

The Breakdown of Moral Order in Coleridge's *Osorio*

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Coleridge wrote his tragedy, *Osorio*, over the eight month interval from April to November of 1797, making it his chief literary preoccupation between the re-publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* and the composition of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It comes therefore at a particularly important transition in his early literary career, one in which he abandons the Miltonic verse of *Poems* for the new direction of *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as one that sees him begin his close collaboration with the Wordsworths. Despite its potential interest as the product of this period, the play has received relatively little critical commentary, having been overshadowed by the political writings of 1795-6 and the celebrated poetic achievements of 1798 that bracket it. What has gone unnoticed however is that *Osorio* also signals for Coleridge a decisive pessimistic turn regarding human capacity for malice. Far from rehearsing the philosophical optimism manifest in the 1795 Lectures and *The Watchman* of 1796 in which local evil was understood to accrue to the progressive realization of universal good,^[1] *Osorio* presents instead a world of irremediable violence and moral ambiguity.

The nature of evil had of course been a recurrent theme both publicly in the *Lectures on Revealed Religion* and *The Watchman*, and privately in the letters and notebook entries. In the spring of 1796, a journal entry indicates plans for a major work entitled, 'The Origin of Evil, an Epic Poem,' and not coincidentally as it turns out, plans for 'A Tragedy' (CN I 161). Why the epic poem on evil was never written has been a topic of much speculation, but several commentators suggest that it was indeed written, in a sense, by being inscribed in other works, of which *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Osorio, A Tragedy* have been singled out.^[2] Although some commentary has pursued this line of enquiry by pointing to the play's critique of Godwinian rationalism,^[3] it has stopped short of realizing its more radical assault upon Hartley's doctrines of association, universal benevolence, and the 'domestic affections.' This is a significant turn for the 'compleat (sic) Necessitarian,' Unitarian, and apostle of Hartley and Priestley, especially considering that the theory of the domestic

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affections had been central to Coleridge's rebuttal of Godwin in the 1795 lectures.^[4] Without by any means endorsing the Godwinian theory of 'rational benevolence,' *Osorio* subtly undermines the Hartleyan arguments Coleridge had used against it, for his tragedy stages the failure of domestic affections and indeed of any coherent moral system that seeks to build upon the postulate of moral perfectibility.

II

Set in Granada at the height of the Spanish Inquisition, the play takes fraternal rivalry and violence as its primary subject in what amounts to a re-working of the Cain-Abel myth.^[5] Its central actions are initiated by *Osorio*'s attempt to have his older brother, Albert, assassinated so that he (*Osorio*) might marry Albert's betrothed, Maria, their mutual foster

sister.^[6] Albert's apparent victimization at the hands of his sinister brother, and Maria's chaste reluctance to receive Osorio's advances, thus appear to create an asymmetrical love triangle favoring the Albert-Maria side to the detriment of Osorio-Maria and pitting Albert against Osorio as unambiguous representations of good and evil. Indeed, critical commentary has almost exclusively judged Albert and Osorio in these terms as a 'good brother—bad brother' moral binary resulting in the tendency to interpret the character of Osorio as a continuation of Coleridge's attack on the central tenets of Godwinian ethics.^[7] Although it does not go far enough, such an appraisal is not entirely unwarranted. Despite sharing many of Godwin's anti-ministerial political views, it is well known that Coleridge had been consistently disenchanted with the latter's atheism since his acquaintance with *Political Justice* in 1794. The *1795 Lectures* and *The Watchman* demonstrate increasing hostility to the Godwinian precept that dispassionate reason could serve as the sole ground for right conduct. A vitriolic rebuttal of a pro-Godwinian adversary in *The Watchman* of April 2, 1796 reveals the extent to which his animosity for the Godwinian doctrine of 'disinterested benevolence' had grown:

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O this enlightened age! when it can be seriously charged against an Essayist, that he is *prejudiced in favour* of gratitude, conjugal fidelity, filial affection, and the belief of God and a hereafter!!...I do consider Mr. Godwin's Principles as vicious; and his book as a Pandar to Sensuality.

