The Poetic Forms of Life: Coleridge, Bushnell, and the Nature of Religious Language

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SPEAKING TO A PAIR OF STARRY-EYED VISITORS sometime around 1830, Coleridge boasted of his standing as a prominent thinker across the Atlantic: "Go to America if you have the opportunity; I am known there. I am a poor poet in England, but I am a great philosopher in America."[1] Assisted by James Marsh's "Preliminary Essay" to the first American edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1829), Coleridge's reputation steadily increased in the decades following his death. His place as a mediator of German theology and philosophy is plain enough. For many Americans, Coleridge was a fair substitute for reading Immanuel Kant or Friedrich Schleiermacher—and the Englishman required only a fraction of the effort.[2] By 1842, Ralph Waldo Emerson noted the report that "whole shelvesful" of *Aids to Reflection* were sold yearly to students in Massachusetts' rising Andover Theological Seminary.

Among the most prominent North American disciples of S. T. Coleridge is the Congregationalist pastor, theologian, and "Father of American Liberal Theology," Horace Bushnell (1802–76). After the New England Puritan Jonathan Edwards, Bushnell is arguably the leading Christian theologian in American history. He initiated a controversial, liberal theological agenda through numerous published works over the course of his life, including *God in Christ* (1849), *Christian Nurture* (1861), *Christ in Theology* (1851), *Nature and the Supernatural* (1858), and *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (1866). He originally intended to pursue a career in law and began his studies at the Yale Law School around 1830, but instead pursued Christian ministry after experiencing a religious conversion during a revival on Yale's campus in 1831. In 1833, Bushnell took up the pastorate of the Congregationalist North Church of Hartford, Connecticut (serving from 1833–59).

His early years of ministry were relatively quiet ones, but his reputation as a noted public figure emerged in subsequent decades. Bushnell served his community and beyond as a pastor, sought-after lecturer, proponent of higher education, and even a city planner who influenced the emergence of publicly funded parks in the United States. His chief source of notoriety, however, derives from the numerous theological writings that brought him as much fame as scrutiny during his adult life. Above all, it was the publication of *God in Christ* (1849) that signaled Bushnell's rising leadership in the American churches. *God in Christ* was subject equally to strong criticism and approbation; opponents were so distressed that they unsuccessfully charged him with heresy

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[1] Quoted in T[homas] Wemyss Reid, *The Life, Letters, and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes*, third edition (London: Cassell, 1891), 2:432.

[2] Claude Welch claimed that "Coleridge may be seen as the real turning point into the theology of the nineteenth century. He was as important for British and American thought as were Schleiermacher and Hegel" (*Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, vol. 1, 1799–1870* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972], 112.

in the Connecticut General Association of Congregational Ministers in 1850.

While it is a commonplace to assert Coleridge's general influence on Bushnell's thought, the specific form of his influence has always been more difficult to pin down. Generalities abound in the literature. Robert Edwards's biography, for example, summarily notes the marked impact Coleridge had on Bushnell compared to his erstwhile professor at Yale, the famed New Haven theologian Nathaniel William Taylor (1786–1858): "If Nathaniel Taylor opened the door a few inches for him on new theological horizons, Coleridge flung it wide, knocking over a good deal of familiar spiritual furniture in the process."[3] Conrad Cherry, whose work contains one of the best accounts of Coleridge's influence on American thought, rightly indicates that Bushnell first read STC while at Yale but came more decisively under his influence "after he had taken up residence in Hartford." Cherry's thematic synopsis, however, ambiguously concludes that Bushnell "adopted uncritically" many of Coleridge's key insights and "brought all of them to bear upon his own American theological situation."[4]

The most complete analysis of Bushnell's conception of language remains Donald Crosby's study, *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language, in the Context of Other Nineteenth-Century Philosophies of Language*, which compares Coleridge and Bushnell extensively but concludes only that the former had "provided seed-thoughts" while the latter "could not even with full propriety be regarded as a disciple of Coleridge, for he was first and foremost a disciple of his own experience … He found a brother in the Englishman, not a master."[5] Catherine Albanese recognizes Coleridge's impact on Bushnell's theory of language through *Aids to Reflection*, which "attracted almost a cult following among those drawn to literature, philosophy, and religion from a romantic perspective," but quickly dismisses his influence in favor of Emerson, Swedenborg, and even a personal encounter with a clairvoyant during a trip to California.[6] Most recently, Philip Aherne has included Bushnell in his wide-ranging survey of Coleridge's legacy in Britain and North America in the century after his death.[7] Aherne perceptively notes that the Hartford theologian served as one of two primary avenues for Coleridge's influence in North America, and he further remarks that Bushnell "emulated Coleridge's verbal intellect in his sermons," drawing on his affirmation of a "moral intuition" in matters of faith and doubt.[8] While these are all helpful accounts of Coleridge's general influence on Bushnell, they all broadly conceptualize the nature of their relationship.

I suggest Coleridge's influence on Bushnell should be associated directly

[3] Robert L. Edwards, *Of Singular Genius, Of Singular Grace* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 37.

[4] Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination: From Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 161, 168.

