Sublime Hermeneutics in Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*

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COLERIDGE ORIGINALLY PLANNED THAT *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit,* likely written in 1824, would accompany the publication of *Aids to Reflection* in 1825. But in the event, the *Confessions* only saw posthumous publication in 1840 as a series of fictional letters from Coleridge to readers of the bible.[1] Scholars have duly appreciated the *Confessions* as a prescient critique of a then prevalent Christian belief in the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of the Christian Scriptures. Coleridge calls this view God as "superhuman …Ventriloquist" who converts "the penman into a Man-pen!"[2] One crux for interpreters who held this view was the curses in the song of Deborah (Judges 5), hardly an example of Christian charity. Coleridge's commentary in the *Confessions* on Deborah is part of a network of recurrent allusions to her song elsewhere in the Coleridge canon. Several of these allusions in the 1811-12 lectures on Shakespeare and Milton call her song "sublime." My paper will explore how Coleridge's use of the sublime in relation to this passage in the *Confessions* illuminates the more familiar criteria in his critique of biblical literalists. My interest in Coleridge's treatment of Deborah's song may appear narrow. But Jeffrey Barbeau rightly asserts, "The case suits Coleridge for its applicability to the formation of a doctrine of Scripture." Indeed, elsewhere Coleridge himself takes this view in singling out the case: "the erroneous preconception that whatever is uttered by a scripture Personage is in fact uttered by the infallible Spirit of God makes *Deboras* of them all."[3] After a brief outline of the main points in the *Confessions*, I will discuss two aspects of Coleridge's hermeneutic in the song of Deborah and their relation to her song as "sublime." These two aspects involve the reader looking back to the past of the text and looking forward to the reader's present.[4]

Robert Barth identifies three main points in Coleridge's *Confessions.*[5] First, Coleridge contrasts inspiration with revelation, so as to avoid confusion of the assisting Holy Spirit (inspiration) and the revealing Word (revelation). Second,

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[1] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Shorter Works and Fragments II*, ed. H. J. Jackson, and J. R. de J. Jackson. Bollingen Series LXXV 11 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995), pp. 1116, 1113, 1111. (Cited as SWF II.)

[2] SWF II 1136; *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Anthony John Harding. Bollingen Series L (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002), 5524 qtd in Anthony J. Harding, ed., *Coleridge's Responses: Selected Writings on Literary Criticism, the Bible and Nature. Vol. II. Coleridge on the Bible* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 199. (Cited as CN V and Harding 2007.)

[3] Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 62 (cited as Barbeau); *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Marginalia I & II,* ed. George Whalley. Bollingen Series LXXV 12 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980), I 822-23. (Cited as CM.)

[4] On some aspects of looking forward and backward, I am grateful to Anthony John Harding, "Coleridge: Biblical and Classical Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), pp. 455-72. (Cited as Harding 2009.)

[5] J. Robert Barth, S. J. *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), pp. 59-60, 62. (Cited as Barth.)

he emphasizes "the unique instrumentality of the inspired author of Scripture," including his peculiar emphases and cultural milieu. Finally, on the question of inerrancy, he supports prophetic claims to direct divine communication (more on this below) but not the "natural knowledge" of scriptural writers, "historical inaccuracies," and so on. Therefore he is careful to distinguish "between inspiration and inerrancy": all scripture is inspired but not all, inerrant.[6]

In the *Confessions* itself (SWF 1135-36), Coleridge portrays Deborah as mother and patriot, who has loved and blessed the defenders among her people against the enemies of Israel, but with "bitterness, awakened & borne aloft by the same Love," she also curses the tribes who did not come forward in battle for Israel's defence. Two highpoints of the passage are worth noting. First, Coleridge "throw[s] [himself] back" into her age, seeing her "in the not yet tamed Chaos of the Spiritual Creation"; adding a second reference in Greek to creative Chaos, he feels himself in her portrait as "among the first Ferments of the Great Affections," "swelling up *against* and yet *toward*" the "outspread wings" of the Holy Spirit revealed in the act of creation of Genesis 1 (his third reference to creation). Thus in looking back into biblical history, he views Deborah's curses as a particular stage in human spiritual progess, in tune with the Spirit in creation, but with a love "not yet tamed" and still in "ferment." Second, with Deborah's "Image … before my eyes," he contemplates her heroism "of will and character," bringing his interpretation forward to readers in the present: he finds instruction and light in what is "fierce and inordinate" in her song, not obscured in her as a "prepatory Veil" for New Testament figures. Instead, he finds in her a "lesson of humility, a ground of humiliation, and a shaming yet rousing example of Faith and Fëalty." She also possesses virtues of other Old Testament heroes—"self-oblivion," elevation above the individual, total devotion to God. To read Deborah otherwise through the eyes of scriptural inerrancy is to trivialize such human passions in favour of a dictating Spirit, the "super-human … Ventriloquist." In such readings, "all is gone! all sympathy, at least, all *example*! I listen in awe and fear, but likewise in perplexity and confusion of Spirit." I want, then, to pursue in more detail Coleridge's proposed two-fold method of reading Deborah's song: looking back to the time of its writing, and then, looking forward.

