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"A Rationality Larger Than The Material Universe"

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“A RATIONALITY
LARGER THAN
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Irving Massey

*Coleridge and German Philosophy:
The Poet in the Land of Logic*
by Paul Hamilton. London:
Continuum, 2007. Pp. 192.
\$138.00 cloth.

Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason
by Richard Berkeley. New York:
Palgrave, 2007. Pp. 240. \$69.95
cloth.

Paul Hamilton's book would do better as the subject of a seminar than of a review. It assumes a fresh reading, plus total recall, of European philosophy at least from Kant to Kierkegaard, as well as of all the relevant literary texts. It does not stoop to summary or explanation. In a word, it is not a book for the intellectually timid. One had better care deeply about the issues that it raises, because it places great demands on a reader.

The abstract printed on the back cover of the book states a large part of Hamilton's argument more clearly than the text itself does: "Coleridge's infectious attachment to German (post-Kantian) philosophy was due to its symmetries with the structure of his Christian belief . . . Its comprehensiveness, however, rendered redundant further theological description, undermining the faith it had seemed to support." It may be because of Coleridge's devotion to German thought that his attachment to Christianity, although obviously central to his life and work in one sense, seems at times in another sense only ancillary: an outrigger running in tandem with his philosophy. Despite his commitment to German philosophy, though, when Coleridge rebels against its all-inclusive style, he does seem to be craving an alternative that offers something more than either quasi-religion or mere talk about religion. This alternative emerges (perhaps somewhat arbitrarily) as institutional theism, a real

and conceptual structure that Coleridge builds up gradually alongside his preoccupation with Continental philosophy. The growth of Coleridge's need for religion in this almost tangible sense is documented in the recent work by Donald M. Craig, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy*, which has a substantial amount of material on Coleridge.

Coleridge's rebellion against the sense of constriction created by the German philosophical frame may also be detected, according to Hamilton, in what he calls the "mystery poems," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel," all of which flirt with a major transgression. Perhaps in these poems divinity itself has assumed a transgressive form (56). Whether or not Coleridge later repudiated this element in the poems (52), their resolutely unfinished—or, one might say, unfinishable—quality clearly does keep them outside any hermetic philosophic system. (Whether they are much more compatible with orthodox Christianity than with German philosophy is another question.) In his conclusion, in fact, Hamilton follows Coleridge in arguing against any closed, terminable, self-sufficient poetry.

Hamilton's last chapter, "Spelling the World," is a tour de force. It opens with a section titled "The Mammaloshen," or "mother tongue." In Yiddish, the word "mammeloshen" refers to Yiddish itself. Here it serves to introduce an astonishing passage in Coleridge about a child's

emergence into consciousness, into language, and into an awareness of God, through its interaction with its mother. The child literally spells its world into being as it begins to identify its mother (121).

One of the respects in which Coleridge found systematic German philosophy inadequate was in its failure to acknowledge the centrality of personal affect. Once more, the infant-mother relationship is the touchstone, and the model, again, is language. The sounds of a word are liable to fall apart; the word can lose its meaning, even vanish, until we can "touch" it again; so a child in the dark will sometimes cry, "I am not here, touch me, mother, that I may be here!" (128). Human touch is a prerequisite for reality, meaning, and identity.

In the end, though, Hamilton does call on a different aspect of German philosophy to support another Coleridgean view—namely, that the aesthetic cannot be a final value. (If I understand him correctly, Hamilton imputes the opposite view to Wordsworth.) This is an important point, since one can often feel that Coleridge is an almost-failed poet, or a poet *malgré lui*; alternatively, that his poetry sits uneasily among his floods of philosophical or autobiographical prose: that one can't really tell where it fits in, or whether it fits at all. If, on the other hand, poetry is only one of the forms in which larger human expression finds its articulation, in which poetry is only a name for a certain

part of mental breathing, so to speak, then Coleridge's poetry and prose do fit together. "The Jena idea of poetry, as Walter Benjamin famously stated, was prose, a much wider practice than any literary establishment might encompass, and something with a place for each of us" (138).

This is a book to tease, or torment, one into thought.

Ambitious as Hamilton's book is, its ambition is more than matched by that of Richard Berkeley's. Hamilton's work is much livelier and more engaging; Berkeley's is more systematic, even pedantic, in pursuing the nuances of Coleridge's opinions about German philosophy. It is only gradually that one realizes what is at stake: not really Coleridge's opinions about anything, but the nature of truth itself. Berkeley confronts what one might choose to identify as the second most important problem in philosophy, after the nature of consciousness—namely, whether reason is a natural or (at least in some sense) a supernatural phenomenon.

