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Coleridge's Assertion of Religion: Essays on the 'Opus Maximum'

(Leuven: Peeters, 2006)

by Jeffrey Barbeau

GROWING OUT OF a postgraduate seminar and a one-day conference, both held at Clare College, Cambridge, this collection of essays is the first published volume devoted specifically to the *Opus Maximum*. The contributions fall roughly into either of two categories, the analytic (concerned with the argumentation of the *Opus Maximum* texts themselves) and the contextualizing (concerned with the place of the *Opus Maximum* in Coleridge's intellectual development or its relation to particular schools of philosophical and theological thought). Examples of the former include Luke Wright's essay on the systematicity of the *Opus Maximum* fragments, Murray Evans's on the concept of will, and Alan Gregory's on personhood; examples of the latter include James Vigus's essay on literariness, Jeffrey Barbeau's on natural theology, and Nicholas Reid's on the Logos as unifying principle.

Much of the volume's interest, however, arises from the substantial differences of focus, even tensions, among the individual chapters. Both Evans and Vigus analyze the rhetoric of the *Opus Maximum*, but to different ends: one establishing the philosophical function of repetition; the other, the prominence of literary allusion in the most 'unliterary' of Coleridge's prose writings. While Evans, offering a glimpse of his forthcoming monograph on the *Opus Maximum*, finds Coleridge's concept of will philosophically coherent, Graham Davidson, informed by his familiarity with the whole of Coleridge's life and *oeuvre*, finds the same concept morally ambivalent. Douglas Hedley emphasizes Coleridge's general affinity with Christian Neoplatonism, Karen McLean his particular affinity with the pagan Plotinus. (By way of qualifying Coleridge's own apparent misunderstanding of Plotinus with respect to the transcendence of the One, Hedley criticizes Thomas McFarland for assimilating Plotinus to the 'pantheist tradition'; but he himself too readily assimilates Plotinus on the one hand and Schelling on the other to a specifically Christian Neoplatonism.)

The 'quest for system' to which Barbeau refers in his introductory essay fairly describes a number of essays in the collection itself: the quest, that is, to demonstrate that Coleridge indeed *had* a system, whether a system of which the *Opus Maximum* is the manifestation (as Wright contends) or to which it is a contribution (as Reid argues). But by tracing the development of the *Opus Maximum* back to the 1790s, Barbeau's introduction implies something else: that the fundamental continuity and most distinguishing characteristic of Coleridge's intellectual life consisted in an unrelenting search after truth, a search to which finally no system, no appropriated body of concepts, proved adequate. How little Coleridge's affirmation of Trinitarian Christianity, the

sincerity of which we need not doubt, resolved fundamental theological questions for him is revealed by his complex negotiation in the second decade of the nineteenth century with the vitalist monism of *Naturphilosophie* and his troubled reflections thereafter on the origins of evil. Of course, to seek truth presupposes that it is knowable, but the difficulty of reconciling this assumption with the formal demands of systematicity confronted Coleridge, as Daniel Hardy's essay reveals, no less in the *Opus Maximum* than in the project of the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*. Truth exceeds any system by which it might be known. One reason Coleridge retains his fascination for us is precisely that he cannot claim to offer a *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. Davidson seems to me to reach a similar conclusion when he observes the conflicts between Coleridge's lived experience and his conceptualization of the will.

This is not the place to rehearse the history of the publication of the *Opus Maximum*, a process probably more troubled and certainly more protracted than the composition of the original manuscripts. (In the event, John Beer's admirable concluding essay includes a sketch of that history.) But a few words of response to points raised by the contributors may be in order. That the edition eventually appeared with an introduction, annotations, and index is something of a wonder, for at various points during its production I was told that Princeton University Press was prepared to publish it without any of those features—and indeed not to publish it all. What Beer refers to as evidence of hastiness in the final stages of publication, such as the omission of a note identifying the source of the anecdote of Lieutenant Bowling in the 'Preface', was in fact the result of the press's decision—correct, I think, under the circumstances—not to supplement or revise Thomas McFarland's annotations. Hence the appearance of the text in Appendix 1 without any explanatory notes. My role in the edition was deliberately restricted, if that is the word, to editing and proofreading Coleridge's text and overseeing the proofreading and indexing of the volume as a whole.

As for the text itself, the dating and the ordering of the manuscripts are largely separate issues. The arguments advanced by Wright and Evans for arranging the fragments in a particular order are based on interpretations of the *Opus Maximum* as a single *work*. But my task was to date and edit a group of *manuscripts* that had been assigned by Kathleen Coburn and Thomas McFarland much earlier, and not without a degree of arbitrariness, to the *Opus Maximum* volume, a volume that (like the *Shorter Works and Fragments* and unlike the *Biographia*) was an editorial creation of the *Collected Works*. Would there have been a conference and collection devoted to the *Opus Maximum*, one wonders, if Coburn had included the manuscripts in the *Shorter Works and Fragments* instead of assigning them their own volume? In dating the manuscripts I assumed that Coleridge was likelier to have dictated passages already written in his own hand (e.g., in the *Notebooks* and the 'Essay on Faith') than to have done the reverse, but I made no assumptions about the relation of the relation of the so-called *Opus Maximum* manuscripts to one another. Thus I see no reason to

revise my dating of the fragments in light of Wright's criticisms, which are based merely on his own tendentious re-ordering. Unfortunately it was not possible to publish the edition as a binder of removable leaves so that readers could arrange the text as they prefer.

Whatever the faults of its presentation, the *Opus Maximum* is finally accessible without resort to a microfilm reader, and the essays on it in Coleridge's *Assertion of Religion* amply fulfil the promise of the volume's cover description to 'open new avenues for future discussion of pivotal themes in Coleridge's writings'. Not the least of the collection's virtues is to remind us that the writings of Coleridge's last fifteen years are no less significant—and no less worthy of interpretation—than those of his first thirty years.