

Aspects of Coleridge's theory of imagination

In Coleridge's works there are surprisingly few references to his theory of the imagination. His famous remarks that climax Book XIII of Biographia Literaria are inadequate as an exposition of a theory of the imagination: he does not define imagination per se at all, but instead subdivides it into two categories, primary and secondary imagination. For a more concise account of imagination itself one must turn to a statement in "The Statesman's Manual", in which Coleridge describes imagination as "that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanent and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors."

This statement reveals first that imagination is not a "faculty" of the mind, but is instead a process of activity within the mind, in which diverse elements in the external world are harmonized into a "gestalt". In this process the universal truths are connected with the concrete images and percepts then formed, with the aid of reason, into ideas. Thus these ideas are formed when the concrete form and the associated universal truth are processed together. Coleridge defines an idea as an "educt of the imagination actuated by pure reason."²

This remark involves four major elements: the universal truths; the concrete forms of the natural world; the mind and senses of the individual; and the end product of the interaction of the first three elements, namely the symbols, or ideas, or art. Coleridge defined the symbol as the "conductor" of truth, which should be "characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal."³ This seems to say, rather clumsily, that the symbol reveals the universal truth and the particular expression of that truth at the one time. All of this points to the central creed of the great romantic poets in England, Germany and France, namely "the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious."⁴

Side-stepping the issue of "reason" temporarily, it is necessary to examine further the nature of the process of imagination. Coleridge called the imagination an esemplastic power, an adjective which he coined from the Greek words meaning "to shape into one."⁵ Thus imagination operates esemplastically, unifying normally separated elements in the universe of perception. This is clarified by other statements by Coleridge: "The imagination modifies images, and gives unity to variety; it sees all things in one."⁶ This basic principle is expressed forcefully in The Friend: "Every power in nature and in spirit must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: and all opposition is a tendency to re-union . . . The identity of thesis and antithesis is the substance of all being."⁷

This is almost exactly an expression of the theory of the triad, as in Schelling and Schlegel. The triad can be expressed in the equation :

thesis + antithesis $\longrightarrow$ synthesis

in which case this synthesis may correspond to the "idea" formed, or the "symbol" when the universal truth and a concrete form are related in the mind. By extension, art can be a manifestation of this synthesis, since art is "the middle quality between a thought and a thing, or . . . the union and reconciliation of that which is Nature with that which is exclusively human."⁸ This is a process in which the passive store of percepts or images in the mind ("*vis receptiva*") and the active, creative powers, and will react together, interceded by taste, to form the "synthesized" balance and harmony of the mind. Of this Coleridge says: "Taste is the intermediate faculty which connects the active with the passive powers of our nature, the intellect with the senses; and its appropriate function is to elevate the images of the latter, while it realizes the ideas of the former. We must therefore have learned what is peculiar to each, before we can understand that "third something", which is formed by a harmony of both."⁹ The original triad equation can now be varied to this equation :

vis receptiva + reason $\longrightarrow$ *tertium quid* (synthesis)

To reiterate, imagination per se is a psychological process involving the interaction of the passive *vis receptiva* and the active reason in order to reduce the varied forms of nature into a harmonious, unified whole, and thus reveal the universal truths. It thus acts between man and nature.

Important to this theory is the distinction between understanding and reason. As Coleridge saw it, understanding was related to the phenomenal world of sense perceptions and objects, while reason provided man with an insight into the universal and transcendent forms through which the concrete forms of nature were fulfilled. Reason and understanding are linked by imagination such that the ideal and the real are joined, to produce the synthesis.

It is thus impossible to conceive of the imagination (in Coleridge's theory) without seeing it as the active process which always acts to establish the relationship between man and Nature, by combining aspects of nature itself and aspects of man's percepts into a new, unified whole.

Basic to Coleridge's theory is the differentiation of imagination and fancy. The first reference to this distinction seems to have been made by Crabb Robinson in 1810: "He (Coleridge) made an elaborate distinction between fancy and imagination. . . . Fancy is the arbitrarily bringing together of things that lie remote, and forming them into a unity. The materials lie ready for the fancy, which acts by a sort of juxtaposition. On the other hand, the imagination under excitement generates and produces a form of its own."¹⁰ The point of this distinction is that whereas fancy produces a unity from diverse forms which is the same as the sum of the parts imagination produces a unity which is more than just the sum of the parts. While fancy combines the percepts, imagination transforms them. Hence

fancy is a lesser power than the creative imagination, since, by virtue of its ability to go beyond the mere objects to the universal truths, imagination is the vital power of creativity, not just the power of reorganizing the percepts.

