Coleridge's Higher Sublime?

Alan Gregory

AS IS WELL KNOWN, the 18th century was a high point for theories of "sublimity," the experience of "pleasing astonishment" or of "invisible immense power" that "humbles and exalts" the heart, to quote a few phrases from its enthusiasts.[1] Conventional accounts of the sublime during this period tend to focus on Burke for England and Kant for Germany and follow what comic book writers describe as a "story arc." The narrative rises in England, with folk such as Dennis and Addison and reaches its climax in Germany where Immanuel Kant, to quote Samuel Monk, "took the isolated discoveries of earlier thinkers and welded their fragmentary aesthetic together so as to create a truly philosophical system."[2] The main problem, of course, with this narrative is that it relegates a great deal of quite interesting writing to the bridesmaid status of a Kantian "pre-cursor."

Another problem is that conventional accounts of the sublime tend to underestimate the importance of theology in the English contribution to this tradition. The theological value of the sublime, however, was crucial to many writers. For both Dennis and Addison, for instance, the sublime was apologetically important. It grounds Dennis' claims for religious poetry as the highest form of art, while Addison fits it within the general argument from design, as the human capacity that fits us for divine worship. Ussher gives us a philosophical psychology in which a readiness for the sublime is the abiding theological backdrop of the human mind. Edward Young, on the other hand, uses the sublime to rescue enthusiasm and religious emotion for respectable folk frightened by Methodists.

For readers of Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*, these theological intentions are important because of his long standing antipathy to the bulk of 18th century English theology, especially its apologetics and its philosophical theology. Coleridge's hostility to much of the 18th century theological tradition, often compared unflatteringly with the work of "the old divines" of the previous century, began with his rejection of associationism and later became a wholesale attack on theologies that conformed to Lockean epistemology. Coleridge's paradigm example of this villainy was William Paley, whose utilitarian ethics and apologetics based on empirical "evidences," Coleridge despised, not least because of its considerable influence within the education of English clergy. With the partial exception of Ussher, the more theologically explicit accounts of the sublime all work with Lockean assumptions, the assumptions Coleridge critiqued so vigorously. Addison, for instance, appeals to Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities as evidence of God's benevolent provision for human delight and knowledge of Himself. It is worth asking, then, whether Coleridge, when he uses the term "sublime" within a theological context, does so in a way that distinguishes his theological

[1] Beattie, Ussher, and Young, respectively.

[2] Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (The Univ. of Michigan, 1960), 4.

project specifically from aspects of this English tradition. That question is usefully illuminated by the *Opus Maximum*.

"God," Adam Smith tells us, "is of all the objects of human contemplation by far the most sublime." This is meant as an uncontroversial commonplace and so it was. It is significant because of the comparative form according to which God is the sublimest thing around. Addison, Baillie, and Young all like to describe "sublime experience" in ascending degrees of intensity, eventually reaching the starry firmament and, finally, the capping experience of awe before the sublime God. Theologically, this gives us a discourse lacking in either the conceptual or imaginative discrimination by which God is radically distinguished from creatures. The argument from design, which was the privileged post-Newtonian argument for the existence and wise benevolence of God, not only suited the empiricist context, as did the sublime, but also worked to obscure and relativize the distinction of Creator and creature. Coleridge, significantly, questioned the apologetic importance of the argument from design, suggesting that it had more value for strengthening existing faith than in any argument against atheism. The problem was that the argument from design made the primary question that of explaining the happy ordering of the world and the intricacy and convenience of its elements for the good of creatures. The more radical and prior question as to the *existence* of contingent reality was hidden behind the interest in the *nature* of things. With the more primary perplexity unrecognized, it was all too easy to represent God as merely the supreme entity alongside all other entities. On the other hand, Coleridge insists, as Nick Reid has pointed out, on the Divine Will as causative of existence, on the "I Am" as alone "self-subsisting" and who, because He is such, is able to create a truly "unnecessary" universe, contingent upon its participation in the gift of being. This preserves the fundamental distinction between the being of God and the being of creatures: God is "self-causing" Being and, in no way, therefore, a being, even a supreme being, among beings.

The term "object," in Adam Smith's statement, is also theologically ambiguous. Coleridge, for instance, insists that "no object of Sense is sublime in itself; but only as far as I make it a symbol of some Idea." Coleridgean "Ideas," though, are not "objects," they transcend the distinction of subjectivity and objectivity. Whilst finite realities are their objective "exponents," our mind's participation in "Ideas" enables us to recognize them in their objective forms and to live in a moral accordance with them. Of course, God is not "an object of Sense" for Addison and Co, as are cats and cucumbers. However, in their accounts of sublimity, God is known in essentially the same way as any *finite* reality, a feature also, and an inevitable one, of Locke's empiricist argument for God's existence and nature. The Coleridgean distinction between "reason" and "understanding" functions, therefore, and this is its crucial theological root, to preserve the uniqueness of God, the uniqueness that is compromised in theologies within the limits of the Understanding alone. Coleridge answers Locke's rejection of "innate ideas" by

