Why we need the Opus Maximum to understand the Coleridgean Symbol

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THOSE WHO GO TO THE *OPUS MAXIMUM* expecting the ludic effects of Coleridge's earlier writings will be disappointed, for while its rhetoric is interesting (as Murray Evans has shown us),[1] it basically provides hundreds of pages of sustained philosophical argument. They are, moreover, in the disorganized and unpolished form that one might expect of an unpublished manuscript, particularly one by Coleridge.

The *Opus Maximum* is nonetheless important in understanding romantic theory. This, at least in its Coleridgean form, is broadly a theory of the imagination and its vehicle, the 'symbol'—by which I refer not to the conventional symbols of language, but to the quasi-aesthetic or formal symbols of art, a distinction which I have previously argued is central to Coleridge's views and which in more recent times figured centrally in the views of Susanne Langer.[2] The theory of symbol was a major preoccupation of Coleridge's German contemporaries, as Nicholas Halmi shows—and one of the things I want to do in this essay is to argue with Halmi's important new book, to argue that he is right (in Coleridgean terms) to stress the opacity of the symbol in much fallen human experience, but less so in those moments of epiphany when grace descends, or within the divine sphere.

In this essay, I want to talk about seven ways in which the *Opus Maximum* grounds this view.

1. The Opus Maximum supplies the missing transcendental deduction

The *Opus Maximum* provides the sustained metaphysical account promised in the *Biographia*. Most readers will remember the stunning moment when, in chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, Coleridge announces that he has received a letter from a friend—who advises him very conveniently to skip what has come to be known as the missing transcendental deduction.

Coleridge's argument, as is well known, was based on Schelling's version of Kant's transcendental deduction, and as Halmi argues Coleridge had presumably planned to 'replace the [three] stages in [Schelling's] dialectic of self-affirmation, including the realization of the absolute in nature, with the persons of the Trinity.'[3] The problem, however, was that this amounted to pantheism, and Coleridge had been resisting pantheism ever since 'The Eolian Harp'—where his wife Sarah, disapproving and unsuitable though she may have been, had drawn him back from the abyss.

Chapter 13 is, then, one of the great retreats in literature, paralleled only by

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[1] Murray Evans, "Reading 'Will' in Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*: The Rhetoric of Transition and Repetition," in Jeffrey Barbeau, ed., *The Harmony of All Knowledge: Variations and Themes in the "Great Work" of S. T. Coleridge*. Studies in Philosophical Theology (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 2006) 73-96.

[2] Nicholas Reid, *Coleridge, Form and Symbol* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 152.

[3] Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) 124-125.

Tristram Shandy's failure to get himself born. But while Sterne is clearly a model for the shambolic narrator of the *Biographia* (with its Sternean subtitle, 'Life and Opinions'), Halmi is nonetheless wrong to argue that chapter 13 displays the 'unresolved coexistence of contradictory theological conceptions' in Coleridge's thought—the muddlesome doubleness identified by Seamus Perry.'[4] Similarly, Michael-John Kooy is wrong to argue that Coleridge's transcendental deduction failed.[5] For as Mary Anne Perkins and I separately argued many years ago, Coleridge returned to the missing transcendental deduction in the *Opus Maximum*, where he derives the first two terms of Schelling's dialectic in a way which is quite un-Schellingian.[6] It confines them entirely to the human or finite sphere, and ensures that they do not contaminate the Trinity with any suggestion of pantheism.

Why does this matter? It matters partly because the transcendental deduction lies at the heart of Coleridge's project, his claim to demonstrate an underlying relation between us, as perceiving subjects, and nature as perceived object. In the *Biographia*, the deduction was intended (somewhat against the Wordsworthian grain) to explain something of Wordsworth's intuitions about nature. It was also meant to explain what 'Frost at Midnight' called 'that eternal language which thy God utters.'

The deduction matters, then, because it grounds the theory of imagination and symbol. It also, incidentally, vindicates Coleridge's claims to have produced a work of systematic philosophy. It is true that not all of the details are filled in in the *Opus Maximum*, but the *Opus Maximum* does re-ground Schelling's dialectic in ways that are consistent with Coleridge's Trinitarianism. The transcendental deduction is essentially complete, and so is the missing account of how the imagination functions as 'the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the Infinite I AM.'