[5] Donald A. Crosby, *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language, in the Context of Other Nineteenth-Century Philosophies of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 106–07.

[6] Catherine L. Albanese, "Horace Bushnell among the Metaphysicians," *Church History* 79 (2010): 614–53, esp. 623–24 and 634.

[7] Philip Aherne, *The Coleridge Legacy: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Intellectual Legacy in Britain and America, 1834–1934* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[8] Aherne, *The Coleridge Legacy*, 134–36, 141.

with Bushnell's mystical and intellectual conversion in 1848. More specifically, re-reading Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* revolutionized Bushnell's understanding of language, bringing a fresh awareness of the poetic and symbolic nature of words representing thought. Bushnell never duplicated Coleridge's views but worked from insights he gleaned from *Aids to Reflection* in his influential "Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language" in *God in Christ* (1848). He thereby serves as an exemplary case study for understanding Coleridge's influence on other readers and writers in the century after his death, illustrating the tendency to discover in him not a source for specific beliefs to be duplicated so much as an actuating influence whose writings prompted new avenues of theological and philosophical reflection.

Mystical Experience

The standard account of Bushnell's rise to prominence involves a peculiar mystical experience in February 1848. Five years earlier, his only son Horace Apthorp Bushnell died of a brain disorder; he was just four years old. According to Bushnell's wife, their son's unexpected death led her husband to new awareness of the Father's loss of Christ in the crucifixion: it was, in his wife's use of Edward Irving's phraseology, a "Glorious exchange" of sorrow for expectation and faith in the Son of God.[9] In 1847, Bushnell began reading Thomas Upham's biography of the mystic Madame Guyon (1648–1717) as well as Upham's *Principles of the Interior or Hidden Life*.[10] These works of mystical theology inspired him to a greater appreciation of the experience of divine life in the soul. Upham describes the "hidden" or "inner" life as "a life grafted into another life. It is the life of the soul incorporated into the life of Christ."[11] Bushnell's perusal of these mystical works apparently led to the momentous experience of February 1848, as his daughter later explained: "On an early morning of February, his wife awoke, to hear that the light they had waited for, more than they that watch for the morning, had risen indeed. She asked, 'What have you seen?' He replied, 'The gospel.' It came to him at last, after all his thought and study, not as something reasoned out, but as an inspiration,—a revelation from the mind of God himself."[12]

The immediate fruit of Bushnell's awakening was a sermon preached from the pulpit at North Church in Hartford: "Christ the Form of the Soul." According to his wife, this sermon captured the vitality of his experience, especially "his spiritually illuminated conception of Christ, as the indwelling, formative life of the soul,—the new-creating power of righteousness for humanity."[13] The work, which remained in manuscript until mention of it in the *Life and Letters* encouraged its posthumous publication in *The Spirit in Man*

[9] Mary Cheney Bushnell, *Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), 191; Edwards, *Of Singular Genius*, 62.

[10] Thomas C. Upham, *Life and Religious Opinions and Experience of Madame de La Mothe Guyon*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847); idem., *Principles of the Interior or Hidden Life*, third edition (Boston: Waite, Peirce, & Co., 1845).

[11] Upham, *Principles*, 12.

[12] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 192.

[13] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 192.

(1903), mirrors the language of Madame Guyon and Upham. Upham's instruction that "The old life perishes, in order that there may be a new creation in Christ. The deformity of the ancient nature passes away, and the image of Christ in the soul takes its place,"[14] finds a parallel in Bushnell's claim that "[t]he great design of God in the incarnation of his Son is to form a divine life in you. It is to produce a Christ in the image of your soul, and to set you on the footing of a brother with the divine Word himself."[15] The mystical experience was followed by an equally mystical sermon, espousing the need for the experience of divine life in the soul.

According to his wife, Bushnell extended the ideas captured in the mystical experience and subsequent sermon with *God in Christ*, which "more adequately set forth" his new understanding of Christ "as the indwelling, formative life of the soul."[16] But closer examination of *God in Christ*, which compiles three lectures delivered at Yale (August 1848), Harvard (July 1848), and Andover Theological Seminary (September 1848) with a "Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language," indicates that his re-examination of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* proved more decisive for the translation of his mystical experience into theological form than many recognize.[17]

No one doubts that Coleridge influenced Bushnell's thinking. But perhaps his new vision of the gospel was less a "revelation from the mind of God" as an interior process corresponding to his study of not only French and American mysticism, but also English romanticism. Bushnell quietly and somewhat cryptically acknowledges a deeper source of indebtedness in his "Dissertation" in *God in Christ*:

> It costs me no mortification, to confess that the most fructifying writer I ever read, was one in whom I was, at first, able only to see glimpses, or gleams of truth; one whom it required years of study and reflection, of patient suspension and laborious self-questioning, to be able fully to understand; and, indeed, whom I never since have read, at all, save in a chapter or two, which I glanced over, just to see how obvious and clear, what before was impossible, had now become.[18]

Could it be that Coleridge's work mediated the mystical experience and subsequent efforts to explain his new perspective on faith?