Having thus located imagination per se, and having noted some of its relationships, we can now analyse the two categories of imagination, the primary and the secondary.

Coleridge "defines" the primary imagination thus: "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."¹¹ In other words all humans have the primary imagination as a necessary prerequisite to perception. But Coleridge does not confine the primary imagination to the phenomenal world of perception: it also has the power to go "straight to the inner principle of things",¹² namely the "infinite I AM", or God. Hence in this category the phenomenon and the noumenon (to use Kant's terminology) are available to all men through the power of the primary imagination in perception.

The secondary imagination Coleridge considers "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 its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates, in order to recreate; 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."¹³ The secondary imagination implied, then, the specifically artistic application of imagination, and differs from the primary imagination in almost the same way as imagination per se differs from fancy. While the key words associated with primary imagination are "perception" and "repetition", the key words associated with the secondary imagination are "recreate", "process", "idealize", "unify", and "vital". In these two remarks Coleridge seems to be saying, then, that the primary imagination is concerned with normal sense perception common to all, while the secondary imagination is concerned with artistic creation based on normal sense perception.

Coleridge's theory of the imagination in essence consists of his initial "definition" of imagination in "The Statesman's Manual", and the "definitions" of the two categories, primary and secondary, in Book XIII of Biographia Literaria, as well as a few scattered comments through his works. Yet although the actual expression of his theory is minimal, the "side-issues" (reason-understanding, imagination-fancy, and so on) are more considerable. Unfortunately the projected essay on imagination and the supernatural, promised in the Biographia Literaria, was never written, so this probably explains the sparseness of his theory - together with the fact that his prime concern was with the writing of poems, not theory.

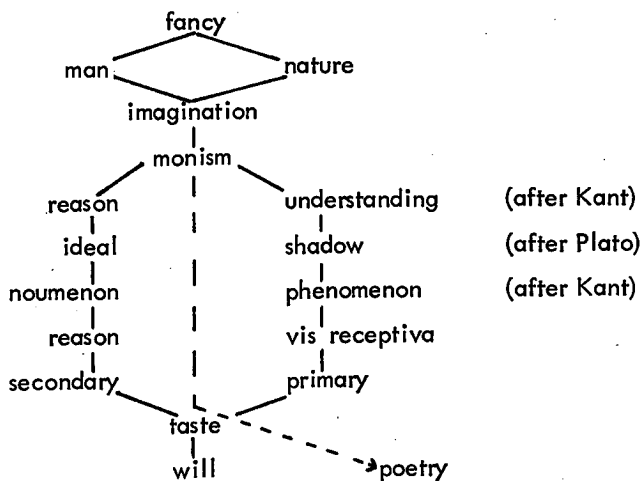
The value of Coleridge's theory of the imagination is expressed by Lowes thus: "For the Road to Xanadu, as we have traced it, is the road of the human spirit, and the imagination voyaging through chaos and reducing

it to clarity and order is the symbol of all the quests which lend glory to our dust. And the goal of the shaping spirit which hovers in the poet's brain is the clarity and order of pure beauty. Nothing is alien to its transforming touch."¹⁴

Imagination therefore duplicates nature by presenting it as conception in which the insights of reason are united with the impressions and judgments of sense and understanding. It then reconciles this conception "with that which is exclusively human." Art is the result of this reconciliation, and as such is the mediator between, and reconciler of, nature and man. This theory is extremely important in the development of literary theory, and today is often unconsciously used as a basis for the expression of many ideas concerned with the identity of the poet, or his role as poet in society. It is thus an integral part of the gradual development of literary theory.

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Coleridge's theory represented schematically:



References

1. W.J. Bate, Coleridge, 1969, p. 159.
2. Ibid, p. 160.
3. Ibid. p. 164.
4. R. Wellek, "German and English Romanticism"/, Studies in Romanticism, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1964, p. 35.
5. Coleridge: Biographia Literarie, Book 10.
6. J.L. Lowes, The Road to Xanadu, 1951, p. 432.
7. J.V. Baker, The Sacred River, 1957, p. 133.
8. Op.cit. Studies in Romanticism, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1964, p. 30.
9. Op.cit. The Sacred River, p. 136.
10. Op.cit. The Road to Xanadu, p. 346.
11. Op.cit. Biographia Literaria, Book 13.
12. Op.cit. The Sacred River, p. 122.
13. Op.cit. Biographia Literaria, Book 13.
14. Op.cit. The Road to Xanadu, p. 433.