2. The Opus Maximum casts light on the plagiarism controversy

These facts also matter because they throw light on the great plagiarism controversy. As all readers will know, Coleridge took much of the philosophical material in the *Biographia* from Schelling, while protesting loudly that no one could accuse him of plagiarism. And this is precisely what he has been accused of, most notably by De Quincey and Ferrier soon after his death, and by Norman Fruman in 1971. The charge of plagiarism becomes a reason for not taking Coleridge's theory seriously.

But there is something very odd about the controversy, since if Coleridge had really meant to steal from Schelling, that is precisely what he would have done. There would have been no problem in sketching out the missing transcendental deduction, in chapter 13. But the *Opus Maximum* shows how

[4] Halmi 125; Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) 7-34.
[5] Michael-John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002) 125.
[6] Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 1994) 119; Nicholas Reid, 'Coleridge and Schelling: the Missing Transcendental Deduction,' *Studies in Romanticism* 33.3 (Fall 1994), 451-479. See Reid, chapter 6.

Coleridge was able to take an argument which was Schellingian in form, and put it on much surer foundations. James Engell is right, then, to point to the Quixotic element in the *Biographia*, to the high comedy which Coleridge manages to make out of what remains a serious piece of metaphysical argument.[7] For there is something delicious in pasting together a series of sentences taken from your foe, so that they come to a set of conclusions quite contrary to his own, and salting the concoction with a discussion of plagiarism. It is a dangerous game, but Sterne would have understood.

3. Tautegory: the symbol symbolises more than just itself

The *Opus Maximum* also allows us to understand what Coleridge meant by 'tautegory,' because (and contra Halmi) the *Opus Maximum's* discussion of the Trinity grounds Coleridge's view of the relation between vehicle and tenor, and therefore grounds the possibility of symbol embodying meaning beyond itself. Numerous critics have argued that the poetic symbol, in Coleridge's theory, needs to be understood in a broadly skeptical or post-Kantian context (Wheeler, Shaffer, Hodgson, Hamilton, etc).[8] For similar reasons, Halmi (contra Barth) rejects the 'widespread misunderstanding … of the Romantic concept of the symbol as a figment of Christian theology'. While the romantic symbol was supposed to be the point of contact between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, Halmi insists that the romantic symbol in fact refers to nothing but itself. This, as he points out, was the origin also of modernist arguments for the 'heresy of paraphrase,' and the 'intentional fallacy.' For Halmi, symbols do not stand for anything. They simply are.

In support of his position, Halmi points to the famously obscure passages in *The Statesman's Manual, Aids to Reflection* and 'On the Prometheus of Aeschylus,' where Coleridge defined symbol as 'tautegorical.' The term stands in opposition to 'allegory, and is defined in *Aids* as follows:

> tautegorical (i.e. expressing the same subject but with difference) in contradistinction from metaphors and similitudes, that are always allegorical (i.e. expressing a different subject but with a resemblance).'[9]

Halmi emphasises the sameness of the subject in a tautegorical symbol, suggesting that form and content are identical, and that the symbol expresses nothing but itself. But this is to neglect Coleridge's emphasis, in the quotation, on difference: form and content differ, at least on some level, though in another sense they are (as Halmi suggests) consubstantial. The content can

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[7] James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (eds), *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), cxxix.

[8] Kathleen Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980); Elinor S. Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975); John A. Hodgson, 'Transcendental Tropes: Coleridge's Rhetoric of Allegory and Symbol', in *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981) pp. 273-92; Paul Hamilton, 'The Philosopher' in Lucy Newlyn (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

[9] *Aids* 206.

have no existence apart from the form, though it is nonetheless genuine and informative.

How is this possible? The answer, as usual, lies in the Trinity, for where the Father recognises himself in the Son, there must be an essential sameness; but also a genuine 'otherness' (or what Coleridge calls alterity—see below).[10]

So again the *Opus Maximum* leads us to a qualified view. There is clearly much to be said for the kind of reductionist account of the poetic symbol that Halmi offers. The Mariner, faced by the albatross, is dealing with a symbol that appears to be utterly inscrutable. And Goethe pointed to this reduction in describing symbol as 'a living and momentary revelation of the inscrutable'—but one where 'the idea remains eternally … inaccessible in the image ... inexpressible.'[11] For the finite mind, trapped within Schelling's dialectic, there is no moment of transparent self-intuition. As I have argued elsewhere, such a moment is infinitely deferred, and with it all hope of finding meaning within the symbol, for the unaided finite mind.[12] On the human level, then, there is something important in Halmi's argument, for on that level, as Modiano points out, symbol 'always points to but never reaches completely the fullness of an absolute unity.[13] And in the famous notebook entry, 'In looking at objects of Nature,' Modiano points to the way Coleridge speaks of 'seeking, as it were asking' a symbolic language for something within him. (CN II 2546).