Tracing the few references to Coleridge in the *Life and Letters* helps to reconstruct the extent and even timing of Bushnell's crucial debt. The most frequently cited evidence of his allegiance to Coleridge comes from a telling conversation about literary influence:

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[14] Upham, *Principles*, 240.

[15] Horace Bushnell, "Christ the Form of the Soul," in *The Spirit in Man: Sermons and Selections*, Centenary Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 48–9.

[16] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 192.

[17] Coleridge's theory of language has a mystical, Kabbalistic quality that likely encouraged the form of Bushnell's encounter; for more on Coleridge's theory, see Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (New York: St. Martins, 1991), ch. 6.

[18] Horace Bushnell, *God in Christ. Three Discourses, delivered at New Haven, Cambridge, and Andover, with a preliminary dissertation on language* (Hartford: Brown and Parsons, 1849), 87.

> One night, as he lay, with two friends, before the camp-fire, the conversation turned upon authors. One by one the literary champions went down under his lance, until the field was pretty thick with the slain. One then quietly asked him what authors he did like. Hesitating a little, and probably perceiving the snare, he mentioned two or three, but finally demolished them all, save Coleridge. I have heard him say that he was more indebted to Coleridge than to any extra-Scriptural author.[19]

The comment certainly indicates the extent of Bushnell's allegiance to Coleridge. But what had he discovered? He learned two cardinal lessons under Coleridge's tutelage. Above all, Coleridge provided him with a writer's workshop on the use of words. According to John T. Sewall, Bushnell believed that the writings of Coleridge, especially *Aids to Reflection*, helped him to develop as an author, moving from a provincial use of language to a more advanced mode of writing and thinking:

> By-and-by it fell to me to begin the reading of Coleridge. For a whole half year I was buried under his "Aids to Reflection," and trying vainly to look up through. I was quite sure that I saw a star glimmer, but I could not quite see the stars. My habit was only landscape before; but now I saw enough to convince me of a whole other world somewhere overhead, a range of realities in higher tier, that I must climb after, and, if possible, apprehend.[20]

He was no longer limited by the cast of language drawn from a "country family" in "country society." While William Paley provided something of a "plain go-afoot style" that served him for a time, Coleridge lifted Bushnell's writing to higher spheres of expression: "Finding the air full of wings about me, buoyant all and free, I have let them come under and lift. The second, third, and thirtieth senses of words—all but the physical first sense—belong to the empyrean, and are given, as we see in the prophets, to be inspired by."[21] Words came alive to the possibilities of the range of meanings—a range, he is careful to add, according to their nature, "and not *contrary* to it."

Laboring under Coleridge's weighty tome, Bushnell finally came to a place of understanding. His pivotal insight, mystical in tone, exemplifies the unfolding of a new way to *use* language because he now understood the complex relationship between physical objects and intellectual ideas: "My powers seemed to me more than doubled; and where was the language to serve me in such higher thoughts as I might have? In this mood or exigency; I discovered how language built on physical images is itself two stories high, and is, in fact, an outfit for a double range of uses. In one it is literal, naming so many roots, or facts of form; in the other it is figure, figure on figure, clean beyond the dictionaries, for whatever it can properly signify."[22]

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[19] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 499; perhaps an account from the late 1860s.
[20] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 209.
[21] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 209.
[22] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 209.

The Science of Words

Bushnell was much like many of his North American contemporaries for whom Coleridge's works tended not to inspire a repetition and re-duplication of a specific set of beliefs so much as the production of a new set of questions and a new way of thinking about contemporary issues. In Aherne's estimation, the reason Coleridge was so influential is actually rather simple: he established a distinctly pedagogical mission in the last two decades of his life. His goal, "to teach young men how to think independently," fundamentally shaped his legacy: "Independency from Coleridge's ideas was … an essential component of applying his message."[23] According to the nineteenth-century American philosopher Noah Porter, *Aids to Reflection* "taught us the art of thinking, or of referring facts to principles, and of looking below the phenomena of the moment or the age to the imperishable truths which give them their meaning and value."[24] In order to understand how Coleridge's writings transformed Bushnell, a closer look at his view of language will be useful.

The right use of words—religious or otherwise—was at the heart of Coleridge's late pedagogical project. Not surprisingly, reflection on language, including "the value of the Science of Words, their use and abuse," is one of the primary concerns of *Aids to Reflection* (6–7). Extending his previous discussion of biblical authority in *the Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge focuses especially on the language of Scripture, which he describes (drawing on Leighton) as "the language of the Children of Men" (AR 93).[25] But he makes Leighton's claim even more specific by extending the initial aphorism: Biblical language, he claims, relies on the "language of the Affections which they excite in us; on sensible objects, neither metaphysically, as they are known by superior intelligences; nor theoretically, as they would be seen by us were we placed in the Sun; but as they are represented by our human senses in our present relative position" (93–94). This passage re-orientates a reader's attention to the psychological aspect of biblical language, which expresses divine ideas by way of linguistic accommodations and relies on figures of sensory experience to convey spiritual truths. Note well: Coleridge believes that "nine times in ten" the literal sense of Scripture is the best interpretation (94). He questions the authenticity of some historical accounts in his notebooks and letters, to be sure, but his focus in *Aids to Reflection* is more theological than historical. When dealing with spiritual matters—particularly when the issue involves the expression of beliefs related to union with God—the unqualified literal sense alone simply will not suffice.

