From her Kennel beneath the 'rock
She maketh Answer to the Clock,
Four for the Quarters, and twelve for the hour;
Ever and aye, by Shine and Shower,
Sixteen short Howls not over loud;
Some say, she sees my Lady's Shroud.\textsuperscript{5}

The four pledged accents of the Preface and the four invariant howls of the mastiff bitch (“[e]ver and aye, by Shine and Shower”) may be coincidental; their proximity, however, makes the reader pause before extending the benefit of the doubt. And the wider passage then begins to suggest a conscious running play on accentual regularity. The clock provides an unyielding temporality, which resonates through the separate forms of nature: the owls in turn wake up the cock, which rhymes almost perfectly with that instigating timepiece, and whose utterance (“Tu—whit!—Tu—whoo!”) we feel almost compelled to stress heavily, perhaps exaggeratedly, in concordance with Coleridge’s scheme. “Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour” overtly references the dominant principle; that principle even seeps into the two prepositional homonyms, “for.” Four and twelve, meanwhile, map almost perfectly the syllabic range between short
(3) and long (2, 10) lines. All this adds to the sense of a verse line already commenting upon itself in the very moment of its realization.

I say that we feel “almost compelled” to stress the owl’s cry shrilly, naturally, as a kind of mimic hooting of our own:

/ / / 
Tu—whit!—Tu—whoo!

The force of that compulsion comes partly from the contrast with the skipping, almost anapestic second line, which had lengthened its stride only to come to a shuddering halt with these bare four syllables. But despite my claims for the inexorable movement of the passage, neither I nor Coleridge nor his Preface can finally fully compel us to stress the line in accordance with its stated principles. We are not obliged to realize four stresses. We can indeed stress lightly a detached utterance like “Tu—, ” just as we ordinarily would such a soft monosyllable: to voice it not as an owl, but as a human being reporting an owl:

- / - 
Tu—whit!—Tu—whoo!

But, as Omond shrewdly notes, actively disobeying the Preface’s claims does not dissolve the more fundamental dilemma it poses: “our perception of rhythmical uniformity persists; persists, even though the syllables transgress instead of enforcing it.” Coleridge elsewhere described “Christabel” as depending “for it’s beauty always, and oft en even for it’s metrical existence [sic], on the sense and passion.” Yet the smallest accentual decisions that we have to make from the start reveal a more fundamental interdependence, where bare metrical existence itself forms a sense and passion, forms the kind of voice (whether emphatically present, or ironically distanced) that we hear ourselves articulating.

It is curious that such reflections depend upon the question of accent, where Coleridge’s Preface had specifically linked the passion and sense to syllabic “variation.” It may well be that he was sufficiently blinded to the rhythmical novelty of passages such as the above, as to consider his achievement in more conventionally metrical terms: where the number of beats remains constant in number and spacing, the variation of syllables between them can indeed suggest a fluid variation in established metrical feet. (Coleridge was certainly sufficiently interested in such established forms elsewhere: see for instance his schoolboy crib, “Metrical Feet,” or, less famously, his attempt to revive the English hexameter.) Indeed, it is noticeable that several readings of “Christabel” approach the relation
between poetic form and “passion” in precisely this way—as if a change in the metrical condition of the former led directly (and unilaterally) to an alteration of the latter (“swift anapests” equal exhilaration, or “heavy spondees” equal torpor).

But as the above passages show, the notion of beat is constant in neither number nor spacing; the various potential rhythmical actuations of the line allow us to deviate from the poem’s prescribed pattern, while all the time feeling its prescription. Even when we do process a line in adherence to a more conventional metrical principle (and Ada F. Snell is not wrong to see many such lines as resolving themselves into iambic tetrameter), it is a mistake to take it (or the feet that comprise it) in isolation; such moments form part of a series of broader rhythmical contractions or expansions, of which lines 2–3 above offer a clear example. Syllabic quantity proves insufficient to account for affective change in “Christabel”: we actuate a certain passion not only when we sound the resounding beat, but also in the manner in which we sound it.

These rhythmical variations therefore offer the reader variant means of voicing the poem, each with a particular affective charge. But the actuation of a line is more than a matter of individual performance choice: it produces a rhythmical pattern to which we are ourselves made subject. Just as our “choice” over which syllables to emphasize produced a particular animate entity (an owl or the report of an owl), so too do the more recognizably human voices that ensue channel and redirect the accumulated rhythmical energy. The first such voice that emerges belongs to none of the recognizable protagonists (Christabel, Geraldine), but rather the unnamed and unannounced narrator. The rhetorical interrogative is its natural mode. “Is the Night chilly and dark?” it asks, before answering its own question, over-fastidiously, “The Night is chilly, but not dark.” (14–15). Throughout, this unnamed speaker’s torpid reiterations revel in sketching solid form and outline from mere suggestion, only to dissolve it just as rapidly:

The Night is chill; the Forest bare;
Is it the Wind that moaneth bleak?
There is not Wind enough in the Air
To move away the ringlet Curl
From the lovely Lady’s Cheek—

