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SUBLIME AND FINITUDE AS SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS IN COLERIDGE'S LATER POETRY

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Abstract: *S. T. Coleridge's later poems stand out from the rest of his poetic creation through the use of a language at times denotative and apparently unresourceful that, nonetheless, manages to shape a new, less acclaimed type of sublime. Having the Kantian meaning of the sublime as a starting point, this paper will be an occasion for analyzing a post-theological understanding of the concept, that is no less philosophically interesting and that echoes the age-long fear and fascination with death and finitude. As scholar Christopher Stokes argues in his book *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime. From Transcendence to Finitude* (2010), one should be aware of the wider implications of the sublime in order to have a complete picture of Coleridge's poetical works. Poems such as "Limbo", "Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance" or indeed "Human Life or On the Denial of Immortality" emanate a sense of pessimism about the figure of the Romantic visionary. The reasons for this attitude will be explored in their aesthetic, philosophic and religious dimensions as they oscillate between a desire to transcend and the need to embrace the notion of finitude. Such poems could be better understood by reading them as a post-theological scenario, with their particularly Kantian sublime to which Coleridge adhered. Themes such as love and hope constitute examples of theological terms that are deconstructed in Coleridge's post-theological integration.*

One of the things that make S. T. Coleridge's poetry and critical thought so interesting is the fact that he is driven in two directions; on the one hand, towards transcendence, and on the other hand, towards finitude (Stokes 1). As critic Christopher Stokes maintains, "the sublime implies an experience of the limit" (Stokes 1). He explains that "there are transcendent, confident forms of the sublime, borne aloft by the grandeur of the Romantic ideology, but there are also weaker, more fragile and finite forms" (Stokes 2). The nature of the sublime with respect to Coleridge's later poetry represents one of the concerns of my paper. English Romantic poems such as Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sun-rise" or P. B. Shelley's "Mont Blanc" are commonly associated with the Burkean sublime, understood as a feeling of awe that results from the exposure of the subject to the sight of chasms, cataracts or high mountain peaks. What is implied is that the self comes into contact with the transcendent, with the infinite in Nature and is thus awe-struck. Edmund Burke's analysis that is present in his work entitled *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) deals with "basic sensory responses, pain and pleasure, the body" (Stokes 67). Also, Burke distinguishes

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between "beauty as a social passion and the sublime as a passion of self-preservation" (Stokes 67).

In contrast to Burke's view of the sublime, Kant believes that sublimity resides in the mind and that there are no sublime objects: "We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason (Kant, *Critique* 129). However, in an earlier formulation of the sublime entitled *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), Kant held a similar position to that of Burke, as he argued that "the sublime must always be large, the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple, the beautiful can be decorated and ornamented" (Kant, *Observations* 17). Echoing Burke's terror-sublime, Kant mentions, as examples, landscapes and Milton's depiction of hell: "The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton arouses satisfaction, but with dread" (Kant, *Observations* 14).

The Sublime

Both the concepts of *the sublime* and that of *finitude* are of great relevance for contemporary philosophical research, and I would like to limit my inquiry to French philosophy, and especially to Jean Luc Nancy and Alain Badiou. Jean Luc Nancy contributed greatly to our understanding of the Kantian meaning of the sublime in his study entitled "The Sublime Offering", published in the collaborative work *Of The Sublime. Presence in Question* (1993) alongside scholars such as Jean-Francois Courtine, Michel Deguy or Jean-Francois Lyotard. Nancy draws attention to the fact that Kant was unaware of the important role the sublime plays in aesthetics, when in fact, the sublime is the underlying factor that makes beauty possible: "the sublime represents in the *Critique* nothing less than that without which the beautiful could not be the beautiful or without which the beautiful could be nothing but the beautiful" (Nancy 34).

