
UNIT 3 COLERIDGE : *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall take up Coleridge's major critical work *Biographia Literaria* with special attention to his theory of Imagination and his view of poetry. In doing so, we shall also touch upon the influence of German thinkers on his thought.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Biographia Literaria was begun by its author as a literary autobiography but ended up in discussions about Kant, and Schelling and Coleridge's perceptive criticism of Wordsworth's poetry and a comprehensive statement on creative imagination which constitutes his most signal contribution to literary criticism and theory. As was his wont, Coleridge has let his awe-inspiringly powerful mind loose on aesthetics, its philosophical foundations and its practical application in an almost desultory manner. The result is a mine of inexhaustible potential called *Biographia Literaria* to which critics of all shades of opinion have turned for help and inspiration and very seldom has any one of them been disappointed. Arthur Symons justly described the work as ['the greatest book of English criticism']. Coleridge has sometimes been accused of borrowing from the Germans, particularly from Kant, Schelling and the Schlegels, but most of his ideas were originally arrived at and, in my case, the system into which these ideas were fitted was the creation of his own great mind.

Coleridge's whole aesthetic – his definition of poetry, his idea of the poet, and his poetical criticism – revolve around his theory of creative imagination. From this point of view chapters XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria* are most significant.

The statement of the theory of imagination in *Biographia Literaria* is preceded by a prolix and, at times, abstruse philosophical discourse in the form of certain theses or propositions whose crux is Coleridge's attempt to define Nature and Self. Nature – the sum of all that is objective – is passive and unconscious while Self or Intelligence – the sum of all that is subjective – is vital and conscious. All knowledge is the product of the coalescence of the subject and the object. This coalescence leads to the act of creation, I AM. It is in this state of self-consciousness that ['object and subject, being and knowledge, are identical'] and the reality of ['the one life in us and abroad'] is experienced and affirmed and chaos is converted into a cosmos. What happens is that the Self or Spirit views itself in all objects which as objects are dead and finite. Coleridge's theory of creative imagination is essentially grounded in this perception. Hence Coleridge's view of the imagination approximates to the views of

Schelling and Kant. Like Coleridge they recognise the interdependence of subject and object as complementary aspects of a single reality. Also they all agree about the self conceived as a totality: thought and feeling in their original identity and not as an abstraction.

3.2 FANCY AND IMAGINATION

Coleridge builds his theory on the basic distinction between Fancy and Imagination – terms which were used before him more-or-less indistinguishably to express the same import. He first refers to this significant distinction in Chapter IV of *Biographia Literaria*. The occasion is his consideration of the excellence of Wordsworth's mind as reflected in his poetry:

Repeated meditations led me first to suspect (and a more intimate analysis of human faculties, their appropriate marks, functions and effects matured my conjecture into full conviction) that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or, at furthest, the lower and higher degree of one and the same power.

Coleridge ultimately uses the term 'Fancy' for the eighteenth century view of imagination which was essentially mechanical and determined by the law of association. Imagination, on this view, does not modify, much less does it transform the materials that it deals with but merely reproduces them. In Kantian terms we should call it the reproductive imagination. 'Fancy', says Coleridge, 'has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definitives. ...Fancy must receive all its materials ready-made from the law of association.' Our brief discussion of the theory of association in the context of the eighteenth century view of imagination above would make it clear that although Coleridge does assign a minor role to Fancy in the production of poetry, it is with him essentially a pejorative term, because as Shawcross explains, the distinction between imagination as universally active in consciousness and the same faculty in a heightened power as creative in a poetic sense.

In contrast to Fancy, Imagination is essentially creative. Coleridge subdivides it into the Primary and the Secondary Imagination:

The Primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

The Primary Imagination is the elemental power of basic human perception which enables us to identify, to discriminate, to synthesize and thus to produce order out of disorder. In this it is analogous to the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The Secondary or artistic Imagination co-exists with the conscious will and is different in degree and mode of operation from the Primary Imagination. First it is essentially vital even as all objects as objects are fixed and dead. That is to say, it is active and projective in nature and has a life-bestowing capacity which informs the world of objective phenomena with attributes which make it responsive and hospitable to man. Secondly, it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify. In other words, the creative imagination, through a process of dissolution, diffusion and dissipation creates a chaos and then sets out to create a universe from it. It is a coadunating and esemplastic power which reconciles opposites, unifies disparate elements and synthesises dialectically opposed forces. It idealises and reshapes the

data of experience to create a new reality out of them and this reality has the prime attribute of organic unity in it.

3.3 COLERIDGE'S VIEW OF POETRY AND 'THE POET'

Coleridge's definition of poetry and the poet naturally arises from his views on imagination. He begins with a distinction between 'poetry' and 'poem'. Poetry is a term of wider connotation which he uses to cover most of the forms of imaginative literature and other fine arts whose immediate purpose is to impart pleasure through the medium of beauty. In his essay entitled 'On the Principles of Genial Criticism', which forms of part of *Biographia Literaria*, he writes:

All the fine arts are different species of poetry... They admit, therefore, of a natural division into poetry of language (poetry in the emphatic sense, because less subject to the accidents and limitation of time and space); poetry of the ear, or music; and poetry of the eye, which is again divided into plastic poetry of the eye, which is again divided into plastic poetry or statuary and a graphic poetry, or painting. The common essence of all consists in the excitement of emotion for the immediate purpose of pleasure through the medium of beauty; herein contradistinguishing poetry from science, the immediate object and primary purpose of which is truth and possible utility.