(43–47)

As Snell observes, the above lines are generally octosyllabic, with slight variations. Yet this does not preclude deeper variations of a different sort. The narrator’s question (“is it the Wind that moaneth bleak?”)
is not merely rhetorical: it is a question that no reader would dream of answering, given previous other faux-naïf suggestions and retractions. But the feel of such passages is determined less by its propositional self-canceling (“[t]here is not Wind enough”), than a series of apparently minor accentual shifts. Unchallenged iambics persist up to and including the narrator’s query; yet the following line opens with no real candidates that would preserve the duple measure, where forcing “is” into compliance would sound all the more awry given that the line asserts that which is not. Line 46 reintroduces an iambic progression, only for the ensuing trochaic sequence once again to unsettle it. Scanning such passages accentually, as a consistent recurrence of four beats, is therefore accurate yet insufficient as a measure: such rhythmic variations as we observe above emerge only through periodic departure from a more tightly defined set of accentual-syllabic patternings, which thereby never quite attain the status of laws.

The uncertainty that we feel at such moments is more than a practical anxiety over “correct” scansion: it is an affect in its own right. The constant unsettling of rhythmical patterns offers a sonic counterpart to the doubt that the above passage thematizes; but at the same time, the more radical line variations toy with our doubt, forcing our voice to make sport of our frustrated knowledge. Snell marks five separate instances of four-syllable lines, which can all (as with “Tu—whit!—Tu—whooh!”) conceivably be omni-stressed. (As with that earlier moment, the Preface’s stipulation vies with our customary—if not necessarily “natural”—inclination to stress the line iambically.) The narrator avails itself of one such moment, asking a further rhetorical question at the significant moment just prior to Geraldine’s appearance:

She folded her Arms beneath her Cloak,
And stole to the other side of the Oak.
What sees She there?

(56–58)

Just as the first tetrasyllable marked the actuation of a particular animate being (the hooting owl), so too does this potentially omni-stressed line sound the knowing narrator most fully. We could well imagine our voice, following another two flurried anapestic lines, congealing so as to intone, as if to a child, ‘WHAT . . . SEES . . . SHE . . . THERE?’—the internal rhyme, assonance and provision for caesurae only adding to a gloomy mock-Gothic portentousness. Once again, a wide affective range (is it risking too much to say that even as adults we might feel trepidation at such moments, just as we might find them willfully bathetic?) emerges
not through even the thinnest hint of drama or character, but across very concentrated moments of rhythmic variation. The distinction is perhaps too absolute: for this rhythmic variation itself engenders drama and character.

When Christabel and Geraldine do finally make their entrances and speak, as we say, for themselves, their distinct characters and actions emerge only within the terms of this accumulating experience of rhythm. Coleridge, as with his narrator, clearly has a certain amount of fun exploiting this fact from the start. For even the eponymous heroine Christabel's earliest apparition is forcefully controlled in such a manner as to unsettle her singularity. A stanza describing the mysterious Geraldine, seen from a distance, closes with the narrator's emphatic declaration, “Beautiful exceedingly!” (69). The following couplet retains this exclamatory force, in a phrasing that directly recalls the narrator's own “Jesu, Maria, shield her well!” (55); yet Coleridge manipulates the line-break quite overtly:

Mary mother, save me now!
(Said Christabel) And who art thou?

(70–71)

The parenthetical diegetic check “(Said Christabel),” which feels willfully unsubtle, arrives too late for us to take it into account. We are already voicing Christabel, before we know that it is she that we are voicing: the manner in which we voice her therefore bears the echoes of even those non-humans or non-characters that have preceded her. We could well imagine that Coleridge, reciting “Christabel” in the years before its publication, shifted his pitch to mimic whatever he imagined Christabel sounded like; but the surmise is inconsequential for the more interesting questions that the printed poem raises. Indeed, typographic features are crucial to, and inseparable from, rhythmic variation: the forced parenthesis encourages us to separate the line into two separate, four-syllable units, a voicing that would be further licensed by the tendency to stress trisyllabic proper names such as Christabel (as also Geraldine, Leoline) firmly; and by the extent to which “And who art thou” resembles the previous, omni-stressed rhetorical questionings of the narrator. The result is a series of abrupt transitions that both mark and call into question who or what is speaking.

Throughout their early exchanges, such marked rhythmic transition is made to compel Christabel and Geraldine's actions, much as it has our own vocalization. The former extends her hand to the latter:
She rose: and forth with steps they passed
That strove to be, and were not, fast.

(112–13)

Agency here is sieved through prosody. The first of these octosyllabic lines proves emphatically iambic: the comma underscores the rhythm, while the stress falls appropriately on variants of movement (“rose [. . .] forth [. . .] steps [. . .] passed”), each describing the passage of feet (the running pun on metricality runs all the while). This momentum carries naturally over into the following line, where the expectation of propulsion forces itself into the verb “strove,” and might, at a push, unusually emphasize even the auxiliary “be”—as if existence precisely were being fought for. The formerly emphatic iambic pattern then further struggles to maintain itself with the same auxiliary, “were,” whose conjugation forces the voice to struggle yet further in converting both its softness and pastness into presence.

