Opus Maximum and Beyond

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IN THE *OPUS MAXIMUM*, Coleridge writes of "the depth of the mystery… in all the great and stirring epochs of the Christian theology: the narrow isthmus which we have to pass, with atheism on the one side, or a world without a God, and [on the other] Pantheism, or a world that is itself God."[1] The passage appears early in Thomas McFarland's "Fragment 3," one of the four principal manuscripts edited for the Collected Coleridge edition, which exist in draft form as dictated to J.H. Green and John Watson.[2] As Coleridge's letters and notebooks from 1796 to 1833 reiterate in many versions, he planned a comprehensive *magnum opus* throughout much of his lifetime; the extant *Opus Maximum* is not the *magnum opus* "but a series of manuscripts associated with that dream."[3] Each of the three essays in this section attends to the "narrow isthmus" of the passage above, while relating it, perhaps surprisingly, to concerns in many more areas of current Coleridge studies.

Graham Davidson's essay argues that *OM* illuminates Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*, in particular its definition of the Primary Imagination. Davidson queries a prevalent view exemplified in Shawcross's statement that "the primary imagination is the organ of common perception, the faculty by which we have experience of an actual world of phenomena." In contrast, Davidson suggests, for Coleridge "[c]ommon perception and human perception are not synonymous." Davidson goes on to remind us of Coleridge's contrast between his own perceptions of the world—"We see our God everywhere"—and those of an atheist, for whom "all this magnificent work would be a blank."[4] But Davidson's more important landing-place is *CN* IV 4692 (1820), from which he looks back to Chapter 13. In the 1820 note Coleridge opines that through Imagination, we may apprehend "Presences" when experience of the merely empirical "can supply no more." Therefore (in Davidson's words) "Ideas are living presences, and they blend with Ideals, living purposes." Coleridge has thus "presented a precise description of the primary imagination—and it is an idea-educing power." For further precision about such ideas, Davidson turns to "On the Divine Ideas," McFarland's Fragment 3 of *OM*. Here Coleridge labours, as in the definition of Primary Imagination in Chapter 13, to express "the truths of eternity… in the forms of time": "For the finite can be one with the absolute, inasmuch only as it

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1 *Op Max* 221.

2 These include the last two sections of Victoria College Library MS 29 (McFarland's Fragments 1 and 2), Huntingdon Library HM 8195 entitled "On the Divine Ideas" (Fragment 3), and Victoria College Library MS 29 part 1 (Fragment 4). Nicholas Halmi dates these large fragments in the period, 1819-23 (*Op Max* xx). *Op Max* xvii and the respective headnotes for each of the four fragments discuss the dictation of the manuscripts.

3 John Beer, "Coleridge's *Magnum Opus* and his *Opus Maximum*," in Jeffrey W. Barbeau, ed., *Coleridge's Assertion of Religion: Essays on the* Opus Maximum (Leuven, Paris, Dudley MA: Peeters, 2006) 288. On the various projected incarnations of the *magnum opus*, see *Op Max* xci-cv and Barbeau, "The Quest for System: An Introduction to Coleridge's Lifelong Project," *Coleridge's Assertion* 1-32.

4 *LPR* 338-9.

represents the absolute verily under some particular form."[5] Davidson summarizes the connection between Chapter 13 and *OM* thus: "the primary imagination is the power that can educe ideas; a divine idea is a discrete, creative, constitutive form of and within the Logos, the creator and the evolver."[6] As for our perceptions of Nature, Davidson reminds us of another reflection by Coleridge, one consistent with "the assertion that the imagination is the living power and prime agent of all human perception." This later passage comments that the imagination, "educing the creative ideas of the logos, brings order, and thus perception, to the chaos of passive sensation." On Davidson's argument from *OM*, then, the Primary Imagination of Chapter 13 cannot be "the organ of common perception." And he makes a Coleridgean application to the present: if we long for and sense the beautiful order of Nature, "then your primary imagination has yet to be fully extinguished, your humanity is safe for another day."

For those who doubt the pertinence of *OM*, then, Davidson's essay shows that the discussion there of divine ideas can illuminate so central a theme in Coleridge studies as the imagination, and so central a crux as Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*. The essay achieves the considerable task of unpacking some difficult Coleridgean discourse on divine ideas.[7] Davidson goes on to unsettle one conventional assumption about the primary imagination and connects *OM* with both earlier and also later passages from the canon. Davidson thus successfully models one way in which scholars can domesticate *OM* into Coleridge studies without recourse to that sometimes reductive label, the "later Coleridge."