Nancy calls the sublime "a decisive moment in the thought of the beautiful and of art as such", and adds that "it does not merely add itself to the beautiful but transforms or transfigures the beautiful" (Nancy 34). Before Kant's theorization, other writers had intuitions about *this something* that underlies beauty. Boileau, the French Neoclassical writer, spoke of "this je-ne-sais-quoi which charms us and without which beauty itself would have neither grace nor beauty" (Nancy 34). Fenelon also expressed a similar concern when he wrote "The beautiful which is only beautiful, that is, brilliant, is only half-beautiful" (Nancy 34). Referring to poetry, Nancy maintains that Kant places it "above all other arts" as it "enlarges the soul by giving liberty to the imagination" (Nancy 49).

A recent Coleridge scholar, Ben Brice, even calls Kant's theory of the sublime "radically anti-symbolic" (Brice 78). Brice and Nancy both agree that there is a certain shyness (if we may call it so) of the imagination (*Einbildung*) to illustrate the Ideas of Reason. According to Nancy, "the imagination does not signify the subject who makes an image of something but rather the image imaging itself, not as a figure of something else but as a form forming itself" (Nancy 29). Echoing Nancy's

concerns, Brice maintains that "a world of spirit is disclosed, negatively, through the inability of the imagination to find 'sensible' illustrations of Ideas of Reason. The imagination is in fact always humiliated in its attempt to 'see' noumenal realities embodied in the language of nature" (Brice 78).

Although he greatly admired Kant's philosophical system, Coleridge felt the rift that existed between his own spiritualized version of natural theology and the noumenal realities accessible by Reason alone. René Wellek, in his classical study *Immanuel Kant in England*, argued that Coleridge attempted to build a house by using architectural styles that wouldn't go together well, thus the attempt to mix Kantian concepts with Anglican theology (Wellek 67). In a letter from April 14th 1805, Coleridge wrote that he rather seemed "to be seeking, as it were asking, a symbolic language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new" (Perry 87-88). After writing his great works of philosophical prose, *Biographia literaria*, *The Friend*, *The Statesman's Manual and Aids to Reflection*, it became apparent that Coleridge's theory of symbolism assumed "a triadic analogy between the 'subjective' structure of the human mind, the 'objective' structure of the natural world, and the transcendent attributes of their divine creator" (Brice 96-97).

Concerning Coleridge's later poetry (1815-1833), Stokes notices that the literature characterizes it as a period marked by "de-sublimation" and "a lack of transcendence" (Stokes 4). Stokes does not agree with this commonly held view in the literature, positioning himself on a more moderate position by arguing that finitude is a vehicle for the manifestation of some sort of transcendence, although the latter term should be understood in a post-theological context, as a notion that recalls the sign of a presence.

One should also bear in mind the three interpretations of God provided by Alain Badiou – these being the God of religions (who is considered dead in a post-Nietzschean, post-theological reading), the God of metaphysics (god-principle, the One which must be replaced by a thinking in terms of multiplicity) and the God of the poets (Romantic loss and return of the divine) (Watkin 23). Although we are here laying emphasis on Coleridge the poet rather than Coleridge the critic, philosopher and theologian, it would be difficult not to take into consideration his multiple scholarly pursuits, especially his theological interests, which had always been of great importance to him.

Finitude in Heidegger and Nancy

Since we are interested in phenomenology and how it could be applied to Coleridge's later poems, we should also bear in mind what finitude meant for Martin Heidegger. At the outset, finitude is a concept that must be understood in terms of limits. It is in this context "of the boundedness of human life by the limits of birth, death and shared worldly existence" that we should understand finitude (James 91). Heidegger coined the term *Dasein* and explained that it is finite since we exist in the midst of what already is (cf. Inwood 69). And since we are finite, "we have sensibility and sense-organs to receive intuitions from objects". In other words, "the essence of sensibility consists in the finitude of intuition" (Inwood 69). Philosophy

itself is a manifestation of our finitude, "an attempt to make ourselves at home in a world that we did not create and do not fully understand" (Inwood 70). Also, all philosophizing is incomplete, finite and restricted. Being, a key term for Heidegger, is finite in three ways:

- (a) It requires other things (God, etc.) to reveal itself in a civilization,
- (b) No revelation of being reveals everything there is; there is always more than any civilization discloses (Hence the finitude of being refutes any idealism).
- (c) Every civilization has a beginning and an end (Inwood 71).

