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*The Challenge of Coleridge: Ethics and Interpretation in Romanticism and Modern Philosophy,
Literature and Philosophy* by David P. Haney

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THE COMPLETION of the *Collected Coleridge* has ushered in a new age in Coleridge studies. With unfettered access to Coleridge's complete works in critical editions, now, more than ever before, we have the opportunity to make a fuller assessment of not only Coleridge's place in the nineteenth century, but his ongoing vitality as a resource in the history of ideas. Haney's *The Challenge of Coleridge* places Coleridge's works in a rich and often complex dialogue with a wide range of modern philosophers and, in this way, he attempts to shed light on crucial issues that preoccupy contemporary thinkers. Broadly conceived, Haney's work is an examination of the relationship between ethics and interpretation. In this sense, the study is a contribution to

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current debates on the association between human interaction and the interpretation of the self vis-à-vis the world. To this end, the author devotes considerable attention to the place of ethics in aesthetics and sheds light on the ethical implications of literary interpretation. More concretely, Haney's meticulous marshalling of Romantic criticism and contemporary theory is founded in a thoroughgoing attempt to move beyond the penchant in recent scholarly debates to either accept Coleridge's philosophical vision of religion as an antidote to contemporary theory or to reject his attempts at system by unmasking the hidden contradictions and implications that lie latent in his writings. Hans-Georg Gadamer's belief that historical texts have the ability as others to engage contemporary texts and readers in a conversation underlies the whole of Haney's *Challenge*: "My hope is to produce a kind of criticism that will see Coleridge's writing, not as embodying a set of concepts (hidden or apparent) to be affirmed or critiqued by modern theory, but as embodying a set of perspectives that can be put into a mutually illuminating and mutually challenging relationship with more recent perspectives" (8). Thus, Haney's work is not a study of Coleridge or of contemporary thought, but an attempt to allow both Romanticism and modern philosophy to interact and engage in a dialogue.

In seven demanding chapters, Haney draws his readers attention to a series of questions raised by Coleridge's criticism that, far more than serving as the site of historical retrieval, inevitably foment an engagement in the contemporary context between ethics and interpretation. The first chapter lays out the theoretic framework of the book. Haney explains Gadamer's principles of conversation and then provides a basis for the usefulness of Coleridge today. Haney asserts that Coleridge continues to be a valuable interlocutor for contemporary thought precisely because Coleridge's

horizon is no longer shared: “One reason there are so many common areas of concern between Coleridge and us is that our thought is so thoroughly conditioned by Romanticism; thus the same factors that make the conversation difficult also make it important” (22). Haney explains here, too, that the book is not an attempt to appraise Coleridge’s positions so much as to observe “what happens when these positions... are placed into contexts of both his own contradictory, ego-questioning experience and some modern reflections on related issues” (23).

Subsequent chapters take up this Gadamerian conversation by exploring themes such as ethics and art, knowledge and being, the will, aesthetic experience, and love. The second chapter is founded on a distinction between *techné* and *phronesis*, or technical and ethical discourse, and takes up *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a means of demonstrating the inherent tensions between the two. The relationship between the technical process of composition and the autonomy of the work as art finds explication in the third chapter through a discussion of knowledge and being. Coleridge’s hermeneutics thereby provides Haney with an opportunity to discuss the way

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that interpretation is directly connected to cultural interaction: “Knowledge is hermeneutically constituted in the ethical particularity of human dialogue” (79). In chapter four, the complex relationship between knowledge and interpretation as well as lived experience and literary structure are drawn out through a discussion of the “is” and the “ought”: in the case of the Mariner, the existence of the ethical act (“is”) remains inseparable from the moral that must be taught (“ought”). Haney’s attention turns to literary and dramatic criticism in the fifth chapter. One notable section—among the most intriguing in the book—describes the idea of “the sacrificial spectator” and relates Coleridge’s Christian theology of sacrifice and atonement to the ethical force of drama: for Coleridge, an “appropriate understanding of drama is both an active engagement of the will and a challenge *to* the will: by actively resisting bad drama’s efforts merely to reflect and gratify our desires, we exert this ‘sacrificial’ will in order to hold the isolated will of the ego (the will to self-gratification) in check” (158). In the final two chapters, Coleridgean self-sacrifice is placed in conversation with Levinas and Ricoeur, among others, towards a fuller discussion of otherness, the self, and the experience of love. Haney concludes that placing the insights of Ricoeur and Levinas in conversation with Coleridge demonstrates “how Coleridge both is and is not vulnerable to the charge of promoting an ethics of idealistic autonomy, the charge that has informed so much recent criticism under the banner of the ‘Romantic Ideology’” (256).