Concerning looking back, Anthony Harding highlights Coleridge's particular interest in "how modern forms of subjectivity" emerge from ancient times over many centuries (Harding 2009 461). Eschewing Eichhorn or Lessing's naturalistic explanations for the supernatural in scriptures, Coleridge seeks explanations "in the beliefs or religious practices characteristic of the time" (462), preferring the reader with "imagination enough to *live* with his forefathers" rather than those reading "a work meant for immediate effect on one age, with the notions & feelings of another" (464, citing CM II 969).

[6] Barth 62. Barth summarizes Coleridge's position thus: "all Scripture is *inspired* by (written under the guidance of) the Holy Spirit; *revelation* is not necessarily coterminous with inspiration; *inerrancy* is necessarily conterminous with revelation but not with inspiration" (66). Barth provides William Lee's views as an orthodox measure of Coleridge's contribution to the debate (59ff.).

Coleridge contrasts ancient Greek culture's slavery to pantheism and a "debasing and sensual polytheism" (468, 459), with ancient Hebrew monotheism.[7] While polytheists follow "the natural leadings of the imagination or fancy governed by the law of association," Coleridge regards monotheism as "progressive" because it has "a dim horizon as well as a clear vicinity, and what truth has more right to be obscure to us than that which, when we arrive at [it], will be the very perfection of our being"? (LHP I 56 qtd in Harding 2009 462). This insistence on the contrast between a clear present and dim future recurs in an oft-quoted passage in *The Friend* on the indefiniteness of sublime ideas.[8] Here Coleridge echoes his present-future distinction by asserting that humans are "the dupes of the present moment" because conceptions for the future consequences of their actions are "indistinct," while those in present temptations are "vivid." Next he echoes the relation of obscurity to "the very perfection of our being." We are "to reserve the deep feelings which belong, as by a natural right to those obscure ideas that are necessary to the moral perfection of the human being." We are "to reserve these feeling, … for objects, which their very sublimity renders indefinite, no less than their indefiniteness renders them sublime: namely, to the Ideas of Being, Form, Life, the Reason, the Law of Conscience, Freedom, Immortality, God!" These passages, then, combine biblical hermeneutics, the necessary historical imagination of readers, the dimness of the future, and sublime ideas.

Coleridge often uses "sublime" of biblical passages in his marginalia and notebooks without much elaboration. For example, he writes: "What can Greece or Rome present, worthy to be compared with the 50th Psalm, either in sublimity of the Imagery or in moral elevation?" (CM I 430 qtd in Harding 2007 152). He terms Christ's words from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15: 34) as the "sublimest evidences" of "all Virtues united" (CN V 6634 qtd in Harding 2007 266). While he does not call Deborah's song "sublime" in the *Confessions*, he does so three times in his 1811-12 lectures on Shakespeare and Milton. Here Deborah's song is a passage "of deepest pathos & even Sublimity." But she is not a poet; "Nature is the Poet here."[9] Elsewhere, again Deborah is not a poet, "although … the song itself [is] a sublime Poem" accidently, due to her peculiar circumstances (LL I 310). Coleridge implies what kind of sublime poem her song is in other passages in the lectures. Readers of biblical passages (such as Isaiah 1) have "been affected with a sense of their high poetic character" due to unfamiliar uses of metre, whose effect is "the stately march of the words" (222-23). Elsewhere in the lectures, Coleridge mentions that passion justifies "connecting disparate Thoughts purely by means of resemblances in the words

[7] Harding is quoting from *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lectures 1818–1819:On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson. Bollingen Series LXXV 8, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), I 56. (Cited as LHP.)

[8] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke. Bollingen Series LXXV 4, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), I 105-06. (Cited as F.)

