James Engell

Coleridge and German Idealism: First Postulates, Final Causes

first published in
The Coleridge Connection
Essays for Thomas McFarland
edited by Richard Gravil & Molly Lefebure (Macmillan 1990)

Digitized by Humanities-Ebooks 2007
from
The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland

edited by Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure

Volume Contents

Table of Abbreviations

1. Richard Gravil, Introduction and Orientation

Part One: The Sometime Jacobin?

2. Ian Wylie, Coleridge and the Lunaticks
3 Nicola Trott, The Coleridge Circle and the ‘Answer to Godwin’
4 Nicholas Roe, Coleridge and John Thelwall: the Road to Nether Stowey

Part Two: Friend and Ventriloquist

5 Molly Lefebure, Humphry Davy: Philosophic Alchemist
6 Grevel Lindop, Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey
7 Tim Fulford, Coleridge and J. H. Green: The Anatomy of Beauty

Part Three: The German Connection

8 James Engell, Coleridge and German Idealism: First Postulates, Final Causes
9 Frederick Burwick, Coleridge and Schelling on Mimesis
10 E. S. Shaffer, The Hermeneutic Community: Coleridge and Schleiermacher

Part Four: The American Connection

11 Anthony John Harding, Coleridge and Transcendentalism
12 Jonathan Bate, Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid

Part Five: Sage and Evangelist

13 H. W. Piper, Coleridge and the Unitarian Consensus
14 Robert Barth SJ, Coleridge and the Church of England
15 John Beer, Transatlantic and Scottish Connections: Uncollected Records

Select Bibliography: Revised and Updated

Search Terms

Coleridge and German Idealism: First Postulates, Final Causes

JAMES ENGELL

In my beginning is my end. ... In my end is my beginning.
—Eliot, East Coker, from the motto of Mary, Queen of Scots

I

More than any other writer, Coleridge introduced the English-speaking world to the Kantian and post-Kantian era of modern philosophy. In his related struggle to accommodate the transcendental or ‘critical’ philosophy to Christian belief, he formulated questions essential to the last century and a half of philosophy and Protestant theology. Engaging the German idealist tradition, Coleridge performs an implied critique of it. His acquaintance with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), as well as with Spinoza (1632–77), Leibniz (1646–1716), and Jacobi (1743–1819), helps him to develop insights in criticism, semiotics, psychology, metaphysics and religion. (True metaphysics are nothing else but true divinity’, he asserts in the Biographia [ii, 291].) However, his German connection leaves us neither a systematic overview of these or other German thinkers – no extended study or treatise – nor a closely defined Coleridgean system itself. His own adumbrations, rarely fleshed out in full and punctuated by brilliant but fragmentary comments on German thought, have tempted commentators to reconstruct an ‘Esstecean Methodology’ (his own phrase, from ‘S.T.C.’). But others have disparaged a lack of systematic originality, implying that Coleridge is a philosophical parasite who capitalised on a language barrier.

Carlyle, with brutal condensation in his Life of John Sterling (1851), depicts the German connection as it appeared to him in 1824–5. Coleridge, then fifty-three, was completing Aids to Reflection:

Coleridge sat on the brow of Highgate Hill … looking down on London and its