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Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the Supernatural Will in American Literature
(New York: Routledge, 2019)
by Brad Bannon

BRAD BANNON'S MONOGRAPH CLAIMS A DUAL LEGACY of oscillatory influence from Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Taylor Coleridge on Romantic-era American writers' dealings with the free will problem. Bannon justifies his seemingly unusual move of bringing Edwards and Coleridge together by showing not only how Edwards affected Coleridge, but also how Edwards affected Coleridge's influence on these subsequent American writers. Bannon identifies, in respect to Coleridge's argument for a supernatural free will, an internal struggle, a fierce resistance to Edwards's theological determinism that "belies a deeper involvement," or inadvertently acknowledges the "force" of Edwards's position (22). He finds the reverberations of this struggle in these American writers. Bannon's study achieves its highest degree of focus and makes its greatest contribution during a brilliant and compelling literary analysis of texts by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville. Through these chapters, the reader gains an in-depth understanding of the complex ways in which Edwards's and Coleridge's opposing ideas influenced these writers as they dealt with and worked out issues related to the free will problem in their fiction.

Bannon begins his analysis of Romantic-era American fiction, in chapter three, with Hawthorne, paying special attention to *The Scarlet Letter*. Turning first to notebooks and letters, Bannon shows that Hawthorne's ideas about the free will problem are most clearly expressed in his conception of Providence (89). Through this reading of personal writings, Bannon reveals Hawthorne's tendency to waver between a serious acceptance of Providence as a divine presence actively involved in the daily life of humans and a light-hearted, even comic, playfulness that suggests Hawthorne's refusal to admit that such involvement is ubiquitous (or that human life is simply or fully determined). Ultimately, Bannon identifies Hawthorne as "something of a soft determinist: since the only constraint on free will is Providence, which is to a large extent unknowable, humans are essentially free—simply put, we cannot tell the difference between freedom and fate" (97). Thus, for Hawthorne, Providence is inscrutable, and this inscrutability is closely associated with another significant idea that Bannon presents in this section, namely, that Hawthorne is most adamantly fixated on the mystery of the free will problem and not on its

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solution. Turning to Hawthorne's fiction, especially *The Scarlet Letter*, Bannon touches on opposing ideas of divination and divine inscrutability, Providential decree and human will, and determinism and freedom. What is most fascinating about Bannon's analysis, though, is how it allows the reader to see that Hawthorne raises difficult questions about the free will problem through his fiction precisely so he can refuse to answer them.

While Bannon does well to show Hawthorne's wavering between opposing ideas of Providence and free will, and convincingly demonstrates that his fiction was much more concerned with the mystery than the solution of the free will problem, this first literary component is the weakest in Bannon's argument. Rather than taking on directly the *oscillatory* influence proposed by his own dual legacy thesis, Bannon focuses his interpretation of Hawthorne's fiction mostly on Edwards's influence (a rather tenuous connection) and on drawing out elements of theological determinism. Bannon begins to broach this oscillatory influence when he follows others in associating Hester Prynne with a self-determined will, but he does not follow through or demonstrate this idea in the text. What is missing is a deeper analysis of the philosophical underpinnings guiding Bannon's approach to the fiction. He tells the reader that Hawthorne accepted some notion of the will as free, and he places Hawthorne's position somewhere between Edwards and Coleridge, but he does not demonstrate or elaborate on this. Indeed, there is relatively little discussion of Hawthorne's position as it relates to Coleridge's idea of a self-determined supernatural will. His most direct claim in this regard is that "Hawthorne vacillates between a self-determination that most clearly manifests itself in his resistance to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, and a passive acceptance of Providence" (98). Bannon spends more time on Hawthorne's strained personal relationship with Emerson, however, than he does on fleshing out Hawthorne's idea of the human will, how it was opposed to Emerson's, and why the quality of self-determination in Hawthorne's idea of will "most clearly manifests itself" when he is resisting Emerson's position.

Key components forming the philosophical spine of the book are also in need of further development, especially in regard to Edwards's and Coleridge's opposing positions on the will. For Edwards, Bannon explains, human beings have the capacity for choice and volition; however, the human will can only become supernatural as a result of the direct influence of God, and is, under any other circumstance, restricted by the same constraints as the universe as a whole, and thus is subject to the same causal and theological determinism (11–13). While he clearly identifies Edwards as a "theological empiricist" and names him as an influential proponent of theological and causal determinism, Bannon mostly provides the reader with an idea of a position of causal and theological determinism in general (19).

By contrast, Bannon examines Coleridge's position more thoroughly. As a result, the reader learns that Coleridge accepted natural law and believed the human will to be "co-existent," "co-extensive," and "co-present" with natural causation, but refused to accept the human will as "entirely subject to its rule"

(82, 88). For Coleridge, "the 'responsible' power of volition 'must be *spiritual*, and consequently *supernatural*'" (10). The human will achieves this transition into a supernatural mode by aligning itself with Reason, and thus, aligning itself with the divine will (15). This is not "Calvinism in disguise," however, because, as Bannon explains, God's will does not determine the human will, but rather the human will becomes free and determines itself when it becomes aligned to, and thus, "consubstantial with[,] the will of God" (27). This happens as a result of human effort and an influx of the divine, rather than by direct divine influence alone. While Coleridge posits that the human will has the capacity to become self-determined, supernatural, and thus, free, Bannon points out that he ultimately fails to demonstrate exactly *how* the human will becomes self-determined. This is not surprising, though, given Coleridge's insistence in the *Biographia* that "freedom" in respect to the human will "must be assumed as a ground of philosophy, and can never be deduced from it" (BL I 280). Bannon calls Coleridge's solution to this problem of self-determination in the human will "patently circular," but it seems Coleridge accepted such a solution as necessitated by the very nature of the problem itself. As Bannon shows, Coleridge characterized the self-determined human will as "incomprehensible —i.e. causeless, unconditional, indetermined—else it could it [*sic*] not be freedom" (15; M III 312). In other words, the supernatural human will is a self-caused first principle and, as such, is indemonstrable.