Later in *Aids to Reflection*, the religious dimension of the "science of words" becomes more pronounced, driving much of the theological content of the book. In fact, behind Coleridge's famous dictum that "Christianity is not a Theory, or a Speculation but a *Life*. Not a *Philosophy* of Life, but a Life and a living Process" (202) is a stark reminder of the same limitations of language to

[23] Aherne, *The Coleridge Legacy*, 284–85.
[24] Aherne, *The Coleridge Legacy*, 284.
[25] Aphorism XIV of "Moral and Religious Aphorisms" (AR 93–95).

which he had already alluded.[26] He explains that in matters of divinity, words can only convey truth by way of either analogies or metaphors: "*Analogies* are used in aid of *Conviction*: *Metaphors*, as means of *Illustration*" (205). Analogies express identity through intelligible forms, most often when a lower power or principle is used to identify an idea of "higher dignity," as Jesus himself expressed the idea of spiritual re-birth in John 3:6 ("That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"). Metaphors, however, differ from analogies by illustrating a notion by similarity rather than identity, as when comparable relationships of cause and effect convey a relationship. When a mis-identification of a similarity of effects for an identity of causes (particularly with reference to the divine) takes place, there is "a confusion of metaphor with analogy" (206).

Coleridge recognized the theological implications of such a distinction and offers an extended illustration of how metaphorical language shapes doctrinal claims about the redemptive work of Christ.[27] According to him, four metaphors appear most frequently in the Christian tradition: sin offerings, reconciliation, ransom, and the satisfaction of a debt. All four are metaphors that can be traced back to the language of Paul in the New Testament. In this, Paul's description of the work of Christ differs from the presentation given by John the Apostle, whom Coleridge consistently refers to as the Evangelist *according to the Spirit* (AR 322).[28] Whereas John "enunciates the fact itself" as best a mind can conceive the matter (and, thus, using the same kind in a lower dignity) (322), Paul's account of redemption depends on metaphors that illustrate the divine mystery through examples of similar cause and effect relationships. "Would you be grateful to one who had ransomed you from slavery under a bitter foe, or who brought you out of Captivity?", Coleridge asks, "Here is redemption from a far direr slavery, the slavery of Sin unto Death!" (325).

Consider the satisfaction of a debt. Coleridge complains that some have regarded the debt of sin a "sum total" that must be accounted for through a torment "paid in full by the Son of God incarnate" (327). The forgiveness of a debt, a biblical metaphor, conveys the experience of an effect of an act—an effect that cannot be identified with the cause itself without confusion. Whereas John typically focuses on the cause of the work in analogies that name Christ, Paul relies on metaphors to illustrate the experience of effects in familiar events in everyday life:

> this metaphorical *Naming* of the transcendent Causative Act through the medium of its proper effects from Actions and Causes of familiar occurrence connected with the former by similarity of Result, has been

[26] Aphorism VII of "Aphorisms on Spiritual Religion B (AR 196–206).

[27] Aphorisms XIX of "Aphorisms on Spiritual Religion B (AR 316–39). Redemption is itself a metaphorical term, associated with the idea of "ransom." For a fuller account of Coleridge's ideas about redemption, see Jeffrey W. Barbeau, "Coleridge, Christology, and the Language of Redemption," *Anglican Theological Review* 93 (2011): 263–82; see also, *Coleridge's Writings*, vol. 3, *On Language*, ed. A. C. Goodson (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), ch. 7.

[28] On Coleridge's assessment of biblical authors, see Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), esp. ch. 4–5.

> mistaken for an intended designation of the essential character of the Causative Act itself; and that thus Divines have interpreted *de omni* what was spoken *de singulo*, and magnified a *partial equation* into a *total identity*.
> (AR 333)

The likeness of such events to commonplace feelings of forgiveness or relief had led Christian theologians to identify the felt effect of Christ's redemptive work with the cause itself. In this way, doctrines of a satisfaction of sin through the pains of Christ's death on the cross and a ransom from the devil's chains of imprisonment were widely embraced by English Christians. Coleridge, ever aware of the objective and subjective senses of faith, thought such misapprehension of the work of Christ brought confusion and increasing skepticism in the modern world. For Coleridge as a teacher and an apologist, only closer attention to the use of religious language could supply the antidote.

