Coleridge's Sublime and *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829)

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COLERIDGE'S *ON THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH AND STATE* (1829) has received well-deserved attention, particularly for his idea of the clerisy or "National Church." The Clerisy combines "the learned (a small class devoted to advanced academic teaching and inquiry) and a numerous body of [local] clergymen and teachers."[1] This Clerisy is to represent "all the so called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the Theological."[2] What deserves more scholarly attention is Coleridge's deployment in his prose of the sublime. My analysis of *Church and State* (hereafter *C&S*) builds on what I have elaborated in *Sublime Coleridge* as a double aspect of Coleridge's sublime in prose. The first involves "the ever hovering but indemonstrable Idea that sooner or later, readers may 'possess'"[3]—in the case of *C&S*, his ideas of Church and State. Such discourse exhibits what Modiano defines as "the foremost quality of Coleridge's sublime object," be it nature or literary prose[4]: "[u]nity of an indeterminate character, which cannot be localized in physical forms, yet is hazily apprehended through them."[5] A second aspect of Coleridge's sublime in prose—its "intense engagement with the objects of sense"[6]—coexists with the first in polar tension: the rhetorical features of Coleridge's prose. Readers' object, "as they follow the turns of Coleridge's argument toward possessing the

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1 Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (1964; rpt, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), 54.

2 *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer, Bollingen Series LXXV 10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 46. (Cited as C&S.) This edition is based on Coleridge's second edition of the text in 1830 (C&S lvii).

3 Murray J. Evans, *Sublime Coleridge: The* Opus Maximum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Chapter 5, 152-53 and passim. Christopher Stokes' exploration, in *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime: From Transcendence to Finitude* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) of another kind of double nature in Coleridge's sublime, is often congenial to mine. Other important studies on Coleridge's sublime—by Modiano, Knapp, Thorpe, and Shaffer—are footnoted below.

4 Emily Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," in ed. Timothy M. Costelloe, *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 172-73, makes three helpful distinctions for categories of the sublime: first, "phenomenological experience of the sublime" as in Wordsworth's experience of nature; second, "sublime discourse ... expressive of such experiences," as in parts of Wordsworth's *Prelude*; and third, philosophical discourse on the sublime. She properly adds: "These three categories tend to run together in practice." Indeed, the proliferation of natural, textual, artistic, postmodern etc. sublimes in Costelloe's collection of essays confirms that Brady's distinctions pertain to many sublime objects, not just nature, and that common traits of the sublime exist across the different kinds. My essay on *C&S* succeeds two others (footnoted below) as parts of my monograph in progress, "After Sublime Coleridge: Coleridge's Later Prose and Recent Sublime Theory." This study focuses on sublime prose discourse, i.e., philosophical discourse often on the sublime. This discourse achieves sublimity in relation to how Coleridge (as distinguished from Kant) defines it, and includes work by Adorno, Kristeva, Jameson, and other recent theorists.

5 Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press, 1985), 115. Cf. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Table Talk, Recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge (and John Taylor Coleridge)*, ed. Carl Woodring., Bollingen Series LXXV 14 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), II 371: "Where neither whole nor parts, but unity, as boundless or endless *allness*—[here is] the Sublime." Coleridge's starting-point for here distinguishing the sublime from the beautiful, the grand, etc. is a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

6 Raimonda Modiano, "Coleridge and the Sublime: A Response to Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 9 (1978), 117.

idea, *is* his rhetoric, not exclusively 'a sublime state of mind.'"[7] Examples of these "physical forms" of his discourse in *C&S* include his illustrations and his crossing or moving of boundaries of the political entities discussed—State, National Church, Christian Church, the "Third Possible Church" (C&S 129), and so on. The result is complex reconfigurations of the religious and the political in his text. The sublimity of Coleridge's discourse, however—this combination of elusive haziness with oblique argument—presents impediments to readers' application of his ideas to their contemporary conditions. Is it the fate of his ideas to remain merely theoretical? Finally, because this rhetoric reappears in other texts of the 1820s, such as *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* and *Aids to Reflection,* I will suggest that Coleridge's sublime discourse may prove to be helpful in illuminating that desideratum of Coleridge studies, more scholarship on his later prose after *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

