

# The Coleridge—Johnson *Agon*

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OF THE MANY HAPLESS TARGETS of Coleridge's spleen, perhaps none comes as more of a surprise than Samuel Johnson. The occasions for congenial, eighteenth-century fellow-feeling were in no short supply: they both stood untouched among their contemporaries in their criticism of Shakespeare; they both conceived of themselves as guardians of the language and champions of the main line of English verse (though they differed on what exactly that was); they were both recognized as the greatest conversationalists of their times; they were both Church-and-State men in their mature years. Yet Coleridge waged a sustained campaign against Johnson—in his notebooks, as Seamus Perry has discerned, and in his lectures on Shakespeare, as demonstrated by James Engell and others—determined to attack him “with all due severity” for his critical malfeasance.<sup>1</sup>

The Shakespeare criticism of the two men is of course an important site of conflict, with Coleridge objecting to what he perceives as an excessive rigidity and lack of imagination in Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765). Coleridge condemns what he calls the “damnable rage,” exemplified in Johnson, of judging the poet—what Coleridge wonderfully calls “the poor becritick'd Animal”—by his faults, “instead as of yore by his excellencies” (CN III 3970). Shakespeare, though, is only one point of contention between the two critics, sharing the unenviable position with, most frequently, Milton and Leibniz, both of whom I will focus on today.

The cause of Coleridge's agitation with Johnson's Milton criticism is straightforward enough: in Johnson's now famous words, “*Paradise Lost* is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take it up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure” (SJ 711), an assessment echoed in Johnson's less quoted remark that “Surely no man could have fancied that he read ‘Lycidas’ with pleasure had he not known its author” (SJ 699).<sup>2</sup> These, and other similar assertions, typically produce something close to rage in Coleridge, in a way that only the work of David Hume was able to match. Just as he wished to “besprinkle” Hume “copiously from the fountains of bitterness and contempt” for his religious doubt, he wishes to attack Johnson “with all due severity” for his literary doubt.

Religious doubt and literary doubt were not, however, always distinct for Coleridge, who, like William Blake and later Harold Bloom, conceived of the English literary tradition in quasi-mystical terms—terms, in fact, that he believed defined the nation itself. As he puts it in one of his most significant

<sup>1</sup> James Engell, “Coleridge, Johnson, and Shakespeare: A Critical Drama in Five Acts,” *Romanticism* 4 (1998), 22-39; Seamus Perry, ed., *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For Coleridge's intention to “attack Johnson with all due severity” for his remarks on *Paradise Lost*, see *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Bollingen, 1957-73), Vol. II 2026. Hereafter CN.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

notebook entries:

Let England be Sir P. Sidney, Shakespere, Spenser, Milton, Bacon, Harrington, Swift, Wordsworth, and never let the names of Darwin, Johnson, Hume, *furr* it over!—If these too must be England, let them be another England / — or rather let the first be old England, the spiritual platonic old England / & the second [,] with Locke at the head of the Philosophers & Pope of the Poets, with the long list of Priestleys, Paleys, Hayleys, Darwins, Mr Pitts, Dundasses, &c &c — be representative of commercial G[reat] Britian... (CN II 2598)

There are no doubt many things that could be said about this passage, one that we may say, with little exaggeration, could have been written by no other writer in the language. It is Coleridgean in every respect, from its intellectual scope and synthetic vision right down to, as far as I can tell, the only instance of the verb *furr* in modern English. What is perhaps most striking, though, is its resistance to what was emerging as a kind of English “identity”—centered around Pope, Hume, and Johnson—that still, for some at least, remains relevant and meaningful. So in his review of Peter Ackroyd’s 2003 *Albion*, Christopher Hitchens can ask, with characteristic verve, “Is there such a thing as ‘Englishness’—and if not, then why can’t one imagine Samuel Johnson as an Italian?”<sup>3</sup> Coleridge, again like Blake, offers an alternative historical vision of England as a spiritual and, perhaps with a glance back to Cudworth and More, a Platonic place. Milton is a central figure in this vision, and Johnson’s criticism of him marks for Coleridge a turn from spiritual to commercial concerns, a turn that deeply troubled Wordsworth as well.<sup>4</sup>

It was in a lecture on Johnson’s “Life of Milton” that Coleridge was hissed for calling Johnson a “fellow” (a word also of some importance in connection with Leibniz, as we shall soon see). “Fellow” might seem to us a strange word to provoke the audience’s ire. Its primary meaning, in the eighteenth century and in our own, is generally positive, denoting equality and welcome familiarity; one speaks of a “fellow” with some degree of approbation. Adam Smith made “fellow-feeling,” or sympathy, the dominant ethical category of the Scottish Enlightenment. As early as the fourteenth century, though, “fellow” has at times been used pejoratively, applied unceremoniously to schoolboys, animals, things, commoners, servants, and, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, to blacks. And Coleridge does not plead innocence for applying the “fellow” epithet to Johnson, for he immediately—and elegantly, I think—apologizes, saying “It is in the nature of Evil to beget Evil—and the

