Life and Symbol

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Preface: Symbolic Expression and Life

Any system of philosophy has included, whether implicitly or explicitly, a definition of man. And any definition of man includes, whether implicitly or explicitly, an idea of man's position in nature and the universe.

The definition of man which is most commonly accepted in the philosophical thinking of this century is that man is a kind of animal that lives in and by a system of symbols. In accordance with this definition, Ernst Cassirer could make 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. Through symbols human beings become cultural, therefore human, but through 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 with each other as a system. This idea of symbol seems to have originated in Ferdinand de Saussure's thinking. 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 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.[3)]

According to this explanation, the essence of expression through symbols can be formulated as the presence of the greater in the lesser. So in this formula of expression it is possible that symbols express the eternal and universal reality in human intelligence. And this formula will also satisfy the condition of that expression which Leibnitz aimed at in his scheme of "mathesis universalis" or "characteristica univer-

salis", i.e., the mediation between the finite and the infinite which makes possible the expression of the whole universe in a monad.[4)]

Then how can a symbol have such power of expression in Coleridge's case? 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 evolved 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 the essence of 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 pre-designing 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.[5)]

To Coleridge, the essence of thinking must be something other than logic which he seems to think depends on "arbitrary signs". So for essential thinking to develop, such means as words elevated into living things are necessary. Words, if living, must surely be autonomous and have a 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.[6)]

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.

It seems that by considering symbols as having life Coleridge tries to solve the problem of expression in Leibnitz and Spinoza[7)] which is one with the problems of being, knowing, and creating, in the framework of Schelling's idea of organic unity.[8)] Then what does Coleridge think gives life to a symbol?

I. Life as the Power of Expression in the Mind

First of all we must consider what Coleridge thought is the relation of symbol to 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, 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 their own form of working. Coleridge calls reason "the forma formans", which he says "contains in itself the law of its own conceptions".[9]

> 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, 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",[10] 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".[11] 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 one with the power and Life of Nature, according to Plato, or Plotinus . . . is the highest problem of Philosophy, . . .
>
> (*Collected Works* 6, 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, 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, has an essential relation with reason, and therefore will be led by its power in the form of living ideas of "Oneness and Allness" to the truths of the universe.

Coleridge further explains the nature of symbolic expression in relation to the power of reason working in religion:

> . . . 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, p. 64)

Religion is here considered to be a form of symbolic expression 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 its power must be most intense there as "the only form in which those truths can attain life and reality". There must be an order in symbolic expression according to the intensity of power of life acting in the process in relation to universal truths. 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 the true sense of the Ideal.
>
> (*Collected Works* 6, p. 62)

II. Life as the Power of Expression in Nature

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 given 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.*[12)]

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 "that is presupposed by all its parts". It is a self-expressive power, and if this power expresses itself in the process of the production of symbols, it will "interpenetrate" 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 "to give birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors". And each of the symbols thus produced will enunciate the whole by abiding "itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative".

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 expresses 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.
>
> (*Complete Works*, I, p. 391)

Life expresses itself in degrees according to the realization of the tendency to individuation. So there must be 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."[13)]

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.[14] 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".[15] 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 begins a new series beyond the appropriate limits of physiology.
>
> (*Complete Works*, I, p. 390)

Thus:

> . . . , the individuation itself 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.
>
> (*Complete Works*, I, 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 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, and, therefore, of the relation of nature to the supreme intelligence. 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".[16]

> 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.
>
> (*Complete Works*, 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".[17] 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".[18] 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",[19] 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.
>
> (*Complete Works*, 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 very 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*".[20]

Then, according to this principle, Coleridge traces the progress of nature from "the requisite and only serviceable fiction" of "the representation of CHAOS as one vast homogeneous drop".[21]

> 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.
>
> (*Complete Works*, I, p. 401)

From the beginning in the process of nature is included the fundamental principle of life (polarity and unity). So life contains in its principle the possibility of expressing in nature the truth of the creation in the universe (differentiation of chaos). And this continues to "that last work, in which Nature did not assist as handmaid under the eye of her sovereign Master, who made Man in his own image, by superadding self-consciousness with self-government, and breathed into him a living soul".[22)]

It is in man that nature realizes the highest degree of life. And it is in its highest degree that life expresses 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 the inter-communion 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.
>
> (*Complete Works*, I, p. 412)

Conclusion: Life in the Universal System of Intelligence

Now as we have traced the process of nature to man where the power of life expresses 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, 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 chapter previous to it, 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 the 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".[23] And in the same chapter, Coleridge

identifies subject with self and intelligence, and consciousness with representation, considering intelligence as "exclusively representative".[24] 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, 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",[25] imagination dissolves them to make polarity as "the necessary conditions of the *manifestations* of life" 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, 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 through 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 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 by symbolic expression. 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.

To Coleridge, this universe is a great evolving system of intelligence which expresses itself with life as its power and with symbols as its means.

Notes

Preface

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5) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1956-71), I, pp. 625-6. Letter to William Godwin, 22 Sept., 1800.
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8) Schelling, F. W. J., *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, the English translation of 2nd ed. 1803, by E. E. Harris and P. Heath, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

I.

9) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Letters*, II, p. 1198. Letter to Thomas Clarkson, 13 Oct., 1806.
10) *Collected Works* 6, p. 61, f.n.
11) Ibid., pp. 23-4.

II.

12) Coleridge, S. T., *Complete Works*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd, 7 vols. (New York, 1871), I, pp. 386-7.
13) Ibid., p. 389-90.
14) Ibid., p. 390.
15) Ibid., p. 390.
16) Ibid., p. 391.
17) Ibid., p. 399.
18) Ibid., p. 397.
19) Ibid., p. 401.
20) Ibid., p. 401.
21) Ibid., p. 401.
22) Ibid., p. 411.

Conclusion

23) *Collected Works* 7, I, pp. 272-3.
24) Ibid., p. 255.
25) *Complete Works*, I, p. 399.

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