[9] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes. Bollingen Series LXXV 5, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987), I 69. (Cited as LL.)

expressing them … in the highest & most lyric kind, in passionate repetition of a sublime Tautology (as in the song of Debora)" (267). That Coleridge himself translates the opening of Deborah's song (Judges 5: 1-11) into verse underlines his preoccupation with its "high poetic character."[10] These passages confirm that Coleridge treats her song according to his principles for great English poetry, including Shakespeare's. Indeed, in the *Confessions* Coleridge compares how occasional and pedantic questions of authorship can destroy "that unity or total impression" of joy and wisdom from the bible and Shakespeare alike (SWF II 1129-30). The doctrine of inerrancy "petrifies at once the whole Body of Holy Writ, with all its harmonies, & symmetrical gradations," "actuated by a pure and holy Spirit, one and the same … working diversly" in "all the several books bound up together" (1134-35). So Coleridge invites his readers in contemplating Deborah's song—in a phrase Harding (2009 470) borrows from *Aids to Reflection*—to experience a "*Passing into a new mind*."[11]

The "looking forward" from Deborah's song, then, involves a sublime experience for readers that draws them into a pleasurable and instructive dimness. This experience relates to, but is not, I think, identical with the one that Elinor Shaffer discusses in her comparison of Coleridge's *Confessions* and the "Confessions" in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*: "that there can be no rational proof of religious faith, yet that an imaginative construction of such a view could animate and underpin a life."[12] Nor does this sublime reading experience privilege reading "by light of the Spirit" over reading "historically and philologically," a preference Coleridge sometimes expresses.[13] For there is also something "brainy" in the dimness of the sublime experience of Deborah that Coleridge offers. This quality, first, relates to the least "modern" of Coleridge's biblical hermeneutical principles in the *Confessions*: his support of prophets' claims to direct inspiration from God, his belief that their words "from God" are inerrant (SWF II 1130-31). Both Coleridge and his commentators Harding and Barbeau properly qualify the assertion, so much so that Coleridge's claim is almost negligible. First, Coleridge regards such inerrant inspiration as exceptional rather than normative (Barbeau 153). What's more, the true meaning of the Prophets and the Old Testament exceeds the past moment of uttering or writing, residing not in the "outward letter," but in "the Spiritual, *the Life* of the letter" of the prophet's message (154 & CN V 6069). After the immediate prophetic situation *or* after even "the non-fulfillment" of the prophecies, "the *apparent* falsification of their promises, the failure of their literal sense, [becomes] evident" and their forward-looking "applicability" is all

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[10] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays. 3 vols. Bollingen Series LXXV 16 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001), 1, 2, 613-15. Mays dates the poem, December 1799.

[11] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer. Bollingen Series LXXV 9 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993), p. 132. (Cited as AR.)

[12] Elinor S. Shaffer, "The 'Confessions' of Goethe and Coleridge: Goethe's *Bekenntnisse einer Schönen Seele* ('Confessions of a Beautiful Soul') and Coleridge's 'Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit,'" in *Goethe and the English-Speaking World*, ed. Nicholas Boyle and John Guthrie (London: Camden House, 2002), p. 153.

[13] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 4, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Merton Christensen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990), 5337. (Cited as CN IV.) Qtd in Harding 2007 192.

(CN V 6069 qtd in Harding 2007 231). For all the dimness of Coleridge's sublime reading of the bible, then, proper interpretation also requires thinking, an active understanding of the distinction between past event and its application for readers now.

This crux on prophetic inerrancy relates to a second, relatively conservative aspect of the *Confessions*: Coleridge's stance on the spiritual authority of canonical authors as opposed to "the authors of imaginative works" such as Homer (Harding 2009 466). Again, Coleridge softens this view by using the perceived *genius* of a canonical author as a mark of authenticity in New Testament texts—or as a benchmark by which to judge inauthentic passages in canonical gospels, for example, the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke.[14] "Of the authenticity of [Paul's letters]," he writes, "we have the same kind of evidence as Cicero's and Pliny's—for *they* have a character of individual Genius" (CM I 512 qtd in Harding 2009 467). For Coleridge, the concept of Genius is, of course, cognate with the sublime. As masters of the Imagination, Shakespeare and Paul and Wordsworth navigate the boundaries of poetic self and world, supremely sensitive to the pleasurable fitness of parts and wholes in their works. In this regard, Harding is surely right to correlate the *Confessions* and Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, where the primary imagination depends on the divine act of creation and the secondary imagination is "an echo of the former." [15] The derived divinity of the imagination sorts well with the "stress on the integrity of the human witness" in the *Confessions* (Harding 1985 10). (This association also recalls the three references to the act of creation in Coleridge's analysis itself of Deborah's song.) Harding continues that granting any intentional fiction in Luke's gospel, for example, would undermine the reliability of the human author's experience of Jesus. There would then be no human author for the human reader to meet, but instead "only a vague somewhat, a cultural milieu, the mythopoeic faculty of a given community at a given point in history." Behold the irony of any post-enlightenment scholar denying responsible agency to ancients (92-93). Coleridge, then, insists on human freedom *retroactively*, even for directly inspired prophets, as they participate in the divine act of creation. And the stakes are even higher, as I have argued elsewhere.[16] In texts contemporary with the *Confessions*—the "Essay on Faith" and the expanded version of it in the *Opus Maximum*—Coleridge emphasizes that there is "No I without a Thou!"[17] The pertinence for the *Confessions* is radical. The subjectivity of the modern reader is no constant in a hermeneutical relationship with authors from the past. Instead the reader herself becomes a subject rather than a "vague somewhat" only by according equal subjectivity to ancient authors. In this inter-subjectivity of reader and author, because there is "No I without a Thou," there are also no

