



Samuel Taylor Coleridge and His Theory of Poetry

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Coleridge was the son of a Devonshire parson, born and brought up in the city of London, educated at Christ's Hospital and Cambridge and prompted by these circumstances to develop a greater intimacy with books and philosophy.

younger of the two English poets called the older romantics with William Wordsworth is credited for laying the foundation of the Romantic Movement.

For Coleridge, knowledge was like a province to be traversed and conquered.

one of the most musical of the English poets and for his supreme flights of imagination and remarkable versification is honored as the high priest of romanticism.



Critical Remarks

- ❑ **Grierson and Smith** write “seeing nothing of nature but the sky and stars, and taking no such delight as Lamb took in the city crowds. He dreamed, and read and talked...”.
- ❑ **Swinburne** : “as a poet, his place is indisputable: it is high among the highest of all time...”
- ❑ **Hazlitt** says “he is the only person from whom I ever learnt anything. There is only one thing he could learn from me in return, but that he has not. He was the first poet, I ever knew. His genius at that time had angelic wings....”

LAKE POETS



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH



SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE



ROBERT SOUTHEY

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William Wordsworth, Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were known as the **Lake Poets or Lakers** because they lived in the Lake District of Cumberland, though initially Francis Jeffrey used the term derogatorily in The Edinburgh review in 1817



First phase (1794-1796)

- ❑ Period of experimental poetry
- ❑ While at Cambridge, Coleridge was so passionately stimulated by the fervor of the **French Revolution** that he abandoned his studies and enlisted himself in the **Light Dragoons**.
- ❑ On his return Coleridge came into the association of Robert Southey with whom he collaborated in the writing of a tragedy *The Fall of Robespierre* and also planned a Utopian commune called the **Pantisocracy** to be developed on the banks of the river Susquehanna in America, based on the ideal of equality as taught by William Godwin.
- ❑ Coleridge had begun publishing poems by 1794 and his early poems appeared in ***The Morning Chronicle***. ***Ode on the Departing Year*** and ***ode on France***, show him imbibing the spirit of the eighteenth century poets like Collins and Gray.
- ❑ Coleridge himself refers to these poems as “**Effusions**” and their ebullience (a word Coleridge himself used) was supplied by a mix of themes on love, politics and philosophy. However these poems, which Wordsworth described as “**poems of Sentiment and Reflection**”

Pantisocracy

- Meaning “equal or level government by/ for all”
- Utopian scheme devised for an egalitarian community
- A system of government where all rule equally

Second Phase

- A transformation came about in Coleridge, as man and poet after his meeting with Wordsworth in 1797 at Nether Stoway and led to one of the most intimate and enduring friendships between any two poets and a blossoming of Coleridge's genius.
- Coleridge became Wordsworth's greatest admirer and initially imbibed Wordsworth's love of nature, The Wordsworthian attitude is evident in the poems of the period like "**Frost at Midnight**" and "**Fears in Solitude**".
- Their friendship was a fruitful partnership symbolized with the publication of "**The Lyrical Ballads**" in 1798, which is understood to be a bench-mark in the revival of romantic poetry.

- Coleridge's association with the Wordsworths (William and his sister Dorothy) was significant as it brought out the best of his creativity and resulted in poems like "**The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**", "**Christabel**" and "**Kubla Khan**".
- The enchantment felt in the poems of the period could be a transfusion of Coleridge's personal emotions of the time
- There may have been another simultaneous effect on Coleridge's mind that produced a hallucinatory state- the opium which he had started taking regularly to alleviate his physical and mental illness and which gradually crippled his imaginative powers.
- Coleridge's marriage to Sarah Fricker was a failure but friendship with Wordsworth brought into Coleridge's life a deep passion in the person of Sara Hutchinson who was a friend of Wordsworth and with whom Coleridge fell in love.
- But the dilemma of being in an unhappy marriage deeply affected Coleridge and added to his increasing dependence on opium, severely assaulting his mental peace and incapacitating his creative faculties.

Third Phase



- In September 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge had travelled to Germany where Coleridge devoted himself to the study of philosophy at Hamburg and from here he gradually started turning away from poetry to metaphysics.
- In 1802 Coleridge published his ode on Dejection, which is a summing up of his personal trials, and passions, his new found recourse in philosophy and metaphysics and in a way his departure from his earlier held mutual views on the role of nature with Wordsworth.
- By this time Coleridge had become fully addicted to opium and his creative energies had waned.
- He exiled himself from family and familiar people and spent two years at the wartime Civil Service at Malta during which time he wrote his confessional Notebooks.

