

Samuel Taylor Coleridge - Biographia Literaria

The *Biographia Literaria* was one of Coleridge's main critical studies. In this work, he discussed the elements of writing and what writing should be to be considered genius. Although the work is not written from Coleridge's poetic mind, it is still written with the qualities and rhythm of the poetic. Not only does he discuss literature itself he discusses the many variables that influence and inspire writers. Through this discussion, he makes many value judgments, leaving his audience with a clear understand of his stance on certain issues. Some of the issues he tackles include politics, religion, social values, and human identity. His treatment of these issues tends to be conservative in its foundation, yet also blatant and original. He does not cater to one certain audience; rather he expresses his own thoughts from a personal viewpoint. Coleridge delivers the *Biographia Literaria* without a second thought of whether or not there will be any disagreement from his audience.

"Imagination" and "Fancy"

Rejecting the empiricist assumption that the mind was a *tabula rasa* on which external experiences and sense impressions were imprinted, stored, recalled, and combined through a process of association, Coleridge divided the "mind" into two distinct faculties.⁵⁷ He labelled these the "Imagination" and "Fancy." The **IMAGINATION** then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. 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 secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. 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 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, and 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.⁵⁸

"Fancy," in Coleridge's eyes was employed for tasks that were "passive" and "mechanical", the accumulation of fact and documentation of what is seen. "Always the ape," Fancy, Coleridge argued, was "too often the adulterator and counterfeiter of memory."⁵⁹ The Imagination on

the other hand was "vital" and transformative, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation." For Coleridge, it was the Imagination that was responsible for acts that were truly creative and inventive and, in turn, that identified true instances of fine or noble art.⁶⁰

The distinction b/w Fancy and the Imagination :

The distinction made by Coleridge between Fancy and the Imagination rested on the fact that Fancy was concerned with the mechanical operations of the mind, those which are responsible for the passive accumulation of data and the storage of such data in the memory. Imagination, on the other hand, described the "mysterious power," which extracted from such data, "hidden ideas and meaning." It also determined "the various operations of constructive and inventive genius."

Engell has demonstrated that Coleridge's division of the imagination into the "primary" and "secondary" draws a distinction between creative acts that are unconscious and those that are intentional and deliberate. "The Primary Imagination" was for Coleridge, the "necessary imagination" as it "automatically balances and fuses the innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the mind receives through the senses." It represents man's ability to learn from nature. The over arching property of the primary imagination was that it was common to all people. The Secondary imagination, on the other hand, represents a superior faculty which could only be associated with artistic genius. It was this aspect of the imagination, one which could break down what was perceived in order to recreate by an autonomous willful act of the mind that has no analog in the natural world—which Coleridge associated with art and poetry. A key and defining attribute of the secondary imagination was a free and deliberate will; "superior voluntary controul. . .co-existing with the conscious will." The secondary imagination, once activated by the will, "dissolves, dissipates in order to recreate." Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*,

significance of the Imagination

The significance of the Imagination for Coleridge was that it represented the sole faculty within man that was able to achieve the romantic ambition of reuniting the subject and the object; the world of the self and the world of nature. By establishing the creative act as mimicking the "organic principle" or "one"—a divine principle believed to underlie all reality—the romantic theorist sought to establish a harmonious relationship between the ideal world of the subject and the real world of the object. Baker has demonstrated that Coleridge was convinced that the Imagination acted as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the

infinite I AM," and that it not only reinforced the notion that perception was active and creative, it established the cosmos as an organic entity.

For Coleridge, the most important aspect of the imagination was that it was active to the highest degree. The creative act called the whole soul of man into activity. As Baker has argued: "the creative act, on the contrary, is a godlike-act-of-power and causing-to-be, imagination being the divine potency in man. The creative act by which the poet writes the poem is similar to the creative act by which God ordered the world out of chaos; if the poet's creative act is not a creation ex nihilo, it is a process of organic becoming through which the materials are transformed into something absolutely new, and also very likely, strange." James Volant Baker, *The Sacred River. Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination*

"Imagination" as "ESEMPLASTIC,"

Coleridge explained this property of the "Imagination" as "ESEMPLASTIC," to "shape into one" and to "convey a new sense." Coleridge in the tenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* described this ability of the imagination as "Esemplastic." Noting that *esemplastic* was a word he borrowed from the Greek "to shape," Coleridge explained that it referred to the imagination's ability to "shape into one, having to convey a new sense." He felt such a term was necessary as "it would aid the recollection of my meaning and prevent it being confounded with the usual import of the word imagination." *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1, p. 86

If you really want to use a pretentious-sounding term, try *esemplastic*. Derived from Greek words meaning "into" and "one" and "mold," and coined by Coleridge in 1817, the word means "having the function of molding into unity; unifying." The picture derived from the word is of someone, probably a poet, taking images and words and feelings from a number of realms of human endeavor and thought and bringing them all together into a poem s/he writes. This requires a huge effort of the imagination, which we might call the "esemplastic power of the poetic imagination." A decade after its first appearance a writer could remark, "Nor I trust will Coleridge's favorite word *esemplastic*..ever become current."

Not only did the subject subsume the object it can also be argued that Imagination subsumed the role of Fancy within the creative work. Thus while Coleridge argued that the poet relied on both Fancy and Imagination when inventing a poem, and that the poet should seek a balance of these two faculties, (Coleridge, *Biographia Literari*, vol 1, p. 194) the "active" and "transformative" powers of the Imagination negated the contribution of, and representation of Fancy. In Coleridge's system, the Imagination is ultimately the only faculty which contributed to the creative process.

