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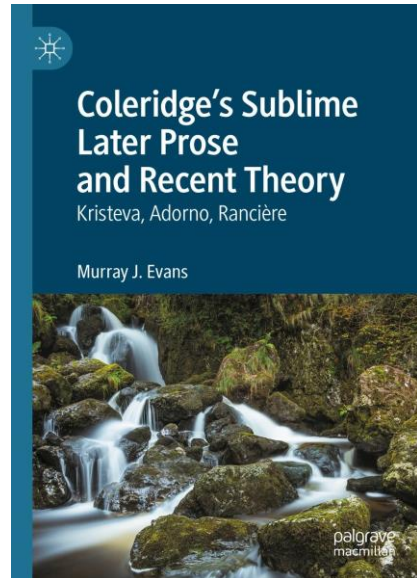
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*Coleridge's Sublime Later Prose and Recent Theory:
Kristeva, Adorno, Rancière*

by Murray Evans¹

A NEW BOOK BY MURRAY EVANS IS CERTAIN to be an event among Coleridgeans: his previous study *Sublime Coleridge: The Opus Maximum* (2012) was a reading of astonishing range and depth, even drawing on the music of Brahms at one point of his argument. His new book continues to focus on Coleridge's sublime discourse in terms of the moving boundaries that religion occupies in his expository writing but now extended to all the major prose texts of the 1820's, while including the *Lay Sermons* of 1816–17 and the two lectures on the Middle Ages from 1818. If this were not scope enough, Evans engages Coleridge in a prolonged conversation with three modern theorists. He pairs *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* with Julia Kristeva's *The Incredible Need to Believe*, *Aids to Reflection* with Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, and *On the Constitution of the Church and State* with Jacques Rancière's *Aesthesis*. This is no academic exercise in comparative analysis but an open-ended juxtaposition of anticipations in Coleridge's writing and retrospections among the later theorists. Evans's task is made no easier by the fact that only Rancière has any overt knowledge of Coleridge. Cross-fertilisation is not the issue, however, but rather an inherent porousness between distinctive texts overflowing (both forwards and back) their respective historical niches. Evans implicitly follows the dictum of theologian John Milbank, who insists Coleridge doesn't just anticipate contemporary concerns but stands alongside us on the margins of still unresolved problems.² Evans asserts that Coleridge's later speculative prose is much less religious than is often thought (206), but it is no coincidence that theology is of relevance to all four writers considered here, whether directly or only obliquely.

Evans begins his discussion from Elinor Shaffer's warning that we still have no adequate conception of the late Coleridge from 1819 to 1834. His



¹ Murray Evans, *Coleridge's Sublime Later Prose and Recent Theory: Kristeva, Adorno, Rancière* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

² John Milbank, 'Divine Logos and Human Communication: A Recuperation of Coleridge', in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009) 3–24.

second aim is to illustrate different versions of the sublime as encountered in phenomenological experience, literature, and philosophy. Coleridge was a pioneer in adopting a broader, post-Kantian version of the sublime using illustrations from one mode to another, such as nature or sublime rhetoric. This enables Evans to bring Coleridge into equal dialogue with his three other authors, avoiding any one-way privilege, but insisting the three later figures themselves share a Romantic pedigree, of which Coleridge is an exemplar if rarely a direct influence.

Evans's boldest claim is that this conversation is made more feasible by Coleridge's gradual abandonment of the symbol: he is seen moving from the notion of a translucence of the eternal through the temporal in *The Statesman's Manuel* and his conviction that Idea can only be conveyed by symbol in *Biographia Literaria* towards the expanded definition of symbol as copiousness and heterogeneity, to be known alternatively as 'assemblage' or 'compound' in the 1818 *Lectures* on the Middle Ages. In the 1820's in *Opus Maximum* he is warning readers of the dangers of symbol or analogy that distract the mind from the Idea. By the time of *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, the disappearance of symbol into Idea is all but complete.