- On his return he formally separated himself from his wife and for six months he stayed with Wordsworth and **Sara Hutchinson**.
- Coleridge turned to delivering lectures to distinguished audiences and the **18 lectures On Poetry and the Principles of Taste** given at the **Royal Institute** express his developed attraction for this form.
- His lectures on Shakespeare published in 1907 in two volumes as **Shakespearean Criticism** are a hall-mark in developing the novel concept of “**organic**” form and “**epiphenomena**” which conveys the idea of a poet’s work as the particular emanations of a single creative mind. Coleridge also came close to realizing his dream of a literary synthesis of a literary, moral and political paper in **The Friend** which ran for **28 issues** and was published in book form in 1812.

Fourth Phase

- At this time Coleridge came to a great crisis in his life in a break with the Wordsworth and **Sara Hutchinson**.
- He wrote a few poems like ***The Visionary Hope***, ***The Suicide's Argument*** and ***Time, Real and Imaginary***, some political articles and re-worked his early play ***Osiris*** which was produced at Drury Lane as ***Remorse*** in 1813.
- Coleridge suffered a physical and mental breakdown in 1813 for which he had to be treated. In 1814 he wrote the commentaries added to ***The Rime of the Ancient Mariner***, and his best work on literary criticism the ***Biographia Literaria***, aptly described as "***a kaleidoscope of philosophy, criticism and autobiography and one of the key texts of English Romanticism***".
- Coleridge had come to the end of his poetic career but he now flourished as a philosopher, lecturer and critic, expounding mature views on society, religion and culture

- All his reading and absorbing of knowledge in his younger age came into actual force now and his two **Lay Sermons**, (1816-17), his lectures on the History of Philosophy, his General Course on Literature and **Aids to Reflection** are all systematic discourses on various branches of learning, concrete and scientific in approach.
- Coleridge is spoken of chiefly as a poet but as a matter of fact his literary acumen encompasses almost all established literary forms and he made valuable contributions to the field of criticism and philosophy.
- Through his works such as **Biographia Literaria**, Coleridge has anticipated a modern philosophical and psychological criticism of the arts.



COLERIDGE'S THEORY OF POETRY

- On 30 March 1815, Coleridge wrote to Byron of his intention to add to his poems “*A general Preface will be pre-fixed, on the principles of philosophic and genial [having to do with genius] criticism relatively to the Fine Arts in general; but especially to Poetry*”
- when Wordsworth’s 1815 **Poems** with its new Preface to **Lyrical Ballads** is printed, Coleridge asserts – “*altho’ Wordsworth’s Preface is half a child of my own Brain ... yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth ... I rather suspect that some where or other there is a radical Difference in our theoretical opinions respecting Poetry – / this I shall endeavor to go to the Bottom of*”
- Eventually in 1817 Coleridge publishes **Biographia Literaria**, an extended dialogue with – and a critique of – Wordsworth’s two Prefaces (1800 and 1815).

- **Biographia Literaria** is an autobiographical, philosophical, religious and critical text.
- **The first four** chapters present literary events of Coleridge's life from Christ's Hospital to 1798;
- **chapters 5–9** summarise his intellectual migration from various mechanistic and associative systems to rest on religious and transcendental principles
- **chapters 12 and 13** discuss fancy, primary and secondary imagination;
- **chapter 14** is a philosophic discussion of perceptions, imagination, and the aesthetic experience of fine arts, particularly poetry
- **In chapters 17-20 and 22**, Coleridge critiques Wordsworth's theoretical principles of poetry.
- Rejecting empiricism and materialism as adequate explanations of human psyche, Coleridge develops an argument on how the mind works, processes details, reflects, associates, and connects impressions and ideas derived from the senses.

- Poetry in ***Biographia Literaria*** emerges as a nexus of philosophy, life, religion, friendship, theory and practice of writing.
- Coleridge describes poetry in chapter fourteen as “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 distinct gratification from each component part”

Coleridge defines the poet as

“The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blend, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis*) reveals itself in the of reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, more than usual order....”