In the case of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, finitude is also an important concept. He makes use of the rich post-Kantian tradition – Heidegger, Sartre, Bataille, Blanchot, Levinas. The task of a finite thinking, for Nancy, "would be to think thought itself as that which, without renouncing the values of truth and universality, can only think within and at its own limit, touching at its limit and at its own singularity of thought" (James 91). However, Nancy does not argue that finite thinking is "some kind of prison house". Nor is finitude rendered as "a limitation of thought, which would imply an existence, beyond the limit, of a limitlessness or of an infinite (and therefore theological) transcendence (James 92).

Coleridge in the Game of the Post-Theological Integration

Although it may seem implausible for Coleridge to be in dialogue with contemporary thinking about atheism, we will nevertheless attempt to sketch a framework through which such a reading of his later poems could prove worthwhile. Coleridge himself was an adversary of atheism in many of his writing, but especially in his 1825 *Aids to Reflection*, where atheists are seen as cunning people who 'subvert' the symbolic and holy meanings of words, by means of a mechanistic philosophy, debasing as it were words from their sacred associations, turning words into allegories and metaphors and religions into mere myths.

For Coleridge, words are symbols that render God intelligible to Man. Man's estrangement from the ultimate reality words are supposed to convey represent an unpardonable separation from the Living God of the Holy Scriptures. In several parts of *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge seems to be worried against a metaphorical way of reading the Bible. In his words, *the evaporation into metaphors* of ultimate realities such as Regeneration, Grace or the Eucharist is one of the risks Christianity faces (cf. Coleridge, *Aids* 200). This argument is part of the discussion concerning the eputation of miracles from the Bible, as part of the Enlightenment project: "the mysteries of religion, and truths supersensual, are either cut and squared for the comprehension of the understanding, "the faculty judging according to sense", or desperately torn asunder from the reason, nay, fanatically opposed to it" (Coleridge, "Aids" 199).

Christopher Watkin sees in Badiou and Nancy's philosophies a way of constructing a post-theological integration in order to move beyond the term 'atheism': "A thinking radically without God is integrated with a retention of notions

otherwise associated with God"; "it is a turn to religion in order to turn the page on religion". However, this is no easy task, since atheism can be imitative or parasitic on traditional theological concepts such as the One, unity or divine Justice. Let us recall Coleridge's plea to safeguard the holy symbolic load from the atheists. In the twentieth century, thinkers such as Albert Camus reject such pretensions to a higher meaning of life: "Je continue a croire que ce monde n'a pas de sens superieur" (quoted in Watkin 3). Even as early as the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that the faith in science still relies on a metaphysical faith, thus warning about the extent to which modern thought still recalls the God it has replaced (Watkin 5).

Alain Badiou takes an anti-historicist and anti-interdisciplinary stance because he believes that there is a danger that philosophy could become "little more than its own museum" (Watkin 26). Philosophy is "scattered and subordinated" to disciplines such as art, poetry, science, political action and psychoanalysis". Therefore, it is "imperative for philosophy to break decisively with historicism" and that its concepts must be put forth "without having to appear before the tribunal of their historical moment, for it is philosophy which judges history, and not the other way around" (Watkin 26). Historically, the attribute of God's transcendence is seen by Badiou as "a construct of the philosophical identification of the One with infinity" and that this was made possible "by philosophy's adherence to the disastrous notion of finitude" (Watkin 24).

For Badiou, the death of God "delivers us to the omnipresent infinity of thought, leaving finitude itself simply as a vestige of the tyranny of the sacred" (Watkin 32).

