
David P. Haney. *The Challenge of Coleridge: Ethics and Interpretation in Romanticism and Modern Philosophy*. University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2001. 309p.

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Contemporary critical theory, in literature as well as philosophy, comments on ethics and history from a variety of angles and perspectives, both as objects of that critical theory as well as tools for the practice of that theory. In recent decades, questions of literary interpretation have broadened to issues of textual and narrative treatment and, by implication, to issues of the treatment of ethnic and cultural expression. As such, these have become ethical discussions.

David Haney avails himself of the wedding of hermeneutics and ethics, and brings to bear twentieth-century categories and practices on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's work in Haney's recent book, *The Challenge of Coleridge*. At the same time, Haney further articulates and analyzes those very categories and practices in Coleridge's terms—of polarity, trinity, unity, poetic faith, imagination, and will, among others. Two of the major figures to represent 20th-century hermeneutics and ethics are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Levinas; minor figures include Paul Ricoeur, Wayne C. Booth, Martha Nussbaum, and Bernard Williams.

Haney distinguishes and discusses ethical issues of interpretation on several planes of literary critical analysis in general, and the study of Coleridge's work in particular:

- Explicit ethical judgments in the work of Coleridge, and the interrogation those judgments experience in light of 20th-century criticism (Chapters 6 and 7).
- The reader's/critic's engagement with and relationship to the text under consideration (Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 7).
- The poet's relationship to his own creations (Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 6).
- The role of literary texts in ethical evaluation (Chapter 2 and 5).

Haney demonstrates thoroughly that Coleridge's work rewards the hermeneutic/critical scrutiny; but whether or not Coleridge's work also poses an authentic challenge to contemporary hermeneutics and ethics is arguable. Haney proposes his intent anyway, in less than challenging words: "I use a reading of Coleridge in dialogue with twentieth-century criticism and philosophy to explore the question of how ethical problems of human interaction are related to the interpretive problems of how selves understand the world and each other" (xi). Hardly fightin' words.

If Haney's book rewards the reader, I think it will be in affirming, as he claims, the relation between hermeneutics and ethics in general, and between Coleridge

and contemporary critical theory in particular, but that relation is one of analogy rather than, for instance, reciprocal influence or challenge. Do we *interpret* situations and people and, as a result, interact with them in a characteristic way, *because* we have implicitly or explicitly adopted twentieth-century hermeneutic principles? And does reading Coleridge *challenge* this influence, whether by bringing to awareness what was only implicit—and thereby exposing those assumptions to scrutiny—or directly questioning what is explicitly employed in the activity of interpretation?

I think that in the end, and at the very least, Haney has thoroughly demonstrated in the particulars of Coleridge's work, that, like our interactions with other human beings, our interpretive engagements with texts make ethical claims on us: "The process by which the author is effaced when his or her utterance enters the technology of written reproduction is also the process by which the poetic word, freed from the bonds of authorial intention, is presented in its true otherness, such that we can engage it according to the ethical structure of a conversation with an other" (69). In both encounters is the possibility, the danger, and often the fact, of domination, repression, condescension; both the text and the person become invisible, get trampled on. Levinas' work on subjectivity and Gadamer's work in hermeneutics are effectively discussed in a way that makes a *prima facie* case for the relevance of Coleridge's own work, poetic and discursive.

Arguably, Haney effectively questions the twentieth-century theory in Coleridge's terms, and really puts elements and features of that theory into question. Especially in the later chapters, Haney guides the reader through extended discussions of Coleridge's work and thought as such and as a result, Coleridge becomes a substantive voice, a recognizable voice. Unfortunately, in much of the earlier chapters, it is contemporary critical theory, only occasionally foiled by scattered bits of Coleridge's terminology and concepts, that overwhelmingly predominates. Thus the conversation sometimes ignores Coleridge outright, and more often reduces his inclusion to just another source of terminology.

Haney recognizes the narrow, and highly technical, character of the book and the correlatively probable "small [audience] of professors and graduate students" (xi) for the book. As such, individual chapters read separately may be very useful in granting those students and professors a look at how 20th-century hermeneutic and ethical critical theory handles 18th- and 19th-century romantic texts, and in granting them a hermeneutical-critical introduction to Coleridge's work that, if anything, will encourage the reader to consult Coleridge himself on these matters. ❀