The sense of a vast and "indeterminate" unity "hazily apprehended" through "physical forms," one aspect of Modiano's characterization of the Coleridgean sublime, informs Coleridge's focus on "ideas" in *C&S*. As in the title of the text—*On the Constitution of the Church and State according to the Idea of Each* (C&S 9)—Coleridge again and again reminds readers that he is dealing with the Idea of Church and State rather than merely offering a history of such institutions or mere concepts of them (e.g., 31, 57). In a note to *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge stresses that an idea is "in its own proper form … *inconceivable*" (C&S 17* and n. 2). An Idea is a truth of Reason which is expressible only through the Understanding from which it emerges "in the disguise of two contradictory conceptions: each partly true, but together "the representative or *expression* …. of a truth *beyond* conception and inexpressible." For example, one such Idea appears in "Extremes meet" (96), a favourite maxim of Coleridge's that enacts through paradox his Idea of polarity: that

> [o]pposite powers are always of the same kind, and tend to union, either by equipoise or by common product. Thus the + and – poles of the magnet, thus positive and negative electricity are opposites. (24*)

Knowledge of these ideas, moreover, may be either conscious or unconscious. This "knowledge, or sense, may very well exist, aye, and powerfully influence a man's thoughts and actions, without his being distinctly conscious of the same, much more without his being competent to express it in definite words" (12). But it is also "the privilege of the few to possess an idea" whereas "of the generality of men, it might be more truly affirmed, that they are possessed *by*

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[7] Evans, *Sublime Coleridge*, 152. The imbedded quotation is from Elinor S. Shaffer, "Coleridge's Theory of Aesthetic Interest." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27 (1969), 404. Her example from Coleridge on the natural sublime, concerns "a thirsty traveller who hears a sound he imagines to be trickling water": "Coleridge considers that the aesthetic pleasure lies in the power of the mind to be *interested*...the interest is not in the sensation of thirst, nor yet in interest itself as a sublime state of mind, but in the *object,* in the sound of trickling water." On common traits of the sublime across different kinds (e.g., natural sublime, textual sublime), see notes 4 and 5 above.

it" (13, emphasis added). Ideas are, in other words, sublime; according to another Coleridgean pairing, we can apprehend but not comprehend them. [8]

The beginning of this apprehension, then, occurs in readers' encounter in *Church and State* with opposites, the portal in the Understanding to an intuition of an Idea. *C&S* abounds in such pairs of opposites. For example, Coleridge envisages the Constitution, "the attribute of a state," as an "equipoise and interdependency" of the two polar forces of Permanence and Progression (23-24). Permanence as embodied in landed property comprises "Major" Barons and "Minor Barons" or "Franklins," and Progression, "the mercantile, the manufacturing, the distributive, and the professional" classes that Coleridge calls "the Personal Interest" (24-28). In parliament, the Major Barons possess the upper house as "permanent and hereditary senators" (29), and the elected representatives of the Minor Barons comprise a "minor proportion" of the lower house, the majority of which represents the Personal Interest (27). Thus the relative numbers of each house ideally prevent one dynamic from dominating the other. The King, with "executive power," is "the beam of [these two] constitutional scales" (29-30), Permanence and Progression. Coleridge's whole array of opposite forces and institutions takes some parsing.

Coleridge does not make this process easy in *Church and State* because of the tendency of his distinctions to collapse.[9] Much of this tendency in *C&S* arises from his double naming of parts of his various ideas in the text. "State" (in the first sense), for example, sometimes means "a *constituted* Realm" that includes the National Church or Clerisy, and sometimes "State" (second sense) is in "contradistinction from" the National Church, as in "the phrase, CHURCH and STATE" (C&S 107-08). Then there is the matter of multiple churches in the text: National Church or Clerisy, "Christian Church" (113), ancestral Church of England (125), and even, "the Third Possible Church" (129) or "Papacy, and Papal Hierarchy" (139-40). For inevitably tired readers, Coleridge provides some help in this summary of his principal distinctions: "The true Church *of* England is the National Church, or Clerisy. There exists, God be thanked! a Catholic and Apostolic Church *in* England: and I thank God also for the Constitutional and Ancestral Church *of* England" (125).