That faltering rhythm is then brought almost to a decisive halt by the second comma—as if the line could expire into a sigh, finish right there on “not.” When, then, following the comma the line does indeed resume, the emphasis is abrupt and redoubled. “[F]ast,” standing alone between punctuation and line-ending, receives all the emphasis that had gradually drained from the line, as the softening voice is forced to rouse itself from its pause; compensating, it overcompensates. Where the line has been seen to surrender all momentum, the term falls into its derivative meaning: held fast. We witness the accumulation of a quantum of energy, which seeks a regular outlet only to be frustrated, before finally discharging itself with a belated force; in that process, the disappointment of rhythmic expectation comes to condition even the semantic properties of language.

It is striking that the effect of so many of the above passages depends upon rhythmical variation as it applies to metrically ambiguous monosyllables—the auxiliaries of line 113, or the infantile questionings of the narrator. We earlier saw that such metrical uncertainty produced a distinct (if variable) affect in its own right. The drama proper of “Christabel” further develops the coincidence of rhythmic expectation (the falling of the beat) and significant ambiguity (where or whether the beat falls). Geraldine has collapsed, “belike through pain,” at the gate of Christabel’s castle; whereupon, “the lady rose again / And moved, as she were not in pain” (133–34). As with more than one of the above examples, we again note the significance of metrically indeterminate particles such as “not.” We could well
imagine a range of vocalizations of line 134, each with varying degrees of emphasis dispersed across apparently simple connectives: weighting “as” stresses the causal function of the connective (Geraldine really is only feigning pain), while weighting “were” stresses the subjunctive (as if she were not pained). It is here significant that the less normative (though still plausible) scansion produces a skeptical threat that cannot be expunged. Coleridge’s Preface thus forms only one part of the rhythmical demand that we feel the verse make upon us at this stage: for, aside from the four-beat rule that we follow or contravene, there exists the pressure of rhythmical patternings that possess varying levels of familiarity (iambic, trochaic, anapestic, or other), whose separate claims are each inseparable from the sense we make of the line. And the sense that we make (or feel is made for us) is always also affective—as the line readily concedes, concerning as it does Geraldine’s “pain.” However much Coleridge may have believed in his verse’s transparent communication of “passion,” “Christabel” consistently emphasizes those moments at which feeling is significantly dubitable: from the wind that may or may not “moaneth bleak,” to the first animate beings (“what can ail the mastiff bitch?”), to the human figures that never wholly disinvest themselves from such animal life.

If Coleridge’s Preface proves incapable of controlling the potential rhythmic variation of “Christabel,” so too do the various subsequent editorial presentations of the poem. The several manuscripts of “Christabel” vary considerably; that their variations are as much typographic as lexical may well suggest a well-founded doubt on Coleridge’s behalf about how to make the poem clearly performable.12 (It should by now have become clear that I take what might here have struck Coleridge as a problem as one principal reason for the enduring significance of “Christabel.”) But we have equally seen several moments at which Coleridge willfully manipulates the slippage or variability of voice, as in the parenthetical “(Said Christabel).” The vexed issue of intentionality makes the editorial task yet more foreboding; as J. C. C. Mays notes in his introduction to the Bollingen Series Poetical Works,

A line or passage may have the same words in several versions, but its emotional burden may be muted or changed by the other factors I have named. Sound, or tone of voice, often says as much as words. When a comma is added, or other punctuation is made heavier, the notation is altered. When an exclamation is substituted for a question-mark, pitch adjusts to a new direction. Hyphens slow down a line by distributing stress more evenly. A quotation-mark lifts a phrase into another register.13
The manuscript versions of Christabel cover practically all these bases, which makes the resultant *Bollingen* text all the more interesting, for its effort to subordinate rhythmic variation to a clearer notion of voice and character. The very first encounter between Christabel and Geraldine represents a case in point. Christabel asks, very reasonably, “[a]nd who art thou?” In recording the response, I list respectively the *Bollingen* version, collated from variant manuscripts and printed versions, and the *Oxford World Classics* edition, which reprises the 1834 *Poetical Works*:

The Lady strange made Answer
meet
And her Voice was faint and sweet:
“Have Pity on my Sore Distress,
I scarce can speak for Weariness.
Stretch forth thy Hand, and have
no fear—”
Said Christabel, “How cam’st thou here?”
And the Lady, whose Voice was faint and sweet

The lady strange made answer meet,
And her voice was faint and sweet:—
Have pity on my sore distress,
I scarce can speak for weariness:
Stretch forth thy hand, and have no fear!
Said Christabel, How cam’st thou here?
And the lady, whose voice was faint and sweet,
Did thus pursue her answer meet:—
Did thus pursue her answer meet.

