

COLERIDGE'S ELABORATION ON THE IDEA OF IMAGINATION

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Abstract. *The thoughtful approach to Wordsworth in the second volume represents Coleridge's understanding of poetry at its best. The importance of the organic metaphor and idea for later thinking about poetry can hardly be exaggerated. The sense of the work of art as an organism, self-germinating and self-enclosed, pervades modern writing and modern criticism.*

Key word: *poetry, expressive language, the psychological acumen, semasiology.*

РАЗРАБОТКА КОЛЬРИДЖЕМ ИДЕИ ВООБРАЖЕНИЯ

Аннотация. *Вдумчивый подход к Вордсворту во втором томе представляет собой лучшее понимание поэзии Кольриджем. Важность органической метафоры и идеи для последующего размышления о поэзии трудно переоценить. Ощущение произведения искусства как организма, саморазвивающегося и замкнутого в себе, пронизывает современную письменность и современную критику.*

Ключевые слова: *поэзия, выразительная речь, психологическая хватка, семасиология.*

The lectures of 1811-1812 on Shakespeare were influential in the general revival of interest in the Elizabethan drama. Dr. Johnson's 1765 preface to his edition of Shakespeare's works had defended him as the poet of nature who held up a mirror to life and manners. Against this mimetic emphasis Coleridge lay stress on Shakespeare's expressive language and the psychological acumen associated with it: "In the plays of Shakespeare, every man sees himself, without knowing that he does so." A more important legacy of the lectures on Shakespeare is the idea of organicism, which has deep roots in his earlier critical reflection. In lecture notes on Shakespeare, Coleridge evokes organic form in terms which mimic the contemporary German critic August Wilhelm Schlegel. The form of Shakespeare's dramas grew out of his characters and ideas, on Coleridge's telling; the old dramatic conventions did not impede the conception. The structural variety of his plays—the seeming irregularities of *The Tempest*, in particular—arose from expressive requirements. Organic form redeemed Shakespeare's unconventional dramatic constructions. The importance of the organic metaphor and idea for later thinking about poetry can hardly be exaggerated. The sense of the work of art as an organism, self-germinating and self-enclosed, pervades modern writing and modern criticism. Coleridge's elaboration on the idea of imagination

in this period owes something to the distinction of mechanic and organic form as well. His definitions of primary and secondary imagination and of fancy have become canonical; they served I. A. Richards, notably, as a theoretical basis of the “semasiology” which he proposed in 1935. This putative science of meaning was meant to shore up the foundations of English as an academic discipline and proved influential not only at Cambridge but throughout the English-speaking world, including the United States, where it provided impetus for the development of the New Criticism, as it was called. Treating Coleridge as a provincial outpost of the new German critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, English and American readers have usually abandoned the complex record of his reading and response in favor of one or two manageable ideas. The result has been general misapprehension about his orientation and commitments. Coleridge does not make sense as a model of aesthetic reading despite the efforts of Richards and others to bend him to this purpose.

What sort of reader was he, then? Moral and political, certainly, but something more. On his return from Germany in 1799, Coleridge had undertaken “a metaphysical Investigation” of “the affinities of the Feelings with Words & Ideas,” to be composed “under the title of ‘Concerning Poetry & the nature of the Pleasures derived from it.’” The connection of his philosophical studies with his critical ambition is important for understanding how Coleridge imagined the critical function. He was not interested in judging writing by current standards. Conventional judgments of good or bad relied on unspoken assumptions which he was concerned to test and modify, where appropriate, by the light of reason. Adjudicating taste is the usual purview of the “man of letters.” Coleridge was trying for something more philosophical, of larger scope and bearing: “acting the arbitrator between the old School & the New School to lay down some plain, & perspicuous, tho’ not superficial Canons of Criticism respecting poetry.”

