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Sublime Coleridge
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
by Murray J. Evans

MURRAY EVANS HAS WRITTEN AN IMPORTANT BOOK on the *Opus Maximum*, centred most strongly on the status of Coleridge's 'one postulate, . . . the Existence of the *Will*' (OM 11; Evans 143). For as James Engell has argued, 'the selection of first postulates, or of the place to stand, is crucial, and it seems that the battle for Coleridge is largely won or lost there.'[2] Evans thus focuses closely on the epistemology that underlies Coleridge's first postulate, and contends forcefully that this centres on the idea of the sublime, itself a product of a rhetoric that Evans traces with more than usual thoroughness.

For while the world of the Understanding operates through 'clear, distinct, and adequate conceptions' (F I 106), the world of Reason depends on the reader's ability to generate from within themselves 'ideas' that are not subject to the same kind of demonstrative proof. Put another way, ideas are the axioms on which arguments depend, basic assumptions which are not themselves provable and where the author's task is to persuade the reader of the reasonableness of the axiom. In either case, there is thus a kind of sublime 'excess,' for the reality of the idea (of the Will, for instance) *exceeds any conceptualisation* of it. Coleridgean ideas thus grow out of:

> the deep feelings which belong . . . to those obscure ideas that are necessary to the moral perfection of the human being, . . . for objects, which their very sublimity renders indefinite . . . namely, to the Ideas of Being, Form, Life, the Reason, the Law of Conscience, Freedom, Immortality, God! (F I 106; Evans 135)

On this basis, Evans shows how sublimity plays a role in Coleridge's presentation of basic ideas (like that of the Will), and how the rhetoric of the *Opus Maximum* evokes this sublimity. Indeed, his fifth chapter is a tour de force, carefully dissecting the views of numerous critics on the nature of the Coleridgean sublime (he comes down mostly on the side of Modiano). He argues that since ideas (like that of the will) cannot be demonstrated, they can only be evoked through a dialectical process of positive and negative 'proof,' where the positive 'proof' is more like a process of suggestion, using

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[2] James Engell, 'Coleridge and German Idealism: First postulates, Final Causes', in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), 159, quoted in Evans 146.

'successive extrapolations from the postulate, authorities or best words, and illustrations to build argument' (152). The negative proof consists of 'warnings against analogies, and proof by absurd alternatives,' and is combined with 'appeals to meditate on the idea' (152). Ideas emerge from the 'polarity of consideration and commitment' in a 'sublime rhetoric' (152).

The early chapters of Evans's book are mostly focused on careful demonstrations of the structures of Coleridge's rhetoric. In his first chapter, for instance, Evans focuses on *repetition*—in examining Coleridge's attempt to place the idea of will (the 'prothesis') at the centre of the idea of God. He argues that 'This repetition . . . enacts, rather than merely asserts, the centrality of the "I AM" in Coleridge's ideology.' And he concludes that 'Conceptually or intuitively, the postulate of the Will … is always present in the changing registers of discourse in OM' (28). As he wittily remarks, 'Readers need to trust this growing sense of *déjà vu*' (28).

In the second chapter, Evans explores further the implications of the claim that 'the existence of the Supreme Being in any religious sense is indemonstrable' (OM 103; Evans 39). Evans shows that this leads Coleridge to enact a rhetoric of the sublime in the ways described above (Evans 57)—a demonstration that helps to explain the endless repetitions and discourses on the impossibility of demonstrating the idea of God. He goes on to claim that it lends a quality of poetry to the *Opus Maximum*, though some readers will feel that depends on a rather particular definition of poetry (52ff).