(71–78) (71–78)

In two lexically identical passages, variant spacing, punctuation and elision entirely shift the vocal delivery. The *Bollingen* version re-establishes the line breaks that later printings of “Christabel” omitted, thus marking more clearly the vocal shift from Geraldine (71–75) to Christabel (76–78). But the most obvious effort to mark this shift is, of course, the superposition of speech marks at this stage (a form of punctuation present in none of the manuscript versions of this passage, for all their many different ways to designate speech). The 1834 edition makes it significantly ambiguous (once again with the aid of the enjambed diegetic marker) who is delivering a line such as “Stretch forth thy hand, and have no fear!” As I have been endeavoring to demonstrate throughout this reading, such ambiguity is essential to the effect of “Christabel,” however much we would or would not choose to call it intentional.
We need such an ambiguity at this stage not for ambiguity’s sake, but because the suggestion that Geraldine might be beginning to possess the voice of Christabel is essential not only to the drama at this point, but also to the manner in which the poem has situated and enacted vocalization more generally. The ensuing drama only pushes home this point more fully. The *Bollingen* edition continues to regularize voice into direct speech, until the climactic moment of Part One, which finds itself as a result denuded of significance. There, Geraldine suddenly speaks with “altered voice,” being in some way possessed (we intuit) by the spirit of Christabel’s dead mother. “‘Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine! / I have power to bid thee flee.’” (204–6), she declares, with every single manuscript version marking speech with inverted commas, where previously there had been none. By regularizing speech so thoroughly throughout, the Bollingen edition conceals the poem’s morbid but apposite truth—that only at the moment of possession by another, can voice be heard directly to speak.¹⁴

This moment of “altered voice” is exceptional within the broader pattern of “Christabel” as a whole, which is less interested in designating voice than the process of vocalization, a process that is, from the earliest lines, impelled by the poem’s prosodic organization. Perhaps it is in this respect (rather than its gloomy Gothic décor, or suggestive fragmentariness) that “Christabel” anticipates later verse forms such as the monodrama, which, as A. Dwight Culler has noted, feature a much more supple relation between prosody and character than the term “dramatic monologue” tends to imply.¹⁵ Does this entail that, as Christabel and Geraldine conclude Part One by settling down to sleep, they amount to no more than the slumbering moans with which the poem commenced? Is living character no more than the latest enumeration of a rhythmical pulse that has already invited and foreordained it?

This is not, I think, the principal lesson of “Christabel.” It is true that I have attempted to demonstrate the many ways in which that poem’s rhythmical variation consistently dictates voice, character, sense, and passion—and how part of that dictation often involves leaving such entities significantly open. But this does not mean that the poetic drama can be reduced to unaccountable shifts in pitch or tempo. Admittedly, the earliest lines produce performance dilemmas of various kinds, whose resolution even the clamorous Preface cannot dictate to us, and which we must decide upon in ignorance of the full scene. We make “sense” in the unpremeditated act of voicing.

Yet those decisions are less free than we might imagine: as “Christabel” develops, its rhythm also generates a series of working assumptions, expec-
tations, and conventions. So those earliest lines do indeed seem to call for the four-beat principle; in turn, the periodicity of those emphases (however varying their allocation across the line) is abstracted into regularity, or intimated as feeling. These, then, are no more than beats; and yet we feel them in a certain way: with foreboding, perhaps, or with humor. We have seen this latter possibility form a significant part of the first “real” voice that meter articulates, that of the narrator who at once absorbs and directs metrical uncertainty. Its mock-Gothic is brought into being concretely through heavy stress (“[w]hat sees She there?”), yet then becomes an active voice, an interpretation of and cue to further stresses, a governing expectation.

“Characters” such as Christabel and Geraldine are no different. They respond to rhythm’s call, but the poem subsequently finds itself answering to their movements. As the uncertainty that we are compelled to answer through our voicing, these characters interpret the rhythmic patterns that comprise them. Is Geraldine “belike” in pain? While her affect is as irresolvable as the mastiff bitch’s own ailment, we cannot but voice her in such a way as to suggest an answer. Character is one demonstration of the force with which we bestow even the slightest stress with significance and feeling. In reality we are forming such voices all the time. Another term for them is “convention.” I said earlier that we approach the earliest lines of the poem as a performance dilemma, but this is only a partial truth. For behind even the first emphasis we place lie a variety of voices, sedimentations of past experience that come to dictate the terms of our current engagement, in the form of generic, societal, or even vocal expectation. As readers we may be unknowing in this, but we are also uninnocent. “Christabel” then attains a critical relation to such voices, through charting their rhythmical emergence.

What broader significance does this close reading of “Christabel” hold for our conceptions of rhythm? It is from the beginning essential to be clear about the ways in which this poem is not original. It is certainly not original judged by Coleridge’s own precepts. As Brennan O’Donnell notes, his loose yet recognizably accentual-syllabic approach had proven a staple of English verse since Chaucer; while Derek Attridge makes the four-stress line the dominant pattern of English verse. Coleridge’s “new principle” would then reinvent the most venerable of all prosodic devices! Omond attempts to gloss such derivation in positive terms, claiming that “Christabel” “vindicated for English verse its natural inalienable birthright.”

