

James A. Sey

Review article: *Verbal imagination: Coleridge and the language of modern criticism*. (A.C. Goodson. 1988. Oxford University Press. Hardback, 236pp.)

In the late 1980's, literary studies have never seemed more eclectic and multiform. The literary academy in South Africa is trying to forge its own post-colonial identity through an agonistic struggle with the broad Eurocentrism of poststructuralist theories. The educational and ideological implications of such a struggle are of the first importance for the ability of the academy to articulate other political struggles in our country.

It seems, therefore, and I say this with my own reading bias as far as possible in mind, anomalous to encounter a new American book of criticism which is an institutionally conservative revisionist account of a relatively neglected but seminally important Romantic poet-critic. My description here is only partly pejorative. Romantic poetry, especially, has been the object of much critical attention in the decades since structuralism ushered in a new literary dispensation. Particularly in the American academy theorists such as Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom and Paul de Man, all influential figures, have brought their deconstructive reading strategies to bear on Romantic texts. More peripherally (in every sense), Jacques Derrida has done the same. This is, of course, no accident. Romantic poetry displays unashamedly and without repression (indeed, with a characteristic narcissism) its desire for the transcendental Logos. The aporia implied by this desire is thus made explicit, since, in both senses, this is what the poetry is *about*. Critical attention, however, has focussed on Wordsworth and Shelley as representatives of the two generations of English High Romanticism.

Any book dealing with the poetry and criticism of Coleridge has to deal with his relationship with Wordsworth, but Goodson is more concerned here to trace the philosophical and theoretical contribution Coleridge has made to a particular strand of English literary criticism – what Goodson calls “Cambridge English”.

The book opens with an investigation into Coleridge's connection to “the formation of modern criticism” (p.xi). Goodson wastes no time in explicitly stating his own critical assumptions; he is concerned to “bring his (Coleridge's) way of reading to bear on current mediations of his position: on Cambridge English and its institutional inheritors” (p.xi).

In the first part of the book these inheritors are very deliberately chosen: I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, William Empson and Raymond Williams. Those familiar with the canons of English literature and criticism will be aware of the affiliations of the first three figures named here. Williams's differences with the others, specifically politically orientated in his criticism, are deftly

suppressed by Goodson in his attempt to trace Coleridge's continued influence on literary studies. This move on Goodson's part is characteristic of his investigations in the book as a whole.

Goodson's overview of Coleridge's influence on these theorists is presented first, as he states in the introduction, so that readers can "think through some of the large issues" before moving on to examine in the second half of the book the specifically textual orientation between Coleridge's own poetry and his theories of language.

The book begins with a brief discussion of Coleridge's theory of language, making the important but curiously unsupported point that "the transcendental process of signification at work in his idea of language . . . is expressed in various ways" (p.7). Goodson accepts this point without investigating it, which leads to certain other assumptions in his subsequent discussion of the Cambridge English critics in his "study in context and transmission". The context, apparently, is how Coleridge has been transmitted by certain institutionally powerful and ideologically dominant critics (Richards, Leavis, Empson) through the course of twentieth century English studies. Williams is domesticated to this in order to add "objective" force to Goodson's claims for Coleridge's continued institutional importance.

The discussion of the critics begins chronologically with Richards, focusing most importantly on his concept of the "science" of semasiology, the object of which was the "semantic function of language" (p.9). Richards's main contribution, in which, Goodson tells us, he was hugely influenced by Coleridge's theory of "living Words", is that the language of poetry is anathematically opposed to the language of science. This line of thinking is taken up in different ways by Leavis, Empson and, in passing, by the American New Critics (Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom are the examples used). Goodson criticizes Richards for the latter's insistence that the two linguistic functions were totally separate. In Goodson's words: "His (Richards's) apology for poetry presumes that we are committed by circumstances to immanent reference" (p.12). Goodson attempts to show that Coleridge himself realized that poetic language had to retain a referential function. A point Goodson makes strongly here, and that he frequently repeats in other contexts, is Richards's inadequate use of source material when dealing with Coleridge. (His own knowledge of Coleridge's writings is extensive and widely drawn upon, and he seems intent on reminding his readers of the fact.)

From this discussion and criticism of Richards he goes on to examine the connections Coleridge and the idea of semasiology have with the influential figure of F.R. Leavis. Leavis is characterized by Goodson as first following Richard's lead in defending poetic language against the incursions of science, particularly in his defence in *Scrutiny* of the contemporary modernist writers. He moves away from Richards's position over the issue of the latter's book *Coleridge on Imagination*, which attempted to situate Coleridge's theories of

poetic language as human product and *idea*, rather than image or simple linguistic sign, within the larger programme of Richards's perceived attack on poetic language by that of reference. Leavis changes his original support of Richards to go on to criticize him from the point of view of a notion of language which Terry Eagleton¹ describes as "a naive mimeticism: the theory was that words are somehow healthiest when they approach the condition of things, and thus cease to be words at all" (p.31). Mention is made of Leavis's characteristic "sense of value in tradition" (p.30), an ideological formation which particularly colonial cultures colonized by England have reacted against, as Eagleton points out (1987). Interestingly, Goodson sees Leavis's connection with Coleridge as inhering in their shared sense of this tradition, a spuriously historicized observation: "With Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth at its cardinal points, Coleridge's version of high poetic tradition is clearly the prototype of Leavis's own" (p.34).

