

Coleridge's Later Poetry.

Morton D. Paley,

Oxford, Clarendon Press 1996, xii+147 pp

Reviewed by: Edoardo Zuccato, I.U.L.M., Milan (Italy)

While the canon revisers are unburying many forgotten writers, several areas in the works of the canonised figures remain obscure or vague even to their scholars. One such area is Coleridge's later poetry, which to my knowledge had never been the specific object of any book before Morton Paley's. Its material has been divided thematically into five chapters which analyse groups of poems on the same subject (Hope, Negation, Self, Love, Epitaphs).

An introduction provides readers with the literary and biographical backgrounds necessary for a discussion of the poems, and it summarises the results of the study as well as the critical guidelines behind them. It was Coleridge himself, as Paley shows, that repeatedly belittled the poetry of his later years 'to avoid comparisons with his greatest poems' in two main ways: by lamenting the loss of his creative powers (in poems whose quality often subverts their own case), and by defining it 'as something other than poetry' (p. 2). Paley also argues that the dominant modes of Coleridge's later verse can be traced to his early poetry, since besides the 'Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' there are for example 'Parliamentary Oscillators' and 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter'. A characteristic instance of his late mode is 'The Two Sisters', which is made up of 'intimately personal subject matter', 'discursive style', and 'personifications in a miniature allegory' (p. 36).

Paley believes that the turning-point of Coleridge's career as a poet was not the 'Dejection' ode, as might be expected, but 'To William Wordsworth'. This often ambiguous text would represent, among other things, Coleridge's definitive farewell to his role of oracular poet, which he left to Wordsworth. From that time, Coleridge's public mask as a poet was a different one. The style he developed often drew on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century devices such as personification and allegory; the themes he explored revolve round the concept of loss. Paley points out that Coleridge's mask, unlike Yeats's, is a simplified exaggeration 'of the poet's subjectivity, through which he can present painful aspects of his existence in verbal constructions that remain under his control' (p. 94).

Metaphysical loss is mainly discussed in the chapter on 'Negation', where the analysis of the variants of what he calls the 'Limbo constellation' sheds light on some of Coleridge's most enigmatic poems. Nature is now 'an unreadable text', and this is another crucial reason why the poet cannot be the messenger of supernatural truth. The process of self-definition reappears in a number of poems written between 1816 and 1819, when Coleridge established himself as a major thinker and lecturer. They include some of his best-known late poems, such as 'Youth and Age' and 'Work without Hope'. All of them include comparisons between a happier past and the present, when the poet is sundered both from nature and the other humans.

This is even clearer in the following chapter, which discusses the poems on 'Love', or, better, the verbal strategies he developed to cope with its absence. The theme is a central one in the European tradition from the troubadours onwards, and Coleridge rephrased it in his own terms in texts which combine 'faery' subject-matter, an intimate tone, 'a thinly disguised eroticism', and technical devices like personification or allegory (p. 98). Excluding 'Alice du Clos', which goes back to the ballad style, these poems can be linked to seventeenth-century poetry specifically, and to the Petrarchan tradition at large. Paley states that in 'Constancy to an Ideal Object' Coleridge's attitude has 'much in common with the love-psychology' of the *stil novo* poets

(p.100); however, he knew nothing about them, and the traces that have been detected in two texts, in my opinion, are too vague to be significant.

The central idea in these poems is that hope, in any sense, cannot live without love and vice versa. Coleridge's metaphysical and existential anxieties found their most concise expression in the 'Epitaph', the last outcome of a long-standing interest whose first instance is the bathetic 'A Tombless Epitaph'. The 'Epitaph' is a carefully-wrought poem which combines the features of classical epigraphs and their Renaissance imitations with the tradition of 'church yard Christian Verses' and personal contributions like the 'death in life' motif. Paley's book closes on Coleridge's last effort, which focussed on a well-known pun on his own name (S.T.C.=ESTESE=more or less, the Greek for 'he hath stood'): a gesture of ultimate narcissism which suits a great Romantic perfectly.

Though the structure of Paley's study is neat, some aspects would have been investigated more deeply. In other words, I think that the limits of his work do not lie in what is discussed in it, which is intriguing, but in what has been left out, that is a great deal of material. Of course I am not claiming that every single poem composed by Coleridge after a certain date should have been analysed, which would be unreasonable or in any case pedantic. However, there are important areas of Coleridge's late verse that are not even mentioned in Paley's study: I am thinking of many beautiful fragments like 'The Netherlands', where visionariness turns into a sort of imagism, thereby anticipating the Modernist development of Romanticism in another way besides the above-mentioned revival of Baroque forms such as allegory; or occasional poems -- some of them fragments -- on the art of writing and the life of a poet which are often lighter in tone, such as 'The Reproof and Reply', 'Lines to a Comic Author, on an Abusive Review', and 'To the Young Artist Kayser of Kaserwerth'; or openly political verse (as opposed to poems with political implications though on subjects other than politics), from 'The Madman and the Lethargist' to 'A Character' and beyond; or philosophical and theological speculations like 'Sancti Dominici Pallium' and the important 'Self-Knowledge', which often possess a political element; or translations (from Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Italian) and imitations, which means that Coleridge's return to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century forms like personification must be set in a wider context, where the passage from translation to original verse must not be seen as a quantum jump, as his own literary theory implied, but as a gradual transition from translation (for example, 'Faith, Hope, and Charity' from Guarini), to partial imitation (see 'A Tombless Epitaph'), to new texts prompted by translation (for instance, 'Love, Hope, and Patience in Education', whose general idea is based on the text of Guarini just mentioned). At the end of this spectrum, even a poem like 'To William Wordsworth' might be considered as a sort of loose imitation, being a panegyric of Wordsworth written in the style of 'The Prelude'.

This brings us back to another crucial problem, that is, the starting-point of Coleridge's late poetry. Though a specific date will always be the result of arbitrary choice, I believe that the 'Dejection' ode is still the best option. 'To William Wordsworth', composed in 1807, conceals some relevant events in the transition from the early to the later poetry. Between 1802 and 1807 Coleridge's main poetic projects were 'The Soother of Absence', a collection of love poems linked to his unreciprocated love for Sara Hutchinson, and an 'Essay on Metrics': he found material for both in Italian poetry, whose study he undertook during his period in Malta and Italy and the years following it. It is true that Coleridge's speculations on hope and love cannot merely be traced back to his sentimental frustration, but it is very difficult to understand them without taking into due account the origin of his preoccupations and the new interests he developed between 1802 and 1806. Given his moral dislike of the eighteenth century, he would not have

returned so often to neoclassical devices such as personification and allegory and to forms such as imitation if he had not found them in the poetic tradition of Renaissance Italy.

An inevitable consequence is that Paley's study fails to discuss the vital interaction among all these interests of Coleridge, and to set them in the context of the cultural debate of their time: for example, theology, politics, and intellectuals are the themes of *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, and also appear in 'The Garden of Boccaccio' (an interesting intertwining of the revival of learning with an outline of Coleridge's own cultural development), in 'Love, Hope and Patience in Education' (on the role of intellectuals again), and in several other texts. A wider perspective would also have benefited the discussion of topics such as his return to eighteenth-century poetic modes and figures of speech. My opinion is that the complexity of Coleridge's later poetry is great, and though Morton Paley has made a significant contribution to our understanding of some of its central elements, a thorough study on the subject remains to be written.

Copyright © Contributor 2003 - All rights reserved