Divine Grammar

Reading *Aids to Reflection* transformed Bushnell's thinking. In one especially suggestive passage, the Hartford theologian implicitly compares controversies raging over his own writings with Coleridge's influence on his conception of religious language. One conversation recorded in the memoir begins with a question by Bushnell's fellow Hartford resident Dr. William Patton: "'Why is it,' said I, 'that you complain that you are so generally misunderstood? Where you are criticized, you say that the critics misapprehend your positions; and they reply that you ought to express yourself more clearly. Why can you not do so?'" Bushnell's answer, as summarized by Patton, connects his view of language to the work of his principal forebear:

> It is because of the different views which they and I take of the human soul and of the relation of language to spiritual truth. They succeed easily in so expressing their ideas as to be understood by their readers; but it is because they deal with subjects mechanically, and not according to nature … I conceive of the soul in its living nature; as free, and intelligent, and sensitive; as under vital and not mechanical laws. Language, too, for that reason, is not so much descriptive as suggestive, being figurative throughout, even where it deals with spiritual truth. Therefore an experience is needed to interpret words.[29]

Immediately following, Bushnell praises the influence of *Aids to Reflection* on his thinking. He had read *Aids to Reflection* years earlier, but the text remained beyond his understanding. Then, I propose, amidst the period of intense study and reflection around 1847 and 1848, Bushnell rediscovered *Aids to Reflection* only to realize that he now began to comprehend the meaning and significance of Coleridge's work, especially in the American's insistence on the resistance of

[29] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 208.

spiritual truths to dogmatic construction.[30] Bushnell describes the influence of Coleridge's work as something of a mystical encounter:

> Thus, when I was in college I once undertook to read Coleridge's 'Aids to Reflection.' But the author seemed foggy and unintelligible, and I closed the book, and put it upon my book-shelves, where it remained a long time. Meanwhile, my mind went on thinking and maturing; and one day, my eye falling on the book, I took it down and began to read, and, behold, all was lucid and instructive! And so it will be some time with my writings. Men will read them, and give me credit for perspicuity instead of vagueness and uncertainty. That will be when they have truer conceptions of the soul and of language.[31]

The statement echoes the unnamed interlocutor alluded to in the "Preliminary Dissertation"—"the most fructifying writer I ever read, was one in whom I was, at first, able only to see glimpses, or gleams of truth"—placing Coleridge's work at the heart of Bushnell's theological renewal.[32]

In fact, Bushnell's "Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language" was a bold theological manifesto written to counter the tendency towards a stultifying rationalism in New England theology—especially the works of Nathaniel Taylor, a disciple of the Scottish "common sense" philosophy of Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart.[33] Bushnell believes that "a great part" of the trouble among the churches results from "the misuse or abuse of this instrument."[34] In the earliest parts of the work, he explains the origins of language, particularly as sounds became associated with objects. Two spheres of language emerged: a physical language for objects and a language of intelligence that represents thought. The problem, Bushnell thinks, is that spiritual ideas require objects from the sensible world to mediate as outward signs: "It is only as there is a Logos in the outward world, answering to the logos or internal reason of the parties, that they can come into a mutual understanding in regard to any thought or spiritual state whatever" (21). Images, especially from the natural world, provide a common point of reference between individuals, such as "spirit," which refers to breath, or "faith," which represents a binding cord (25).

Two strangers cannot share their thoughts except by way of the objective-

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[30] Edwards, emphasizing Bushnell's consistency, describes the change as a matter of degree: "To a point, the 'Dissertation' only published what he had said to a limited audience in his 1839 'Revelation.' The theory of double-level language; the mysterious correlation between inward mind and outward matter; the power of physical objects to become signs of spiritual truth; and the expressive activity of the divine Logos in bringing all this to pass—anyone acquainted with his Andover address ten years before would have found these concepts familiar. Yet in other ways the 'Dissertation' was different" (Edwards, *Of Singular Genius,* 112). This is consistent with my proposal that Bushnell's rereading of Coleridge in 1848 proved decisive to the deepening of his convictions.

[31] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 208.

[32] Patton's conversation occurred just as Bushnell was under attack for the lectures. Horace Bushnell, "Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language, as related to thought and spirit," in *God in Christ*, 9–117.

[33] On the theological conversation in New England, see Edwards, *Of Singular Genius*, 111–15; cf. Crosby, *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language*, 80–96.

[34] Bushnell, "Preliminary Dissertation," 11–12. Subsequent references to the "Preliminary Dissertation" will be cited parenthetically in the text.

subjective nature of communication. For Bushnell, the emphasis on the individual subject is paramount. The formation of particular words derives not from the sound (as if the sound of thunder must be the same in all languages) but from the meaning assigned to a word by an individual speaker. He rejects any notion that the outward form is nugatory, since all words reference a physical representation in their origin and provide the basis of individual meaning: "There is a logos in the form of things, but which they are prepared to serve as types or images of what is inmost in our souls" (30). The recipient of communication interprets the word according to the range of possible meanings. This process, connecting words and thought, was designed by the divine—a grammar for a world "made by him, though it knows Him not" (32).[35]

As with ordinary communication about thoughts and ideas, Bushnell believes that theological language depends on analogical rather than identical relationships. While there is certainly a literal meaning in biblical texts (the records of historical events, for example), theological concepts depend on words that are "natural figures" or analogies presenting mental concepts. In the Gospels, Christ utters truth, giving "living symbols, without definition, without *proving* it" (75). The real purpose is to bring before the mind an image that can assist with inward knowing—the intuition of truth. When Christ spoke, he offered truth rather than logic: "truth is that which shines in its own evidence, that which *finds* us, to use an admirable expression of Coleridge, and thus enters into us."[36]

