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reads

Poetics, Aesthetics and Phenomenology in Samuel Taylor Coleridge

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

by Tom Marshall

TOM MARSHALL'S *Poetics, Aesthetics and Phenomenology in Samuel Taylor Coleridge* is a wide-ranging philosophical foray that begins by taking seriously a bit of Coleridgean marginalia written in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “the absence of any clear account of—was ist Erfahrung [what is experience]?”² There is a kind of academic gap here that Marshall makes note of and that serves as the origin of this book. For, on the one hand, Coleridge's complaint seems to be “ignoring [the] central theme” (9) of Kant's work, with its expostulation of the necessary conditions of experience.³ On the other hand, when Coleridge asks Kant, “[w]hat do you mean by a *fact*, an empiric Reality, which alone can give solidity (inhalt) to our Conceptions” (9), he puts a question to Kant's system which that system is not formulated to answer. In searching after “content as it is experienced by a *subject* of consciousness” (10, my emphasis), Coleridge is posing a phenomenological question, and Marshall's book is concerned to show how this question ties together several areas of his thought, as well as informing different aspects of his writing.

While aligning Coleridge with phenomenology as a philosophical investigation of experience itself, Marshall is careful to distinguish exactly which kind of phenomenology he believes is distinctive of Coleridge-as-phenomenologist. Marshall's familiarity with philosophical figures to whom Coleridge might be compared—Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel—is comprehensive and allows his study to pursue a phenomenological program that in earlier scholarship⁴ may have been given only in outline or pursued by different methods. For all that, his explanations are clear and do not rely overmuch on a style that is inaccessible to either literary critics or philosophical laity.

Marshall aligns Coleridge with the project of Edmund Husserl, which takes the central task of phenomenology to be “a pure description of the ways in which experience is given to the subject” (17). Precisely because it is “geared toward the establishment of an *a priori* mode of description” (17), Husserl's project (when overlaid upon Coleridge's own) brings out the best of Coleridge's authorial worlds: his philosophical prose writings, especially

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² CM III 248 (quoted in Marshall, 9).

³ In this, Marshall's book also intercedes between Coleridge and some of his critics, who have claimed he did not really understand Kant's philosophy.

⁴ Marshall cites Richard Haven's *Patterns of Consciousness* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), Kathleen Wheeler's *Sources Methods and Processes in Coleridge's 'Biographia Literaria'* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), Mary Ann Perkins's *Coleridge's Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, 1994), Nicholas Reid's *Coleridge, Form and Symbol* (Routledge, 2006), and Ewan James Jones's *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), among others.

Biographia Literaria, constitute a properly “proto-phenomenological” effort (14); whereas his poetical writings can now be situated as symbolically active (perhaps even super-Kantian) accounts that attempt to make transcendental principles of cognition transparent within experience.

Nevertheless, Marshall also recognizes differences between Husserl and Coleridge, chiefly with respect to “the necessary presence of religion” (19) in the latter’s philosophy. Coleridge’s conviction that all philosophical inquiry is ultimately religious in nature would be discounted by the Husserlian “radical methodological autonomy” (19), as no philosophical-phenomenological inquiry can be autonomous if all cognition is undergirded by God. For this reason, Marshall chooses to present a treatment of Coleridge’s thought that “is not explicitly reliant on a particular religious conviction” (20), acknowledging that such an omission means that for some the study may appear incomplete.

Marshall’s first chapter, “Anti-Psychologism and Ideal Laws in *Biographia I*” addresses Coleridge’s rejection of the Hartleyan system of associationism. Marshall shows how Coleridge’s accounts of the imagination and cognition in the *Biographia* pave the way for a “new poetics” (39). Despite the latter’s idealist preoccupations, Marshall argues that Coleridge’s aim was to establish “fixed canons of criticism,”⁵ which would be based on the objectivity of poetical descriptions of cognition-through-experience rather than the opinions of literary critics. To do this, Coleridge needed to work in the twin realms of empiricism and materialism himself. But first he had to clear away Hartley’s system.

Marshall then turns to “Coleridge’s Phenomenological Engagements with Idealism.” Exploring the ground between Coleridge and the German trio of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, Marshall explicates “accounts of the subject-object relationship . . . culminating in a position which shares a great deal with Husserl’s account of intentionality” (73). Marshall argues that Coleridge’s position syncretically adopts features of German philosophy (a position that feels like a development of Seamus Perry’s in *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*), but that Coleridge also remains ambivalent to Schelling (a view that helps to explain the minor alterations Coleridge makes to otherwise verbatim borrowings). Marshall might initially seem overly-nuanced in his treatment of Schelling, but these differences gradually become more indicative of the originality of Coleridge’s thought. The chapter culminates in an illuminating discussion of Coleridge’s philosophy of art: “In Schelling, art is brought in to rescue philosophy, whereas in Coleridge, philosophy is brought in to provide a foundation to art” (105).