[14] CM I 512 & II 36-37 qtd in Harding 2009 467.

[15] Anthony John Harding, *Coleridge and the Inspired Word* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1985), p. 10.

[16] Murray J. Evans, *Sublime Coleridge: The* Opus Maximum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 68-71.

[17] The "Essay on Faith," SWF II 837; *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland, with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi. Bollingen Series LXXV 15 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002), p. 172.

"superhuman ventriloquists" (SWF II 1136), the lynchpin of the inerrancy doctrine that Coleridge critiques in the *Confessions*.

In conclusion, the "passing into a new mind" that Coleridge envisages for readers of the bible thus involves the crossing of boundaries that Shaffer and Mark Cheetham associate with the sublime in Kant and Coleridge.[18] Part of this sublime hermeneutical transaction is tonal and transformative—like the comfort in *Aids to Reflection* of Leighton's text, second only "to the inspired Scriptures" (CN IV 4867 qtd in AR xlvi). This comfort Coleridge means to pass on to readers of the *Aids*—offering as he puts it, a "soft and quiet *Illapse* into the very recesses of our Conviction."[19] But the *Confessions* mean to move boundaries, not only between reader and author, but also between belief and unbelief, and for those already with faith, between faith and doctrinal belief. This intention is evident also in one earlier trial title for the *Confessions*, that Coleridge mentions in a letter of 23 May 1825: "The Grey-headed Passenger: or Conversations on Ship-board… during a voyage to the Mediterranean—or Cabin Conversations on subjects of moral and religious interest."[20] Coleridge envisages a fictional shipboard conversation, aka the *Confessions*, between a "Grey-headed Passenger" and "a young Clergyman, newly ordained who had subscribed to the 39 articles [of the Book of Common Prayer], on the principles of [William] Paley as mere Articles of Peace, quite satisfied in conscience that he should never preach counter to them as he should never trouble himself or his flock about them." The young man becomes "mortified by the doubts which the Grey-headed Passenger expresses" as to the stability of his beliefs (qtd in Jasper para 4). For Coleridge in the *Confessions*, the impediment to scripture readers' looking back to ancient cultural contexts and looking forward to a sublime "passing into a new mind"—a dim awakening to faith and belief—is the doctrine of inerrancy. In the *Confessions*, he demonstrates that it is absurd. After all, "the erroneous preconception that whatever is uttered by a scripture Personage is in fact uttered by the infallible Spirit of God makes *Deboras* of them all" (CM I 822-23).

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[18] Elinor S. Shaffer, "Illusion and Imagination: Derrida's Parergon and Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. Revisionary Readings of Kantian Formalist Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Illusion: Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 138–57; Mark A. Cheetham, "Moments of Discipline: Derrida, Kant, and the Genealogy of the Sublime," in *Intersections: Nineteenth–Century Philosophy and Contemporary Theory*, ed. Tilottama Rajan and David L. Clark (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 359: "the sublime has been used habitually as a way of making and figuring distinctions" in "its parergonal activities." Editors Rajan and Clark (29) comment that in "the analytic of the sublime," Kant "rethinks the very nature of the boundary."

[19] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs. 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–1971), V 197-200 qtd in AR liii. (Cited as CL V.)

[20] CL V 464 qtd in David Jasper, "S. T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840): Its Place in the History of Biblical Criticism," *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* 5 no. 4 (2007), paragraph 3; consulted 30 April 2015. (Cited as Jasper para [number].)