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reads

*Coleridge's Philosophy of Faith: Symbol, Allegory, and Hermeneutics*

(Mohr Siebeck, 2011)

by Joel Harter

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RECENT YEARS HAVE WITNESSED the resilience of the Coleridgean symbol as a rich subject of scholarly interest. Joel Harter's profound and provocative *Coleridge's Philosophy of Faith: Symbol, Allegory, and Hermeneutics* marks the latest treatment of the topic, whose previous investigators include such influential voices as David Jasper, Douglas Hedley and Nicholas Halmi. Harter's book also reflects recent critical trends by accounting for Coleridge's complex interdisciplinarity, with the symbol situated at the intersection of his parallel pursuits in religion, philosophy and literature. And yet, while recognizable in its focus, Harter's book is still fresh in emphasis, stressing the "ongoing significance" of Coleridge's "allegorical vision", paying particular attention to contemporary theology. Admirably grounded in the intricate mechanics of Coleridge's dense "middle period" – from *The Statesman's Manual* in 1816 to *The Friend* in 1818 – Harter's treatment nevertheless persistently pushes outwards and forwards, giving priority to Coleridge's lasting currency. The book aptly culminates in its Chapter 6's transition to modern theology, reading luminaries such as Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Hans Frey and David Tracy in light of Coleridge's symbology.

In seeking to demonstrate the meaningful persistence of the Coleridgean symbol, Harter sets himself a task beset with ironies from the outset. As widely recognized, the symbol forms the synthetic crux of Coleridge's thinking, inhabiting the very centre of his diverse intellectual efforts. And yet, as Harter acknowledges, Coleridge nevertheless seems "reluctant" to isolate any single symbol, rarely offering "specific examples" of his most essential trope. In such elusiveness, however, Harter discovers not the failure, but the success, of Coleridge's symbol, his hesitancy reflecting the ineffable power and transformative potential of the symbol. While recent critics such as Nicholas Halmi find the Romantics' neglect to specify symbols as symptomatic of the symbol's interpretive emptiness, Harter disagrees, suggesting the "deferral" implied in the Coleridgean symbol to be a dialectical reflection of its illuminating "presence". Bridging immanent and transcendent, identity and alterity, the symbol for Coleridge is *tautegorical* and "self-signifying", yet also involves "participation in the *otherness* of God, nature and culture" – a tension that accounts for Coleridge's own "rhetoric of principled obscurity".

Harter's own errand is thus necessarily a "labyrinthine" one, seeking to speak directly to his reader about Coleridge's symbolic "indirection". And perhaps for this reason, it is the reader who becomes Harter's primary focus as he expositis Coleridge's symbology. Emphasizing subjective experience rather than specific object, Coleridge's "reticence" to "identify particular symbols" is

understood as privileging “interpretive act” over “particular figure”, encouraging his audience’s interpretive independence. Catalysing an “activity of the mind”, the symbol’s efficacy ultimately resides with the reader, and their own “faithful” response. We may “live in a world of collapsed symbols that do not achieve presence but endless deferral”, Harter admits, gesturing to Paul de Man; however, this is due to a “failure of [our] imagination, not of [the] symbol”, and, as a result, “participation remains ever available for those who faithfully seek it”. Such insistence on the latent and living capacity of symbolic readership lends Harter’s book an urgent currency, befitting its reach towards contemporary intellectual climates. However, this emphasis also raises the stakes for our own creative reading of Coleridge. In Harter’s view, Coleridge’s symbol possesses a distinctly modern relevance precisely because “our life and thought have only become more mechanistic and instrumental” – the very problems that Harter finds addressed and resisted by Coleridge’s symbology.

Harter’s emphasis on the reader is not only evident in the explicit focus of his argument, but also implicitly in his argument’s form and flow. Attentive to audience experience, Harter’s academic prose is highly readable, offering a narrative that unfolds smoothly from his introductory survey of scholarship, to his concluding coda on modern theology. Mirroring its central concern – the participatory and synthesizing symbol – *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Faith* also implies a high level of its own author’s participation, frequently synthesising voices and perspectives, blending together Coleridge with Harter himself. Indeed, Harter’s sympathy with his subject occasionally leads to passages and paragraphs that seem to blur the line between the critic and Coleridge. The book opens, however, with a topic of terminology – the classic definition of “symbol” *contra* “allegory” – which finds Harter diverging from Coleridge, and many Coleridgeans. In Chapter 1, Harter seeks to (re)assimilate the symbol within a broader tradition of “allegorical vision” that reaches back to Hellenic and biblical legacies. For Harter, Coleridge’s own “distinction between allegory and symbol is misleading because it masks both symbol’s historical relation to allegory and the allegorical significance of Coleridge’s own symbol”. Rather than the “symbol vs. allegory” dichotomy enshrined in Romantic and Romanticist traditions, Harter prefers instead to distinguish between different types of allegory, and most primarily, between allegory which is “abstract” and “one-dimensional”, and allegory which is “interpretive” and “poetic”. It is this latter allegory which Harter aligns with Coleridge’s symbol, appealing to their shared “polysemeity” and inexhaustible interpretive potential.

It is the core of *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Faith* – its middle chapters, treating Coleridge’s “middle period” – where Harter’s treatment is most substantive and significant. Although constrained in historical breadth, centered on three years of publication merely (1816-18), Harter’s treatment is impressive in its ample scope, skillfully negotiating a wide variety of political, aesthetic, and theological concerns. Addressing Coleridge’s complex engagement with predecessors from antiquity to the Enlightenment, Harter offers sensitive readings of the philosophic and exegetical foregrounds to *The Statesman’s*

*Manual*, the first volume of the *Biographia Literaria*, and *The Friend*, accenting, for example, how Robert Lowth's "mystical allegory" intervenes to complicate Coleridge's debts to Schelling. As Harter surveys this constellation of influence, it is Kant who perhaps unsurprisingly emerges most insistently. In his splendid Chapter 3 – "The Philosophy of Faith and the Symbolic Imagination" – Harter supplies a superb reading of Coleridge's conscious revisions of the Kantian project, emphasizing in particular their critical divergence on intellectual intuition, and the regulative/constitutive divide in the "ideas of reason". It is the remarkable strength and rewarding insights of such treatments that may lead some readers to regret that Harter's succinct focus prevents his treatment of the later Coleridge; while *Aids to Reflection* is briefly treated in Chapter 6, Harter's parameters lead to the exclusion of texts such as "On the Prometheus of Aeschylus" (1825; pub. 1834) – an essay remarkable not only for introducing Schelling to the term "tautegorical", but also for its rare application of Coleridge's symbology, finding him decidedly less "hesitant to give specific examples".

As Harter's book vigorously resists recent criticism of Coleridge's symbol as either contradictory or incoherent, it marks a valuable contribution to this durable conversation within Coleridge studies and beyond, and will doubtless provoke a variety of scholarly responses. The book is energetic and elegant, and I find its insightful apology for Coleridge's ongoing significance to be convincing; however, regardless of where readers stand in the symbol debate, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Faith* merits serious and sustained attention, and will be read, and re-read, with reward. Reflecting Coleridge's own "rhetorical labyrinth", there is not only "pleasure and purpose" – but also great profit – in traversing the "mazy page" of Harter's study, a book whose own complexity impressively suits its Coleridgean origins.