J. C. C. Mays is the editor of the Poetical Works in the Bollingen Collected Coleridge and surely the greatest living authority on Coleridge's poetry. So the publication of this book signifies an important and welcome event in Coleridge studies. The book falls into seven chapters whose respective topics Mays helpfully outlines in his Introduction (3-5). Reviewing three major phases in the history of the reception of Coleridge's poetry, Chapter 1 argues that while various editions have sometimes chosen different poems, the basis of selection has unfortunately been the biographical model of early brilliance and successive decline. Chapter 2 explores Coleridge's compositional purposes in writing poetry and construes the poems as variations on the enduring "plot" of his attempt to accommodate an abiding sense of absence. After Chapter 3 reconstructs the nature and rationale of Coleridge's prosodic and syntactical experiments, Chapter 4 shows how, despite their centrifugal brilliance, the "famous three"--"The Rime," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan"--internalize ballad conventions and thus express the "center" of Coleridge's poetic endeavors. Respectively examining the plays and the short poems of his later years, Chapters 5 and 6 show how the compositional principles and situational norms that Coleridge established in his early work also shape his late poetry. Chapter 7 concludes the book by explaining the relationship between life and idea in
Coleridge's poetry, the lyricism of his characteristic work, and the continuing relevance of his poetry to contemporary poets and readers. All told, Mays defines Coleridge as an incessant experimenter and, after about 1805, the master of a subtle, nuanced lyricism: "The light touch, not the full-frontal assault on the sublime, was where the poet of the Affections (as opposed to Imagination) was at his best" (93). In a quietly impassioned and unabashedly personal way, Mays thus defends the continuing vitality of Coleridge's poetic career.

In light of this purpose, Mays's second and third chapters are crucial to his argument and therefore most deserving of close scrutiny. In Chapter 3, which justifies the book's title by arguing that Coleridge relentlessly experimented with prosody and style, Mays presents Coleridge as a New Poet "adjusting the claims of two rival systems of understanding and organizing verse" (67): one Classical and based on syllabic pattern, the other vernacular and dedicated to maintaining an equal number of stresses in each line regardless of the number of syllables. Unsurprisingly, Coleridge started out in the Classical camp; like most eighteenth-century practitioners, he followed quantitative norms of scansion. But after using accentual stresses to bring the speaking voice into his poems, he tried to combine the two systems. As early as the 1796 version of "The Eolian Harp," Mays shows, Coleridge committed himself to this combination. He then continued his experiments with "grammetrics" in the other conversation poems as well as in "The Ancient Mariner," where his efforts to expand the ballad stanza led naturally to the more radical innovations of "Christabel." The chapter is filled with perceptive commentary on formal issues, and I found it all the more
instructive because of its many references to available prosodic analyses with which, I ruefully confess, I was wholly unfamiliar. But the supervening importance of the chapter remains its claim that Coleridge was above all a synthesizing prosodist. To engage "the essential Coleridge," Mays argues, we must recognize that the common thread and defining enterprise of his poetic career was his search for a poetics that would creatively blend quantitative metrical feet with accentual stress.

Anticipating Chapter 3, Chapter 2 defines the kind of poetry produced by this approach to poetic composition. Coleridge, Mays claims, typically composed by entering a private mental space. While pouring his major intellectual ambitions into prose forms, he reserved poetry for lyrical self-exploration, adapting metrical language to probe "emotions below the level of thought" (43), by which Mays chiefly seems to mean elements of Coleridge's "private mythology" (51), feelings fundamental to his life and being. Beginning with an original sense of loss, incompletion, and yearning for wholeness, the myth turns to strategies of recovery, especially by various types of withdrawal into dream. So while we often gloss the opening solitudes of Coleridge's poetry biographically, the absences with which the poems begin signify --for Mays-- an archetypal situation. In approaching a poem by Coleridge, he writes, "one must therefore imagine the separate space Coleridge entered when he began to compose verse as a kind of memory theater in which a small cast of actors rehearse what is in the end the same plot over and over again in a variety of ways, as if to enact a recurring trauma that can never achieve definitive
performance" (43). By reading poems as variations on this plot, Mays sets many of them in a new and rewarding light. At one point, for instance, he brilliantly challenges "the ground plan of what Abrams calls the Greater Romantic Lyric" (57) by showing that Coleridge's meditative lyrics--and in different ways the supernatural poems as well--characteristically dramatize two-part epiphanies (the second an attempt to discipline and contain the first) and incomplete returns-upon-themselves (56-61). But Mays seeks in this chapter not so much to read individual poems as to elucidate an encompassing pattern. "Coleridge," he declares, "fixed early on the theme of incompleteness and yearning, bolstering it with a sense of buoyancy lost as youth gave way to manhood, and it was never fundamentally revised" (52-53). His "command over what he wrote developed, but the plotline hardly at all because it was a situation to come to terms with" (56), and one with which he never made his final peace.