reintroducing "ideas" but, in contrast to the Cartesian tradition Locke had attacked, he argues for ideas as active, formative, and seminal powers that inform the mind insofar as it participates in Divine Reason. Theological discourse that confounds "reason" with "mere understanding," conforms the mystery of God to the constraints of the latter, and thus loses the uniqueness of the being and knowledge of the "I Am." In the *Opus Maximum*, this account of reason as a participation in the dynamics of Divine ideas, is developed further as Coleridge identifies the second person of the Trinity as the *Idea of Ideas,* thus grounding the transcendence and dynamism of "Ideas" within the Trinitarian relations. If "Ideas," as the forming powers belonging to God's creative Logos, are the true source of the Sublime, then no finite reality can be called sublime "except by metaphor," a distinction directed against the theological ambiguities of the conventional account of sublimity.

In a late marginal note on Isaiah chapters 50 and 51,[3] Coleridge identifies "a Sublimity, only to be fitly acknowledged by Adoration, in those passages, in which the Jehovah WORD, the Supreme *Being*, and Eternal Reason, speaks of himself, as a Servant to the Supreme Will, the absolute Good self-affirmed in the Holy I AM." Here, the Divine Word, as second person of the Trinity, is described, following the conventional interpretation of Isaiah 50.4-8, as a "Servant," and Coleridge specifies this further as "Servant of the Supreme Will." As the "Jehovah WORD," the Logos is also "the Supreme *Being*," a point Coleridge emphasizes with italics. Crucial to understanding this gloss is a passage in the *Opus Maximum* in which Coleridge argues for the priority of Divine *Will* over Divine *Being*. Coleridge describes the Divine Name given to Moses in Exodus 3, "I AM that I AM," as a "sublime enunciation," its sublimity disclosed in that God alone may be named in this way and that no analogy is adequate to its exposition. For Coleridge, everything stands or falls on our recognizing that "I AM" names God not simply as "Being," but as Divine Being divinely *Willed*. He thus prefers to translate the Hebrew as "That which I will to be I will be."[4] In other words, God is not Spinoza's "It is," but the Biblical "I Am," the God who is infinitely "from himself," the "self-affirming Actus purissimus,"[5] who, therefore, creates freely, not necessarily. Absolute Will is thus the eternal condition of the divine being. If we understand what "will" is, Coleridge argues, we shall have no trouble grasping why will in God must have priority over being, though not, of course, in a temporal sense. There is no contradiction, after all, in thinking of being as a "product," as caused. However, we abandon the very idea of will if we understand being as a condition, the cause of will. "No other definition of Will is possible," Coleridge explains, except "that which originates, … that which is essentially causative of

[3] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 12 : Marginalia: Part 1, Abbt to Byfield*, ed. George Whalley (Princeton University Press, 1980) 435.

[4] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 15: Opus Maximum* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 189.

[5] Ibid., n88.

reality."[6] Were being primordial, then the ontological cart would precede the volitional horse and there would be no Divine Will. No Divine Will leaves us with no alternative to pantheism, since there is no will to will a world distinct from God, a contingent creation.

In the sublime "I AM," therefore, God names himself as "self-causing" and, therefore, never to be confused, either wholly or in part, with creation, the reality that does not will its own being. On the other hand, this Divine Name discloses how creation may be understood as having its own relative integrity, freely willed by God in its finitude. If, however, God's being is the being of the Divine Will, therefore, "essential causativeness… abiding undiminished and indiminishable," then Coleridge's "bulwark" against Spinoza demands Trinitarianism. "Eternal Causativeness" requires an eternal object and the only adequate candidate is "a self wholly & adequately repeated, yet so that the very repetition contains the distinction from the primary act, a Self which in both is self-subsistent, but which yet is not the same because the one only is self-originated."[7] The Jehovah WORD is thus the perfect "Idea" of the "Supreme Mind," "substantial & consubstantial… with the Father."[8] In earlier theology, though, the price of emphasizing the Divine Will, as Coleridge does, was to weaken the ontological bond between Creator and creation by making creation "arbitrary." Coleridge protects himself from this, however, by his affirmation of the WORD as also the "Eternal Reason," the *Idea Idearum*, according to which creation participates in the mind of God.

What I've sketched here is a discussion about the eternal life of God, what is conventionally referred to as the "immanent Trinity." Coleridge, though, ingeniously applies the relationship between the Supreme Will and the Word to the Servant of Isaiah 50. This moves the relationship onto the level of the incarnation, or, again to use the conventional phrase, the "economic Trinity." The obedience of the Incarnate Christ, who, as Isaiah's "Servant," gives his "back to the smiters," enacts within the creation, the relationship of willed Being and Divine Willing, the Being given and Being received and returned that constitutes the life of God.[9] For the sake of space, I've said nothing about the Spirit, but it is worth mentioning that if Coleridge's Trinitarianism appropriates "Will" to the Father and "Being" to the Son, then the reciprocity that is constituted in the "self-affirmation" that passes between them, would be the Spirit. Coleridge's treatment of the Spirit in the *Opus Maximum* is brief but, essentially, this is what he argues. A self-subsistent act, that of the "eternal proceeding from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father… such procession being in its nature circular at once ever refluent and ever profluent"[10] … "that which proceedeth from the Son to the Father and that which is returned from the Son to the Father, and which in this circulation