After a fascinating (albeit somewhat digressive) account of "the evolution of Coleridge's views on slavery and race alongside the abolitionist theologies of John Woolman and Olaudah Equiano" in chapter two, and an extensive consideration of Emerson's position on the will in chapter three, Bannon presents the reader with his study's most exceptional contribution in an analysis of texts by Poe and Melville in chapter four. Aligning Poe's position on the human will with Edwards's, Bannon claims that, for Poe, "free will of the supernatural, Coleridgean kind is almost certainly out of the question" (115). In his readings of "Ligeia" and "Morella," Bannon shows that Poe had a "grisly fascination" with the idea of a self-determined will, but also that he was ultimately unwilling to accept such a notion. For Poe, "the 'gigantic volition' of the Lady Ligeia" (and, likewise, Morella) "is something of a nightmarish fantasy," and such freedom under the influence of human individuality could only lead to a "grotesque amplification of unbridled human desire" (117–18). In his philosophical tract, *Eureka*, Poe characterizes each human soul as, in some sense, divine, and thus, as part and parcel of a self-determining divine will. According to Bannon, though, for Poe, human beings cannot act "in opposition to this sweeping intentionality" of the divine will in the universe (114–16). The world is safe, then, from the horrors of Poe's fiction because human beings are bound not only naturally by natural law, but also supernaturally by an overarching divine intentionality.

As for Melville, his position on the free will problem is much more ambiguous. Focusing on *Moby Dick*, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and *Billy Budd*, Bannon explains that Melville was writing each during a time when he was

becoming "increasingly interested in the seeming incompatibility" between Edwardsian determinism and Coleridge's "persuasive insistence on the supernatural will" (121). According to Bannon, Melville's "most vigorous confrontations with his inability to choose between [… the two views] appear prominently" in these texts (Ibid.). Through his analysis of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Bannon draws out the idea of escaping causal necessity through the inaction of not willing. What is most interesting, though, is that, through Bannon's reading, Melville appears to use Bartleby's character to both illuminate this idea and demonstrate its impossibility. As Bannon explains, "Bartleby continues to perform actions such as remaining in the building, sitting on the banister, and staring silently at a dead wall," and thus, one must conclude that "he has chosen, or preferred, to do these things rather than others" (134). Thus, Bartleby's character demonstrates that an attempt to transcend causal determination by way of not willing is futile, as not willing to do certain things turns out to be willing to do others. Moreover, Bartleby's refusal to will (at least positively) ultimately leads to his death (129–30). Thus, while Bartleby's character may complicate matters in respect to identifying the preceding cause of Bartleby's willing (i.e., the cause seems to be Bartleby's idea of not willing and it is unclear how this relates to other determining factors, such as past events, past experience, disposition, etc.), Bartleby's character also shows that no matter what a person can achieve with regard to the will, he is still bound by the "ironclad network of cause and effect" in the physical world, and is thus subject to its consequences, as Bartleby was subject to the ultimate one (121).

In *Billy Budd*, however, Bannon shows that Melville begins to test even the most unyielding limits of the natural world. Bannon explains that this unfinished text "is significant both for its bold treatment of the free will problem, and also for the fact that it is Melville's final foray into the question that had occupied him for nearly forty years" (136). The climactic moment when Melville dives most fiercely into the free will problem is represented by Billy's hanging, during which there is an "inexplicable absence of muscular spasm in [… the] body" (138). Bannon directs the reader to the next chapter, wherein "two disputants" stand in for the opposing positions: the Purser, representing a position inclusive of the idea of a Coleridgean supernatural will, and the Surgeon, representing a position of Edwardsian determinism (138–39). Bannon claims that this chapter is meant to show "the compromise, or metaphysical deadlock, that [… Melville] has appeared to have reached on the matter" (139). Thus, even though it seems as if Billy has somehow escaped the laws of natural causality, Bannon argues that the case of Billy's hanging and the dispute between the Purser and the Surgeon that follows represent Melville's arrival "at the precipice of the epistemological limits that had vexed him"; i.e., Melville reaches an "impasse" wherein these opposing positions must "coexist" because neither provides "an adequate account of the world" alone (140). Through the lens of his dual legacy thesis, then, Bannon identifies Melville's "final refusal" to fully accept either Edwardsian determinism or

Coleridgean supernaturalism as "among the most powerful of the American literary responses to the free will problem in the nineteenth century" (140–41).

Overall, Bannon's study has much to offer in satisfaction of a wide variety of interests, and would be especially valuable to Coleridge scholars and those more broadly interested in Romantic-era American fiction and religious and political themes as they relate to the free will problem. In a study so rich with literary and historical context that it can, at times, distract the reader, Bannon effortlessly draws many subtle and intriguing connections among various thinkers, texts, and ideas. The book's argument would be stronger if Bannon spent more time developing and fine-tuning certain philosophical aspects rather than on some of the more digressive content; still there are flashes of brilliance that make the whole worthwhile. Bannon's riveting analysis of Cormac McCarthy's fiction is one of the best the book has to offer, yet this only appears in the epilogue, where it is tangential at best. Indeed, by the time one reaches the end of the book, Bannon's thesis has dropped out of sight entirely. Despite these few faults, however, Bannon's argument is stimulating and convincing, and within the framework of his dual legacy thesis, he offers compelling new perspectives on the selected works of fiction, especially those from Poe and Melville. On the whole, Bannon's monograph is a study rich with historical and literary significance, and philosophical import with respect to the free will problem.