While analogies provide hints and images that aid the mind's reflection, they also generate false conceptions and ambiguities. Since analogies carry many possible meanings, repugnant inventions contrary to the original idea are possible. So, when theologians receive Christ's words not as prompts for reflection but as "absolute measures and equivalents of truth" (40), they go awry. Theologians, looking to the Bible for guidance, draw out from a single image a whole series of conclusions.[37] Dogmatic claims multiply errors in the process. In order to avoid such false impressions, the apostles necessarily explained spiritual ideas under many different forms, presenting the same idea from many different angles. For this reason, Bushnell provocatively states that the Gospel of John is the most "contradictory book in the world" (56):

> What, then, shall we say of Christ and the Gospel of John? If it requires such an array of antagonisms to set forth the true idea of poetry, what does it require to set forth God and redemption? What should we expect, in such a work, but a vast compilation of symbols and of forms,

[35] Bushnell's assertion of the sensible origin of language was among the many critiques of his work, see Crosby, *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language*, ch. 7.

[36] Bushnell, "Preliminary Dissertation," 75. Elsewhere, Bushnell refers to this as a "Perceptive Power in spiritual life, an unction of the Holy One, which is itself a kind of inspiration—an immediate, experimental knowledge of God, by virtue of which, and partly in the degree of which, Christian theology is possible" (93).

[37] Bushnell notes that arguments from cause and effect in proofs for the existence of God have been the source of leading some astray: "By just this kind of process it was that Shelley, immersed in the logic of Oxford, became an atheist" (65).

> which to the mere wordsman, are contrary to each other? And then what shall we do?—what, for example, with the trinity, the atonement, the bondage and freedom of sin? Shall we say, with the infidel, this is all a medley of contradiction—mere nonsense, fit only to be rejected? Shall we take up these bold antagonisms, as many orthodox believers have done, seize upon some one symbol as the real form of the truth, and compel all the others to submit to it; making, thus, as many sects as there are symbols, and as many petty wars about each truth as it has sides or inches of surface? (68–69)[38]

Not at all. Rather, claims Bushnell, the Bible gives many perspectives on an idea in order to form as complete as possible a sense of its truth. Words are unable to capture the fulness of the divine mystery, whether in discussion of the triune nature of God or the redemptive work of Christ. This means religious dogmatism is not an option.

Bushnell's "Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language" thereby establishes a strikingly experiential and intuitive basis for understanding the theological language that grounds Christian faith and practice. While optimistic that the language of natural science will continue to provide increasingly useful analogies, he casts significant doubt on whether a complete systematic theology is even possible: "can the Christian truth be offered in the molds of any dogmatic statement?" (74). Nonetheless, he argues against New England Unitarians that the creeds and the Scriptures remain helpful and even necessary. The sundry Christian creeds provide a range of images that can prompt interior knowledge. The Bible, far from discarded as some "magazine of propositions and mere dialectic entities," will be received as "inspirations and poetic forms of life" (93). In short, since language can only prompt a knowledge of spiritual truths, poets "are the true metaphysicians," for "if there be any complete science of man to come, they must bring it" (73).

God's Last Metaphor

Bushnell's work undoubtedly echoes many of Coleridge's theological views. Both men share a deep commitment to an interpretation of the Bible that de-emphasizes an unreflective dependence on the outward senses. This is not an absolute rejection of the sensory: both agree that nature provides a repository for the mind to draw upon. In *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge refers to nature as a glass that allows for a wider vision, revealing God in every age. Still, while proclaiming the works of God as "the *poetry* of all human nature," it must nevertheless be read "in a figurative sense" to discover "correspondencies and symbols of the spiritual world" (LS 70). Such an act turns the soul inward, seeking "within us, what we can never find elsewhere … what no words can put there" (LS 92–93). In *Aids to Reflection*, STC concludes again with a rejection of the tendency to identify feelings with "objects of the Sense."

[38] On Bushnell's views of language and the Bible, see James O. Duke, *Horace Bushnell: On the Vitality of Biblical Language*, Society of Biblical Literature (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984).

Whatever demonstrations of God in nature may be asserted by the likes of William Paley and the "Mechanico-corpuscular" school of philosophy, evidences of God will never satisfy: "Make a man feel the *want* of it; rouse him, if you can, to the self-knowledge of his *need* of it; and you may safely trust it to its own Evidence" (AR 405–06). Theological propositions are not proofs of faith, for the language of theology points not to "mere *phaenomena*" but spiritual matters that must be spiritually discerned. "[I]t was one of the great purposes of Christianity," Coleridge asserts, "to rouse and emancipate the Soul from this debasing Slavery to the outward Senses, to awaken the mind to the true Criteria of Reality, viz. Permanence, Power, Will manifested in Act, and Truth operating as Life" (AR 406–07).

Yet, for all the ways that Coleridge's method of theological analysis informed his work, Bushnell's re-orientation of Christian faith to the subjective takes Coleridge's ideas in a more experiential and less philosophical direction. The difference is apparent in the three discourses that appear alongside the "Preliminary Dissertation" in *God in Christ*. In these discourses—delivered at prominent theological institutions in New Haven, Cambridge, and Andover—Bushnell applied his views of language to doctrine, taking the same biblical text as the basis of his three lectures: "For the Life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us" (1 John 1:2).