As Evans juxtaposes Coleridge with Kristeva, we see Coleridge addressing the need for an improved biblical hermeneutic in his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, which does not claim inerrancy but an exemplary power and humanity still alive to the modern reader. This hermeneutic benefits from the earlier symbol theory of *LS* largely being left aside. Here, Coleridge is moving boundaries, marginalising literalist Bible readers but bringing in inquiring readers searching for wisdom and insight. Coleridge offers a sublime experience of being invited to sustain faith in the potency of biblical characters, drawing his readers 'into a pleasurable and instructive dimness' inspiring moral perfection (50). With Kristeva, her sublime genealogy combines psychoanalysis, Catholicism, and agnosticism. In Christianity she sees human suffering made shareable as Christ loses his spirit as well as his body in death but in a way that, as enacted by the modern self, can represent suffering as diverted through artistic creation in a mode of resurrection. For her, we are now confronted by the sacred rather than the religious, understood as a traversal from unthinkable nothingness to a more approachable version of the sacred. This features from within a plurality of discourse both 'amorous' and 'semiotic' but not symbolic, and so echoes Coleridge's own movement away from his earlier sense of symbolism towards the more expansive sublime of the 1818 *Lectures*. None of these disciplines can survive on their own for Kristeva but must place themselves at the borders of any possible discourse, echoing at one remove Coleridge's own claim that in the Bible 'every agent . . . has a life of its own, and yet all are one life' (*LS* 31). Evans distances the two writers, however, by concluding that Coleridge's own sublime discourse in *Confessions* has an aesthetic charge that Kristeva's lacks. Her emphasis on the sublime as arising from psychoanalytic sublimation may submerge Coleridge's own Romantic sublime. Kristeva's sublime, dependent on constant mobility and

interpenetration at the semiotic level, doesn't maintain the Romantic awe before infinite vastness.

For Adorno, Evans draws on *Aids to Reflection*. Coleridge is seen as trying to induce in readers a transition, via Leighton's aphorisms, 'from a not irreligious Morality to a Spiritual Religion' (*AR* 105). Coleridge's appeal to his readers' common sense doesn't bridge the gap needed to intuit the relevance of faith and conscience. His sublime rhetoric forbids any appeal to a symbolic sense of intuitive wholeness, only offering glimpses (sometimes contradictory) of the Idea of redemption. Negative definitions and formal indifferences aim to prepare readers for spiritual religion but are no grounding in themselves, as by this stage Coleridge believes the Idea is too elusive for that. 'Redemption' became a key term for Adorno, though he rejected the organic symbol in favour of essential contradiction and negation as the only way to truth, but STC's combination of the sublime with Christian theology doesn't disappear into the blackness of Adorno's post-holocaust modern art. Adorno asserts that previous moments of the sublime are retained or 'sedimented' within the radical traumas of modernity. For Adorno, theology is essentially fallen but its calls for redemption irreplaceable. Essential to *AR* for Evans is its deployment of negative conceptions in order to decipher a truth beyond them, so Will cannot be Nature, thus suggesting a gift of super-Nature. Speculative reason gestures towards redemption but cannot accomplish it on its own, offering something akin to 'intuitability' in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Coleridge's Ideas remain elusive and double but must be held together, as in the Idea that divine ideas are God's thought of finite things, originating with Him but requiring separate existence. This challenging doubleness means the Ideas have an 'alternative' existence for Coleridge. The Idea can present opposite extremes as an 'indifference', each of which is the Idea from different perspectives, but which are not relations of identity, just as Adorno refuses any given identity as repressing a richer underlying difference. So, for Coleridge, redemption is not a repayment of debt, and God is not Person when seen as Ground and vice versa.

Despite some persisting definitions of symbol in *AR*, Evans argues that Coleridge's positing of indifference as a rhetorical medium surrenders any more sensuous appeal to readers' intuition. Ideas hover in attempts to contemplate them alone, and the dispersive nature of indifference implies their indeterminate character. Here Evans acknowledges how he comes at Coleridge's Ideas inductively, or 'from below' or in terms of rhetorical or aesthetic 'infection', given the complexity of presenting the role of Ideas within sublime discourse from a reader-response perspective. He argues that Adorno's late nineteenth-century stage of the sublime sheds light on what is already happening in Coleridge's late prose, and conversely, Coleridge is already anticipating Adorno's own developments. With Adorno, the transfer of desire to the imagination is a form of sublimation already a spiritualization, so nature's spiritualization involves a transfigured preservation of the past in the present. Adorno's foregrounding of the negative as emancipation in Romantic

