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Coleridge and German Philosophy
by Paul Hamilton
(Continuum, 2007)

The ambitious title of this book represents a programme, rather than a *fait accompli*. Paul Hamilton has here extended theses he has broached before into a welcome plea for considering Coleridge's interests in German philosophy not as matter for reproach, or for detailed enumeration of 'plagiarisms', but for understanding him within the framework of the development of post-Kantian philosophy in which he himself was a player. This I argued in my Ph.D. thesis in 1964, and elsewhere, and it has at length come to pass, now that the detailed work of tracking many of Coleridge's specific references has been carried out not only in book-length studies but also in the footnotes to all the volumes of the *Collected Coleridge*, whose final volume, the hitherto unpublished late MS known as the *Opus Maximum*, was published in 2003, as well as in the five double volumes of the *Notebooks*: informed work on Coleridge's philosophic undertakings can now be carried out, not in a spirit of vindictive tracking of 'borrowings', nor in a defensive movement (still characteristic of much of the *Collected Coleridge*) claiming other, native roots for Coleridge's thought, but in full acknowledgement that the Kantian and post-Kantian movements were the most impressive, challenging and far-reaching philosophical thinking that Europe had seen since Descartes.

Coleridge, as I argued then, and often since, deserves credit for having perceived the intellectual value and excitement in the new thinking, rather than nationalistic knuckle-rapping for having recourse to 'foreign sources'. That this movement of thought stands behind all European Romanticism, giving it weight and substance, is now widely acknowledged. And the last thirty years have also seen full critical editions undertaken not only of the philosophers Schelling and Fichte, a great deal of intelligent and penetrating commentary by German philosophers and critics, and a number of new translations of their major work including the new Cambridge Kant, but also editions of the major Romantic critics such as Friedrich Schlegel. That Coleridge is now rightly regarded as the greatest of English critics owes much to his grounding in this philosophical movement.

Hamilton has earlier raised the matters given extended treatment in this current book, in his short article 'Coleridge's Stamina' in *Repossessing the Romantic Past*, ed. by Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton (CUP, 2006), 163-182, a title that perhaps obscured his theme (though he re-uses it in the present book) and in perhaps his best outline of his thesis, the compact article 'The Philosopher' in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (CUP, 2002), 170-186, including a useful bibliography of recent German work (some of it available in English). These already contain the heart of his new book; the important (if hardly new) claim to Coleridge's own place in the evolution of

German post-Kantian thought, not merely as an exemplar of it, but as explicitly recognized and acknowledged in the late work of Schelling, especially his *Philosophy of Mythology*. Schelling, calling Coleridge ‘a truly congenial man’, adopted Coleridge’s term ‘tautegory’ from the lecture ‘On the Prometheus of Aeschylus’, his Royal Institution lecture (1825), which in turn had drawn on G. F. Creuzer’s *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* and Schelling’s essay ‘Ueber die Gottheiten von Samothrake’; the Lecture was published only in 1834 (Hamilton 105-6). This work of Schelling dating from his later lecture series (which is referred to in the text merely as *Werke* II /I, 196n) was itself largely disregarded at the time; because of the domination of the philosophical scene by Hegel, and by the Hegelians of the right and the left, Schelling’s acknowledgement and praise of Coleridge brought neither of them any recognition then. Without explicating Coleridge’s or Schelling’s lectures, Hamilton interestingly suggests a connection of ‘tautegory’ with Coleridge’s attempt to use ‘symbol’ to contain opposites and the need for a term that would recognize an unchanging starting-point yet allow for an infinite amount of change. Behind this lies Hamilton’s earlier work (in *Coleridge’s Poetics*) on Coleridge’s term ‘desynonymization’: ‘synonymy is repetition without a sense of history... Desynonymy respects the difference necessary for a truth to reproduce itself...under different historical circumstances. And Coleridge’s desynonymized word for this is “tautegory”’ (84).

Hamilton’s enucleation of this central connection between Coleridge and Schelling also serves to sideline McFarland’s stress on ‘the pantheist tradition’, which despite the great merits of his book of that name (*Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*) has dogged Coleridge studies by suggesting that Coleridge had rejected Schelling on the grounds of his ‘pantheism’ by 1810; as Hamilton reminds his readers, Coleridge staved off criticism of his own borrowings by directing criticism at the sources to whom he owed the most.

It is a pity that Hamilton does not then continue into the subject of mythology as it presented itself at the time; he limits himself to denying that ‘mythology’ in late Schelling was the same as ‘mythology’ as understood by the higher critics of the Bible. Yet their concerns emerge from the same urgent point, the failure of ‘historical religion’ (as highlighted by Lessing), and the discussion needs to take in the vital thinking of Schleiermacher about hermeneutics and the nature of the community of believers in successive periods (a good example of ‘tautegory’).