Evans also finds in the text a 'rhetoric of indifference' (60), by which he means that the idea of God emerges through neither the thesis nor the antithesis, representing impossible attempts to define God, but rather in the space between. Evans demonstrates this rhetoric of indifference in examining the 'passage from the absolute to the separated finite'—which he rightly sees as a central question for the *Opus Maximum* (OM 218; Evans 45).[3] Here he argues that Coleridge sets up a dilemma. On the one hand, Coleridge argues that if the finite world is part of God, then we cannot account for evil (since God is good). On the other hand, if the finite world is separate from God, then the finite world is separate from all actuality and we cannot account for the existence of the finite world.

For Evans, the Coleridgean position emerges as the point of indifference between these two positions, though I would stress that Coleridge does not set up the dilemma to create space for some kind of apophatic approach, one which obtains knowledge of God through negation. Instead, Coleridge answers his dilemma by *analysing* the concept of actuality. Since will is free, it has the potential to will itself apart from God and therefore apart from actuality. This is the origin of the potential—as opposed to the actual—and the origin of evil.[4] Evans examines human subjectivity in his third chapter, focusing mainly on the

[3] Coleridge makes a concerted attempt at this passage in CN V 5813—one of his most brilliant and least-referred to notes. (Ed.)

[4] Nicholas Reid, *Coleridge, Form and Symbol* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 121; originally published in 'Coleridge and Schelling', *Studies in Romanticism* 33.3 (1994), 473.

ways in which Coleridge expanded on the earlier 'Essay on Faith.' He explains the basis of self-consciousness in conscience, the I−thou relation (and its origin in the child−mother relationship), the status of Reason within the self, and the ways in which the human subject is an image of God. He argues (contra Perry) that the *Opus* brings together the issues mentioned above in a systematic way. He again brings out well the way in which Coleridge's argument has a hypothetical character, proceeding through 'postulates.'

Evans's fourth chapter represents another strength of the book, for in tackling the Trinity he looks more closely than other critics at the status of the Holy Spirit. While it is not hard to see how the Father and the Son are 'self' and 'other,' it is harder to see how the Spirit also requires personhood. Evans lays out the argument by which the Father sees himself in the Son, a 'seeing' that Coleridge insists must take the form of an act, which means that it is a form of will. Since will can only be instantiated in the form of a person, the act is thus personal, and the Spirit-as-person thus embodies the love implicit in the act.

But as Evans points out, this represents the 'most vulnerable point' in Coleridge's argument for the Trinity (115). I endorse this view, since Coleridge could have just as easily argued for a ditheistic God (Father and Son), and identified the Spirit with the non-existential Ground. The problem is acute, because as Coleridge says, there is no 'express warrant in the scriptures themselves' for the idea that the Spirit represents the 'co-eternal intercirculation of Deity' (OM 201, 206; Evans 104, 96). Coleridge thus needs to persuade us that his view of the Spirit is correct, an argument Evans sets out more carefully than previous critics have done (104–17).

Evans again notes the rhetoric carefully, ranging from what he calls 'the necessary falsehood of the contrary,' the citing of authority, and meditation on the idea (106, 107). He again goes on to suggest that these ideas (the falsehood of the contrary, and authority) sit within the text in a dialectical relation out of which emerges the 'idea' (108). This captures an important insight into the structure of the text. In outlining the dialectical (or more precisely pentadic) scheme, Evans also comments usefully on the way it underpins Coleridge's *naturphilosophie*, his thinking about colour, magnetism and chemistry—and future writers on Coleridge's *naturphilosophie* will need to consult this chapter in particular (99-104).

I want to end this review by commending the quality of Evans's scholarship, for he is everywhere careful to locate his arguments within the context of previous critics. This is becoming a rare quality, but one which we as a discipline should insist on. Evans's book has important things to say about the roles of rhetoric and the sublime in the *Opus Maximum*, and in the process reflects more clearly than previous critics on the epistemology underlying Coleridge's arguments. Readers with an interest in the Coleridgean sublime more generally will need to engage with chapter 5, while readers interested in the status of the Holy Spirit will need to consider the arguments in chapter 4. Some readers will find the first two chapters hard going—and my advice is to skim them so as to arrive at the important argument that follows.