As this summary illustrates, part of the confusion arises from a crossing or moving of familiar boundaries concerning Church and State, and thus, concerning the religious and the political. Elinor Shaffer associates this

[8] Examples of this commonplace in Coleridge occur in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland, with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi, Bollingen Series LXXV 15 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 98, 211, 216.

[9] Cf. Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 39.

dynamic with the sublime in Coleridge.[10] For example, to the State (second sense) falls the responsibility "to reconcile the interests of permanence with that of progression—law with liberty." The National Church or Clerisy, however, is "to secure and improve that civilization, without which the nation could be neither permanent nor progressive" (44). To this "civilization," moreover, the National Church must add "*cultivation*, in the harmonious developement [sic] of those qualities and faculties that characterise our *humanity*. We must be men in order to be citizens" (42-43). Religion is "not the essential constitutive end" of the National Church. Yet "religion may be [its] indispensable ally" (45), since the National Church enables persons to "be led by the *supernatural* in themselves to the contemplation of a power which is likewise super-*human*; … science, especially moral science, will lead to religion" (44). Thus the State and the National Church, while remaining distinct, inter-animate one another.

In Coleridge's text, moreover, the boundary between them is not only mobile but permeable. The "morality which the state requires in its citizens for its own well-being and ideal immortality, and without reference to their spiritual interest as individuals, can only exist for the people in the form of religion" (69). In other words, the ethics of state-citizens depend on religion that in its spiritual aspect, is none of the state's business. This boundary-drawing recurs in other distinctions, this time concerning the Christian Church. Coleridge stipulates that the Christian Church is "no state, kingdom, or realm of this world … it is the appointed Opposite to them all *collectively*—the *sustaining, correcting, befriending* Opposite of the world!" From the State, the Christian Church "asks only protection and *to be let alone*." Yet the boundary is again permeable. The Christian Church is "the compensating counterforce to the inherent and inevitable evils and defects of the STATE"; anything good in the state, the Christian Church will collect, focus, and "radiate" back to the state "in a higher quality" (114-15). Other scholarship has noted in related ways what I regard as sublime boundary-moving among Church and State and Christian Church in *C&S*. With an eye on irony in the text, for example, Deborah Elise White comments that "From the point of view of the nation, religion is a productive blind spot. Though, of course, from the point of view of religion, it is the nation that sees through a glass darkly."[11]

How, then, were Coleridge's readers to apply the insights of *Church and State* to their contemporary political situation? First, a major disappointment of *C&S* is that Coleridge's revised and second edition of 1830 does not remedy the unorganized last half of the text (C&S lvii). These sections are on the

[10] Elinor S. Shaffer, "Illusion and Imagination: Derrida's Parergon and Coleridge's Aid to Reflection. Revisionary Readings of Kantian Formalist Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Illusion: Theoretical and Historical Approaches,* eds Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 138–57. I am indebted in my essay to Shaffer for the discourse of "moving the boundaries" (e.g., 147): Coleridge alters "Kant's use of the parergon [border or frame] to move the boundaries and to call in question the clarity of the distinction between the intrinsic and the extrinsic," between what is inside and outside entities—in Shaffer's case, to redraw the boundaries among the domains of philosophy, religion, and the aesthetic in *Aids to Reflection* (1825).

[11] Deborah Elise White, "Introduction: Irony and Clerisy" in *Irony and Clerisy*, Romantic Circles, Praxis Series, 1999, www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/irony/white/ironyintro.html, par. 8, accessed May 9, 2017.

Christian Church, "the Third Possible Church," and, in the "second part" of the volume, on the Roman Catholic Relief Act admitting Catholics to sit in Parliament. This act, passed in April 1829 before publication of *C&S* in December, had been the presenting cause of Coleridge's writing the text. Finally, there is a so-called "Appendix," miscellaneous materials of little explicit relevance.[12] Collected Coleridge editor John Colmer calls this ending "disastrously ragged," providing no answer to the question Coleridge himself meant to address in a proposed third part entitled "*What is to be done now?"* (C&S lvii). Second, Coleridge also insists that any analogy or historical example he gives cannot be a "proof" (85) but only an "illustrative model" (39) of the sublime Idea, never to be captured in the individual instance. These problems leave Coleridge's readers with much of the hard work of applying his Ideas to contemporary English society. There nevertheless remain some clues to accomplishing this task.

