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*Coleridge, Language, and the Sublime:  
From Transcendence to Finitude*  
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)  
by Christopher Stokes

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EVEN IN HIS MOST EXCITED MOMENTS of revelatory ecstasy, idealistic speculation, or inspired mysticism, even when airily affirming the metaphysical unity of all things, bringing himself and us up from landing place to landing place into the heights where he shows us there is One Life within us and abroad—even then Coleridge can be quite down to earth. Such, at least, is the claim that is at the heart of Christopher Stokes' new book. Coleridgeans might well think that they have heard this sort of thing before: Coleridge in his philosophical reflections is hardly the wide-eyed, misty-minded library cormorant he has been made out to be. And it is true enough, too, at least to a number of us. The more we have made our way through the *Collected Works* over the last few decades, and understood the historical context of his thinking, the more we discover certain abiding concerns folding their way into his metaphysical thoughts and core beliefs. Concerns about physiology, say, and messy ethical issues surrounding love and friendship, and the mixture of science and politics inflect his philosophy and ultimately revise the old image of STC's system as a Dutch attempt at German sublimity,<sup>1</sup> a botched kind of Kantianism, an extra scrap of Schellingiana, a useful though flawed import of more coherent intellectual postures that consequently offers little of note to the history of ideas.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, and unlike most philosophers subjected to the contextualization of historians of philosophy, his system becomes more plausibly universal the more it is situated in its time and place. Where there once was an impure and imported idealism, there is Coleridge's own homebrew mixture with tendencies also towards skepticism, towards natural-philosophical experimentation, even towards something like phenomenology. In short, many of us are quite willing to see that his metaphysical concerns are less purely idealistic. Or that they are, in a word, more worldly.

And yet, are we really willing to apply this point of view directly to Coleridge's conceptions of what lies in the beyond? Here we are caught at an impasse. However much we want to make Coleridge into an inspired empiricist who also recognizes the importance of the spiritual and divine, a creative

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<sup>1</sup> Just to name a few interesting contextualizing studies that provoke (or engage in) some philosophizing on these issues: Alan Richardson's *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 39-65; Felicity James' *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), and Paul Hamilton's *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic* (London: Continuum, 2007); and Pamela Edwards' *The Statesman's Science: History, Nature, and Law in the Political Thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). There are more, of course, where these came from.

<sup>2</sup> See René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England, 1793-1838* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), 65-135, esp. 68-69. Even the great champion of Coleridge's philosophical efforts, J.H. Muirhead, also was surprised at their lack of acceptance when compared to some similar ideas of, say, Carlyle. J.H. Muirhead, *Coleridge as Philosopher* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930), 256-261.

methodologist with tendencies towards intuitive induction, a philosophic muddler, with a certain play of mind<sup>3</sup>—how much can we really pass over his metaphysical commitment to the divine, to the existence of the otherworldly and to its importance in our lives? We find studies of Coleridge here often taking on a note of apology for the hastiness with which they reconcile his opinions with a view more naturalistic than might seem plausible, or acknowledging that the beliefs they are considering are something Coleridge might have not avowed as forthrightly.<sup>4</sup> Here is where Stokes's work wants to defend Coleridge, as it were, from his defenders. Stokes wants to say that, in his own view, Coleridge's earthiness precisely makes the idealistic vein in Coleridge's thought all the more important. For Stokes, the thought that the transcendent *itself* is worldly—while yet still remaining something at the limits of our experience—is Coleridge's particularly unique contribution as a thinker. So while we might say he does not have the idealist orientation we once attributed to him, he is not just a philosopher of the phenomenal (or the noumenal, for that matter). He is in fact someone with an eye always on the edges of that experience, on the limitation of our experience itself. In short, he is a thinker of nothing more, and nothing less, than the limitedness of experience—its finiteness.

The subtitle "From Transcendence to Finitude" signals Stokes' intention to adjust our interpretation of Coleridge's thinking along these lines. And while we still need much deconstructive elaboration, with the help of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Luc Marion and others, to understand what "finitude" exactly *is*, there is an area where Stokes can show us Coleridge's interest in it more directly. This is in Coleridge's conception of sublimity. For if we normally think sublimity *the* essentially transcendental experience, we have another thing coming. Stokes has here another counterintuitive claim for us: Coleridge, in his eyes, sought to build up a conception of the sublime around its *least* transcendental aspects. And in taking a traditional transcendental event and rethinking it along worldly lines—in rewriting a traditionally otherworldly experience as the sense of the exact limit of our experience—Coleridge clearly works out this thought of finitude. In short, Stokes says, it is here that that we can best see Coleridge, even as he is reeling off into the heights, at the same time grounding himself.