art chimes with Coleridge's own preoccupation with negative definition and indifference. Although there is a movement in the sublime towards negation, such sublimity also marks the occupation of art by theology. Art and theology attract each other as they both attract and reject interpretation. They share a relation but not an identity. Though Adorno's conception of art rejects religious illusion, it refuses any established realism in retaining the 'sacred nature of the untouchable' (112). If art remains theology, it is because its claim to truth and an affinity with untruth are one and the same. So, non-identity for Adorno leads him to strange affiliations, even though he refuses any symbolic unity between the universal and the particular. Adorno's sublimation of Romantic sublimines, Evans concludes, can look like one of the possibilities for Coleridge's sublime theology in our own time. But only to the extent Coleridge cannot be superseded, and Evans reminds us Adorno's project and that of Coleridge remain distinct.

Rancière invites comparison with Coleridge more directly where he argues in his *Aesthesis* the dream begun by Romanticism with Schelling, Coleridge, and Emerson is not over, however altered over time and despite some hostile versions of Modernism. Though Rancière rejects the sublime as such, Evans finds that his discourse is sublime in effect, especially where he identifies *farniente* (or reverie) in nineteenth-century art and his own use of 'style indirect libre' in the various 'scenes' of *Aesthesis*. Rancière is defiantly loose conceptually (rejecting Marxism as over-rigid) but blends symbol, the spiritual, and the material in his treatment of religious discourses. Evans find this echoes Coleridge's own struggles in *On the Constitution of Church and State* to chart a practical link between ideas and concrete particulars, having political and social purchase. He identifies (following Raimona Modiano) two features of the later sublime prose: the ever hovering but indemonstrable Idea that readers must grasp for themselves, and an intense engagement with the objects of sense. Each feature is in polar tension with the other as Coleridge's rhetorical figures cross or move the boundaries they encounter, as between the State and the National Church, or Christianity and a third possible Church. This is done by means of practical illustrations in ways reminiscent of modern sociology or linguistics, though they never capture the Idea fully in any individual instance. Such illustrations can never be symbols (seen now as more like 'opaque obstacles' in *OM* 225–26), nor are they proofs but exemplifications. Unlike the early symbol uniting the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal, illustration preserves the distanced integrity of Ideas, however much particulars fail to embody Ideas without contaminating them.

Despite Rancière's conflicts with the sublime, Evans argues that both his politics and aesthetics enact the sublime in asserting what is fundamentally dissensual, divisive, and resisting any given representation. For Rancière, art defines a sphere of specific experience no longer following the same rules as other spheres, and its associated politics declares the end of any hierarchical model of received representation. As Coleridge sets up a polarity between Church and State, so does Rancière between authority and his preferred mode

of politics, proclaiming an essential democracy disrupting the sensual fabric of both established society and academic art. *Aesthesis* consists of a number of 'scenes' present at a newly defining singular event, but the scene, rather like Coleridge's illustrations, is no key to an Idea. One such scene is Rousseau's theory of a new disinterested state dispensing with old hierarchies, a sort of *farniente*, a quasi-paradise where people and things need do nothing. This for Rancière has political and aesthetic consequences. Evans detects some similarity between Coleridge's aim to show how best Ideas might be discerned from within sociopolitical events and Rancière's belief in a contingency open to interpretative reconfigurations of sensible reality by anyone or everyone. Though Coleridge's 'spiritual' and Rancière's 'material' remain distinct, they are not stark opposites. Where Rancière retains a working sense of symbol, it is in terms of an unrepresentable (and therefore sublime) whole expressing the actuality of a particular but not the eternal shining through the temporal. Rancière recognises that Coleridge's legacy is seeking a community possessing the spirit of its material life or the sensible materiality of its idea. Despite resemblances, Evans concludes the two projects remain irreducible: Coleridge's insights arise from his abiding care for spirit, idea, and symbolic mediation glimpsed in actual experience but resisting complete incorporation into finite experience.