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hitchens, review of Peter Ackroyd’s *Albion: The History of the British Imagination*, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See Wordsworth’s *The Convention of Cintra* in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 324–25.

indignation we feel at injustice makes us commit the same.”<sup>5</sup> Evil, we shall presently see, is the concept at the center of the triangular relationship between Coleridge, Johnson, and Leibniz. Coleridge, finally, is joined in the contemptuous use of “fellow” by none other than Johnson himself, whom Boswell records as saying that Leibniz was “as paltry fellow as I know” in his *Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides* (1784).<sup>6</sup> The remark occurs in a conversation between Johnson and the Reverend Hector McLean on Leibniz’s supposed confutation of Bayle.

Leibniz, I have suggested, is the other important point of contention in Coleridge’s agonistic engagement with Johnson. Coleridge’s notebooks refer to the “paltry fellow” comment just quoted and, in an entry marked “important,” he refers to Johnson as the “most fertile instance” of “the great injury done to mankind by a man of *no genius, no real wisdom*, attaining to the very height of that reputation,” an example of a middling intellect standing in the way of a great one. “Take for instance,” he writes, “Johnson’s silly opinion, concerning the *Origin of Evil* in opposition to Leibniz whom he could not understand—his authority in favor of Ghosts and all other selfish & base Anti-religions....” (CN III 3321). The origin of evil was no small matter for Coleridge, of course; it was, rather, one of his most persistent concerns (“woe to the man, to whom it is an uninteresting Question” [CN I 1622]). It is the motivating problem of the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Christabel,” it is a principal subject of the *Aids to Reflection* and the *Opus Maximum*.

Coleridge’s dismissive comment on Johnson obscures a more complicated relationship, with the concept of evil at stake. In referring to Johnson’s “silly,” allegedly anti-Leibnizian, “opinion concerning the origin of evil,” Coleridge is, according to Kathleen Coburn, “reading or remembering Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*” (CN III 3321n), in which Johnson pronounces:

Moral evil is occasioned by free-will, which implies choice between good and evil. With all the evil that there is, there is no man but would rather be a free agent than a mere machine without the evil; and what is best for each individual must be best for the whole. If a man would rather be a machine, I cannot argue with him. He is a different being from me.<sup>7</sup>

(JTH V 117)

It is hard to see exactly what Coleridge finds so “silly” about Johnson’s view. In fact, it is perfectly consonant with the emphasis on the will found throughout his writings. The instances are too numerous to mention them all, but it is worth noting that the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge’s most sustained and

<sup>5</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, Vol. I, ed. R.A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 411. Hereafter LL.

<sup>6</sup> James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides*, ed. Frederick Pottle and Charles H. Bennet (1936), 256. James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson with Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. G.B. Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

arguably definitive treatment of the subject, is entirely premised on the possibility of evil and the priority of the autonomous will.<sup>8</sup> Coleridge's break with Hartley—along with his discovery of German philosophy, the most decisive moment in his philosophical development—was motivated by the devastating effects strict adherence to associationist doctrine would have on the will and moral responsibility. Thus an 1803 notebook entry in which Coleridge attempts to explain the "Origin of moral Evil from the *streamy* Nature of Association" (CNI 1170).

That Coleridge, like Johnson, granted the primacy of the will and the possibility of evil is evident enough, but what is less clear is why and how Leibniz—as opposed to, say, St. Augustine, or Archbishop King, or Joseph Priestley (all influential on Coleridge's thoughts on evil)—assumes a central position here. Leibniz, of course, offered a seminal explanation of evil, whereby God, in his creation of the best of all possible worlds, included evil because some great goods (i.e. the freedom of the will) are necessarily bound up with certain evils (i.e. sin). This is the view expressed in Leibniz's *Theodicy* essays (1710), a response to Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), which argued that the sufferings of this life demonstrate that God could not be both benevolent and omnipotent.

Coleridge took a copy of the *Theodicy* with him to Malta in 1804, and annotated a copy loaned to him, likely in 1809, by DeQuincey. He was struck by one passage in particular, in which Leibniz contends "It is again well to consider that moral evil is an evil so great only because it is a source of physical evils."<sup>9</sup> The distinction between "moral" and "physical" evil, we have seen in the previous quotations, is preserved in the writings of both Johnson and Coleridge. Next to this assertion, though, Coleridge writes: "This section, in my opinion, contains the *Falsum Magnum* on which all the Theodices have struck: & with them the first Principle of morality. I mean the subordination of moral to physical Evil: in consequence of which the latter in reality constitutes the true evil of the former."<sup>10</sup> God's omnipotence, for Coleridge, may prevent physical evil, so to designate physical evil as the greater evil, he argues, is to make the idea of a subordinate, yet unpreventable, "moral" evil "unintelligible." Moral evil must be the greater evil because God is in no position to prevent it; he is unable to prevent it because, as Leibniz argues, once God—who chooses only perfection, e.g. what is positive—has issued the