I, on the other hand, prefer to see in the poem a historical singularity that need claim neither essential novelty, nor rediscovery of putative origin.
For Coleridge's reinvention of the wheel—or more accurately, the reflexive form of reading that “Christabel” forces upon us—alters that wheel, alters the nature of poetic technique. By being told to stress the stress that we would otherwise have unthinkingly applied, “Christabel” foregrounds the affective dimension that all verse bears (and conceals). It is new, then, not in the way it imagines itself to be, but in its historical need to highlight or recover those naturalized habits of reading that comprise tradition. A work such as Walter Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel* owes a debt to Coleridge’s poem, then, not through its adoption of a common, broadly accentual meter, but in the manner that such structural organization enables a comparable historical reflexivity. The failure of the Preface either to explain or direct his achievement therefore does not simply undermine Coleridge’s intentions: it proves his intuition of the relation of passion and verse form true in a more radical manner than he was able to conceive.

By emphasizing the category of rhythm in general, and the four-beat line in particular, I am thereby of course following Derek Attridge, whose work has done more than anyone’s to inspire the recent resurgence in the critical treatment of the term, to which this volume hopes to contribute. Yet by speaking of the reflexive manner of reading that “Christabel” forces upon us, I wish to append a sense of historical specificity that some of that recent work has a tendency to overlook. We can readily point to other compositions that, inspired by “Christabel,” similarly manipulate the syllabically various but consistently four-beat line—Scott’s *Last Lay*, Wordsworth’s *White Doe of Rylstone*, Byron’s *Oriental Tales*. Such affinities encourage many critics to speak of such a thing as “Christabel meter”; and yet the very notion of a template that could be emulated misrepresents Coleridge’s defamiliarization of pre-existing tradition.

For even if there is some “innate” inclination to the four-beat line in English vernacular verse (whether biological or linguistic), it is just as sure that such rhythmic patterns have been internalized and socially entrained in a variety of often incompatible ways. “Christabel,” offers a hint of one moment at which such patterns might have meant in a particular manner. A critical history of rhythm does, it is true, present practical difficulties that are more obviously surmountable in the case of specific metrical devices (it is not difficult for us to imagine a critical genealogy of, say, the elegiac distich). By contrast, rhythm appears at once so essential and so irreducibly palpable, that to suggest that even it has a history seems both intuitively and practically difficult.

Perhaps it is our innate resistance to consider rhythm historically, or critically, that has permitted the term to serve a variety of regimes as ideological fodder, as “primal” or “dynamic” animating force. We can readily
perceive the danger of such appropriations. And yet, a markedly ahistorical treatment of rhythm endures—and not for want of recent theorizing on the subject. In perhaps the most sustained recent discussion of the concept in Anglophone verse, Richard Cureton and Derek Attridge offer subtle and divergent accounts; yet neither the striking positivism of Cureton’s system (a positivism that enables several fine readings of William Carlos Williams among others), nor the social, biological, and linguistic contexts that Attridge treats as potential groundings of rhythm, leave much scope for historical articulation.19

Amittai Aviram’s *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry* (1994) goes further, treating the rhythmic impulse as an irreducible somatic force that entirely transcends historical circumstance: “[t]he energy of rhythm exceeds the limits of the limited moment in cultural knowledge reflected in the poem’s images and ideas.”20 My reading of “Christabel” may, it is true, seem to share something with Aviram’s tendency to read poems as self-referring allegories (as Jonathan Culler notes in his contribution to this volume, a poem does not “mean” anything beyond the rhythm that constitutes it). But this resemblance is deceptive: for “Christabel” teaches us that rhythm is never simply a unitary, somatic, positive force, but rather a complex experience that can both be experienced in different ways (many of which are far from liberating), and which is always subject to various historical conventions.

Caroline Levine’s “Rhythms Poetic and Political: the Case of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,” by contrast, pledges a much more nuanced account of the relation that might obtain between historical and poetic rhythms. In Barrett Browning’s three poems on Queen Victoria, we learn that “poetic meter appears [. . .] not as a reflection or expression of political forms, but as precisely another form, one that itself runs up against other poetic or social forms.”21 Yet we might question what room this welcome expansion of “form” leaves for verse rhythm as such. Levine indeed reads Barrett Browning’s practice as a strikingly ahistorical (and thereby rather debatable) matter, as “a rhythmic pattern that is all her own, constraining according to no predictable standard and scarcely indebted to tradition.”22 The portrait of a Victorian society subject to several rhythmic impulses (which encompass verse), “plural and colliding, jumbled and constantly altered, each, thanks to the others, incapable of imposing its own dominant order,”23 may well prove accurate (although it may also smack of Habermas’ more utopian descriptions of the public sphere). But either way: if the social sphere is composed of interweaving but non-subordinating rhythms, why need we go to verse at all, if all it provides is an echo chamber in which the “outside” world sounds?
If Aviram makes rhythm ahistorical, therefore, Levine makes it so socio-historically pervasive that the singularity of the poetic medium (or any relation of causality between it and social “rhythms”) proves difficult to discern. If the dedicated consideration of verse rhythm is to justify itself beyond descriptive insight or hermeneutic virtuosity, its results can neither be summarized as the self-legitimating immanence of the artwork, nor be collapsed into the “rhythms” of social experience in so total a way as to evacuate formal specificity. A study of this kind, that is to say, need demonstrate how the qualitative singularity of verse form engages critically and sensuously with other bodies of thought, without being reducible to them.

