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reads
Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)
by Richard Berkeley

THIS BOOK (based on a thesis in Literature and Philosophy at the Australian National University, where the author was a Commonwealth Scholar) reopens the territory notably explored by Thomas McFarland in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (1969) and makes good the claim that it rewards further inquiry. McFarland's study, the author suggests, displayed an 'idiosyncratic' view of the controversy and thus veiled the significance of Coleridge's position in a Europe-wide 'crisis of reason'. In short, he does not see it, as McFarland presented it, as a struggle with the question of whether pantheist philosophies are incompatible with the religion of revelation, but as a struggle to recast European philosophy in the light of challenges to 'reason'. Coleridge was concerned with this larger picture. To show this the author revisits the main documents of the 'Pantheismusstreit', or controversy over pantheism, the attacks on the leading Enlightenment figures Lessing and Reimarus as followers of Spinoza, whose system was labelled 'pantheist' and (therefore) atheistic by the leading German antagonist, F.H. Jacobi. Lessing was widely regarded as author or co-author of the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* published under Reimarus's name in 1781. Coleridge certainly read Jacobi, but Jacobi was a small player in a larger controversy. A great deal was at stake.

Coleridge's views of Spinoza are thus carefully re-examined; it is one of the contributions of the book that it uncovers a number of references in Coleridge to relevant thinkers (Spinoza, Jacobi, and Moses Mendelssohn) that have only been identified in the long course of the preparation of the notes to the *Collected Coleridge*, and at times he is able to query the readings of the published notes by comparison with the MSS. McFarland cannot be blamed for having failed to winkle out all these references in his pioneering work. However, it is helpful to have them, not least in *Biographia Literaria*, and in the crucial period around 1810 when McFarland argued that Coleridge ceased to refer to Schelling, on the grounds that Schelling was implicated in the charge of 'pantheism'. Berkeley's major service is to query this date, and to show that Coleridge continued to refer to Schelling in important contexts.

Berkeley, however, cannot be said even now to have taken full account of the significance of the subject. Strangely, he overlooks one of the most important aspects of Coleridge's interest in this controversy, the role of Spinoza and of Lessing and Reimarus in the movement known as 'the Higher Criticism' of the Bible, that is, the historical and critical examination of the Biblical texts from the secular point of view of authenticity, authorship and dating of the various MSS. Both Spinoza and Lessing wrote milestones in the development of the application of modern historical methods of assessing documents to the sacred texts, subjecting them to rational scrutiny. It was in this respect that they were leaders in the application of rational method to the

assessment of texts, a major advance of the Enlightenment. Human historical method replaced claims to authorship or dictation by the divinity or the 'Holy Ghost' or 'spirit'. For Lessing, this spelt the end of any claim on the part of Christianity (or any other religious system that made such claims) to be historical, that is, based on actual events in history vouched for by divine authority. Instead they must stand—or fall—on the results of rational scrutiny.[1] As Berkeley has located more of Coleridge's comments on the participants in this controversy, Maximiliaan van Woudenberg has recently shown that Coleridge did indeed do considerable work towards his proposed Life of Lessing while he was in Germany.[2] The blackening of Spinoza's name was in part owing to his trenchant Biblical criticism in the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. In general, the extraordinary disregard of Lessing in the Coleridge secondary literature is to be deplored, and it continues even here (his name does not appear in the bibliography), despite the fact that Lessing is necessarily a major actor in the pantheism controversy. It might be argued that Biblical criticism was an empirical science, as opposed to a philosophy of reason; but this would need to be discussed.

Berkeley begins by pursuing Coleridge's readings of Spinoza. He is here concerned with a tradition of rational philosophy in Europe—hence his title—which may well differ from the kind of 'reason' represented by the empirical testing of the authenticity of documents or historical claims. This places Coleridge rightly in a larger framework of crisis: if 'reason' is the watchword of philosophy, what can we mean by it when we look not at the Greeks or at the British empiricists but at Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza? As we know, and the author of this book knows, the crisis came to a head in Kant, and Coleridge spent his life grappling with Kant's solutions. His grapplings with the definition of 'reason' and 'understanding' are a recurrent theme in his writings. But he did not fail to read and ponder the other European rationalists of the previous two centuries.