Among the most promising aspects of Haney’s *Challenge* is his devotion to Coleridge as an active voice that continues to engage contemporary scholarship. Though Haney suggests to his readers that he has attempted to take a middle road between historical retrieval and ideological critique, in fact, his rejection of the sufficiency of the latter leads to a trenchant judgment of those who find in Coleridge nothing more than contradictions that need to be ferreted out. Drawing on a wide range of Coleridge’s works including poetry, criticism, philosophy and theology, Haney

has provided us with an intriguing account of how Coleridge's writings engage and critique contemporary thought when placed in the modern context. Moreover, despite Haney's highly theoretical inclinations, the volume holds a number of aids for non-specialists who take on this work. Students will undoubtedly appreciate Haney's useful endnotes, a list of "Works Cited," and a well-organized index. Other readers will, no doubt, share Haney's interest in the ethical implications of popular culture; thus his discussion of the sacrificial spectator in chapter five draws on both television and film, such as *South Park*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Independence Day*, in order to discuss the implications of violence, morality, and reality in contemporary society.

Naturally, in light of Haney's dialogical aim, many readers of the *Coleridge Bulletin* will undoubtedly wish for further clarification of important Coleridgean themes. Despite Haney's prefatory caveat that he has done his best not to misrepresent Coleridge, "I am sure my own critical agenda has produced some

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inevitable distortion" (xii), discussions of vital concepts such as original sin and the Trinity lack the fullness and nuance one might otherwise expect. Indeed, even as one might praise Haney for his willingness to allow Coleridge to engage and challenge contemporary thought, one cannot help but wonder if this Gadamerian "fusion of horizons" has not at times distorted the vitality of difference. Haney's praiseworthy aim for conversation occasionally results in a failure to adequately nuance his claims and thereby leads to both historical and linguistic opacity. For example, Haney suggests that Coleridge "partakes of Schleiermacher's subjective orientation to interpretation" (86) and "was solidly Romantic and Schleiermachian" (132), although he elsewhere rightly acknowledges the underlying problem, namely, that "Schleiermacher's specifically hermeneutic thought, little of which was published by Schleiermacher himself, would probably have been unavailable to Coleridge" (88). More disquieting is Haney's persistent phraseology that links linguistic similarity with an equivalence in ideas: "Gadamer's position here resembles Coleridge's..." (136), "[l]ike Ricoeur, Coleridge gives ..." (183), "Coleridge shares Levinas's sense that..." (260), etc. Haney's desire to allow a conversation to take place seems to require this language, but Coleridge's own insight on the difficulties of such a project serves as a telling reminder worth recalling: "We must not, however, always ~~include~~ infer the sameness of the ~~System~~ Thought from the use of the same Words, where the Thought is fundamental.—In order to this the same conclusions must have been drawn from the Thought... Hence I conclude, that tho' Joannes Scotus Erigena & myself enunciate our first principles in the same or equivalent words, we must have attached a very different import to them" (CN, 5:5621). Haney certainly attempts to negotiate this difficult path, but it is most certainly a perilous route.

In sum, despite the difficulties of this project, Haney provides one account of how a conversation between Coleridge and modern philosophers might look. The work is thoroughly engaged with Coleridge's thought but I wish that Haney had not, after taking his readers so far in allowing Coleridge to both challenge and be challenged by contemporary theory, given up the game so easily by apologetically reminding his

readers in closing that he has not attempted to propose any genuine solutions: “I hope this book will not be taken as suggesting that Coleridge provides the answers to these modern problems” (261). Nonetheless, even for those who share neither Haney’s presuppositions nor his conclusions, *The Challenge of Coleridge* provides an insightful account of Coleridge’s thought that will beneficially be studied by advanced students and specialists alike.