Nicholas Reid uses OM to revisit another commonplace, the Coleridgean symbol and related Romantic theory, no less. His essay critiques Nicholas Halmi's important book *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, which itself critiques the Coleridgean truism of the translucent symbol.[8] Halmi "is right (in Coleridgean terms)," Reid asserts, "to argue for 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." Reid does not however simply return to one scholarly state of affairs preceding Halmi's study on the topic, say, New Critical views of the symbol. What distinguishes Reid's treatment is its integral use of *OM* according to seven headings. Among them, several conclusions stand out, illustrating the significance of *OM* for a number of major debates about Coleridge. *OM* is important for completing Coleridge's version of Kant and Schelling's transcendental deduction, as a truncated

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[5] *Op Max* 218.

[6] Cf. *Op Max* 223: "a divine Idea is the Omnipresence or Omnipotence represented intelligentially in some one of the possible forms, which are the plenitude of the divine Intelligence, the Logos or substantial adequate Idea of the Supreme Mind."

[7] Coleridge occasionally defines aspects of OM elsewhere more straightforwardly as in this definition of divine ideas from *SW&F* I 156: "God's *ideas* of finite things, *the finite things*—which originate in him but acquire separate existence."

[8] We should not forget that the author of *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, with which Reid takes some issue, is also the textual editor of *Op Max*. We owe Nicholas Halmi a great debt for providing the text for all to read.

Chapter 13 in the *Biographia* failed to do. This work matters "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 a perceived object." Coleridge's un-Schellingian completion of the deduction also cannot logically be a symptom of his plagiarizing Schelling; this charge too often "becomes a reason for not taking Coleridge's theory seriously." Reid also turns to the famous passages on symbol and tautegory in *The Statesman's Manual*, arguing (pace Halmi on synecdoche) that the "divine symbol has content." Coleridge, moreover, uses "consubstantial" there "not in the sense of shared material substance, but in the sense of shared form." This sense of form derives from Coleridge's Trinitarian formulation in *OM*: the Logos or Son, the *alter* (other) "is the *form* of its own reality, and though one with, yet not the same as, the form of the Idem [the same]," i.e., the Father.[9] In all, symbolic language "is something quasi-aesthetic," not merely "dead forms." Symbolic language reaches beyond itself "just as we construct our knowledge of the world in sensory form."

Reid asserts that "here, it must be admitted, we are right on the limits of Coleridge's explanatory project." Davidson in his conclusion to his essay is also working at this limit in making a similar contrast between a dead nature and one alive with "Presence." And in his final observation, Davidson couples the possible survival of the primary imagination in our day with that of the secondary imagination for any of us poets, thus touching on the domain of Reid's discourse on literary symbols. In other words, although Davidson's essay draws most on *OM*'s discussion of divine ideas and Reid's on the formal difference between Father and Son in *OM*, Davidson's conclusion provides a segue for Reid's essay to follow. Their different topical focus on *OM* is in part only apparent, since a key passage late in Fragment 2 invokes the inter-relation of the Logos, divine ideas, and form (the combined themes of both their essays):

> in this other all others are included, … in this first substantial intelligible distinction (= ὅ Λογος) all other distinctions that can subsist in the indivisible unity (Λογοι θειοι) or[10] contain it, are included… under the form of being—that is, under being as not only the essence but as the form of the essence—all is completed.

Here appear together, then, *the* "other" or Logos; in the Logos "all other distinctions," the divine ideas (Λογοι θειοι); and Logos as "being" in "the *form* of essence" (emphasis added). Reid's contribution to the larger discussion, moreover, is an ambitious demonstration of how reading *OM* enables powerful interventions in so many issues for Coleridge: the symbol, symbolic language, and associated Romantic theory; the transcendental deduction, Coleridge's

[9] *Op Max* 204.

[10] The "or" is present in the MS but omitted in *Op Max* 207.

plagiarism, tautegory and consubstantiality, and theological and poetic form. The scope of his attention gives some additional business to Coleridgeans in many domains.