Attempting to outline such a complex argument is a mission impossible for any reviewer, though Evans is at pains to build up his interpretations systematically, entailing frequent recapitulations or anticipations. Some readers will find this degree of recap over-laborious, but the richness of the material justifies it and achieves a clarity of exposition throughout. I did find myself pondering the role and status of symbol in the later Coleridge. Evans demonstrates how Coleridge steers away from symbol in his sublime *logosophia*, and Morton Paley has implied much the same for the verse of this period.³ Coleridge's later sublime poetics doesn't tell us everything about Coleridge the poet, however, and I sense an aura of organic symbol remains suspended over his later prose, perhaps resurfacing in the haunting scenes of mother/child relations in both *Aids to Reflection* (AR 237)⁴ and *Opus Maximum* (OM 132–34). There was no formal repudiation of his earlier verse as such but more a variation of practice and aim never amounting to a refutation. Evans hopes his book will help to rehabilitate the later prose, but what continues to trouble Coleridge criticism is the problematic simultaneity between poet and philosopher. This is unresolvable at the level of formal poetics alone but critics have yet to confront what is implied by the different modes of *thinking* each represents and which remain implicitly concurrent.⁵

Evans' discussion has very few omissions, but Robert Baker's *The Extravagant: Crossings of Modern Poetry and Modern Philosophy* (2005) usefully

³ Morton D. Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

⁴ Coleridge identifies the mother's eyes as the 'type and symbol of an invisible heaven'. In copy E he adds a note to clarify that 'Things light up into Symbols and become more and more intellectual' (AR 13).

⁵ See Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (2014), which Evans reviewed in *The Wordsworth Circle* 47.4 (2016): 165–67.

detects an underlying current between Romantic and Postmodern sublimes: in the former subjective self-transformation longing for expressive figurative feeling displaces religion while in Postmodernism the drive towards indeterminate openness fragments the subject, both moments gesturing towards the impossible and the inexpressible. Coleridge's sublime refuses religious displacement, and this demands an intellectual improvisation ultimately counter-extravagant, one that will not sacrifice ontological relationship for the aesthetic and ethical freedom of pure enigma. It would have been good to hear even more about the ways in which Coleridge might have critiqued the later thinkers Evans discusses. STC could well have failed to find in Kristeva a discourse *ontologically* expressive as distinct from her creative sublimation of feeling. And he fully derives the origin of religious feeling from the human experience of having a father and a mother where 'all begins in instinct' but insists 'the instincts of man must be human rational instincts' (*OM* 122), i.e. open to the Idea.

Coleridge might well have liked Christopher Craig Brittain's reading (mentioned by Evans in a footnote) of Adorno's 'inverse theology', which gets closer to this enigmatic notion than Evans does and argues it is of intrinsic theological value as such.⁶ Where Evans stages a Coleridge overawed in a Gothic cathedral with his sheer 'sensible impression' 'that I am nothing' (*LHP* II 79), he claims this is moving towards the rejection of religious illusion in Kristeva and Adorno; I find less nihilism here than a vision of the human self as an 'as nothing', an expression of awe rather than fragmentation, in the spirit of Francis de Sales' 'O Lord, I am as nothing before Thee. Why hast Thou been mindful of me to create me?'⁷

Evans's readers will wonder why he chose these three modern theorists. He has set himself a challenge with few obvious connections other than multiple after-effects and revisions in the post-Christian milieu. He has justified his choice with some remarkable comparative analysis, but there remain several more connections enhancing this conversation in closer ways. British theologians like Rowan Williams, John Milbank, and Catherine Pickstock with their interest in the role of imagination, language, and truth formation constitute a promising line. Further afield, Russian theologians like Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov could provoke some fascinating juxtapositions. Nearer to Coleridge's time would be exponents of French spiritual materialism like Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, Blondel, and Bergson. Even general Coleridgeans, however, with little interest in modern theory, should read this book, as it provides fresh insights into the later Coleridge not ordinarily available from single-author analyses. Evans' comparative breadth can only deepen our appreciation of the persistence of the Coleridgean milieu.

⁶ Christopher Craig Brittain, *Adorno and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 2–8.

⁷ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 22.