Life and Expression

—— Coleridge's Vital Principle of the Universe ——

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Preface Symbol and Life

The most commonly accepted definition of a human being in the philosophical thinking of this century is that human beings are a kind of animal that lives in and by a system of symbols. In accordance with this definition, Ernst Cassirer made it clear that any field of cultural activities of human beings is organized as a symbolic form.[1] But by doing this, Cassirer at the same time brought it to light that being cultural means being unnatural. By symbols human beings become cultural, therefore human, but by symbols also they are separated from nature.

Symbols are now generally considered to be the necessary means for human beings to have culture, but the signifying power of symbols is not thought to be based on nature or any universal reality, but on symbols themselves if they are related each other as a system. This idea of symbol seems to have originated in Ferdinand de Saussure's thought. Saussure considered the essence of language as a system of arbitrary signs on which is based the view of the world of those who use

that language. To him 'arbitrary' means nothing other than 'unnatural' or 'not based on nature'. What those arbitrary signs signify are relative according to the system they form. External things and ideas which we think exist in themselves are actually a product of this non-substantial system of signs, and therefore are also non-substantial.[2)]

Quite unlike the concept of symbol in the twentieth century philosophical thought, that in the thinking of the philosophers of the romantic period, especially that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was essentially connected with nature and the reality of the universe. Explaining the nature of symbol, Coleridge says:

> . . . a Symbol is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.
>
> (Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, p.30)

According to this explanation, the essence of the expression by symbol can be formulated as the presence of the greater in the lesser. So in this formula of expression symbols can express the eternal and universal reality in the human intelligence.

Then how can a symbol have such power of expression? Also according to the explanation cited above, a symbol 'enunciates the whole' by abiding 'itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative'. This means that a part can represent the whole, if it is 'a living part' of the whole. So for a symbol to have the power of expression, it must be a living

part of the whole system of symbols, while the system must be a unity of the living parts, i.e., an organic unity.

Coleridge must have worked up to this idea of living symbol in his inquiry into the essence of poetic language. Earlier around 1800 when he concentrated upon metaphysical speculations in his awareness of his declining poetic spirit, he wrote to William Godwin concerning what he thought to be his ideal language:

> I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them —in short, I wish you to philosophize Horne Tooke's System, and to solve the great Questions—whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the semblance of predesigning Consciousness may yet be simply organic, and whether a series of such actions are possible—and close on the heels of this question would follow the old 'Is Logic the Essence of Thinking?' in other words—Is thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? and—how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words etc. parts and germinations of the plant? What is the Law of their Growth?—In something of this order I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things, elevating, as it were, words into Things, and living Things too. All the nonsense of vibrations etc. you would of course dismiss.
>
> (Collected Letters, I, pp. 625-6)

To Coleridge, the essence of thinking must be something other than logic which he seems to think depends on 'arbitrary signs'. So for the essential thinking to develop, such means as words elevated to living things are necessary. Words, if living, must surely have the law of growth of their own like 'parts and

germinations of the plant', and grow organically with the development of the essential thinking. And if such living words are his ideal language, it is certain that Coleridge saw the true realization of it in the poems of Milton and Shakespeare.

> I was wont boldly to affirm, that it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakspeare, (in their most important works at least,) without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say.
>
> (Collected Works 7, Biographia Literaria, I, p. 23)

In this state of language, a word is a living part of the whole which then is an organic unity. A word, if given life and elevated to a living thing, can be a symbol which expresses the truth of the universe. Then what gives life to a symbol?

I. Life and Imagination

First of all we must consider what Coleridge thought is the relation of symbol with the mind. What power of the mind produces symbols? Coleridge's answer is 'imagination', because imagination is:

> 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 permanence 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.

(Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, p. 29)

To produce symbols, imagination must be energized by reason, but, to organize the flux of the senses, the energies of reason must have its own form of working. Coleridge calls reason 'the forma formans', which he says 'contains in itself the law of its own conceptions'.[1)]

> Reason, in the highest sense of the term, as the focal point of the Theoric and Practical, or as both in one, is the Source of Ideas and conversely, an idea is a self-affirming Truth at once theoric and practical, which the Reason presents to itself, as a form of itself.
>
> (Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, Appendix C, p. 61, f.n.)

It is 'ideas' that reason presents to itself as a form of itself. Reason has an energy which acts in the form of ideas. So naturally ideas are 'not merely formal but dynamic', and 'every principle is actualized by an idea; and every idea is living, productive, partaketh of infinity, and (as Bacon has sublimely observed) containeth an endless power of semination'.[2)] Coleridge further explains the nature of an idea:

> . . . that . . . which is an educt of the Imagination actuated by the pure Reason, to which there neither is or can be an adequate correspondent in the world of the senses—this and this alone is = AN IDEA. Whether Ideas are regulative only, according to Aristotle and Kant; or likewise CONSTITUTIVE, and with the power and Life of Nature, according to Plato, or Plotinus . . . is the highest problem of Philoso-

phy, . . .

(Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, Appendix E, pp. 113-4)

Then it must be that imagination, actuated by reason in the form of living ideas, educes ideas and produces a system of symbols with the living power of constitutive ideas by 'incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing the flux of the Senses', and symbols thus produced must be 'harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors'. This production of symbols by imagination is exactly the realization of the essence of symbolic expression formulated as the presence of the greater in the lesser, because here the truths (= the greater) are presented in the organized flux of the senses or 'Images of the sense' (= the lesser). And such expression is made possible by symbols being produced as a system. The system must surely be an organically united whole, because symbols are organized by the energies of reason, and in symbols are incorporated reason in the form of living ideas. Therefore each symbol 'abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative'.

This production of symbols by imagination, i.e., symbolic expression, is also exactly the process of what Coleridge thinks to be the essence of thinking. As we have seen in his letter to Godwin, the essential thinking cannot be developed by 'arbitrary signs' on which logic depends, but by 'words elevated into living things'. Coleridge's distinction of reason and understanding would make the matter clearer.

. . . Reason is the knowledge of the laws of the Whole considered as One: and as such it is contradistinguished from the Understanding, which concerns itself exclusively with the

quantities, qualities, and relations of particulars in time and space. The Understanding, therefore, is the science of phaenomena, and their subsumption under distinct kinds and sorts, (genus and species.) Its functions supply the rules and constitute the possibility of Experience; but remain mere logical forms, except as far as materials are given by the senses or sensations. The Reason, on the other hand, is the science of the universal, having the ideas of Oneness and Allness as its two elements or primary factors.

(Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, Appendix C, pp. 59-60)

While logic, which is carried on with arbitrary signs, is merely the form of understanding that exclusively deals with phenomena, thinking which develops with the growth of living words, i. e., with the production of symbols by imagination, will have an essential relation with reason as the science of the universal, and be led by its power to the truths of the universe. Coleridge further explains the power of reason in relation to religion and duty:

. . . Reason as the science of All as the Whole, must be interpenetrated by a Power, that represents the concentration of All in Each—a Power that acts by a contraction of universal truths into individual duties, as the only form in which those truths can attain life and reality. Now this is Religion, which is the Executive of our nature, and on this account the name of highest dignity, and the symbol of sovereignty.

(Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, Appendix C, p. 64)

Here religion is considered to be the same in nature as symbolic expression formulated as the presence of the greater in the lesser, because, according to this explanation, in religion universal truths (= the greater) are contracted into individual duties (= the lesser) by an action of a power which interpenetrates reason. So this power must surely come from life. In religion, symbolic expression attains its highest degree, for the contraction of universal truths by this power is 'the only form in which those truths can attain life and reality'. Hence:

> . . . in all ages and countries of civilization Religion has been the parent and fosterer of the Fine Arts, as of Poetry, Music, Painting, etc. the common essence of which consists in a similar union of the Universal and the Individual. In this union, moreover, is contained true sense of the Ideal.
>
> (Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesman's Manual, Appendix C, p.62)

II. Life as the Power and Process of Expression

From what Coleridge says about symbol and the mental power related to symbol, it is clear that there at the base of Coleridge's idea of symbolic expression is his insight into life. To express the truths of the universe, a symbol must be living, and therefore symbols must constitute an organic unity. Imagination which produces symbols must also be a living power actuated by reason in the form of living ideas.

Then we must inquire into what Coleridge thinks to be the essence of life. In his *Theory of Life*, after criticizing various definitions of life done by others as incomprehensive, Coleridge tries to present his own definition:

> . . . the most comprehensive formula to which life is reducible, would be that of the internal copula of bodies, or (if we may venture to borrow a phrase from the Platonic school) the power which discloses itself from within as a principle of unity in the many. But . . . , I should at the same time have borrowed a scholastic term, and defined life absolutely, as the principle of unity in multeity, as far as the former, the unity to wit, is produced ab intra; but eminently (sensu eminenti), I define life as the principle of individuation, or the power which unites a given all into a whole that is presupposed by all its parts. The link that conbines the two, and acts throughout both, will, of course, be defined by the tendency to individuation.
>
> (Theory of Life, in W. G. T. Shedd, ed., The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge [7 vols.; New York, 1871], I, pp.386–7)

From this definition, we can see that Coleridge considers life as nothing other than the power which makes symbolic expression possible. The power of life works disclosing itself from within as a principle of individuation, the unification of all into a whole. It is a self-expressive power, and if this power expresses itself as a principle of unity in the process of the production of symbols, it will interpenetrate into reason which is 'the science of the universal, having the ideas of Oneness and Allness as its two elements', and, by giving life to these ideas, energize imagination into a living power of uniting 'a given all into a whole that is presupposed by all its parts' 'to give birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors'.

Seeing life at the base of symbolic expression, Coleridge seems to have placed the acts of imagination in the broader context of

nature and the universe. Then how does Coleridge think the nature of the power of life express itself in nature?

> By life I everywhere mean the true Idea of Life, or that most general form under which Life manifests itself to us, which includes all its other forms. This I have stated to be the tendency to individuation, and the degrees or intensities of Life to consist in the progressive realization of this tendency.
>
> (Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.391)

Life expresses itself in degrees according to the realization of the tendency to individuation. There is a progressive order in nature which consists in the intensities of life. Coleridge considers gold and the other noble metals as in the lowest degree of this tendency, because in them 'of the two counteracting tendencies of nature', i.e., detachment and attachment, the latter subsists 'in the greatest overbalance over the former. It is the form of unity with the least degree of tendency to individuation'.[1)]

The second step is 'the various forms of crystals as a union, not of powers only, but of parts' in which therefore 'the simplest forms of totality' are involved as well as the mere unity of powers seen in the first step.[2)] The third step is seen in the vast formations of sedimentary rock which Coleridge regards as 'the residue and product of vegetable and animal life' and also as 'manifestating the tendencies of the Life of Nature to vegetation and animalization'.[3)] And then:

> In the lowest forms of the vegetable and animal world we perceive totality dawning into individuation, while in man, as the highest of the class, the individuality is not only perfected in its corporeal sense, but begin a new series beyond the

appropriate limit of physiology.

(Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.390)

Thus:

> . . . , the individuation must be a tendency to the ultimate production of the highest and most comprehensive individuality. This must be the one great end of Nature, her ultimate production of the highest and most comprehensive individuality. This must be the one great end of Nature, her ultimate object, or by whatever other word we may designate that something which bears to a final cause the same relation that nature herself bears to the Supreme Intelligence.
>
> (Ibid., p.391)

The power of life express itself in nature, according to the intensity of individuation, as a tendency to the ultimate production of the highest degree of individuality. This ultimate production is the great end of nature, i.e., nature's ultimate object, whose relation to a final cause is the same as the relation of nature herself to the supreme intelligence. So by the power of life nature presents to herself her ultimate product by whose relation to the final cause she expresses her own relation to the supreme intelligence.