In the second part of this essay, I suggested that “Christabel” offered one instance of where an apparently familiar verse rhythm takes on particular significance at a given historical juncture. How? In this final section, I will argue that Coleridge’s poem does not only reveal the affective dimension that all verse continues to bear. Beyond this generic truth, “Christabel” possesses a more contingent and historical—but no less significant—role. For the poem engages the philosophical discourse on affect that underwent such radical shifts over the course of the eighteenth century; and by engaging it through its peculiar formal repertoire, contributes to that discourse in a manner that propositional language could not.

In making such a claim, I draw upon the rich vein of recent work on the philosophy of affect. Susan James’ *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* charts the slow unraveling of the scholastic understanding of “passion”—where the opposed notions of passivity and activity both structurally resemble, and sanction, several other binaries that include body and mind—across the successive philosophies of Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Thomas Dixon’s *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*, meanwhile, traces the gradual supplanting of “passion” as a category, by the “emotion” increasingly preferred in the experimental psychologies of Thomas Brown, Thomas Chalmers, and others.

Taking these surveys together, we see a growing tendency to treat affect as a motive force that is both active and constitutive of character. (Shelley would, in “Rosalind and Helen: a Modern Eclogue,” enjoy rhyming “emotion” and “motion.”) At the same time, even those philosophical texts that do most to reshape our understanding of affect frequently find themselves lapsing into the very scholastic logic that they opposed, with its attendant language of mastery and subordination. So we find Hume’s famous dictum that “reason is, and always ought to be, slave to the pas-
Even the radical treatment of passion in Spinoza’s Ethics, which as James notes “abandon[s] the distinction between active volitions and passive perceptions,” continues to turn on the extent to which “striving” [co-natus] is passive (a partial cause of the subject) or active (a total cause of the subject). “[A]n affect,” states Spinoza, “or passivity of the soul, is a confused idea. For we have shown that the mind is acted on, only insofar as it has inadequate, or confused, ideas.”

William Collins’ “The Passions: an Ode for Music” (1750) here proves a revealing document, in offering an early instance of the supple relation between rhythmic variation and voiced character that “Christabel” would so fully exploit. In a brief nod to convention, the thronging passions are subjected in the opening stanza to a barrage of passive verb constructions. Listening to an allegorized Music suggestively play herself, they are variously “Disturb’d, delighted, rais’d, refin’d” (8), and subsequently, “fir’d / fill’d [. . .] rapt, inspir’d” (9–10). Those now-archaic elided participles permit a breathlessness that carries, however, into a significant reversal. For the passions, having “snatch’d her instruments of sound,” now become significantly, active. Yet the usurping proper names do not merely sing themselves through their song; they sing themselves as song. So timorous Fear and rapid Anger are pinched into two swift quatrains; while Hope dilates into an extended stanza, at the end of which “[s]till would her touch the strain prolong.” Melancholy sings in heroic couplets, until the disappointed end-rhyme of “soul,” which has to wait three further lines for its answering partner—and a disappointing answer at that, “stole.” Joy finally takes this delayed satisfaction of couplets to its extreme, waiting a full seven lines for the almost forgotten “advancing” to be triumphantly answered by “dancing” (88).

As Saintsbury notes, much of Collins’ expressive novelty stems from the manner in which “the form abolishes the substance,” in such a way that metrical variety places a peculiar pressure upon archaic personification. The “Ode to Liberty” is a case in point: “‘Liberty’ to write like that, will enable no one to write like it.” In such cases—as with the “The Passions: an Ode for Music”—we find a logical paradox: do the various affective states (melancholy, joy, even liberty) shape the metrical form that they inhabit, by the force of their capitalized personification? Or does formal variation itself produce emphatic content? This hedging uncertainty over the extent to which affect is reactive or generative indicates, in this specifically poetical context, a shifting attitude to the formative properties of verse (or the “music” that serves as its loose analogy). But it also provides a structural parallel to the impasse charted above, where despite
efforts to cut across scholastic distinctions, philosophical treatments of affect found themselves lapsing back into a vocabulary of (total) passivity and (total) activity.