1. *By negative definition.* Coleridge's insistence that his sublime ideas of Church and State *are* Ideas requires readers to seek and "possess" them in order to discern in actual circumstances "deviations from the idea, from which we must abstract, which we must put aside, before we can make a safe and fearless use" of any example (37). He lists three kinds of "malformation" of the Idea: where "political power" degenerates into "*personal* force"; where any "numerous body of individuals" excludes others from "the performance of civic duties"; or where there is disproportionate representation of any one interest in the legislature (87-88). If Coleridge cannot define Ideas as mere concepts, then, he can say what they are not, by negative definition. An Idea will then more resemble what remains, after the sifting process removes impurities according to, or related to, his three templates. John Stuart Mill in his famous essay on Coleridge in 1840, picks up on this method (in reverse direction) regarding *C&S* thus: "By setting in a clear light what a national church establishment ought to be ... [Coleridge] has pronounced the severest satire upon what in fact it is."[13]

2. *By related guiding principles.* Doubtless there are also guiding principles associated with the Idea[14] in Coleridge's examples, as in the case of the ancient Hebrew polity weakened by Solomon's introduction of a degenerating commercialism (39). The principle here is that Coleridge sees the Clerisy as a bulwark against unfettered commercialism in English society: "Has the national welfare, have the *weal* and happiness of the people, advanced with the increase of the circumstantial prosperity?", that is, the "magic wealth-machine … converted into an intolerable weight of pauperism" (64, 63).

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[12] Alan P. R. Gregory, in *Coleridge and the Conservative Imagination* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2003) offers a more positive view. He allows that the appendix is "a ragbag of Coleridgean forms" and a "scurry of apparently procrastinating introductions": but he nevertheless argues, with particular help from the *Opus Maximum*, that the appendix enables a neglected and "properly theological interpretation of the whole treatise" on church and state (210-11).

[13] Qtd in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958; 2nd ed, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 65.

[14] My usage of "principle" differs from Coleridge's where "Idea" and "principle" are interchangeable (C&S 19, 20, 37), including in the context of my current citation (39).

3. *By an Idea's enlargement of readers' principles and actions.* About a hundred years after the publication of Mill's essay on Coleridge, Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* (65) comments thus on the passage in Mill's essay on *Church and State* already quoted in item 1 above:

> Yet for Mill, and for us, the importance lies in the principle. Mill found, then, in Coleridge, the *enlarged system of action* which he felt to be necessary. It is probably true to say that much of his later work is importantly affected by this enlargement of principle, although the directions that it took lie at some distance from the directions of those writers who consciously continued Coleridge's kind of enquiry.

Williams's view is that Coleridge's idea of the Clerisy (which Williams calls "the principle") caused for Mill an enlargement of principle *and* action, with results nonetheless diverging from conscious (and presumably more conservative) followers of Coleridge. In view of political differences between Mill and Coleridge, the sublime quality of Coleridge's idea—the "*expression* … of a truth *beyond* conception and inexpressible" and "in the disguise of two contradictory conceptions" (C&S 17* and n. 2)—can apparently inspire readers in a direction opposite to Coleridge's.[15]

4. *By recognizing "Power … working as an Idea" in the past.* In a passage on how readers can educe an Idea from past history, Coleridge states that "the line of evolution" of political reform occurs "always as if a power, greater, and better, than the men themselves, had intended it for them" (30); and as time passes, precedents of past rights already gained in political struggle remain for reformers to refer to and build on. Writing of a "potential *Power*" (100) of reform breaking through into "actual" conditions, Coleridge associates the dynamic with the phrase "Vox Populi Vox Dei" ("the Voice of the People is the Voice of God," 100, 40). His point, however, is not a religious one. Instead, he underlines that such potential power is always unpredictable when it breaks out in the actual, only apparent to observers after the event (100). He call this "Power … working as an *Idea*," a surprise that "the Idea should at last awake and become operative," as when the nation gets sick of unjust government (103). What Coleridge is talking about in these passages *sounds* like Christian providence, but his discourse in *C&S* is in another register. Colmer indexes "providence" only three times in the text proper (32, 38, 39), and the passages quoted in this paragraph are themselves brief and few.