Hamilton is not a philosopher, and he does not write as one; he writes as an English literature professor, and he writes for his colleagues. While this imports a looseness, vagueness and free-wheeling quality into his writing, a fondness for *aperçus*, it is probably just the right tone and style to appeal to his audience, allay their fears of ‘German philosophy’ (there is virtually no German in the book), and perhaps at last persuade them to consider Coleridge in a wider context. If we are freed from considering Coleridge’s actual debts, then we are also free to consider texts he did not read, debts he did not directly owe,

and others in the same line of descent (one of the most important of which is Kierkegaard, whose affinities with Coleridge have often as here been glanced at, but never fully explicated).

One of Hamilton's most persuasive points is that even though Coleridge did not read Hegel as far as we know (from about 80 annotated pages of Hegel's *Logic*), in fact *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* apart (1807) offers a framework for considering the whole period in which and through which both Hegel and Coleridge lived. Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a great and attractive book, and one that has affinities with Coleridge in its ambitious historical sweep and its literary references and exempla (some of which, like 'the Master-Slave relationship' have had many literary heirs). It has long been a matter for regret that there is no evidence that Coleridge read what appears to be a congenial book; though we cannot rule out the possibility that he knew of it. But granting the principle that we may consider Coleridge's thought and poetry in relation to any other writer of the period, German or otherwise, and whether or not Coleridge can be shown to have read him, what does Hamilton make of the recommended recourse to Hegel? There is no attempted explication of the *Phenomenology* in relation to Coleridge. One might expect him also to consider Hegel's *Early Theological Writings* (1798); or Hegel's aesthetic lectures (so important later for English criticism of tragedy, via A. C. Bradley, and reflecting back on Coleridge's engagement with A. W. Schlegel on Shakespeare); or Hegel on the state (with reference to Coleridge's *Church and State*)—but he does not. Nor does he undertake any comparison of Coleridge and Hegel.

An important point from his essay 'The Philosopher' (perhaps following from the topic he was assigned) is that Hamilton disentangles Coleridge's post-Kantian philosophy from Christianity, rather than melding them into or as often in the Coleridge literature attempting to celebrate his Christian affirmation. No easy affirmation of Christianity was possible at the culmination of the Enlightenment. It really doesn't add to our knowledge to say, as some recent writers on Coleridge do, simply that 'he was a Christian'; all the idealist philosophers were 'cradle Christians' who carried that mental and spiritual baggage with them. The question is, what effects did that fact have on their thinking in setting their goals, and exactly how did they run into conflict with the authorities through their re-thinking of doctrine (so that Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* was nearly banned despite his high reputation and Fichte was declared an atheist). Even Schleiermacher, now accounted a major Protestant theologian of the period, was seen as a dangerous thinker in his own time. Coleridge saw the urgency of modernizing the Anglican church if it was to survive and formulated his notion of the 'clerisy' (Kant's 'Klerisei') to meet the crisis, and when his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (written in 1824 to preface *Aids to Reflection*) was finally published (1840) after his death it brought a great deal of opprobrium down upon him.

On the side of philosophy of science there is nothing of the work that has

been done on the relation of Steffens to Coleridge's *Theory of Life* (Steffens's name doesn't appear in the index) nor any of the *Naturphilosophie* including Schelling's that played an important role down to Darwin. In short, in its welcome call for consideration of new vistas of German philosophy beyond what Coleridge may have known this book ignores many avenues that have already begun to be explored and are capable of more illuminating treatment.

Finally, Hamilton has a blind spot to Kant and in particular to the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant's major statement on aesthetics, which has always been rightly recognized by commentators on the philosophy of the period and on Romanticism as the central document justifying and raising the value of the work of art, which alone could give a kind of existence to the notions of God, the soul, and freedom, discredited as unprovable by the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Hamilton explicitly reduces the significance of this text and Coleridge's engagement with its arguments and its effects. Hamilton by 'post-Kantian' does not mean Kant (on whom Coleridge rightly spent so much mental energy as the greatest philosopher since Plato) but literally 'after—later than—Kant', and disregarding the elementary fact that none of those who followed Kant, whether Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher, or Schopenhauer—or Coleridge—could have undertaken their thinking without him.

In short, the work of placing Coleridge within and in relation to German philosophy has not been carried out within the pages of this book. But at least Hamilton has issued a call for it, given one important central link through the 'philosophy of mythology', and suggested other attractive avenues to pursue, encouraging his readers to do likewise. Our book *The Reception of S. T. Coleridge in Europe* (Continuum 2007) shows that other idealist movements in Europe did not fail to recognize Coleridge as belonging to their number. We may be sure that there will be many a rich and unforeseen harvest from re-opening the broad question of Coleridge's place in 'German' philosophy.