<sup>3</sup> Stokes is skeptical of Walter Jackson Bate's thoughtful characterization of Coleridge as "in the line of British empirical intuitionists," quoting (p. 160) his essay "Coleridge on the Function of Art," in *Perspectives of Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 130. See also of course his *Coleridge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *From Classic to Romantic* (New York: Harper, 1961). On Coleridge's prefiguring of C.S. Peirce's "abductive" reasoning see Jeffrey Hipolito on "Coleridge's *Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*" in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 254-270. On muddling, see Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 107-122; and on a related kind of playfulness, see John Beer's *Coleridge's Play of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Brice in his excellent *Coleridge and Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) (see the review by Ross Wilson in *The Coleridge Bulletin* (NS), 32 (Winter 2008), 89-91), has to negotiate this issue, for example, and brilliantly characterizes Kant as the "Trojan horse through which Hume's scepticism breached the citadel of Coleridge's piety" (7). The difficulty is in finding a way even then to consider how deeply we are reconstructing beliefs when we reconstruct texts; we feel the revenge of expressivism on modern interpretation. The problem hounds Stokes' work particularly.

And if we think back a little with Stokes to certain moments in Coleridge's writings, we begin to see what he is getting at. We notice, for instance, that rather than thinking of it as a confrontation with outward magnificence, grandeur, impressiveness, oppressiveness—everything we might normally consider sublime—Coleridge often speaks of sublimity as a moment of internal change, internal revolution of thought or sentiment. We notice how often he finds thoughts sublime just as much as rocks, mountains, forests; we see that truths were sublime to him, just as often as trees and torrents.

Tis the sublime of man,  
Our noontide Majesty, to know ourselves  
Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!  
(“Religious Musings,” PW 101 126-8)

O'er the ocean swell  
Sublime of Hope I seek the cottag'd dell  
Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray;  
And, dancing to the moon-light roundelay  
The wizard Passions weave an holy spell!  
(“Pantisocracy,” PW 78 5-8)

And what if All of animated Life  
Be but as Instruments diversly fram'd  
That tremble into thought, while thro' them breathes  
One infinite and intellectual Breeze,  
And all in different Heights so aptly hung,  
That Murmurs indistinct and Bursts sublime,  
Shrill Discords and most soothing Melodies,  
Harmonious from Creation's vast consent...  
(“The Eolian Harp,” Rugby Draft 2, 36-46)<sup>5</sup>

But the uniqueness of this kind of sublimity, in Stokes' eyes, goes further. Sublimity is also a rather doubtful experience, as it were: Coleridge feels what seems to be the feeling, and then wonders whether he was feeling it. To be more specific, there is an energy in Coleridge's experience of sublimity, a restless feeling of intense mental activity, which David Vallins, editor of the volume of *Coleridge's Writings* on the sublime and very much Stokes' interlocutor throughout this book, has described eloquently. Vallins thinks this is an emotional extension of Coleridge's sense that he is being taken beyond himself; it is him finding “liberating sense of calmness and freedom from temporal concerns” in the idea of sublimity—and its intensity is simply because it is felt more deeply and passionately than in other Romantics.<sup>6</sup> But Stokes contends that what Coleridge experiences is merely uncertainty at this

<sup>5</sup> From Paul Cheshire's “The Eolian Harp: The Rugby Manuscript: Folios 26r, 27r, 27v, 28r,” *The Coleridge Bulletin* (NS), 17 (Summer 2001), 1-22. In Draft 1 we find the even more suggestive and strange line, “So low Murmurs and loud Bursts sublime.”