Life is, thus, the dynamic process of nature the essence of which is the expression in each stage of the tendency to the ultimate production of individuality. Coleridge then asks what the most general law of this tendency is which causes this dynamism, and answers 'polarity, or the essential dualism of Nature, arising out of its productive unity, and still tending to reaffirm it, either as equilibrium, indifference, or identity'.[4)]

> Life . . . we consider as the copula, or the unity of thesis and antithesis, position and counterposition,—Life itself being the positive of both; as, on the other hand, the two counterpoints are the necessary conditions of the manifestations of Life.
>
> (Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.392)

According to this view of life in unity and polarity, Coleridge goes on to think that while in the mechanic system there are only 'the relations of unproductive particles to each other', in life 'the two component counter-powers actually interpenetrate each other, and generate a higher third, including both the former'.[5] So he sees those last and highest three powers of inorganic nature, i.e., the magnetic, electric, and chemical powers, express themselves in an organic body 'as reproduction (i.e. growth and identity of the whole, amid the change or flux of all the parts), irritability and sensibility'.[6] Those powers can be vital principles only insofar as they express themselves as something of higher dignity by producing an organic unity. Coleridge denies the idea that a vital principle works 'something in the same manner as the steam becomes the mechanic power of the steam-engine, in consequence of its compression by the steam-engine',[7] and says:

> . . . this hypothesis is as directly opposed to my view as supervention is to evolution, inasmuch as I hold the organized body itself, in all its marvellous contexture, to be the PRODUCT and representant of the power which is here supposed to have supervened to it.
>
> (Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.401)

The organized body is not life itself, but the product and exponent of its evolving power. So what is more essential to this

power as a vital principle is the process of its expressing activity to realize from within something of higher degree in nature, with the organized body only as the means and result of this activity. The principle of this process Coleridge explains again as 'the unceasing polarity of life, as the form of its process, and its tendency to progressive individuation as the law of its direction'.[8)]

Then, according to this principle, Coleridge traces the progress of nature from 'the requisite and only servicable fiction' of 'the representation of CHAOS as the vast homogeneous drop'.[9)]

> In this sense it may be justified, as an appropriate symbol of the great fundamental truth that all things spring from, and subsist in, the endless strife between indifference and difference. The whole history of Nature is comprised in the specification of the transitional states from the one to the other. The symbol only is fictitious: the thing signified is not only grounded in truth—it is the law and actuating principle of all other truths, whether physical or intellectual.
>
> (Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.401)

From the beginning life contains in its principle the possibility of expressing in nature the truths of the creation in the universe. And this continues to 'that last work, in which Nature did not assist as handmaid under the eye of her soverein Master, who made Man in his own image, by superadding self-consciousness with self-government, and breathed into him a living soul'.[10)]

It is in man that nature realizes the highest degree of life. And it is in its highest degree that life express itself as self-consciousness in which is the presence of the supreme being. In man as a self-conscious being, nature 'begins a new series

beyond the appropriate limits of physiology'. But still it can be seen as a process of nature, the highest attainment of the power of life in nature. So:

> In man the centripetal and individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself concentred and individualized—he is a revelation of Nature! . . . Nor does the form of polarity, which has accompanied the law of individuation up to its whole assent, desert it here. . . . As the independence, so must be the service and the submission to the Supreme Will! As the ideal genius and the originality, in the same proportion must be the resignation to the real world, the sympathy and intercommunion with Nature. In the conciliating mid-point, or equator, does the Man live, and only by its equal presence in both its poles can that life be manifested.
>
> (Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.412)

Conclusion Life and Intelligence

Now, as we have traced the process of nature to man where the power of life express itself in the highest degree as self-consciousness, we must examine again the nature of expression in man from the viewpoint of life. The power of expression in man is imagination, so in man the vital principle works to make it a living power. Here comes Coleridge's famous definition of imagination in the 13th chapter of *Biographia Literaria:*

> 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.