- For Coleridge, “what is Poetry?” fuses with “who is a Poet?” and finally “what is Art?”
- Imagination, as Coleridge defines in chapter seven, is “a superior degree of the faculty [of synthesis], joined to a superior voluntary control over it”.
- The mind not only gathers details (fancy), but also creates something new by the coming together of all images (imagination).
- Fancy is the passive power of the mind. Imagination is the active power – of forging new territories.
- The passive power enables the mind to pause, make sense, and sequentially, through a series of apprehensions, consolidate images into perceptions and meanings.
- Fancy works with “fixities and definites” untransformed individually or by the work as a whole; through “choice” or “memory”.

- The active power of Imagination transforms, rearranges the “fixities and definites” to create:

The IMAGINATION... dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association...

- While fancy observes and is a function of memory, imagination associates, and discovers connections between disparate images to create something new.
- This skilful arrangement of parts to create a harmonious whole is what Coleridge further classifies as Primary and Secondary imagination.
- The power of perception, an innate ability of man, is the primary imagination. Secondary imagination is a heightened degree of the conscious will which a poet possesses.
- A poet with the “**synthetic and magical power**” of secondary imagination becomes an agent of the unifying process. The formless mass of experience that fancy accumulates is dissolved, dissipated, diffused, and unified by the poet through secondary imagination.
- This act of creation by the poet “**with form, connections, and unity**” is an aesthetic experience.

- In chapter fourteen, Coleridge describes the reading experience as: “The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey”
- In chapter 18 he says that Metrical composition implies an ‘order’, one that in poetry is directed by “that prospectiveness of mind, that *surview*, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey”
- Coleridge stresses the organic integration of all resources of language in poetry, something that reconciles opposites into an organic whole.
- A poet, “an ideal perfection”, speaks in “delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part”; that ‘the parts...mutually support and explain each other’”

“Willing Suspension of Disbelief”

- It is an intentional avoidance of critical thinking or logic in examining something surreal, such as a work of speculative fiction, in order to believe it for the sake of enjoyment.
- Aristotle described it as one of the principles of theater; the audience ignores the unreality of fiction in order to experience catharsis.
- Alexander Pope, notably, felt the need to explain and justify his use of elemental spirits in **The Rape of the Lock**, one of the few English poems of the century that invoked the supernatural.
- The poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge sought to revive the use of fantastic elements in poetry and developed a concept to support how a modern, enlightened audience might
- Coleridge introduced the term suspension of disbelief in 1817 and suggested that if a writer could infuse a "**human interest and a semblance of truth**" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgement concerning the implausibility of the narrative.

- The term resulted from a philosophical experiment, which Coleridge conducted with William Wordsworth within the context of the creation and reading of poetry.
- It involved an attempt to explain the supernatural persons or characters so that these creatures of imagination constitute some semblance of truth.
- In Coleridge also referred to his concept as "**poetic faith**", citing the concept as a feeling analogous to the supernatural, which awakens the mind.

Coleridge recalled:

... It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us ...

According to David Chandler, Coleridge drew his notion from Marcus Tullius Cicero's *Historia Critica Philosophiae*, which cited the phrase "assensus suspensione" or "suspension of assent".

- ◉ The traditional concept of the suspension of disbelief as proposed by Coleridge is not about suspending disbelief in the reality of fictional characters or events but the suspension of disbelief in the supernatural.
- ◉ This can be demonstrated in the way the reader suspends his disbelief in ghosts rather than the non-fictionality of the ghosts in a story. According to the theory, suspension of disbelief is an essential ingredient for any kind of storytelling.
- ◉ refer to the willingness of the audience to overlook the limitations of a medium, so that these do not interfere with the acceptance of those premises.
- ◉ Suspension of disbelief often applies to fictional works of the action, comedy, fantasy, and horror genres.
- ◉ Suspension of disbelief is often an essential element for a magic act or a circus sideshow act.
- ◉ relationship to imaginative works of art. **J. R. R. Tolkien** challenges this concept in his essay "**On Fairy-Stories**", choosing instead the paradigm of secondary belief based on inner consistency of reality.

- To understand Coleridge's meaning we can refer to records of a lecture he delivered in 1818 on **The Tempest**, where he compared dream and play (or novel):

“in sleep we pass at once by a sudden collapse into this suspension of Will and the Comparative power: whereas in an interesting Play, real or represented, we are brought up to this point, as far as it is requisite or desirable, by the Art of the Poet and the Actors, and with the consent and positive Abidance of our own Will. We chuse[choose] to be deceived”

THANK YOU

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