<sup>6</sup> *Coleridge's Writings: On the Sublime*, ed. David Vallins, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

limit of the intelligible and unintelligible. Sublimity arises for Coleridge in a rather anxious encounter where the mind and the heart attest to the world's continual ability not to make sense of itself; what is felt is a kind of wonder at the capacity for the world to make any sense at all. Stokes, in other words, makes a key point that much literature on sublimity supposes but never quite spells out: sublimity is not an emotion, but an experience of the emotions and their valences almost at one remove. And thus these moments are not, according to Stokes, records of an emotional connection with the beyond, records of someone feeling beyond what he senses in the material world to the immaterial one, but almost of the opposite. They are records of a sudden fascination with the way that the world, however familiar it gets, always has the power to challenge our perception of it, our account of it, our description of it, and of its ability to free us up from our too settled emotional connections to ourselves (though what exactly makes them too settled for Stokes and for Rei Terada, whom Stokes follows here, is a bit of a question). As Coleridge says in a thought-provoking quotation from *The Friend* that is very important to Stokes: "Objects, which their very sublimity renders indefinite, no less their indefiniteness renders them sublime" (qtd. 155).

The most sublime of Coleridge's fragments perhaps captures Stokes's sense of Coleridgean sublimity best:

The poet's eye in his tipsy hour  
Hath a magnifying power  
His soul emancipates his eyes  
Of the accidents of *size*!  
In unctuous cones of kindling coal,  
Or smoke upwreathing from the pipe's trim bole,  
His gifted ken can see  
Phantoms of sublimity.

("On the Poet's Eye" PW 266 5-8)

*Phantoms of sublimity?* What is that? Indeed, something so sublime that even phantoms, wispy traces of it are sublime; and yet how sublime could a mere phantom of sublimity be? If we try to see what the poet's gifted ken can see, this experience that is supposed to be transcendent here comes not to carry us off into the beyond, but to make us fall back upon ourselves, doubt whether what we just felt was real, and begin asking whether what we have grasped was indeed an experience of the sublime. Suddenly we realize we are not taken beyond ourselves, we are still on the hither side of what we can know and feel, even when we think we have passed into the beyond—because after all this ecstatic experience may have just been an experience of a phantom. And then we realize (according to Stokes) that *this*, this state of energetic uncertainty, and comprehension of the world's inability to be comprehended, is a kind of sublimity—Coleridge's kind. "Looking at what is closest to us," as Stokes describes the experience, "we find that existence cannot formalize itself and that the very simplest fact (arguably the fact of immanence *par excellence*, that

something is), is both given, and yet as given remains indescribable" (154). This is because the Coleridgean sublime is characterized by this turn in upon itself that comes from doubts about its transcendental qualities. "Fragment, divide, limit and render finite the sublime"—that is, doubt it—"and what you are left with is still sublime, since fragmentation, division, liminality and finitude are merely the alternative moments of an always double-edged discourse" (13). Thus, as Stokes puts it: "Coleridge's sublime, despite its Christian drift, is [...] not about something other than the world, but about the world itself: a world that does not and cannot coincide logically with itself," much more than any divinity (155).

My account here of Stokes' ideas about Coleridge might suggest just how hard it is to convey his conception of how this sublimity feels. No doubt Stokes, by setting his sights on such a specific trace of emotion, and doing so by interpreting it in the light of its largest philosophical ramifications, does not make this easy, though I think any deep reader curious about Coleridge's particular and sometimes idiosyncratic emotional palate would respect the sympathy with which he tries to get a fix on it. It is clear things become a little more transparent if we think of this emotional phenomenon within a certain narrative of the experience of selfhood: an experience of self-doubt, a questioning of one's feelings, and then an appreciation of the disjointedness of reality which prompted those feelings. This is what Stokes does in the various chapters of the book, hunting down several scenes in Coleridge's writings from different periods of his life in which he detects this narrative of finitude. Of course he could extract this narrative from any time in his life, since for Stokes it is a mere trace in Coleridge's writing, and this lack of specificity makes the scenes chosen arbitrary in principle; Stokes progresses through the chapters though in a way that looks suspiciously like an old-fashioned account of stylistic development. We move from Coleridge's sublime experiences in the doubts about the sincerity of his voice in his early sonnets—the origin, for Stokes, of the rather hedgy term "effusions" that Coleridge gives them instead (30-32); then we look at his experience of sublimity in the attempt to speak honestly and straightforwardly about his political affiliations in "Fears in Solitude," "France: an Ode," and "Frost at Midnight"; then his sublime sense of personal guilt in *The Destiny of Nations*, *Religious Musings*, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; then, perhaps the most rewarding part of the book, his experiences of sublimity in his later poetical fragments. A brilliant insight here is that Coleridge's repeated verbal tick "O!" which we find all over his poetry (and prose, actually) when he is excited about something is a marker of an experience of this particular brand of sublimity—one in which Coleridge is tracing "the limits of immanence without necessarily asserting the successful movement towards transcendence" (132). Here we come to understand a theme running throughout the book, namely that the fragmentariness of Coleridge's poetry and the strange incompleteness of his experience of sublimity in general comes to seem less the trace of a damaged, overawed, overcome self, than one that is finding a resource in a lack of speech.