(*Watchman* 196)

It is not surprising then to find Coleridge, a year later, dramatizing the pernicious consequences of Godwin's principles in the character of Osorio as one who attempts to override inherent feelings of human sympathy with intellectual justifications for having taken the life of another. To rationalize the murder of the man he believes has betrayed him, Osorio reasons with a utilitarian precision that reveals the absurdity of a morality calculated solely in terms of consequences:

I kill a man and lay him in the sun,/ And in a month there swarm from his dead body/
A thousand—nay, ten thousand sentient beings/ In place of that one man whom I had
kill'd. Of these ten thousand lives, [are they] not as happy/ As that one life, which
being shoved aside/ Made room for these ten thousand?" (III 224-231)

Osorio's character is also made to articulate an extreme version of Godwin's objections to the feeling of remorse. Reflecting on the fact that by killing Ferdinand he has made Alhadra a widow and turned their children into orphans, he nonetheless scoffs at the idea of remorse as an impotent and impractical expenditure:

Remorse! Remorse!/ Where gott'st thou that fool's word?/ Curse on remorse!/ Can it
give up the dead, or recompact/ A mangled body.../ Not all the blessings of an host of
angels/ Can blow away a desolate widow's curse;/ And tho' thou spill thy heart's
blood for atonement,/ It will not weigh against an orphan's tear. (200-6)

The Godwinian doctrine of 'disinterested benevolence,' with its rejection of the domestic affections and the Christian virtues of gratitude and remorse, is thus shown to be a recipe for moral complacency.

Nonetheless, by 1797 popular enthusiasm for Godwinism was well on the wane and Coleridge would have been preaching largely to the already disenchanted. Moreover, Osorio's heartless logic is so extremely self-interested and so overstates the case against Godwin as to threaten Coleridge's credibility were that his main interest. After all, the deliberations famously advocated in *Political Justice* as to whether one should rescue Fenelon or the chambermaid if only one could be saved, have the general welfare of society as their motivating aim, whereas Osorio's purpose is entirely self-serving. While the Godwinian overtones of Osorio's rhetoric are unmistakable, Coleridge's objections to Godwin do not seem to exhaust the view of evil that the play attempts to articulate. Indeed, only a few months before beginning *Osorio*

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Coleridge had remarked in a letter to Benjamin Flower that he had in mind a reply to Godwin 'designed to shew not only the absurdities and wickedness of *his* System, but to detect...the defects of all the systems of morality before and since Christ...' (CL I 267). Though such a statement is perhaps to be admired mostly for its impossibly ambitious exuberance, it is clear that Coleridge saw Godwinism not as the source of ethical error, but as an especially pernicious effect of a more fundamental problem.

Indeed, in *Osorio* Coleridge calls into question the ethically optimistic aspects of the 'association of ideas' and its corollary positions regarding the necessity of benevolence and moral perfectibility as formulated by David Hartley and elaborated by Joseph Priestley. These had of course been the foundation for Coleridge's beliefs as a Unitarian and avowed necessitarian. The 1795 *Lectures on Revealed Religion* for example are steeped in the Priestleyan version of Hartley's doctrines of necessity and philosophical optimism. According to these, human conduct is governed by immutable psychological laws, namely, that we cannot act without motive and that we must choose benevolent motives at an increasing rate as experience will prove that only these are associated with feelings of pleasure. Thus the progressive melioration of human morality will lead to millennial utopia. It had been precisely the element of determinism in Hartley's system that made it so attractive to Coleridge because it seemed to provide a psychological proof for his Christian alternative to the Godwinian belief that universal benevolence was contingently predicated upon the proper application of reason. As Patton and Mann note, '[Hartleyan psychology seemed to] remove the element of chance from life, which was the atheist's and materialist's only alternative hypothesis as to the nature and origin of things' (LPR lxi). Events in *Osorio* however appear radically contingent, or if not, then governed by an inscrutable providence whose laws resist systematic prescription for right conduct. As Paul Magnuson notes, the primary actions taken in the play are motivated by dreams, reveries, and staged fictions, suggesting that 'human action is based on dreams and not on the realities of history',^[8] that is, on irrational rather than predictable causal factors. More often than not, these fictions prove misleading and bring about tragically unintended consequences raising doubts as to what in fact constitutes reality. Albert's scheme to make his brother feel remorse for attempted fratricide leads unexpectedly to the death of Ferdinand and Osorio, leaving him in a state of horror and frustrated impotence. Likewise, Osorio's designs to dupe Maria into marriage succeed only in self-deception, while the plan to kill his brother ultimately brings about his own death. But if the plot of *Osorio* thus hinges on a fundamental lacuna between human motive and action, this also constitutes a sharp break with the corollary doctrines of necessity, the association of ideas, and human perfectibility that had previously sustained Coleridge's thought.