[6] *Op Max* 194.
[7] *Op Max* 199.
[8] *Op Max* 203-204.
[9] See "Postscript."
[10] Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, 206.

constitutes the eternal unity in the eternal alterity and distinction—the life of Deity in actu purissima. This is truly the breath of life indeed, the perpetual action of the act, the perpetual intellection <alike> of the Intellectus and the Intelligibile, and the perpetual being and existing of that which saith "I AM".[11]

Two brief conclusions: returning finally to the Sublime:

Firstly, understood within the context of his Trinitarianism, Coleridge's insistence that "Ideas," not objects, are the source of the Sublime, suggests an account of sublimity that preserves the radical distinction between Creator and creature, threatened in the conventional discourse of the Sublime.

Secondly, in comparison with the Lockean tradition, Coleridge offers an account of the sublime, the theological implications of which reflect a far more adequate account of God and of the relationship between Creator and creation. He also suggests a promising approach to connecting the sublime with orthodox Christian doctrine, a task that James Ussher attempted with unconvincing results. Ussher's account of the sublime is unusual in resisting a Lockean account of how we know God. He suggests that God is known through an innate sensibility that always remains in the epistemological background until it becomes explicit in experience of the sublime. Ussher also rolls in a doctrine of original sin and reference to the atonement. This is, again, distinctive. However, he is quite unable to join any theological dots between the Church's theology and his version of the sublime. Among other writers, only Young tries to link sublimity with traditional Christian doctrines, but with similarly unhappy results. Coleridge, however, by finding sublimity in the Ideas of which biblical language is the symbolic vehicle, and, supremely, in the Trinitarian relations, did open up the possibility of developing an account of sublimity from a starting-point in Christian theology.

Postscript

Coleridge's application of the relationship between the Supreme Will and the Word to the Servant of Isaiah 50, discussed above, is a move by which created reality, in this case a human being, is united with and, without the loss of its created integrity, manifests in finite terms the infinite life of the Triune God. Such a strategy depends, on the one hand, upon the Father and Son sharing the one divine nature, and on the other, upon the incarnate Son fully sharing human nature. In the words of the Chalcedonian definition of AD 451: "Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood." Coleridge, of course, not only uses the term "consubstantial" of the one divine nature of the Father and the Son but also in the famous description of biblical symbols as "consubstantial with the truths of which they

[11] *OM* 209

are the *conductors*."[12] Recently, Nick Halmi has argued that Coleridge's use of "consubstantial" in connection with the theory of the symbol identifies the relationship between the Father and the Son with that between God and the world. Thus, Coleridge "dissolved the very distinction between *generatio ex deo* and *creatio ex nihilo*" and rendered his "conception of the symbol" incompatible with "even a minimally orthodox understanding of the Trinity".[13] Nick Reid has discussed Halmi's arguments in his essay and all I want to do here is to suggest that Halmi may have ignored an important element in the theological background to Coleridge's use of consubstantial. Halmi acknowledges that the Greek term "homoousios," introduced in the Nicene Creed, was a long way from being precise, but he both underestimates the extent to which it was clarified and became a normative theological term over the 150 years following Nicea, and he ignores its use as an analogical term. The analogical use of "consubstantial" is clear from the Chalcedonian definition. The framers of the definition were perfectly aware that the Father and the Son did not share divine nature in the same sense as David Cameron and Nick Clegg share human nature. The relationship between the two uses of the term is analogical. It's worth pointing this out because the ontology Coleridge works out in the *Opus Maximum* is one essential to an understanding of theological language as analogical. By insisting on the priority of the Divine Will over the Divine Being, Coleridge identified the ontological ground of a contingent creation that receives existence as a gift. He thus preserved the vital distinction between God as the plenitude of Being, existing wholly in and from himself, and the participated, received being of the creation. This ontology, though, has important implications for theological language. Were Divine Being prior to Divine Will, not only would there be no Divine Will, but "Being" would be a univocal term, as it is for Spinoza. In that God freely wills the gift of being to a creation that has its own integrity and that he preserves in being as "other" to Himself, there is a likeness between Creator and creature, by virtue of the gift of being. That likeness is, though, contained within the greater difference between the God who is the "I AM" and the creature whose existence is contingent. That likeness within difference makes theological language possible as analogical language, which is one way of reading Coleridge's symbols as "tautegorical," that is, "expressing the same subject but with a difference." As "consubstantial," the relationship between biblical symbols and the "truths of which they are the conductors" is analogical to, not univocal with, the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. I am not suggesting that there are not important differences between the Coleridgean use of symbol and the classical doctrine of analogy, but simply that the relationship between the two should be looked at more closely before we conclude that the former is incompatible with Trinitarian orthodoxy.

[12] *LS* 29

[13] Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (OUP Oxford, 2007), 118-119).