

Reviews Editorial

S. T. Coleridge and P. B. Shelley

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THE 8TH OF JULY 2022 MARKS TWO HUNDRED YEARS since the passing of Percy Bysshe Shelley. He was 29 years old. The details of his death off the coast of Italy, widely publicized, soon transformed into the stuff of Romantic legend, and undergraduates have shared the sensational details of his death, the seaside funeral pyre, and his incombustible heart ever since.

The reminder of Shelley's bicentenary led me to seek out scholarly writing on his "A Defence of Poetry," and I soon came upon A. C. Goodson's discussion of "Romantic Theory and the Critique of Language" in *Questioning Romanticism* (1995). In his essay, Goodson reminds readers that Shelley's work is a rebuttal of his friend Thomas Love Peacock's paradoxical "The Four Ages of Poetry." Goodson's comparison between the two writers demonstrates once again that Shelley wrote within a wider network of authors—a network that shaped his philosophy of language and poetics:

Like Peacock, Shelley associates poetry with the condition of language in general, but by making poets demiurges of language he retains the imaginative vitality of the tongue which Peacock writes off as a victim of the civilization of language. Where the poetic function fails, as Shelley intimates that it has in modern language, there is a general loss of vitality, not just a loss of poetry. The progress of civilization is at stake when the tongue is "dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse." When the life of imagination is blocked, reason suffers. It is the function of language that links them in theory and in social practice.¹

Goodson then turns to Coleridge and Wordsworth for yet another Romantic dialogue on poetic language, but my own musings soon turned to Shelley and Coleridge during that fateful period.

The two men were acquainted, of course. Shelley's poem, *Letter to Maria Gisborne* (1820), parodies Coleridge in London, just after mentioning William Godwin ("greater none than he") and immediately before Leigh Hunt ("without whom / This world would smell like what it is—a tomb"). Of Coleridge, Shelley writes drolly:

You will see Coleridge—he who sits obscure
In the exceeding lustre and the pure
Intense irradiation of a mind,
Which, with its own internal lightning blind,
Flags wearily through darkness and despair—
A cloud-encircled meteor of the air,

¹ A. C. Goodson, "Romantic Theory and the Critique of Language," in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer 3–28 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 17–18.

A hooded eagle among blinking owls.—²

Coleridge's appraisal of Shelley around this time had done little to consociate the two: word spread to Byron that Coleridge had been known to repeat Southey's gossipy claim that he and Shelley were living "in a league of Incest" (CL V 206n). This confounded Byron, who had facilitated the publication of *Christabel* (though he later poked fun at Coleridge's metaphysics in *Don Juan*).

I am unaware of any reference Coleridge makes upon learning of Shelley's death in 1822, but in one letter from December 1830 Coleridge weighs in on the young poet's notorious atheism. His words are remarkably positive (however patronizing), defending Shelley's moral conduct *pace* Southey:

I think as highly of Shelley's Genius—yea, and of his *Heart*—as you can do. Soon after he left Oxford, he went to the Lakes, poor fellow! and with some wish, I have understood, to see me; but I was absent, and Southey received him instead. Now, the very reverse of what would have been the case in ninety-nine instances of a hundred, I *might* have been of use to him, and Southey could not; for I should have sympathised with his poetico-metaphysical Reveries, (and the very word metaphysics is an abomination to Southey,) and Shelley would have felt that I understood him. His Atheism would not have scared *me*—for *me*, it would have been a semi-transparent Larva, soon to be *sloughed*, and, through which, I should have seen the true *Image*; the final metamorphosis. Besides, I have ever thought *that* sort of Atheism the next best religion to Christianity—nor does the better faith, I have learnt from Paul and John, interfere with the cordial reverence I feel for Benedict Spinoza. As far as Robert Southey was concerned with him, I am quite certain that his harshness arose entirely from the frightful reports that had been made to him respecting Shelley's moral character and conduct—reports essentially false, but, for a man of Southey's strict regularity and habitual self-government, rendered plausible by Shelley's own wild words and horror of hypocrisy.³

Whatever one thinks of Coleridge's assessment, this is a little-noticed indication of Coleridge's innate capacity for intellectual sympathy.

Occasioned by Shelley's bicentenary, these reflections—Goodson's assessment of language, Shelley's light-hearted verses on Coleridge, and Coleridge's own observations on Shelley's philosophy—are each reminders of the importance of Romantic networks. To understand any one writer, we find ourselves brought into a wider conversation with their contemporaries. None wrote in isolation, nor do we today.

² Cf. Coleridge's letter to John Gisborne in August 1823 (CL V 298).

³ CL V 849–50.

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In this issue, Cynthia Scheinberg reviews of Karen Weisman's *Singing in Foreign Land: Anglo-Jewish Poetry, 1812–47*. Scheinberg discerns two notable scholarly contributions in Weisman's work: her study is both an important interpretation of Romantic history and poetics and a fascinating narrative of Anglo-Jewish poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These poets simultaneously sought and resisted the construction of their literary identity at a time when their existence as "others" within the nation remained a point of political and social contention.

If Weisman's work reveals the construction of individual identity that grounds authorial production, then Matthew Sangster reveals economic constraints that shaped Romantic authorship. In Mark Schoenfield's review *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*, the social and economic conditions of authorial production take center stage, as writers during the period engaged in public discourse through a carefully negotiated web of financial ties (such as literary patronage) that made publication possible.

Next, the *Bulletin* includes reviews of two studies that reveal the inherent interdisciplinarity of Coleridge's works and Romantic studies alike. Adam Neikirk reviews Tom Marshall's *Poetics, Aesthetics and Phenomenology in Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, a psychologically rich monograph that will be of interest to readers engaged in Coleridge's engagement with philosophy, poetry, theology, and science. Then, David Jasper reviews the late Stephen Prickett's *Secret Selves*. Jasper suggests that this book, written by Prickett at the close of a long and fruitful career, reminds us again of the breadth of Prickett's learning in works to which we can fruitfully return again and again.

Finally, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein reviews a new critical edition of Elizabeth Hays Lanfear's *Fatal Errors; or Poor Mary-Anne. A Tale of the Last Century*, which has been published by Timothy Whelan and Felicity James. For Burstein, *Fatal Errors* is "a fine example of how an edition of even a 'lost' novel can illuminate much about the intersecting contexts from which [a work] emerged." Readers will be especially pleased to see how Lanfear's work can shed new light on Rational dissent and Romantic-era gender politics.