But it is also important to recognise that Coleridge speaks of symbols as 'conductors' for truth, and as conveying moral reflections.[14] And here I think the *Opus Maximum* again matters, for it tells us how both views can be true. Coleridge grounds the dialectic in a divine act of creation, a creation in which the divine forms (the origins of the form of the symbol) are gifted to inchoate, finite being. It is true that, as 'On Poesy or Art' tells us, the human mind cannot hope to see symbols in their fully divine relation, but it is also true (as the *Destiny of Nations* puts it) that symbols are a means of a progressive revelation.[15] It may communicate (to finite minds) at least what Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey' calls 'a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused'.

We should be slow, then, to accede to Halmi's view that the Coleridgean symbol refers to nothing but itself. Coleridge clearly sees a role for symbol as part of revelation, and on the divine level, as I shall argue below, 'symbol' is precisely and essentially the unit of meaning. It lies at the heart of the nature of the Son, the Logos, the proto-symbol in which the Father recognises himself (in a moment of genuine knowing), and instantiates all reality. In the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge contrasts his own views of the Divine Ideas with those of Plotinus, saying that 'to suppose God [to be] without Ideas, or the

[10] Reid 119-120.
[11] Halmi 1.
[12] Reid 114.
[13] Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1985) 69.
[14] *Lay Sermons* 29; *On Poesy or Art* in W.J. Bate, *Criticism: The Major Texts* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970) 396.
[15] *Poesy* 394-398; *Friend* 165; *Destiny* ll 80-91.

realizing knowledge … would destroy the very conception of God'. (OM 223) The divine symbol has content.

4. Synecdoche

Halmi also focuses his attack on the Coleridgean symbol by arguing about the nature of consubstantiality. Halmi wants to show that Coleridge conflates two possible senses of the term 'consubstantiality:' that it refers to a part-whole relation that is synecdochical; and that it refers to the same/different relation in the Trinity. He claims that the two senses are incommensurate.[16]

I think there are two things to say in reply. Firstly, Coleridge doesn't often refer to synecdoche. It doesn't, for instance, appear in the indexes of the *Biographia, Friend, Lay Sermons* or *Opus Maximum*.

Secondly, while Coleridge does at times refer to the part/whole relation as being consubstantial, he is not thinking of the substance of the parts (and of the world) as being material, a conception which would imply a pantheistic relation between God and the world. For Coleridge, the world ultimately has no material substance other than its origins in mere privation. It follows, then, that Coleridge can speak (with increasing qualification) of the world as being consubstantial with God, in the way that Robert Barth described—not in the sense of shared material substance, but in the sense of shared form.[17]

5. The Mythic universe

The idea of form underlies the well-known role that Coleridge saw for symbol in our reading of the universe. This is an idea which lies behind much of his early poetry, and which he later developed, for instance in the *Friend* where he claimed that 'The material universe, saith a Greek philosopher, is but one vast complex MYTHOS (i.e. symbolical representation).'[18]

By this, Coleridge does not wish to reduce our reading of nature to 'mere myth,' nor is he positing a two-world view in which myth is divorced from reason. For Coleridge believed (as I believe) that we 'know' primarily by imaging.[19] We know our surroundings, for instance, not primarily as a set of propositions, but by imaging or seeing (though of course propositions alter the way we image reality). Similarly, the Father knows the Son through his image (see below); and nature, as a reflection of the divine knowing, also takes an aesthetic form. I have argued elsewhere that Coleridge is right to insist upon the role of form as a fundamental epistemological concept—fundamental to any analysis of knowledge, let alone aesthetic symbol.[20]

It is in this sense that nature is a divine mythos, a wellspring and system of symbols expressing the divine nature. And it is the function of human myth to

[16] Halmi pp.128-130; 116.
[17] Robert Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination* (New York: Fordham UP, 2001) 37
[18] *Friend* I.524.
[19] Reid chapter 1.
[20] Reid 27-39.

come to terms with nature as mythos. The *Opus Maximum* is again important because it tells us how the finite realm, originally mere privation and potential, or formless chaos, is created. The finite realm is given the gift of actuality by being given form, a form which reflects 'the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.'[21] The symbols of nature thus have their archetypes in the divine self-knowing, and are at least potentially bearers of meaning. This is what underlies Coleridge's mature, higher-critical views of the role of myth in creating human understanding, and of the mythological nature of the Bible.