Such issues arise explicitly in Wordsworth’s “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815):

Passion, it must be observed, is derived from a word which signifies, suffering; but the connection which suffering has with effort, with exertion, and action, is immediate and inseparable. How strikingly is this property of human nature exhibited by the fact that, in popular language, to be in a passion is to be angry!—But

‘Anger in hasty words or blows
Itself discharges on its foes.’

To be moved, then, by a passion, is to be excited, often to external, and always to internal, effort [. . .].

The philosophical endeavor to convert passion into activity—where even Spinoza’s innovation failed to resolve the issue of passivity—here poses comparable problems for poetry. Wordsworth’s formulation struggles gamely to imply a necessary relation between “exertion, and action,” on the one hand, and “suffering,” on the other, an attempt that remains in danger of lapsing into the binary that it would displace. Where the prose extract above appears to lean on the side of action, several of Wordsworth’s verse passages incline the other way. Take, for instance, this central passage from The Borderers:

Action is transitory, a step, a blow—
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
’Tis done—and in the after vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betray’d
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And has the nature of infinity

Lurking beneath an otherwise very familiar Stoic ethic of endurance is, once again, an effort to explore those strangely agential aspects of passive experience, for which a whole host of quintessentially Wordsworthian phrases—“vacancy” (or “after-vacancy”), “torpor,” “strenuous indolence”—function as placeholders. “Christabel” extends such considerations through submitting them to the experience and practice of verse in a far more concerted manner than the passage above, where Wordsworth’s abrupt caesurae (“Tis done—”) suggest a merely spasmodic
agency. Coleridge’s poem, that is to say, actuates feeling as the process that Wordsworth calls “excited [. . .] to effort,” whereby the compelled voice nonetheless recognizes and actuates itself as such.

To say that “Christabel” proved Coleridge’s most significant contribution to the philosophy of affect may well have discomfited Coleridge himself, who often overlooked his more distinctive achievements in favor of grander aims. One such of these aims—though of lesser repute than his lifelong engagement with German idealism—is the late treatment of the Cartesian theory of affect, which emerges most fully in his late essay “On the Passions” (1828). The immediate occasion of the essay is a reading of Descartes’ *Passions of the Soul*, which Coleridge took to represent only a partial advance upon scholasticism:

In order to move beyond this mere “grammatical antithesis,” Coleridge elaborates a bio-affective design—drawing heavily from his previous *Theory of Life*—that is predictably idiosyncratic and fragmentary, yet which provides a more dynamic account of “organic form” than is often attributed to his work. In this scheme, a “Principium Individuii,” or self-individuating impulse, manifests itself at ascending scales of organic complexity: a Leibnizian borrowing that Coleridge infl ects by making expressly affective. Passion, then, becomes both the means by which simple organisms refine themselves into complex wholes, and the characteristic form of expression that those organisms possess. Simple appetites such as hunger and thirst give rise naturally to a more complex series of phenomena, which he describes through the neologism “impetites”—from the Latin “impeto”—motive forces that are still to some degree spontaneous or reactive, yet which also imply a certain intentionality. Such a scheme attempts to move toward what Coleridge summarizes, at the midpoint of his essay, as “Act and Passion—Life being [the identity of acting and suffering].”

Coleridge understandably struggled to express this “self-individuating” impulse in the form of a discursive treatise. Such a notion does not only provide a structural counterpart to the prosodic organization that we have
observed in “Christabel”: it requires a form of expression such as verse for its very realization. Where Coleridge’s “On the Passions” struggles gamely to explain the formation of organic life by virtue of affective diversification, so too have we witnessed the bare sounding of the verse line give rise to voices (animate, animal, human) of increasing complexity, in a process that is similarly, irreducibly affective. The voicing of which we are made self-conscious precisely is the identity of acting and suffering.

Yet the rhythmic unfolding of “Christabel” perhaps also helps account for the subsequent failure of Coleridge’s attempted systematic philosophy of affect. His “impetites” were all along intended to provide a bridge to the third and most complex stage of affective development, the distinctively human passions. But the apparently baser, transitional organic forms already seem to have achieved a remarkable level of affective complexity: indeed, Coleridge locates in them “the Incident of the highest Form of Life.” Coleridge calls this self-reflexive moment variously “Sehnsucht,” “desiderium,” “taedium vitae,” and “Storgè”—the exoticism of these importations betraying the difficulty of definition. In what they have in common (a sense of want, lack, or longing), we can note the clear influence of Spinoza’s own account of the passions, which proceed through “striving”; interestingly, however, Coleridge’s taedium vitae suggests a passivity that Spinoza is keen to excise.

At the very point that Coleridge seems capable of an interestingly modified Spinozistic materialism, however, his precarious table of feeling breaks down—to become, in his own words, “a Miss.” For if the lower level of organic life implied by the “impetites” already possesses Sehnsucht, possesses an “incompleteness [that] in itself may pass into a sense [. . .] a dim semi-sense of itself,” what makes the human passions qualitatively distinct? With bare longing, life has already begun, as Coleridge himself hesitatingly concedes: “Life has an analogon of reflection. Life quodam modo [in a certain way] reflects on itself.”