In the wake of the republication of *Lyrical Ballads* in early 1801 (with ‘1800’ on the title page), Coleridge’s critical project became a protracted effort to come to terms with Wordsworth’s radical claims in the “Preface” for a poetry composed “in the real language of men.” This was the “New School” of “natural thoughts in natural diction”: Coleridge’s own school despite his differences with Wordsworth. His effort to make the case for the new verse in the teeth of pitched hostility on the part of reviewers culminated in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where the “Old School” is treated anecdotally in the opening chapters on the way to the triumph of Wordsworth’s voice. The fifteen years between the “Preface” and *Biographia Literaria* were consumed with working through the critical agenda which Coleridge set himself at the turn of the century. The process was a fitful, often tortuous one. The metaphysical investigation assumed a life of its own,

waylaid by deep plunges into Kant and Schelling, among others. It culminates in the first volume of the *Biographia Literaria* with an effort to provide rational ground for the critical exercise which follows in the second. His definition of imagination remains an important part of his poetic legacy, nevertheless, since it underwrites the development of a symbolist aesthetic still associated with his name though at odds with his enduring commitments.

The thoughtful approach to Wordsworth in the second volume represents Coleridge's understanding of poetry at its best. His account of the *Lyrical Ballads* project challenges some of Wordsworth's claims in the "Preface" to the second edition in a way which distinguishes the effective from the peculiar in his verse. Readers have often taken Coleridge's theoretic pronouncements about imagination as constituting his poetics, while the account of Wordsworth's verse shows him applying more conventional standards in new and thoughtful ways. This discussion of the new school in English poetry includes a detailed treatment of the question of poetic language as raised by Wordsworth, and it is Coleridge's response to his positions in the *Lyrical Ballads* "Preface" that makes up the real centerpiece of the argument. The defense of poetic diction in particular is important for understanding his idea of poetry. Its roots lie in a long meditation on language, not in a philosophically derived faculty of imagination.

This meditation on language occupied Coleridge occasionally during the years between his return from Germany in 1799 and the composition of the *Biographia Literaria*. Among projects which he undertook during these long years of opium addiction, physical disability, and aimless wandering, *The Friend* (1809) stands out for its originality and influence. After two years away, in Malta, Sicily, and Rome, he returned to Keswick in 1806, separated from his wife (who had given birth to their daughter, Sara, on 23 December 1802), lectured and dilated, and finally settled on publishing "a weekly essay" which ran from 1 June 1809 to 15 March 1810. The publication rose and fell by subscriptions, relying on Coleridge's name and reputation, and finally collapsed under the weight of his private difficulties. Eclectic in approach, broadly literary in style, its various essays remain worth considering for what they indicate of the evolution of letters in the period. *The Friend* established a high discursive tone which was influential among Coleridge's inheritors, including Carlyle and Emerson, for whom it was counted among his most valuable works.

In 1812 the Wedgwood annuity was reduced by half due to financial difficulties related to the war. Coleridge continued to wander, staying with friends all over the kingdom and occasionally with his family in Keswick. In 1816 he published *Christabel* with "Kubla Khan" and "The Pains of Sleep" in a single volume; the next year his collected verse, *Sibylline Leaves*, appeared. He

moved into the house of Dr. James Gillman, a physician in Highgate, now a north London village, trying to cure or at least to treat his opium problem. Here he would pass the remainder of his life, writing only occasional verse while preparing philosophical lectures (delivered in 1818), revising the text of *The Friend* for publication as a book, and collating the moral and theological aphorisms which appeared as *Aids to Reflection* (1825). These were popular and influential in America as well as in England. Coleridge published a meditation on political inspiration in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816) among other tracts on subjects theological and political. *On the Constitution of Church and State* appeared in 1830; *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* posthumously in 1840. He planned a comprehensive philosophical synthesis which he was unable to realize, conjuring with a system which lived only in his constantly working mind. The most finished text from among his philosophical papers was published in 1848 as *Hints towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life*. The reconstruction of his abortive synthesis is in progress.

The failure was largely relative to early expectations, however, and to hopes defeated by disease and drugs. Despite everything, Coleridge can still be regarded as a groundbreaking and, at his best, a powerful poet of lasting influence. His idea of poetry remains the standard by which others in the English sphere are tried. As a political thinker, and as a Christian apologist, Coleridge proved an inspiration to the important generation after his own. Recent publication of his private notebooks has provided further evidence of the constant ferment and vitality of his inquiring spirit.

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