"Sublime" is not a word used at all frequently in *OM*. Alan Gregory cites Coleridge's mention of the "sublime enunciation" of God's name to Moses in Exodus 3, "I am in that I am."[11] His point is that "conventional accounts of the sublime tend to underestimate the importance of theology in the English contribution to this tradition." What's more, the "more theologically explicit accounts of the sublime all work with Lockean assumptions, the assumptions Coleridge critiqued so vigorously." If God "is the sublimest thing around," at the apex of an ascent from other less intense sublime experience, there is danger of losing a discourse "by which God is radically distinguished from creatures." This would be the danger of a pantheism that Coleridge deplored. Like Davidson, Gregory turns to Coleridgean "Ideas," which "transcend the distinction of subjectivity and objectivity." Since Ideas form "powers belonging to God's creative Logos," they are "the true source of the Sublime." With reference to Fragment 1 of *OM*, Gregory underlines that Coleridge defines God as Will before Being: "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." Like Reid, Gregory's argument then takes him to Coleridge's Trinity, but with more emphasis on its formulation as Tetractys,[12] a definition incorporating Absolute Will into the Triad (Father, Son, and Spirit). Thus Gregory draws on key passages in *OM*: on Eternal Causitiveness finally requiring another "Self" and on Holy Spirit as "perichoresis," the intercirculation of the persons of Deity.[13] The combination of these ideas he summarizes as "the relationship of willed Being and Divine Willing, the Being given and Being received and returned that constitutes the life of God." He also points out Coleridge's marginal note on Isaiah chapters 50 and 51, linking the Incarnation and this intercirculation of the Trinity. The "obedience of the Incarnate Christ, who, as Isaiah's 'Servant,' 'gives his back to the smiters'" enacts "within the creation" this "life of God" in the Trinity. Thus for Gregory, *OM* illustrates how Coleridge opens up—uniquely in his period—"the possibility of developing an account of sublimity from a starting-point in Christian theology."

Gregory's essay clearly illustrates how valuable a professional theologian can be to discussions of *OM*. This value also holds for his important postscript on the likeness-within-difference underlying the ontology of *OM* and implied in the use of "consubstantial" in the Chalcedonian definition of the Incarnation. The term is analogical, as in the consubstantiality of Father and Son, of Creator and creature, and of biblical symbols "with the truths of which they are the *conductors*." This fact is reason, he suggests, for reconsidering Halmi's

[11] *Op Max* 189.
[12] *Op Max* 209-10.
[13] *Op Max* 195-6, 206.

conclusion that the Coleridgean symbol "is incompatible with Trinitarian orthodoxy." Gregory's conclusions also significantly converge with those of Davidson and Reid around shared attention to themes in *OM*: the formal difference and distinction between Father and Son, for example; and the importance of divine ideas in Coleridge's resistance to materialism and pantheism. Gregory's emphasis on the Trinitarian contribution of *OM* to a unique Coleridgean sublime, moreover, is a welcome example of how much *OM* can enrich our understanding of this important topic for Coleridge studies.[14] Gregory's focus on *OM* is apparently at the theological/conceptual pole of Coleridge's discourse on the sublime, in contrast to his more aesthetic/cognitive discussion of the sublime elsewhere in terms of undefined vastness.[15] Yet for Coleridge, the two apparent extremes interpenetrate in polar fashion, as in his comment that Christianity is the most suitable religion to the sublime, since "the Imagination is kept barren in definite Forms and only in cooperation with the Understanding labours after an obscure & indefinite Vastness."[16] Gregory's essay can thus help Coleridgeans with those acts of historical imagination by which we may re-join together what modernity has put asunder, towards an enriched appreciation of Coleridge's sublime.

These essays join previous work on *OM* in providing pathways into the text, further opportunities to discover insights in *OM* that are portable to other areas of Coleridge studies. Perhaps as Alan Vardy suggests, this panel on *OM* joins other scholars' ventures in the last decade "to study the text and to disseminate its influence in their own historical moment[,] … intently engaged in the construction of Coleridge."[17] The essays also suggest that *OM* may, after all, be a bridge less far than some of us readers feared when we first tried reading this challenging text. Readers and scholars have made many other Coleridge texts less difficult than we first found them to be. The same process has begun for the *Opus Maximum*.

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[14] This is also a major topic in Murray J. Evans, *Sublime Coleridge: The* Opus Maximum, forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan in 2012.

[15] See for example Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985) 115: "Unity of an indeterminate character, which cannot be localized in physical forms, yet is hazily apprehended through them, is the foremost quality of Coleridge's sublime object, to which all others are subordinated."

[16] *CL* I 466.

[17] Alan Vardy, *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (Basingstoke, UK & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 163-4.