Goodson goes on here to a discussion of how Richards's and Leavis's ideas on language were exported to America to become a formative influence (culturally and critically) on American New Criticism, particularly concentrating on Richards's discussion of metaphor: "Richards's positions pointed to metaphor as the touchstone of poetic value. One step farther and the meaning of the poem is the structure of its imagery. This is of course the new critical step" (p.41). This leads to a discussion of the reaction of William Empson to, particularly, Ricardian notions of semasiology. Here the issue of "transmission" turns on Empson's "deconstructive" opposition to the father figure of Richards. This "deconstruction" turns on Empson's notion of "ambiguity", but is confusedly expressed: "In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he was deconstructing semasiology *avant la lettre* while turning meaning into a sphere of conflict" (p.46). This makes the two terms seem exclusive, not the case in a deconstructive reading. Empson's connections to Coleridge's theories are emphasized, particularly in their shared conviction that "words were signs, participating actively in what they represented" (p.54). The next focus of attention in this line of Coleridge's Cambridge inheritors is the Marxist critic Raymond Williams, but here Goodson stretches the case. He emphasizes Williams's connections with Leavis in their desire to create an historical and traditional English, but plays down the fact that for Williams this is a radical critique of dominant notions of an "English" culture. The connection with Coleridge hinges, again, on Ricardian semasiology. Goodson's incisive observation is: "Semasiology remains for him (Williams) what it was, in an incipient form, for Coleridge: a rhetorical art whose claim on historical validity is not scientific but discursive" (p.69). Well and good, but Goodson's own position emerges more clearly in the introduction. Speaking about Williams as Marxist and Coleridge as a "born-again Tory", he says "(t)he fact that the politics do not conform says something important about the politics

1. Eagleton, T. 1987. *The End of English*. *Textual Practice*, 1(1).

– and about those who would insist too strenuously on them” (p.XV). This is nothing less than conservative and high-handed ideological suppression.

The second and third parts of the book focus on Coleridge’s poetry and how it expresses “the master’s” ideas on language or fails to do so. It is here that Coleridge’s interaction with Wordsworth is examined, in order to show how Coleridge’s idea of language, heavily influenced by his relationship with and response to Hartley, Tooke, Locke and the German idealists, is developed in reaction to the ideas in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge’s idea of “living words” frees poetic language from referentiality (ideas opposed to names), but is put at the service of the transcendental, “the material realization of the Logos” (p.89). Goodson’s discussion of Coleridge’s ideas on language betrays his own sense of critical “tradition”.

Those critics who read Wordsworth and the Romantics as “real poets of nature” and who do not radically question the transcendental assumptions of Romantic thought, are the ones Goodson draws on, such as M.H. Abrams and Matthew Arnold. Commendable here, however, is his extensive and incisive use of a neglected source, Coleridge’s marginalia and notebooks, to flesh out to good effect Coleridge’s idea that linguistic “symbols give outness to thoughts”.

Goodson then moves to a specific examination of Coleridge’s poetry in an attempt to illustrate the workings of this theory. The discussion is sophisticated and engaging, beginning with “Frost at Midnight”, moving through the conversation poems to an interesting discussion of “Ancient Mariner”. The latter compares Coleridge’s approach with the nearly contemporary “Novum Organum”, a heavily pictorial poem by Erasmus Darwin, with fruitful results for the preceding theoretical examination.

Goodson concludes with an overview of the critical tradition he has examined in the light of the differing responses to Coleridge.

I have already touched on some of the problems inherent in Goodson’s revisionist account. His use of sources and representation of a critical identity (however qualified) in the Cambridge English critics he discusses is selective and ideologically determined, a possibility which Goodson attempts to efface in his book. This is why the changes in critical currency of the last twenty years are ignored almost wholly, or derided in a very reductionist manner when they are addressed. A salutary instance of this high-handed suppression of oppositional critical models is in Goodson’s comments on Jerome McGann’s new historicist account of “Ancient Mariner”:

If it is all a matter of where one stands the instance of the past hardly matters of course, and readers enjoy a perfect freedom to interpret as they please . . . Freedom of this vacuous kind (is) akin to the familiar anomie of deconstruction. (p.182)

The critical position thus negatively evinced is one which assumes authority

over the past, as the instance of Raymond Williams shows. In his elision of certain historical connectives and concomitant representation of a direct line of influence from Coleridge through Cambridge English, Goodson portrays an historical and ideological bias which represents itself as “right”, “natural” and authoritative. Eagleton’s comments in his article *The End of English* (1987) are illuminating for South African literary critics, because our post-colonial academy still falls under the thrall of this type of ideological hegemony, as Stephen Watson’s position in recent debate shows. Eagleton points out:

It is no accident that “English”, as moral discipline and spiritual balm, developed apace in post-war Cambridge, as a whole alternative identity for an exhausted imperial nation in accelerated decline. (p.2)

It is important to perceive that an American academic writing a book of criticism on a canon of literature which is still being prescribed and is published by a major academic (British) publisher should indicate that, as Eagleton says, “that (dominant) ideology . . . remains powerfully entrenched in the academic institutions”.

As South African academics working with just such a canon and within a post-colonial literary and cultural framework, it is vital that we investigate ways of questioning and changing the dominant notions of literature and criticism which Goodson’s book ultimately maintains. Only then can we begin to shape a new cultural identity.

VISTA University
Soweto