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While Wordsworth's critical ideas obviously worked for his poetry, Coleridge differed in his take on the art. Coleridge did not agree that poetry is the language of the common man. He

thought that lowering diction and content simply made it so that the poet had a smaller vocabulary of both words and concepts to draw from. Coleridge focused mainly on imagination as the key to poetry. He divided imagination into two main components: primary and secondary imagination. In *Biographia Literaria*, one of his significant theoretical works, he writes:

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. (387)

It is the imagination involved in the poetry that produces a higher quality verse. The primary imagination is a spontaneous creation of new ideas, and they are expressed perfectly. The secondary imagination is mitigated by the conscious act of imagination; therefore, it is hindered by not only imperfect creation, but also by imperfect expression. To further subdivide the act of imagination, Coleridge introduces his concept of fancy. Fancy is the lowest form of imagination because it "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites" (387). With fancy there is no creation involved; it is simply a reconfiguration of existing ideas. Rather than composing a completely original concept or description, the fanciful poet simply reorders concepts, putting them in a new and, possibly, fresh relationship to each other. Coleridge also writes that poetry "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (391). Through juxtaposition ideas, concepts, and descriptions are made clear. The more imaginative the juxtaposition is, the more exciting the poem becomes.

As with Wordsworth, Coleridge also combines his theoretical ideas in his poetry. He abandons Wordsworth's notion of poetry for the common man, and uses lofty language, poetic diction, and subject matter that is specialized. While he still holds a reverence for Nature inherent to romantic literature, his poems are not exclusively based around the natural. He makes use of primary imagination in his work, because it is the kind of imagination he values most, and avoids secondary imagination or fancy as much as possible. "Kubla Kahn" illustrates his use of primary imagination:

In Xanadu did Kubla Kahn
A stately pleasure dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. (347)

The poem is the manifestation of a drug-induced vision. The lines have come to Coleridge unbidden, and represents the creation of a previously nonexistent setting. He creates these instances throughout the poem. Especially notable is the vision he describes in the last stanza, "A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision I once saw: / It was an Abyssinian maid, / And on her dulcimer she played" (348). Both of these segments create entirely new scenes in the reader's mind. Coleridge also uses highly imaginative images to create juxtaposition in the poem. He writes, "A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!" (348), and uses this image twice in the poem. The "reconciliation of opposites" manifests itself in lines such as these. The adjective "sunny" implies warmth, while "ice" is cold. Together they hint at a darker side to the superficially idyllic pleasure dome. The simple fact that it is Kubla Kahn's pleasure dome is a juxtaposition as well. The leader of the Mongols is not colloquially thought of as a kind or benevolent man. This discordance, too, hints at the underlying darkness of the poem, thereby exposing a truth that all is not perfect in neither the pleasure dome nor Coleridge's hallucination.

Coleridge and Wordsworth valued artful poetry. Although they had some different theoretical opinions, both of them succeeded at making poetry that is complex and dense enough to withstand two centuries of analysis, and modern critical practice has not yet fully distilled the

potential meaning to be found in their work. It is easy to see how their work places them firmly in the realm of the Romantics, but it is quite difficult to come up with a single form of modern criticism that can fully deal with these two poets. Mimetic forms of criticism, including contemporary Platonists and Aristotelians, could offer observations about how the poetry of Wordsworth seeks to imitate Nature and the effects of Nature on the individual. He works to reconstruct an experience for the reader. Likewise, these same critics could say that Coleridge's imitation of human beings in poems like "Christabel" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" teaches us something about human nature and behavior. Unfortunately, purely mimetic criticism would miss much of the rhetorical devices and aesthetic qualities embedded in the work. Pragmatic forms of criticism, which focus on the rhetorical purpose of the author, could offer insight as to how the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth seek to instruct the reader, and could also elucidate the rhetorical structure of their works. Both of the poets seek to reinforce the individual, the glory and value of Nature, and induce revelations in their readers. Also, as with all of the Romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth are constantly seeking the sublime. This period follows the rediscovery of Longinus' ideas about the sublime, which describe how rhetorical structure is used to gain the same feeling of transcendence as Nature promotes. The work of Coleridge and Wordsworth is also rhetorically constructed to express their critical theories, which a pragmatic reading of the text would pick up. The expressive forms of criticism could offer valuable insights into the poems of Coleridge and Wordsworth by focusing on the texts as products of the poets. Certainly forms of psychoanalytical criticism would have much to say about Wordsworth's constant overflow of emotion and Coleridge's chemically altered imagination. Objective critics like the New Critics and formalists could shed light on the synergy created by the interaction of the various parts of Coleridge and Wordsworth's poems. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge wrote that a poem must be a cohesive unit, with every part working together to build into a whole (390). Both poets pay close attention to form and diction in their work, and create poems that are independent units of thought. Especially the work of Wordsworth seems to precipitate Marxist criticism, which could provide insight about the elements of class in his poems, and could also discuss the connection between form and content in the poetry. Postmodern critics would especially enjoy looking at the fierce individuality of Coleridge and Wordsworth, who each create their own micronarrative of the world while rejecting the metanarratives of their time.

The complexity of Wordsworth and Coleridge's theoretical ideas leads to the complexity of their poetry. It is impossible to name one form of criticism that could sum them up entirely, because ultimately they are working with a large number of weighty concepts. This is why their poetry is still read and analyzed. Since Aristotle claimed in his *Poetics* that the complexity of a work is directly proportional to the greatness of the work, we have sought out literature that withstands multiple intense readings. Because we can look at the poems of Coleridge and Wordsworth in a large variety of ways, we are constantly finding new meaning, which gives the poetry a re-readability not found in lesser work. Re-readability is the hallmark of good literature and of the sublime. Coleridge and Wordsworth knew this, and they wrote toward that goal.

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