Having clarified first Coleridge’s relationship to psychologist accounts of mind and then to philosophical idealism, Marshall’s third chapter gets to the heart of the matter by attempting a “phenomenological analysis of the primary and secondary imagination” (119), calling this analysis “a kind of philosophical translation, wherein the strong affinity of these concepts is emphasised without

⁵ BL I, 62 (quoted in Marshall, 39).

trying to erase their differences” (119). This is a Coleridgean undertaking, indeed. Marshall creatively explicates Husserl terms “noema” and “noesis” through Coleridge’s observations of his son Hartley struggling to articulate the difference between mountains as they appear before the naked eye, and the same mountains beheld in a looking-glass (121).

One notable absence from this central chapter, I felt, was a lack of engagement with Peter Cheyne’s work on contemplation. In both his edited volume on the topic (2017) and his more recent monograph (2020)—which may have appeared too late for consultation by Marshall—Cheyne discusses many of the same ideas and also uses a binary pair of terms (“energy”/“energeia” versus “noema”/“noesis”) to clarify Coleridge’s writings. I would be interested to see a fuller dialogue between the two on Coleridge’s conception of imagination.

In “Coleridge’s *Epoché*,” the penultimate chapter, Marshall zooms in on the well-known concept of the “willing suspension of disbelief.” As Marshall makes clear in this chapter’s opening, the sense of *epoché* or “suspension” also means opening up the mind to “transcendental experience” and suspending the “natural attitude” (what Coleridge calls elsewhere “spontaneous consciousness”) (167). There are overlaps here between Coleridge and Husserl, but Marshall helpfully points out “ways in which the Coleridgean and Husserlian conceptions of suspension diverge” (169). Coleridge’s remarks on stage illusion demonstrate “the dynamic between audience as subject and artwork as object” (171) and prepare for a detailed treatment of *The Principles of Genial Criticism*. In his discussion of the *Principles*, Marshall claims that the *Principles* represents a “stage in the evolution” of the “willing suspension of disbelief” conception (181). Marshall ties this “philosophically critical” (182) stance to Coleridge’s criticisms of Wordsworth’s poetry in chapter 22 of the *Biographia*. This retroactive reading of “suspension” requires that we go forward to *Principles* in order to go back and look at *Biographia* in a new way.

The final chapter, “The Acts of the Mind Itself: Eidetic Intuition and the ‘Conversation Poems,’” puts Coleridge’s “proto-phenomenological system” (200) into practice through an analysis of three poems: *The Eolian Harp*, *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, and *Frost at Midnight*. Marshall’s working thesis is that the conversation poems are unique among Romantic verse for the reason that “each presents its own iteration of a particular kind of philosophical trajectory,” vouchsafing “meditative reflection” (200). Marshall’s criticism is sensitive to the way that Coleridge’s lines and images reveal a proto-phenomenological system at work.

My sole complaint regarding this chapter, which seems important for its attempt to show philosophy realized in poetry, is that in doing so Marshall largely overlooks the musical or what we might call symphonic dimension(s) of poetry, in favour of the semantical-philosophical. This is my bugbear as a poet: Marshall’s readings are consistently in the vein of “Coleridge-as-philosopher-as-poet,” which is in part a delivery on his book’s promise; but this to me seems to go against his assertion, at least somewhat, that for Coleridge

“philosophy is *brought in* to provide a foundation” for poetry (105, my emphasis); these readings operate as if philosophy were in fact the essence of the conversation poems rather than a helpmeet to that essence.⁶

Marshall’s *Poetics, Aesthetics and Phenomenology in Samuel Taylor Coleridge* assists with the ongoing appreciation of Coleridge’s philosophical reputation. Despite the technical ground he covers, this is not a book merely for specialists. Marshall shows an enduring side of Coleridge’s engagement with principled thinking—a part of him that all should be aware of and prepared to deal with, whether they be working in philosophy, literature, theology, or science. He shines a light on Coleridge’s modernity, too, putting his book in the company of Andrea Timár’s *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits* (2015). Finally, in connecting Coleridge to the contemporary philosopher of mind David Chalmers and the “hard” problem of consciousness (as well as to the panpsychist Galen Strawson), Marshall has carried Coleridge forward as a relevant figure worthy of attention for anyone thinking about problems of mind, consciousness, and the “experience of experience” today.

⁶ Without overstating my case, I do not think the musical aspects of Coleridge’s poetry can be set aside from their content, although Marshall is certainly not alone in doing this. To connect phenomenology in poetry to the cognitive experience of sound as music, one place to begin would be Patrick Colm Hogan’s *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts* (Routledge, 2003).