5. *By approaching Ideas poetically.* In *C&S* Coleridge makes a passing, yet in context, serious comment that Ideas "might seem to many fitter matter for verse than for sober argument" (100-01). One implication, that readers may possess Ideas poetically, becomes clearer in relation to passages from his

[15] C&S 24* distinguishes between "opposite" and "contrary." Mills's characterization of Coleridge's politics reflects this riddling aspect of Ideas: "But most of all ought an enlightened Radical or Liberal to rejoice over such a Conservative as Coleridge." In F. R. Leavis, intro. *John Stuart Mill on Bentham and Coleridge* (1950; rpt, New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 140.

lectures on literature where Coleridge links the poetic and the sublime. Coleridge's typical high regard for the sublimity of the bible[16] finds a gloss in his comment on how readers of biblical passages (such as Isaiah 1) have "been affected with a sense of their high poetic character" due to unfamiliar uses of meter; the result is "the stately march of the words."[17] Elsewhere, Coleridge mentions that passion justifies "connecting disparate Thoughts purely by means of resemblances in the words expressing them … in the highest & most lyric kind, in passionate repetition of a sublime Tautology (as in the song of Debora)" (LL I 267). In *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Coleridge treats the Old Testament Song of Deborah (Judges 5) according to these and other principles of great English poetry, including Shakespeare's—as when he compares how occasional and pedantic questions of authorship can destroy "that unity or total impression" of joy and wisdom from the bible and Shakespeare alike.[18]

The discourse of these clues to the application of *Church and State* does not replicate the formal discourse of Coleridge's other later prose works: religious-philosophical discourse in *Opus Maximum*, or biblical-critical, in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. Instead, in *C&S* Coleridge uses serial definitions—expanded epigrams or aphorisms—with historical "illustrations" or "models." (This accounts for the ease of excerpting important definitions from *C&S* in anthologies of Coleridge's works.) All these later prose texts involve the boundary-moving techniques of the sublime, although in different ways. In the *Confessions* he moves boundaries in the subject positions of readers. Here the faithful discover that their belief in biblical inerrancy is absurd, and unbelievers find that reading the bible as they would any other great book is a first step towards faith.[19] A similar sublime moving of boundaries in readers occurs in *Aids to Reflection*, where he proposes that they embrace "the commencement of a Transition from a not irreligious Morality to a Spiritual Religion."[20] In contrast, in *C&S* his sublime ideas of Church and State and the rest invite readers to "possess" these Ideas—these polar posers—that unconsciously possess them. He challenges readers to sift historical events, as he does his own illustrations, for the purer ideas. These Ideas have potential and actual power, unpredictable in the event and discernible only in retrospect, ultimately successful through human agents in overcoming political decay. This discourse of the vastness and indeterminacy

[16] Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, "Coleridge on the Sublime," in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper,* ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939), 208.

[17] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes. Bollingen Series LXXV 5, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), I 222-23. (Cited as LL.)

[18] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Shorter Works and Fragments,* eds H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, Bollingen Series LXXV 11, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), II 1129-30. The evidence in this paragraph is excerpted from Murray J. Evans, "Coleridge's Sublime Hermeneutics in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit,*" *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 45 (NS) (Summer 2015): 41-42.

[19] Evans, "Coleridge's Sublime Hermeneutics," 39-44.

[20] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer, Bollingen Series LXXV 9 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 105; Murray J. Evans, "Sublime Discourse and Romantic Religion in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*," *The Wordsworth Circle* XLVII (Winter 2016): 27-31.

of human events bears the marks of Coleridge's sublime. The sublime discourse of *C&S* also moves the boundary between church and state, and between history and poetry, implying that readers will need to use their poetic sensibilities from reading the bible and Shakespeare, in order to plumb the contradictions and mysteries of Ideas in the past and present, in order to realize his vision of Church and State.

Coleridge's use of this variety of boundary-moving sublime discourse in his later prose recalls contemporary theorist Jacques Rancière's talk of a new "distribution of the sensible": "of places and identities, … the visible and the invisible."[21] For Rancière, such a redistribution is not narrowly aesthetic or literary but also becomes "the principle of a more profound revolution, a revolution of sensible existence itself and no longer only of the forms of State." This revolution "appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life" (32). In *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, I doubt that Coleridge would much disagree with Rancière's formulation.

[21] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, tr. Steven Corcoran (2009; rpt, Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2013), 24-25.