Quite predictably, Christopher Watkin's parallels between the thought of Badiou and that of Nancy end in the two philosophers' failure to avoid Nietzsche's predicament about parasitic atheism i.e. that still retains traces of theological discourse (cf. Watkin 47). Nancy was criticized by Badiou for reintroducing the One, what Badiou dubs "the God of metaphysics". Platonism is another derogatory word with which Badiou labels Nancy's philosophical enterprise: "Badiou's charge against Nancy might be characterized as a 'Platonism of finitude', with finitude raised to a transcendental category" (Watkin 44). Ultimately, since finitude is the absence of the divine, it is considered by Watkin a category that recalls a religious discourse. Of Nancy, he states the following: "Nancy, following the path of a finite thinking, is powerless to extricate himself from finitude's irreducible religiosity" (Watkin 47). I find the phrase *finitude's irreducible religiosity* to be an eye-opener for the subsequent discussion of Coleridge's later poems, as they are marked by a strong sense of finitude that could be appreciated by theists and atheists alike.

Coleridge, Poetry, Theology

Coleridge's literary and philosophical career spanned four decades. The early, the middle and the later 'Coleridge' are marked by different approaches to the imagination. The poetically productive early period during which he wrote his canonical *Kubla Khan*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and, to sustain our argument, *Dejection: An Ode*, is followed by his sketchy, but widely acclaimed theoretical formulation of the imagination as a process that transcends eighteenth century empiricism, thus creating a whole new aesthetic sphere for poetry. The first

two periods of his literary career could be encompassed in the Romantic ideology of idealism, where a *preference for the infinite over the finite* can be noticed. By way of contrast, the later Coleridge is more ambivalent, Janus-oriented and moving between Platonic and Kantian objective idealism and Calvinistic sense of *guilt and finitude*.

As James Boulger states, the early poems exhibit an openness to and a communion with Nature, while the later poems explore issues of religious pessimism. According to Boulger, the later poetry is "no longer Romantic poetry, yet not Victorian either, and certainly unlike the poetry of Catholic converts such as Hopkins or Eliot" (Boulger, 363). The presence of the theme of original sin in *Aids to Reflection* marks the case for an orthodox, Protestant theism that sees Man as weakened in his knowledge and faculties because of Adam's transgression. Calvinism can rather stifle inspiration, since

the implied dualism of the position on sin and the relationship of man to God provides a barren outlook (comparatively speaking, with Anglicanism and Catholicism in mind) for a religious poet, since nature, either as friend or alter ego or as the analogue of a personal Creator can no longer play a substantial role (Boulger, 363-364).

The Blind Bard Theme

Coleridge's later poetry, written or published between 1815-1833 is traversed by a major theme, namely that of *the blind bard* and his ability of *seeing inward*. For example, in poems such as "Fancy in Nubibus, or the Poet in the Clouds" (1817), "Limbo" (1817) or "Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance (1833)", the persona of *the blind poet* arises and is outlined with great creativity and precision. In such poems there appear characterizations of the sort "Be that blind bard.../ possessed by inward light" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*, "Fancy in Nubibus" 435), "Like a lone Arab, old and blind" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*, "Love's Apparition" 488) and the majestic rendering of the poet-persona as "An Old Man with a steady Look sublime, / That stops his earthly Task to watch the skies; But he is blind – A Statue hath such Eyes" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*, "Limbo" 429). Thus *the trope of the Romantic poet as seer*, as someone who sees behind the veil of appearances (as Shelley would have it) is deconstructed. The poem is more dramatic than Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*. The poetic persona of *Dejection* was also in a state similar to a limbo, but he was still working out solutions to get him out of his crisis of artistic faith, hence the line "I may not hope from outward forms to win/ The passion and the life whose fountains are within" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*, "Dejection: An Ode" 365).