Moreover, as Patton and Mann note, ‘Hartleyan theory provided [for Coleridge] a psychological account and justification of ‘benevolence’ by showing how the necessary workings of the associational mechanism inevitably converted love of self into love of one’s family...and thence in widening circles to love of mankind...’ (LPR lxi). This emphasis on the domestic affections as the instrument of necessity had been the foundation for Coleridge’s earlier moral and political thought and had underpinned his opposition to Godwin. In *Osorio* however, any sense of the inevitability of proliferating benevolence is frustrated. Albert’s attempts to effect good will in others merely results in death and misery. Osorio proves unwilling to sustain feelings of remorse, preferring immediate death to the guilt and enslavement of a repentant life. Alhadra’s triumph at the play’s end is the bittersweet satisfaction of having found revenge, and her character seems to herald the prospect of imminent apocalyptic destruction. Far from appearing as the basis for millennial optimism, benevolent determinism becomes the ‘shallow sophism’ invoked by Osorio for self-exculpation, as is most acutely evident when he reflects on his status as his brother’s murderer:

What have I done but that which nature destin’d/ Or the blind elements stirr’d up
within me?/ If good were meant, why were we made these beings?/ And if not
... (II 114-17)

III

If the character of Osorio perverts the idea of the inevitability of universal benevolence, what then of the altruistic intentions of Albert, the putatively ‘good brother?’ After all, Albert’s self-proclaimed mission is not to seek violent revenge, but rather to render his brother repentant, thus restoring the ideal of fraternal affection and harmony. Albert’s motives however prove not to be so unambiguously philanthropic. Staggered by the apparent revelation that his brother and his betrothed have conspired to have him murdered, he describes himself having lapsed into a deep trance while wandering Lear-like out into the troubled elements:

I bared my head to the storm,/ And with loud voice and clamorous agony/ Kneeling I
pray’d to the great Spirit that made me,/ Pray’d that Remorse might fasten on their
hearts,/ And cling, with poisonous tooth, inextricable/ As the gored lion’s bite! (I 316-
322)

The tension between his desire to reform his betrayers and the lethal images he employs bespeaks an uneasy ambiguity as to whether his utterance signifies a benevolent prayer or a curse by which remorse becomes the instrument of revenge. Stung by treachery and unable to recognize his own impulse toward vengeance, Albert succumbs to its venom despite his most strenuous efforts

to manifest Christian magnanimity. The malignant aspects of Albert’s ‘remorse’ as moral dispensation is confirmed however in the denouement when he discloses his true identity and attempts to offer forgiveness. Osorio views Albert’s mercy and the debt of remorse it

demands as the most severe form of punishment imaginable. In a brief fit of masochistic self-debasement, Osorio throws himself at his brother's feet, crying "Forgive me Albert!—Curse me with forgiveness!" (V, 252). But the moment quickly passes as Osorio defiantly seeks death as preferable to a life of atonement that would signify the sovereignty of his fraternal rival.

Yet Albert is no less implicated in what amounts to a master-slave dialectic fought for a prestige signified by the possession of Maria. If Osorio's attempt to wed his brother's betrothed is an overt act of what Rene Girard terms 'acquisitive mimesis,'^[9] Albert's ostensibly benevolent aspiration to reform Osorio belies an attempt to reassert his claims upon Maria and re-establish his position of fraternal dominance. In doing so however, he exacerbates the rivalry both by reinforcing his role as a model for Osorio's emulation, and by mimicking his brother's duplicitous and aggressive behavior. Albert in effect becomes Osorio's double despite his intent to remain morally unimpeachable. The more Albert attempts to take the moral high ground by distinguishing his desires from Osorio's, the more his actions begin to mirror those of his rival. One sees this most clearly in the pivotal *séance* scene where each aims his desires at the same 'object' in Maria and each resorts to similar technologies of secrecy and deceit in order to accomplish them. As Reeve Parker notes,^[10] Albert's most guilt inducing indictment of Osorio applies equally to himself. Disguised as a Moorish sorcerer, Albert asks of Osorio,

What if his very virtues/ Had pamper'd his swollen heart, and made him proud?/ And
what if pride had duped him into guilt,/ Yet still he stalk'd, a self-created God,/ Not
very bold, but excellent cunning...

(III, 92-7)

The mutual applicability of these accusations underscores the real object that stands at the source of their conflict—a coveted sense of self-sufficiency and god-like plenitude of being, apparently manifest in the other, and whose absence in oneself is to be cunningly disguised at all costs. Indeed, if Osorio's crime of hubris has been to assume the powers of the divine in taking the life of another, Albert has no less presumptively undertaken the role of divine arbiter and with equally disastrous consequences. This erasure of distinctions unavoidably draws Albert into a field of violence such that he is finally forced to recognize in his status as victim that he too has become a victimizer of others. His quest to set things aright not only fails to quell the violence that

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has rent the domestic community, but becomes the very instrument by which it is perpetuated. Thus the attempt to locate the play's positive moral vision in Albert's putative benevolence raises as many difficulties as it solves, for Albert proves an entirely ambiguous character as both victim and victimizer.