At Yale, Bushnell treats the "Divinity of Christ" and trinitarian formulas in what was, after the "Dissertation," the most controversial discourse of the three. He carefully weaves between an affirmation of the full divinity of Christ and a denial of Christ's two natures in the ancient creeds. On the one hand, Bushnell affirms Christ's divinity: he was sinless and perfect and "differs from us, not in degree, but in kind" (123). On the other hand, those who allege that Jesus has two *distinct* natures ("two distinct or distinctly active subsistences") depart from the Bible for "[t]he mystery of the divine-human must remain a mystery" (154–55, 161). More provocatively, Bushnell intimates a form of modalism in his doctrine of God. Christ is God's self-expression, the outward representation of the absolute in the finite: "God mirrored before His own understanding, and to be mirrored, as in fragments of the mirror, before us" (145–46).

At Harvard, Bushnell comes closest to Coleridge's views in *Aids to Reflection*, offering a "double view" of the doctrine of atonement according to its objective and subjective senses. Although New England theologians have looked to the outward forms as the basis of Christian doctrine, Christ's mission is "more a poem than a treatise" (203). Calvinists, much as the Roman Catholics, emphasize the ritualistic while Unitarians have accentuated union with God. Against all these, Bushnell suggests that the Scriptures instead offer an account of divine life conveyed in the very person of Christ: "To sum up all in one condensed and luminous utterance, every word of which is power, *God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself*" (189). Christ regenerates human character in a manifestation of the life of God and revives a consciousness of

the self in the human. In consequence, the schools should stop trying to teach Christ, as if his work could be reduced to a doctrine or philosophy: "a man will preach, not by words only, but sometimes quite as effectively by silence. His very life will be luminous, because there is a Christ in it" (274).

At Andover, lastly, Bushnell turns to a broad appraisal of "True Reviving of Religion" in an analysis of "Dogma and Spirit." Revivals of religion were commonplace in these times, spreading through much of the region under preachers invoking "new measures" in the quest to revitalize the churches. Inspired by the likes of Charles Grandison Finney, whose *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835) promoted a scientific assessment of the conditions under which revival could be generated, revivalists encouraged a regular agitation of the senses as the basis of ongoing religious life. In short, what Bushnell dubs a "revival of revivals" was regarded as the basis of enduring faith. In contrast to such notions, he argues that faith has suffered from the tendency to dogmatize. "Spiritual truth dies with spiritual life," he claims; it "must be kept alive as it began to live, by an inward and immediate connection with God" (305). Instead of teaching theology, the schools should encourage a new set of questions and practices associated with the spiritual life. Theology is unable to convey the life of God to the soul, since it trades in little more than images and shadows: "Nay, it were better, if necessary, to forego all instruction, shut up the libraries, give the weeks to prayer, shave the crown, put on hair girdles, ordain a year of silence—better, I would say, to practice any severity, rather than to attempt the knowledge of God by the mere natural understanding" (332). If such a work were attempted, a true revival of religion might begin and unite the separated churches of New England.[39]

Although Coleridge stimulated Bushnell's thinking about language and doctrine, the "Father of American Liberal Theology" extended Coleridge's thought in ways that he would have denied. He is closest to Coleridge when describing the nature of the atonement (following the argument of *Aids to Reflection*), for the causative act remains a mystery that theological language is unable to convey. When Bushnell refers to a revival of religion in the experience of divine life, he approximates STC's reasoning but certainly not his practice. Coleridge often writes on prayer and composed formal prayers for various occasions, yet his own religious practices are unlike the sort of mystical encounters that Bushnell seems to envision and (however sarcastically) promote.[40] When Coleridge writes of the efficacy of the sacraments, he focuses on the interior act of faith, but he also affirmed the outward sense to a degree that the Hartford theologian instinctively mistrusts. When Coleridge received the Eucharist on Christmas Day, December 1827, the first time he received the

[39] Bushnell's address at the Porter Rhetorical Society at Andover Seminary in September 1848 gave rise to "a lengthy one-and-a-half-year, 250-page quarrel between America's two most prominent Calvinist theologians, Princeton Seminary's Charles Hodge and Andover's Edwards A. Park" (D. G. Hart, "Poems, Propositions, and Dogma: The Controversy over Religious Language and the Demise of Theology in American Learning," *Church History* 57 [1988]: 310–21).

[40] Bushnell almost certainly would have embraced Coleridge's philosophical writings on prayer, as in one notebook discussion of prayer in its personal aspect: "The union of our *Conceptions* with our Life is provided for by our Senses: but a union of Ideas with the Life, constituted by a *lively* Faith, by Prayers alone" (CN V 5566).

sacrament since his studies at Jesus College, he describes his own views as striking a middle ground between the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (in which the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ) and the dissenting belief that "to the shame of our Church the great majority of our own Clergymen teach," namely, a "cold and flat" ceremonial in which "the Eucharist is considered as a mere and very forced visual metaphor for the mere purpose of reminding the Partakers of a single event, the sensible crucifixion of Jesus" (CN V 5703).