Berkeley's title may sound grandiloquent and vague until one realizes that the author is in fact trying to deal with the essential nature of reason. Berkeley claims that for Coleridge, "[R]eason is not a human activity, rather it is something external to which human beings stand in relation. Thus Coleridge describes reason as 'the *super* individual of each man by which *he* is *man*'" (190). Similarly, Friedrich Jacobi says, "[I]f we understand by reason, the principle

of cognition in general, then it is the spirit, out of which the whole living nature of man is made . . . he is a form that it has taken on" (190–91). A collapse into pantheism, then, carried, for Coleridge, "not merely the threat of atheism and fatalism, it also carried the far more pervasive threat of the collapse of reason itself" (161). For Coleridge, "this brink [the brink of pantheism] signals not so much a descent into an unacceptable ontology as the implosion of the rational self, or of reason itself" (162).

Why should this be? It may be helpful to translate the problem into simpler contemporary terms. Let us assume that the conclusion that $2 + 2 = 4$ is the product of physical activity in our neurons. If this is true, then there is no reason why the same neurons might not yield a different result: say, $2 + 2 = 5$, or 25. There is no one (other than some other process similarly grounded in matter itself, some other electrochemical mechanism) to evaluate the outcome or to determine its validity. In other words, if reason is a purely physical process, there is no judge or referee to be found anywhere to appraise its results. Even by pointing out that it is finally our physiology that puts us in a position to reach a rational conclusion, or any conclusion at all, we would not be altering the case: our physical existence may be an essential condition for rationality, but it cannot dictate or ratify the conclusion itself. Without subscribing to the anthropic principle, one

could legitimately quote the cosmologist John Barrow here: there has to be “a rationality larger than the material universe” (cited by Jonathan Taylor, *Science and Omniscience in Nineteenth-Century Literature* [Brighton, Eng.: Sussex Academic Press, 2007], 51).

This is, apparently, the “crisis of reason” that Coleridge was struggling to avoid. If pantheism or Spinozism (or some other system that implied that reason was rooted in the physical processes of the universe) were to prevail, then all would go dark in the chamber of Coleridge’s mind.

Berkeley has no hesitation in attaching some passages in Coleridge’s most important poems directly to this anxiety. “And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram’d, / That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps, / Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?” (16–17). Even this wording, achieved after much struggle (17), leaves one in the same basic quandary: if the divine afflatus were not there, or only intermittently there (as in “Frost at Midnight”), one would immediately be engulfed by silence and blank solitude. All depends, then, on being assured of a reliable, even if sometimes only potential, divine presence. Worst of all, of course, would be the possibility that the materialist interpretation is right, and that the wind is not God’s breath at all, but just the physical movement

of the air. Then, without divinity, we would lose our individuality and our identity, and our very (pun intended) “raison d’être.” “[I]f the breeze is everything, then the harp’s tune can have no meaning” (210).

“[T]he speculations of *The Eolian Harp* lead inexorably to the contrasted horrors of the supernatural poetry: the existential blankness of *The Ancient Mariner* and the intrusive alien other of *Christabel* that reduces will to automatism” (209). In fact, one might say of *Christabel* that it not only denies the freedom of the will, but that it also illustrates the mechanism by which pantheism (taken here as a variety of materialism) subverts free will: Christabel, becoming snakelike, becomes part of nature, which, in turn, imposes its automatisms upon human behavior. She is threatened by, or indeed comes to exemplify, “the extinction of rational self-understanding” (209). “Throughout Coleridge’s poetry and philosophy the predicament of human subjectivity and rationality is the key issue, so that the Eolian harp has a hidden significance for his entire intellectual life” (209–10).

Berkeley arrives at these conclusions only after extraordinary efforts. He studies Coleridge’s marginalia on the German philosophers in exhaustive detail, undaunted by the confusions, self-contradictions, and misinterpretations, not to mention the frequently incoherent plagiarisms, that riddle Coleridge’s texts. It seems fair to say that between them Paul Hamilton and Richard

Berkeley have added new dimensions to the canonical work of Thomas McFarland on Coleridge.

Reading through a series of scholarly works in sequence, one finds certain distinctions and groupings forming naturally in one's mind. One major division in this taxonomy lies between books that are written *about* something and books that are written *for* something. Both of these books, but especially the Berkeley book, fall in the latter category. Though modest in its stated intention—namely, to elucidate a conflict in Coleridge's thinking—*Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason* forces one to confront a crucial problem in philosophy on its own terms.

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