Because we are already looking at finitude through sublimity, however, looking at sublimity through these various situations can make the connections of these situations to what we are talking about—even to sublimity itself—seem very tenuous. This reflects a larger aspect of the book: that we feel, reading it, as if the deconstructive angle of vision into the matter at hand gets in the way of the sympathy of the readings and ultimately the experience that Stokes has such a good hold on. We feel as if Stokes forces connections against our will when we are already happy to make them. But we also feel that this is a consequence of the book's heroic effort to position itself between literature and philosophy, at a time when the two areas of thought are much more far apart than they were when deconstruction got off the ground.

Indeed, the readings of all these scenes seem less important generally than Stokes' effort to enlarge our view of the category of sublimity as we have come to understand it theoretically over the last few decades. He lamentably does not provide a history of the debates around sublimity that raged between theorists of the deconstructive persuasion in the 70s, 80s, and 90s over the texts of certain Romantic thinkers, when his wide reading in the topic might have enabled him to do this (for this, we will still have to go back to Frances Ferguson's amazing account in *Solitude and the Sublime*). But he makes it clear how in that history sublimity could often become a rather uncomplicated thing, for all the interest it received and the complexity of all the theoretical talk around it. It could become, that is, simply an event in which one witnessed the collapse of phenomenality, perception, appearance, "presence"—all the bad guys and evildoers of aesthetic thought. And it consequently began to be freighted with every supposedly virtuous tendency that negated the transcendental, the ideal, the ideological. While this made it an experience useful for those who wanted to assert the anaesthetic or materialist basis of certain aesthetic categories (especially de Manians), it also made many of them much too confident that they knew what sublimity was. And while this opened up links to certain states like trauma, it also seems to have made them insensitive to the other sensations (or non-sensations, non-phenomena) that might be related to it.<sup>7</sup>

What Stokes shows, through Coleridge, is that to be wary of the transcendental we do not have to explore something so directly negative in character. At times it can seem like what Stokes wants is not to talk about Coleridge at all but simply to make deconstruction, and a deconstructive account of sublimity, more and more *rigorous*—whatever that old byword meant. In this case it seems to mean, just less and less concerned with the infinite, in ways indicated by Martin Hägglund, for example, though Stokes is much more subtle about this.<sup>8</sup> Yet the account ranges all over Coleridge's corpus and deals sympathetically with him. Many of the discussions make less

<sup>7</sup> Stokes does not refer to Sianne Ngai's affect of "stuplimity" but the difficulties he has to overcome in trying to push back on this insensitivity around sublimity are also evident there. See *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 248-297.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

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canonical poems central to the argument—"Coeli Enarrant," "Limbo," and "Ne Plus Ultra," receive much attention—which is refreshing. Certain documents we might have thought vital to an argument so full of concerns with the emotions and selfhood are left out, such as Coleridge's brilliant essay "On the Passions" (1828). And despite the argument's overall complexity and counterintuitiveness, in the it repays efforts to hear it out. It is trying to redeem the abstruseness it fears we might perhaps deny in making Coleridge more practical, empirical, skeptical, even not so anti-materialist—things deconstructionist accounts of Coleridge usually have a ball trying to convert him into, if they are not damning and disparaging him for being too idealist, too concerned with organicism and symbols and whatnot. And even if in the end if Stokes' basic claim that worldliness can be cultivated in the sphere of the abstruse just has something mighty paradoxical about it which we cannot quite come around to, we can surely find that there is something fitting and particularly Coleridgean in the assertion that Coleridge would be worldly just *here*, in the most typically ideal of all experiences.