<sup>8</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). "In one concluding sentence: there are several positions, each of which might stand on its own grounds as a postulate of humanity, and *a fortiori*, therefore, of every code of religion and morality. But the one assumption, the one postulate, in which all the rest may assume a scientific form, and which granted we may coercively deduced even those which we might allowably have assumed, is the Existence of the *Will*, which a moment's reflexion will convince us is the same as *Moral Responsibility*, and that again with the reality and essential difference of moral *Good* and *Evil*" (OM 11). The Will is later defined as "the power to begin or originate a state" (OM 18).

<sup>9</sup> G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), I ii 134.

<sup>10</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, Vol. III, ed. H.J. Jackson and George Whalley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 505.

positive decree of man's freedom, the absolute rejection of sin is ruled out.<sup>11</sup> Coleridge's interest here is only in this *moral* evil, defined in *Aids to Reflection* as "all evil that is evil without reference to its contingent physical consequences," evil that has its source in the will.<sup>12</sup> Ever the virtue ethicist, Coleridge privileges the purity of one's motives over the consequences of one's action.

All this is in accord with Johnson's opinion of evil, dismissed by Coleridge as "silly" and the product of an inadequate understanding of Leibniz. As they were in their Shakespeare criticism, the two are closer in belief than Coleridge implies. Whence the hostility, then? I would like to suggest that what is at stake for Coleridge is the possibility of a genuinely philosophical criticism, correlative to the kind of philosophical poetry he wished Wordsworth to write. Johnson is many things, but a philosophical critic he is not. His patience for metaphysical abstraction may be summed up in his famous refutation of Berkeley's immaterialism: kicking a stone, he refutes it "*thus*." Such a critical mind may *happen upon* a satisfactory notion of moral evil and the human will, but it does not arrive at it methodically from first principles, that is, philosophically. Leibniz, on the other hand, but a "paltry fellow" for Johnson, is for Coleridge one of the few who understood the nature of "true philosophy." As he writes in the *Biographia*, most systems in the history of philosophy do not meet the criterion of "true philosophy" as laid out by Leibniz: "namely, that it would at once explain and collect the fragments of truth scattered through systems apparently the most incongruous."<sup>13</sup>

Though the school of Leibniz would ultimately be insufficient as an "abiding place" for Coleridge's reason, and though Coleridge fell pathetically short in his own attempts at systematicity, Leibniz represented for him a certain kind of philosophical ideal: systematic, orthodox, and optimistic. His philosophy avoided the religious radicalism and determinism of Spinoza's pantheism while at the same time asserting a philosophically radical notion of substance: unextended, infinite, and incapable of causal interaction, Leibniz's monads each individually mirror the universe. The *appearance* of interaction between them is the result of a "pre-established harmony" between the changes in one monad and those in another. In short, this is a philosophy one could found a literary criticism on. Coleridge's theories, for instance, of the imagination and organic unity, inconceivable in the subjectivist criticism of Johnson, both owe something to the abstruse piety and complexity of Leibniz's philosophy: namely, its ambition to collect and explain the fragments of metaphysical, religious, and scientific truth.

Finally, a word on style. The philosophically-minded Coleridge objected that Johnson's "antitheses are almost always verbal only," lacking presumably

<sup>11</sup> G.W. Leibniz, "On Freedom" in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 94-98.

<sup>12</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 286.

<sup>13</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. I, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 244.

the true vitalism of the “dynamic philosophy” or of Kant’s antinomies.<sup>14</sup> In his notebooks Coleridge comments on the *imitability* of Johnson’s style, explaining his popularity by the fact that so many can imagine themselves doing the same. “Vanity,” he writes, “is at the bottom of it” (CN II 2407). “Johnson’s style,” he says in his *Lectures on Literature* (1808-1819), “has pleased many from the very fault of being perpetually translatable; he creates an impression of cleverness by never saying anything in a common way” (LL II 237). This may seem like an odd statement for the often inscrutable Coleridge to make, though I suspect that cleverness is never really Coleridge’s aim. The long shadow of Johnson made Coleridge reconsider the nature of literary criticism, prompting him to relocate it from the drawing room and the tavern to the philosophical armchair. We may fault his criticism at times for a lack of elegance or wit, but his intense reaction to Johnson reveals, I think, his considerable contributions to the critical tradition: an unabashed seriousness, a sometimes clumsy but typically enlightening philosophical approach, and, finally, like Leibniz, a vital, synthetic energy that struggles to idealize and to unify fragments of truth from what appear to be the most incongruous of systems.

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<sup>14</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Inquiring Spirit*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1979), 184.