Coleridge's use of "metaphor" in his rejection of a memorialist understanding of the Eucharist is particularly instructive. In fact, the overemphasis on the subjective lies precisely at the heart of why he would have spurned Bushnell's open denial of dogmatic language associated with Christ and the Trinity. Bushnell reflects the general tenor and trajectory of the Sage of Highgate's thinking about language and faith, but he lacked the same rigor that Coleridge applied in making many of his most important theological distinctions. In Coleridge's discussion of the Eucharist, for instance, he refers to the dissenting view as a "very forced visual metaphor," but then goes on to compare the feeding of the five thousand in John 6 as "at once symbol & instance" of the Eucharist (CN V 5703). By contrast, Bushnell mixes technical Coleridgean terms such as metaphor and symbol in his discussion of Jesus. In the sermon "Our Gospel a Gift to the Imagination," Bushnell claims that God has filled the natural world with "symbols" that point to God, but he labels these metaphors in describing such symbols: "Metaphor on metaphor crowds the earth and the skies, bearing each a face that envisages the Eternal Mind, whose word or wording forth it is to be."[41] He then makes a remarkable claim about the mediating work of the Son:

> And then, following still the same law of expression by outward fact and image, he crowns the revelation process by the incarnate life and life-story of his Son, erecting on earth a supernatural kingdom to govern the world in the interest of his supernatural redemption. And if we do not take the word in some light, frivolous, merely rhetorician way, we can say nothing of Christ so comprehensively adequate as to call him the metaphor of God; God's last metaphor![42]

For Bushnell, such a recognition allows Christians to recognize the "new-creating, sin-forgiving, reconciling love" and finally dismiss the irrational "literalities of his incarnate miracles, his derivation, the composition of his person, [and] his suffering."[43] Since Coleridge limits "metaphor" to similarity

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[41] The sermon, which first appeared as an essay in *Hours at Home* (1869), was first collected in *Building Eras in Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), 249–85; the sermon, as cited here, also appears in *Horace Bushnell: Sermons*, ed. Conrad Cherry, Sources of American Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1985), 95–117 (101).

[42] Bushnell, *Sermons*, 101. On Bushnell's Christology, see Duke, *Horace Bushnell*, ch. 7.

[43] Bushnell, *Sermons*, 102. He prefers the Nicene Creed most when it presses the limits of language: "it is given visibly to the imagination, and has even its highest merit at the point where it takes on figure up to the degree of paradox: 'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.' Visibly absurd, impossible, false to mere speculation, it is even more sublimely, solidly true" (114).

and illustration, the application of the term to the relationship between God and Christ is untenable.[44] His commitment to trinitarian language and the necessity of redemption are well attested and need not be rehearsed here,[45] but Bushnell's slapdash use of technical terms reveals a significant departure from his mentor.

Conclusion

Mary Cheney Bushnell rightly asserts that the "Dissertation on Language" is the foundation of her father's theology, "the key-stone … to the whole scheme of his thought, to that peculiar manner of expression which marked his individuality,—in a word, to the man."[46] Although he was well read on the subject, Coleridge was the force behind Bushnell's philosophy: the Hartford theologian wrote his most important work on the topic just after he experienced a mystical, intellectual conversion, an event originating in his rediscovery of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. Nevertheless, although he drew inspiration from Coleridge, Bushnell's articulation of the nature of language assumed a new form. Crosby's claim, "He found a brother in the Englishman, not a master," is therefore misleading. It is precisely because Coleridge inspired Bushnell's new formulation that he is a disciple—that's precisely how Coleridge's influence operated among a vast network of writers in the century after his death. In this, Bushnell was not unlike many others, for whom Coleridge inspired intuition without repetition. Ralph Waldo Emerson experienced a great disappointment when he visited an elderly Coleridge in London, hoping to think alongside the man who had shaped his beliefs so profoundly.[47] No doubt, Bushnell would have had a similar experience. Then again, perhaps we should not be surprised, since he claimed that his greatest inspiration was one "whom I never since have read, at all, save in a chapter or two, which I glanced over, just to see how obvious and clear, what before was impossible, had now become."[48]

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[44] In the same sermon, Bushnell calls the Lord's Supper a "metaphor of hospitality" (113). He would have stood on firmer ground if he had used the rich, participatory language of the Coleridgean "symbol" to investigate the Incarnation. On the Coleridgean symbol, see J. Robert Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition*, second edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001], ch. 7, and Joel Harter, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Faith: Symbol, Allegory, and Hermeneutics*, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 55 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

[45] Among the best systematic treatments of Coleridge's doctrinal commitments remains J. Robert Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (1969; New York: Fordham, 1987); many other works devote considerable attention to Coleridge's religious beliefs, including Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion*, ch. 2, and, most recently, Christopher W. Corbin, *The Evangelical Party and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Return to the Church of England*, Routledge Studies in Romanticism (New York: Routledge, 2019), ch. 4.

[46] Bushnell, *Life and Letters*, 203.

[47] On the relationship between Coleridge and Emerson, see Samantha Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), and Peter Carafiol, *Transcendent Reason: James Marsh and the Forms of Romantic Thought* (Gainesville: Florida State University Press, 1982), esp. 108–13.

[48] Bushnell, *God in Christ*, 87.