In the poetry of language he would include, to begin with, even unrhymed imaginative writing. 'The writing of Plato and Bishop Taylor, furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre... The first chapter of Isaiah (indeed a very large portion of the whole book) is poetry in the most emphatic sense.' How can we distinguish a poem proper from this poetry which too has language as its medium like the writings of Plato and the Book of Isaiah. Coleridge says that the poem proper combines the same elements, as are found in imaginative prose compositions, in a different manner because it aims at a different object. Sometimes the object may be merely to facilitate recollection as in 'Thirty days hath September'. Sometimes the purpose may be even communication of truth and such communication may give us pleasure but this pleasure is not the immediate end, but is indirectly obtained while pleasure is the immediate end of poetry.

But pleasure may be the immediate end of a work not metrically composed. Would then the superaddition of rhyme entitle these works to the name of poems? The answer is that nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise. If metre is superadded all other parts should be made consonant with it. A poem is thus 'that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component'. Such a poem Coleridge calls a legitimate poem, 'the parts of which mutually support and explain each other.' This organicism originates from a corresponding organic process whose source is the poet:

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their worth or dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.

Here it must be stressed that pleasure and truth which Coleridge seems to separate are given both by poetry and science. Coleridge's separation of the two seems arbitrary and can be explained both by the fact that Coleridge, like nineteenth century thinkers in general was not able to shed the dichotomies of the current philosophy.

3.4 THE GERMAN ANGLE

A number of Coleridge's key terms and distinctions are derived from German thought and he does this in quite an eclectic way. This means that he draws from a variety of sources and mixes up the borrowings. He borrows from German thought the conception of the ideas that views all experience as not merely general notions, but as a form of mental image or impression. Another idea which is largely German in origin is that the symbol and the mind both participate in a common spiritual life and that the experience of the beautiful is a consequence of this participation. There are also borrowings from Shelling.

Kant is the biggest influence as the fundamental philosophical distinctions put forward by Coleridge are essentially Kantian. He accepts the Kantian distinction between Reason and Understanding and this distinction is the groundwork of his speculation on the nature of fancy and imagination. Seen from the Kantian angle, reason is concerned with ultimate values or with the perception of unity in multiplicity. Understanding operates on a limited sphere.

Kant's reproductive imagination is close to Coleridge's fancy. His productive imagination is close to Coleridge's primary imagination and Reason is close to Coleridge's secondary imagination because it mediates between rationality and understanding by means of symbols. And yet Coleridge's recourse to the 'Idea' still assumes something of a Platonic rather than a Kantian meaning.

Kant explained the imagination in terms of a comprehensive epistemology and Coleridge followed in Kant's footsteps by describing the imagination as operating under Reason. Where Coleridge went beyond Kant was in his belief that Reason could give us more than a knowledge of the world of perception. And yet the symbols of the imagination have to accommodate themselves to the concepts of the understanding.

3.5 A COMPARISON OF WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE AS CRITICS

Here we shall briefly compare the achievement of Wordsworth and Coleridge as critics. Wordsworth's criticism was limited in scope whereas the range of Coleridge as a critic was vast. In his own way he was a system builder and always thought within a larger philosophical context. He considered criticism to be an important part of literary study. I.A. Richards in his book *Coleridge on Imagination* tells us that Coleridge's criticism is of a kind that required us to consider our most fundamental conceptions. He paved the way for appreciation of great poetry as is evident in his praise for Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth is mostly subjective but Coleridge gives ample evidence of both subjectivity and objectivity.

In Wordsworth's whole approach to poetry and expression there is an element of primitivism whereas Coleridge's theory accommodates formal concerns to a considerable degree. His concern with shape, with form, with embodiment and his taking metre to be an integral part of the poetic process all point to this. In this respect he is a precursor of the New Critics.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

Coleridge is the first critic in English to talk at length about the relationship between knowledge and poetic creation. His distinction between Fancy and Imagination is a very useful one. Fancy is arbitrary and aggregating. It is an associative process. Imagination is a creative one. In perception the imagination imposes form and order upon the material of sensation and half creates what it perceives, so in art it works upon the raw material of experience. It gives this raw material a new form and shape. The secondary imagination is essentially vital. To Coleridge the best example of the operation of the imagination in his times was the poetry of Wordsworth.

Coleridge was influenced by German thought but had enough originality to emerge as a major thinker in his own right. His influence as a critic has been remarkable, much greater than that exercised by Wordsworth's criticism.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. What, according to Coleridge, is the difference between Fancy and Primary Imagination?
2. How is Primary Imagination different from Secondary Imagination?
3. What is Coleridge's ideal of a good poet? Who, among his contemporaries, fits the bill best?
4. Of the two – Coleridge and Wordsworth – who has had greater influence on modern criticism and in what respects?

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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