IV

Where then does Coleridge locate his moral imperative in a work so evidently preoccupied with interindividual ethics? I suggest the play declines to provide a clear answer and instead concerns itself with staging the failure of the moral theories Coleridge had previously relied upon. Osorio explores a world in which evil is no longer conceived along Hartleyan lines as contingent and remediable, with its implications for the perfectibility of

human nature. Instead, its characters inhabit one in which violence appears ineluctable and for which atonement becomes impossible. Likewise, Osorio's treatment of insidious desire and the psychology of fraternal rivalry complicates the Hartleyan argument that the family is the locus for the cultivation of 'universal benevolence.'

In its inability or refusal to disclose a new groundwork for ethics that would replace the doctrines it rejects, *Osorio* serves to foreground the moral ambiguity that characterizes the ancient mariner's narrative. From its originary act of treachery through its final cry for apocalyptic vengeance, acts of malice permeate *Osorio*'s narrative, fully anticipating the chain of violent actions that also constitute the Mariner's tale. Just as the shooting of the albatross establishes a world in which violence is gratuitous and ineluctable, so Osorio's attempted fratricide reveals, as Ricardo Quinones remarks of the Cain-Abel story, 'a breach in existence, a fracture at the heart of things.' Likewise, the theme of fraternal violence in Coleridge's reworking of the Cain-Abel story reveals in the character of Albert a figure who is both persecutor and persecuted. As such, he is one, as Raimonda Modiano argues regarding the Ancient Mariner, [11] who conflates the attributes of Cain and Abel into a single figure. Indeed, the profound alienation brought about by Albert's dual identity and his unintentional contribution to a state of generalized violence makes him the first mariner Coleridge cast alone on a wide wide sea.

[1] In the first *Lecture on Revealed Religion*, for example, Coleridge declares, 'Nothing therefore remains but the hypothesis of total Benevolence—Reasoning strictly and with logical Accuracy I should deny the existence of any Evil... [and that] moral evil does not impeach the divine power or benevolence' (*LRR*, 105, 111).

[2] In his article entitled, 'Godwin, Schiller, and the Polemics of Osorio,' Donald Priestman argues that the projected epic on evil was absorbed by the tragedy [*Osorio*], while George Whalley suggests Coleridge "[eventually] came to realize... he had already embodied his epic theme in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" (CL I, 161c, notes).

[3] See Priestman's article mentioned above and John David Moore's 'Coleridge and the "modern Jacobinical Drama": *Osorio*, *Remorse*, and the Development of Coleridge's Critique of the Stage, 1797-1816' (*Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 85, 1982).

[4] See for example in *Conciones ad Populum* his remarks: 'Let us beware of that proud Philosophy which affects to inculcate Philanthropy while it denounces every home-born feeling, by which it is produced and nurtured. The paternal and filial duties discipline the Heart and prepare it for the love of all Mankind. The intensity of private attachments encourages, not prevents, universal Benevolence' (Lect. 1795, 46).

[5] By anticipating *The Wanderings of Cain* in this regard, Osorio suggests Coleridge's extended preoccupation with the Cain-Abel story and theme of fraternal conflict.

[6] While the plot is too complex to recount here, the following sketches out the most central events: unbeknownst to Osorio, the assassination attempt fails. While Osorio creates another scheme to convince Maria of Albert's death, Albert, disguised as a Moor, plots to make Osorio remorseful for his treachery. The secret designs of each become enmeshed with one another, but eventually misfire. Osorio feels compelled to murder Albert's would-be assassin, Ferdinand, an act which ultimately results in his own death at the hands of Ferdinand's avenging wife, Alhadra. Furthermore, when Albert finally reveals himself as Osorio's long-lost, but forgiving brother, Osorio prefers annihilation at Alhadra's hands to the life of guilt that would result from atonement. Albert is finally left in a state of horror in large part because his design has led to his brother's death. The play closes with

Alhadra's impassioned cry for an apocalyptic vengeance that would 'shake the kingdoms of this world... till desolation seem'd a beautiful thing.'

[7] John David Moore remarks for example that 'Coleridge's hero/villain, is the extreme type of Godwinian man... The good elder brother, Albert, offers a corrective to the extreme calculations of Osorio, for Albert's actions are grounded in human affection.'

[8] *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (Princeton, N.J.), 64.

[9] Girard defines this as the desire to possess the object of a rival's desire in an often-unconscious attempt to become like the rival. Such imitative behavior proves inevitably conflictual as 'two hands reach for the same object.'

[10] I am indebted to Parker's article, 'Dark Employments: Tricking Out Coleridgean Tragedy,' which is to my knowledge the only commentary that has questioned Albert's putative benevolence.

[11] See 'Sameness or Difference?: Historicist Readings of *The Rime of Ancient Mariner*' (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999).