(Collected Works 7, Biographia Literaria, I, p.304)

By the living power of imagination, in the human mind is repeated 'the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.

In the previous chapter, for the construction of 'the Dynamic Philosophy' planned as the third treatise of his *Logosophia*, Coleridge enumerates the basic theses of the philosophy. There he proposes 'SUM or I AM' as the first principle, and he immediately tries to express it indiscriminately 'by the words spirit, self, and self-consciousness', saying, 'In this, and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing each other. In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject'.[1] And in the same chapter, Coleridge identifies subject with self and intelligence, and consciousness with representation, considering intelligence as 'exclusively representative'.[2] Then self-consciousness is nothing other than the self-representation of intelligence in which intelligence becomes intelligence by the act of expressing itself to itself. And 'the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' can be identified with the process of the Supreme Intelligence expressing itself to itself. So it is this process that imagination, if living, repeats in the human mind as self-consciousness or self-representation of intelligence.

The vital principle of nature presents its highest degree in man as self-consciousness where imagination as the living power expresses the essence of the supreme intelligence. So naturally imagination keeps in the working of its power the essential factors of life, polarity and unity. Coleridge's

definition of the secondary imagination explains its working:

> The secondary 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 its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, 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.
>
> (Collected Works 7, Biographia Literaria, I, p.304)

When objects are dead and fixed like 'the relation of unproductive particles each other' or the state of 'the exact sum of the component qualities, as in arithmetical addition',[3] imagination dissolves them to make 'the necessary conditions of the manifestations of life'[4] and organizes them into a unity for recreation. Coleridge explains this process in the case of the creative activities of poets:

> This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul (laxis effertur habenis) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; . . . ; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.
>
> (Collected Works 7, Biographia Literaria, II, pp.16-7)

These creative activities by imagination lead to the living words that Coleridge sees are realized in Milton's and Shakespeare's works. And this is exactly what Coleridge considers as the ultimate expression by words, i.e., the realization of the essence of symbolic expression.

Words are living as symbols with the expressing activities of imagination. Elevated to living things, they will have their own law of growth according to their vital principle, and with their growth the essential thinking will develop in which process will be expressed the supreme intelligence.

Life is the power of expression in nature and the universe whose ultimate end is the presence in man of the supreme intelligence. But life expresses itself in the process in nature which has the tendency to the realization of its highest degree. So each step in this process has an essential relation to its ultimate end. Where there is life, there is the expression of the supreme being.

Notes

Preface

1) Cassirer, E., The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, translated by Ralph Manheim, Yale University Press, 1955.
2) Maruyama, K., Soshuuru no Shisou, Iwanami Shoten, 1983.

I.

1) Coleridge, S.T., Collected Letters, II, p.1198, To Thomas Clarkson, Oct. 13, 1806.
2) Coleridge, S.T., Collected Works 6, Lay Sermons, The Statesmans Manual, pp.23-4.

II.

1) Coleridge, S.T., Theory of Life, in W.G.T.Shedd, ed., The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge [7 vols.; New York, 1871], I, pp389-90.
2) Ibid., p.390.
3) Ibid., p.390.
4) Ibid., p.391.
5) Ibid., p.399.
6) Ibid., p.397.
7) Ibid., p.401.
8) Ibid., p.401.
9) Ibid., p.401.
10) Ibid., p.411.

Conclusion

1) Coleridge, S.T., Collected Works 7, Biographia Literaria, I, pp. 272-3.
2) Ibid., p.255.
3) Theory of Life, op.cit., I, p.399.
4) Ibid., p.392.

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