While the author diligently and usefully gathers the citations of Spinoza and Coleridge's direct comments on them, we find that his summary of his findings after fifty pages is curiously feeble, and this disappointment recurs; the writer of this book is not a philosopher. He does make an effective literary point about how to account for evil in a pantheist universe, though: a passage of Coleridge in MS Egerton (an instance of Berkeley's returning to the MSS to query the published readings) invokes the imagery of 'The Ancient Mariner', and reminds us that that poem was written during Coleridge's pantheist period. The passage includes the image of Spinoza 'splitting on a rock on the other

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[1] For accounts of this movement and Coleridge's part in it, also overlooked by McFarland, see Shaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[2] See 'Coleridge's Literary Studies at Göttingen', *The Coleridge Bulletin,* New Series 21 (Summer 2003), 66-80, and 'Coleridge's Göttingen Reading Notes: The Intertextual Research of the Projected *Life of Lessing* in 1799', in *Variants 2/3: Reading Notes*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle and Wim Van Mierlo (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 245-70.

side [beyond] of the mid-channel in which he would have found the deep water and a secure Navigation.' The author comments: 'the figure of the Mariner is (amongst other things) Coleridge's greatest meditation on the burden of finitude in a Spinozistic universe' (56). William Empson made this point brilliantly in his extended commentary in *Coleridge's Verse: A Selection* (1972) on the pantheist stance of the original poem (before the addition of the glosses of 1817); but Empson is not mentioned here. A pity, as Empson's reading is still disputed; it would be good to have Berkeley's fuller comments on his Spinozist reading of the poem.

In Part II the Pantheist Controversy is reviewed, in four chapters: on Lessing (very little), on Jacobi, on Mendelssohn and *Morgenstunden*, and on Schelling. It is surprising to find that McFarland is mentioned only very sparingly, until towards the end of the book he is declared to have got Coleridge 'backwards' (187). There is no reference to McFarland's later writings, which increasingly bent Coleridge into the service of his own ideas. By getting Coleridge 'backwards' the author means that McFarland (and many others) have seen Coleridge's treatment of the reason-understanding distinction as an attempt to construct a defence of Christianity against the Enlightenment. But Berkeley believes that Coleridge sought a definition of reason that would include human actions (rather than have to resort to a mechanistic world in which human experience made no sense). Berkeley's formulation is again less than perspicuous: 'I am suggesting just the opposite: that the distinction [between reason and understanding] is Coleridge's genuine attempt to defend reason by generating a conception of reason that could account for ordinary rational activity, without simultaneously trapping the rational subject in a mechanistic milieu which blatantly fails to account for the most basic features of human experience—not only of religious conviction, but of free will itself' (188).

Coleridge's response is the Kantian move (though Berkeley doesn't identify it as such) that allows the concepts of God, the soul and freedom still to have meaning, although to do so Kant had to allow for a sphere of 'aids to reflection' beyond the limits of reason, as Coleridge acutely pointed out in his book of that title.[3]

Berkeley's most interesting comments occur in his treatment of Schelling's later ideas and Coleridge's continuing concern with them. He shows that Coleridge continued to invoke Schelling and to argue with him in the *Opus Maximum* (as indeed the notes to that work now attest), especially on the problem of evil, the bugbear of pantheists. He argues that Schelling's later idea of an 'evolving God' was too daring for Coleridge; it was no longer a question of 'pantheism' as such, but of an evolutionary process of the divine principle. Berkeley fails to connect this to Schelling's later philosophy of mythology, whereas Paul Hamilton has recently argued convincingly that Schelling drew

[3] See, most recently, my 'Coleridge and Kant's "giant hand"', in *Anglo-German Affinities and Antipathies*, ed. Rüdiger Görner (Munich: Iudicium, 2004).

on Coleridge's concept of tautegory for such a conception of evolution working itself out in history. Berkeley carries McFarland's argument that Coleridge was motivated by fear of pantheist 'immanence' further than he did, if only because McFarland thought Coleridge ceased to concern himself with Schelling after 1810.

The apparatus to this book is thoroughly unsatisfactory. One assumes that it is the author's choice to make all his quotations refer simply to its volume and page reference in the *Collected Coleridge* or to the MSS 'On the Divine Ideas'; but this means the reader must either be familiar in detail with the contents of the different volumes (difficult in the case of for example the two volumes comprising Coleridge's various 'Shorter Works') or have them all before him while reading. The completely inadequate index one is inclined to blame on the publisher, as it is pitifully short, misses out many of the authors and the texts discussed, indeed does not list the texts (despite the largely text-centred discussion of the thesis), and fails to include a number of the page references under those entries that do make an appearance, including 'McFarland'. The reader's task is not facilitated by the apparatus.

Yet perhaps the main service of this book is to bring into play the full references to materials now available in the *Collected Coleridge* relating to the minor figures in the European debate over the nature of reason, namely Jacobi and Mendelssohn, while suggesting that the major figures of Lessing, Kant and Schelling still have riches to offer for our understanding of Coleridge. Moreover, he reminds us that Spinoza still stands as a monument to the notion of reason that was being transformed in the eighteenth century.