The poem entitled "Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance (1833)" is an instance of allegory and best exemplifies Coleridge's late love poetry. Although he is "old and blind", the poet is nevertheless able to watch "the sickly calm with aimless scope/ In his own heart". (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 488) The vision, or the allegory in the poem is that of Love and Hope. While Hope is dressed as a bridesmaid, Love is dressed as "a sylph in bridal trim" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 488). Love "stood beside" the poet's seat and

bent to kiss "her sister's lips" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 488). The "chilling breath" of the kiss "woke just enough of life in death/ To make Hope die anew" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 488). Love, the poet intimates, is more powerful than Hope, her older sister. What is also hinted is that Love is everlasting, while Hope tends to be cyclical. In tune with the old poet's mood, Hope is portrayed as a pale and cold bridesmaid, "with roseless cheek, all pale and cold and dim" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 488). The repetition of "pale" and "cold" intensify the poet's dejection, his "vacant mood".

Late Religious Poems

At times playful, other times "in a vacant mood", the poet constructs allegories of Nature, Work, Hope or Love in a late or ever post-Romantic fashion. Being conscious of the futility of artifice, the poet nevertheless plays along, reasserting himself as a poet grappling with the vicissitudes of old age. As on many occasions in Coleridge's life and literary career, moments of despair have been tempered by faith. These moments are important in themselves, and can be traced in letters, prose works and also in poems. This 1833 poem, "On his Baptismal Birthday", expresses a serene attitude when faced with death and reiterates Coleridge's Christian convictions in the last years of his life. The poet is convinced that Christianity is a universal church: "in Christ we live... / Eternal Thou, and everlasting we", (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*, "On his Baptismal Birthday" 490) hence the personal pronoun "we".

The poetic voice shifts to the first person in the ensuing lines: "I fear not death; In Christ I live! In Christ I draw the breath/ Of the true life!" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 490). The final two lines of the poem echo poet John Donne's Holy Sonnet "Death, be not Proud". Donne's final two lines famously read "One short sleep past, we wake eternally/ And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die" (Donne 175-176). In Coleridge's poem, Death is also defeated in the end: "Is that a death-bed where a Christian lies? / Yes, but not his – 'Tis Death itself there dies" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 490).

In contrast to the pious Christian poetic persona of the poem "On his Baptismal Birthday", the poetic persona that manifests itself in the poem "Human Life, On the Denial of Immortality" (1815) proposes a grimmer philosophical picture. Note that the theological remnants of parasitic and imitative atheism discussed earlier are absent here.

If dead, we cease to be; if total gloom
Swallow up life's brief flash for aye, we fare
As summer-gusts, of sudden birth and doom (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*,
"Human Life" 425).

The overall tone of the poem is godless, bleak and lacking in vivid imagery. As in Camus' lack of belief in a transcendent meaning about the world, the poetic persona in question offers no solution to Man's destiny:

O Man! thou vessel purposeless, unmeant,

Yet drone-hive strange of phantom purposes!
(Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 425)

Furthermore, Man is considered a "blank accident" and "nothing's anomaly" (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical* 425), therefore a product of hazardous creation rather than a creature arising out of a divinely ordained hierarchy.

To conclude, the majority of Coleridge's later poems are either imaginary wastelands where the poetic persona is either hopeless, old and blind "possessed of inward light" or with his eye turned "inward", enjoying the workings of the imagination (Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical*, 435). In the lines quoted above from several Coleridgean poems, there is at work a Kantian sublime underlined by the corruption of old age and by the fading coal of the poetic genius. One could also detect a strange sense of finitude in the poems mentioned above, as the blind bard seems to reign over wastelands like a deposed king. Recurring words like "to look", "to gaze" ("Limbo") are rendered useless by the fact that the stares described are blank stares, stares into the void, stares of the blind bard not in the apex of his career, but in his decline. Such poems could be better understood by reading them as a post-theological scenario, with their particularly Kantian sublime to which Coleridge adhered. Themes such as love and hope became allegories and constitute examples of theological terms that are still present only to be deconstructed in Coleridge's post-theological integration. In his later poems, Coleridge enacts both belief and disbelief and this ambivalence has puzzled many critics who considered these oscillating stances as either Coleridge's play of mind (John Beer) or Coleridge's skepticism (Ben Brice).

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