Here too, “Christabel” had foreknown the philosophical problems that Coleridge posed himself toward the end of his life. Where “On the Passions” breaks off at the very moment that it was supposed to enumerate distinctively human affect, so Coleridge’s poem had promised to communicate a form of “passion” that would be both transparent and readily communicable. The material form that transmitted the message, verse, was on this account to be no more than a transmitter, of a “transition” of feeling that somehow occurred before or beyond it. But “Christabel,” too, had already demonstrated a material world of far greater complexity, where the beating clock, moaning wind and echoing bitches did more than merely anticipate the distinctively human voices that emerge. The
rhythm of “Christabel” is irreducibly various, and part of that variety concerns the manner in which it actively forms, in addition to being formed by, passion. In this respect, Coleridge’s poem enacts what philosophies of affect—including his own—struggle to articulate in propositional terms. In responding to that historical need, it offers a compelling instance of critical rhythm.

Notes


3. Both Saintsbury and Omond take “Christabel” to explode the lingering belief in foot-based, quantitative modes of metrical analysis; by contrast, Ada F. Snell’s paper on “Christabel” (the one extensive scansion of the poem, to which I will subsequently refer) holds that, despite Coleridge’s bluster, the overwhelming majority of “Christabel” resolves itself into iambic lines, with occasional anapaestic substitutions. Snell’s Pause: A Study of its Nature and its Rhythmical Function in Verse, Especially Blank Verse (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ann Arbor Press, 1918) develops such a view, asserting that the English foot is an “objective” truth.


6. Except where stated, I quote from the Bollingen Poetic Works text. In this above extract, I substitute the more commonly printed line 3 (“Tu—whit!—Tu—who!”), which has the advantage of engaging more directly the questions of vocal stress, and the subsequent critical debates around it.

7. Omond, English Metrists, 117. Omond extrapolates from such examples that Coleridge’s poem—unlike the overwhelming majority of prosodic theory from the previous century—apprehends “time,” rather than quantity or accent. I depart from Omond by stressing those moments where the question whether or not we accent a syllable (and hence, the temporal structure) is more indeterminate, and what the apprehension of that indeterminacy means for the affective experience of the poem.


9. See, respectively, Coleridge, PW 1, pt. 2, 807–8; PW 1, pt. 1, 527–30.


11. Here, for reasons that will become apparent in my later discussion of the variant manuscript versions and the marking (or not) of speech, I am reproducing the 1834 edition rather than the Bollingen composite text.
12. This claim need not exclude a certain carelessness on Coleridge’s part; as J. C. C. Mays notes, “[t]hough one would have expected Coleridge to take special care with the punctuation and capitals of *Christabel*, he appears to have submitted the tidiest manuscript (to impress Byron) instead of the manuscript which incorporated his revisions” (*PW* 1, pt. 1, cxiii–cxiv).


14. The ensuing conclusion to Part One supports this argument: Geraldine returns to a speech that is undesigned by punctuation of any sort, as she casts the spell of ignorance upon her companion (271–78).


19. The divergence of these positions crystallized in the exchange that followed Attridge’s review of *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse* (*Poetics Today* 17, no. 1 [Spring, 1996]: 9–27). For Cureton’s response, see 29–50 of the same journal; and for Attridge’s increasingly exasperated response to that response, see 51–54. For Attridge’s reticent treatment of the relation of rhythm to linguistic and biological essentialism, see his “Rhythm in English Poetry,” in *New Literary History*, 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 1015–37.


22. Ibid., 248.

23. Ibid., 250.


26. Dixon in fact claims that the transition from scholastic to materialist conceptions makes affect *more* passive: “[w]hile passions and affections had been thought of by faculty psychologists as ‘active powers,’ Brownian emotions were passive products of the operations of the laws of the physics and chemistry of the mind” (ibid., 134). Yet Wordsworth’s attempt to “activate” passion, as we shall see below, challenge such a broad claim; from the position of the experiencing subject (rather than the receptive brain), affect is increasingly an active means of self-expression, rather than a dominating influence (fate, humors, etc.) to which one is subjected.


29. Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton, N.J.; Princeton University Press, 197. One of Spinoza’s signal innovations in this section is to introduce a notion of “active affects”—a notion that would be paradoxical from a traditional scholastic, or even Cartesian, perspective. Yet such
a formulation has the effect both of retaining passivity as the (negative) criterion by
which affects are to be judged, and rendering certain affects negative as a result. “Sad-
ness,” for instance, is a negative affect for Spinoza insofar as it limits man’s capacity to
act—the action to which it does (somewhat paradoxically) give rise can be directed
only to the overcoming of that sadness. Here we might contrast Wordsworth’s later in-
terest in the way in which such states ("torpor") can be both absorptive and impulsive.

35. Coleridge, SW&F 2:1443. Coleridge writes the phrase in parenthesis in Greek.
37. Coleridge, SW&F 2:1438.
38. Coleridge, SW&F 2:1427.