6. The Logos and form

In previous paragraphs, I have spoken of the Logos as a kind of symbol for God, and of the Son as a formal embodiment of the Father, in something like the way in which a Grecian urn can be an embodiment of beauty and time.[22] Coleridge began to explore this idea right at the beginning of his Trinitarianism, in the 'In looking at objects of Nature' notebook entry previously mentioned. There he speaks of nature as 'a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists' and concludes that 'It is *Logos* the Creator!'

The *Opus Maximum* makes it clear that this symbolic language depends upon a theory of form that lies right at the heart of the divine self-knowing, for instance in the passage which reads:

> Every reality must have its own form. When we contemplate the only begotten of the Father as the Alter in the union of the alter et idem [i.e. the different and the same], we affirm that his, namely the alterity, is the form of its own reality, and though one with, yet not the same as, the form of the Idem. (OM 204)

Form lies at the heart of the Trinity, and so it lies also at the heart of the natural and literary symbols which repeat the forms of the Logos.

7. Relation, alterity and the medium

Indeed, the *Opus Maximum* goes further in identifying form as an ultimately *relational* concept—a concept which depends on relation and difference.[23] A piece of computer code stands in a formal relation, for instance, with the picture it encodes and causes to appear on the screen—for while there is difference, there is also likeness through (and only through) relation. It is through this kind of formal relation that two unalike entities can at the same time be alike. Coleridge adopts exactly this language in a marginal note on Schelling, when he insists on the difference or 'otherness' of the Son vis-à-vis

[21] James S. Cutsinger brilliantly shows that, for Coleridge, the world only has actuality inasmuch as God wills it, continually, to exist. See *The Form of Transformed Vision* (Macon GA: Mercer UP, 1987).
[22] See also Reid 37.
[23] Reid 31.

the Father: 'It [i.e. the Father] has all reality in itself; but it must likewise have all reality in another.' (M IV 400) He goes on to say that 'all eternal Relations are included in all reality—and there can be [no] difference but of relation'.

We thus shouldn't think of the symbolic language as consisting of reified counters, even if of a quasi aesthetic kind. But we nonetheless need to acknowledge the centrality of the aesthetic in Coleridge's epistemology—and, I would argue, in our own. It all comes down to a theory of mind, for Coleridge did not believe that mind operates in a realm of 'pure' concepts, above language and form. Nor did he believe that mind fundamentally operates through the reified tokens of human language, though language clearly plays a large role in the Coleridgean understanding.

Rather, for Coleridge, the medium of thought is something quasi-aesthetic—just as we construct our knowledge of the world in sensory form. (This is not a passive or empiricist view of sensation, for it insists on the active and constructed nature of sensation).[24] Thought does not use a language of reified forms: rather, thought itself is a kind of aesthetic or qualitative medium, and one which is given form through relation. And that quality of relation is what enlivens the dead forms of symbols which are otherwise reified. It is what allows symbols to symbolise meanings that go beyond themselves. But here, it must be admitted, we are right on the limits of Coleridge's explanatory project.

Conclusion

One of my quarrels with so many of the best books on Coleridge is their tendency to assimilate him to his German sources, in their most skeptical form, for the *Opus Maximum* shows just how radically Coleridge sought to re-centre his sources. But if I have argued that the *Opus Maximum* grounds the relation of vehicle and tenor at the divine level through a theory of form, on the human level Halmi is right to point to the way in which the Coleridgean symbol is far from translucent.

In his later years, Coleridge had a darker view of the human imagination and natural symbols, arguing that they were to some extent corrupted by their origins in the Fall. In the *Table Talk* for 1832, he remarked:

> In finite forms there is no real and absolute identity. God alone is identity. In the former … is … a quasi identity only.[25]

In his later years, then, Coleridge would have agreed with Halmi's challenging argument, that the relation between form and content, at least in nature and poetry, is to some extent abrupted.

[24] Reid chapters 1 and 2.
[25] TT I.292. Reid chapter 7.