Mays can redefine the stylistic and emotional purposes of Coleridge's verse because he knows all of it well enough to identify linkages and recurrent elements between poems spanning the poet's entire career. His argument must be taken with the utmost seriousness, not only on its own ground, but also for the breadth of learning and the interpretive flair that supports the argument and unfurls its implications. Generous, intelligent, and acutely responsive to Coleridge's poetry, every chapter of this book made me feel enormously indebted to it. Yet I remain very far from the ideal reader of this book, for it recurrently employed premises and reached conclusions that left me on the outside looking in.
Despite Mays's many glances at the world of issues beyond formalism, I was troubled by the separatist tendency of his formalist argument. As noted above, Mays insists that Coleridge composed from a private mental site. "[T]he poetry," he writes, "is an entry into another world and its contacts with the life of the author are tangential. It is the man who wrote, not the man who sat down to breakfast, who is at the center of the enterprise the Bollingen edition celebrates" (38). Distinctions between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates," in Eliot's famous phrase, have a distinguished history in twentieth- and twenty-first century literary criticism. But how well can they withstand Coleridge's awareness that enclosed bowers and mental topographies are invariably invaded by rising rivers and intrusive voices of some sort? For some time now, even as many Romanticists have challenged the notion of a privileged interiority in Romantic poetry as a whole, the most influential Coleridgeans have been reconstructing the various filiations that tie his poetry to the world. In a book as informed as this one, it is surprising how much of this recent scholarship--locating Coleridge's poems in the context of his changing political views, his complex theological speculations, his dialogic struggles with Wordsworth, and more--does not even appear in Mays's Bibliography.

He might fairly retort that his book unveils the inner life of Coleridge's poems. But this inner life hardly excludes the events of his outer one; they are entangled in the formalist ventures and recurring plots that Mays maps so shrewdly. On one hand, when Mays notes that the despondent opening of Coleridge's 1802 verse "Letter" to Sara Hutchinson marks "a habitual starting
point, not the record of a unique moment of crisis" (46), he makes an excellent point. On the other hand, the poem is nonetheless shaped by the specific circumstances of Coleridge's life in 1802--his increasing opium dependency, his hopeless love for Sara, changes imminent in his social life and relationship with Wordsworth--and these differentiating specifics help to explain the poem. In subordinating the local, biographical context of Coleridge's poems to the recurrent, archetypal "plot" of loss and recovery, Mays tends to promote pattern over particularity.

But suppose one grants that the "essential Coleridge," as Mays claims, created a stylistically experimental poetry which, in his later years, was devoted to private lyrical reflection and centered on an archetypal life-myth. Why then value the later poems as much as the earlier ones, which seem more intimately engaged both with Coleridge's personal life and with the life of his times? Ten years ago, in reviewing the Bollingen Poetical Works, Seamus Perry saluted Mays for presenting a new and previously unknown Coleridge. But "whether it will change which poems we mostly turn to read," he added, "is another thing" (RES, ns 54 [2003], 699). It is a pertinent question here too, for as Mays remarks in the beginning (8), his interpretive study collaborates with his edition to defend Coleridge's poetic practice and accomplishment.

Clearly, Mays seeks to vindicate that achievement in what he considers its entirety: to make the later poems canonical not just between the covers of his edition but within the classroom and in scholarly assessments as well. Repeatedly, therefore, Mays must assure us that during his mid- and late career,
Coleridge cultivated a different but not devalued mode of verse: that when he resigned the mantle of philosophic poet to Wordsworth and turned to writing occasional verse, this "more congenial agenda" allowed for "liberation into the fulfillment of everything he had hitherto been most deeply engaged upon" (180). Likewise, we are told, the poetry written after the three supernatural masterpieces "ranges less widely, or, better say, ranges with more concentrated purpose and awareness" (9); and the result was by no means a poetry of "foreshortened pretensions," for Coleridge's purpose as a poet "was modest, but not an abdication" (42). Yet in my opinion, the verse Coleridge wrote after "To William Wordsworth" generally does qualify as an abdication of sorts, and it remains intrinsically less interesting and less moving than the poems of Coleridge's radical years and the handful of towering canonical texts that currently dominate scholarship on his poetry.

So I did not find Mays's argument wholly convincing. I am nonetheless happy to grant that the book ranges over key issues brilliantly and forced me to reconsider my entire sense of Coleridge's poetic purposes and achievement. This is a learned, vital, and ambitious reformulation of Coleridge's poetics, the interests that possessed him as a poet, and the arc of his poetic career. It is energized throughout by Mays's concentration on the truly central questions of how and why Coleridge wrote poetry.

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