

Imitation and Expression

— Coleridge's Aesthetics and Metaphysics —

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Preface: Imitation and Nature

The idea of “mimesis” represented by the thesis that art imitates nature had always been in the central place in the history of Western aesthetic thought until the nineteenth century when it suddenly disappeared. At the beginning of the century, however, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English romantic, was trying to find quite positive meaning in this thesis in constructing his own theory of poetry and art.

Actually the meaning of the thesis has changed, and differs according to what is meant by “imitate” and “nature”. Concerning this, Coleridge says in *On Poesy or Art*:

We all know that art is the imitatress of nature. And, doubtless, the truths which I hope to convey would be barren truisms, if all men meant the same by the words “imitate” and “nature”.¹⁾

So Coleridge first tries to make clear the fundamental structure

of his idea of imitation, and stresses two elements coexisting “in all imitation”, saying, “These two constituent elements are likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference, and in all genuine creation of art there must be a union of these dispartes.”²⁾ In the process of imitation there must be this dynamism of polarity and unity. Coleridge contrasts imitation with copy which he compares to waxwork. In copy there is “likeness to nature without any check of difference”.³⁾ So:

Why are such simulations of nature, as waxwork figures of men and women, so disagreeable? Because, not finding the motion and the life which we expected, we are shocked as by a falsehood, every circumstance of detail, which before induced us to be interested, making the distance from truth more palpable.

(*BL*, II, p. 256)

In copy there is no motion or life. Only in the dynamic process of imitation can they be expressed. Genuine imitation starts “with an acknowledged total difference, and then every touch of nature gives you the pleasure of an approximation to truth”.⁴⁾

Then Coleridge asks what in nature we must imitate, and answers “the beautiful in nature”.⁵⁾ And he immediately defines beauty in the abstract as “the unity of the manifold, the coalescence of the diverse”, and in the concrete as “the union of the shapely (*formosum*) with the vital”.⁶⁾ So what are essential to the beautiful in nature as the object of imitation are such elements as unity, diversity, form and life. And he continues:

If the artist copies the mere nature, the *natura naturata*, what idle rivalry! If he proceed only from a given form, which is supposed to answer to the notion of beauty, what an empti-

ness, what an unreality there always is in his productions, as in Cipriani's pictures! Believe me, you must master the essence, the *natura naturans*, which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man.

(*BL*, II, p. 257)

To imitate the beautiful in nature an artist must master *natura naturans*, "which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man." Imitation is possible only when there is the bond which mediates man and nature in their highest dignity. This bond must surely be the principle common to man and nature, acting in both. And Coleridge says:

In the object of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements, steps and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness, and therefore to full development of the intelligential act; and man's mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature.

(*BL*, II, p. 257)

From this statement we can guess that intelligence is what Coleridge thinks to be the common principle. If so, how does it make imitation possible?

I. Intelligence and Expression

First of all we must consider what the nature of intelligence is to Coleridge.

Coleridge devotes the 12th chapter of *Biographia Literaria* entirely to the metaphysical speculation on the fundamental nature of the mind, for the full development in the next chapter

of his theory of imagination as the power of expression. There following the Platonic tradition, he chooses the axiomatic method of geometry as the only one which makes philosophy possible as a science, and insists that the primary construction of philosophy should be postulated, saying that geometry “supplies philosophy with the example of a primary intuition, from which every science that lay claim to evidence must take its commencement”.¹⁾

By this primary intuition, Coleridge describes the postulate of philosophy as “no other than the heaven-descended KNOW THYSELF!”²⁾ and from this postulate he tries to solve such basic questions of philosophy as knowing and being by explaining the relation of the mind and nature. He considers the basis of all knowledge as “the coincidence of an object with a subject”. And the sum of all that is merely objective, he calls nature, “confining the term to its passive and material sense, as comprising all the phenomena by which its existence is made known to us”, while the sum of all that is subjective he comprehends “in the name of the SELF or INTELLIGENCE”.³⁾ Then:

Intelligence is conceived of as exclusively representative, nature as exclusively represented; the one as conscious and the other as without consciousness. Now in all acts of positive knowledge there is required a reciprocal concurrence of both, namely of the conscious being, and of that which is in itself unconscious.

(*BL*, I, p. 174)

Speculating on the essential faculty of intelligence in this polarized framework, Coleridge understands that the relation of the mind and nature in knowing is such as that intelligence

represents nature. Coleridge further explains this expressive nature of intelligence in the case of natural philosophy, saying:

The highest perfection of natural philosophy would consist in the perfect spiritualization of all the laws of nature into laws of intuition and intellect. The phænomena (*the material*) must wholly disappear, and the laws alone (*the formal*) must remain.

(*BL*, I, p. 175)

Therefore:

The theory of natural philosophy would then be completed, when all nature was demonstrated identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-consciousness; when the heavens and the earth shall declare not only the power of the maker, but the glory and the presence of their God, . . .

(*BL*, I, p. 176)

Nature is represented by intelligence, but nature represented must be nothing other than intelligence itself. Nature and the mind can be one in essence in the self-representation of intelligence, i.e., self-consciousness.

Coleridge tries further to explain the nature of this expressive faculty of intelligence in relation to the question of existence in the latter half of the 12th chapter of *Biographia Literaria*. There Coleridge announces his plan to construct “the Dynamic Philosophy” for the third treatise of *Logosophia*,⁴ and enumerates the basic theses of the philosophy. 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 same act it becomes a subject”.⁵⁾ This act of a subject of constructing itself objectively to itself is exactly the process of self-consciousness, and therefore that of the self-representation of intelligence in which being and knowing are identical. So:

Only in the self-consciousness of a spirit is there the required identity of object and of representation; for herein consists the essence of a spirit, that it is self-representative.

(*BL*, I, p. 184)

From these considerations, Coleridge tries to make clear the essence of imagination as the power of expression in man:

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.

(*BL*, I, p. 202)

As we have seen, Coleridge considers “I AM” as identical to spirit, self, and self-consciousness, that is, the self-representation of intelligence in which intelligence becomes intelligence by the act of expressing itself to itself. So “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” can be identified with the process of the Supreme Intelligence expressing itself to itself. And it is this

process that imagination repeats in the human mind as self-consciousness.

Now as we could understand Coleridge's idea of the essential faculty of intelligence as self-representation, that is, the activity of expressing itself to itself, we must make clear the relation of this faculty and imitation. Concerning the imitation of nature, Coleridge further says in *On Poesy or Art*:

The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure, and discourses us by symbols—the *Natur-geist*, or spirit of nature, as we unconsciously imitate those whom we love; for so only can he hope to produce any work truly natural in the object and truly human in the effect. The idea which puts the form together cannot itself be the form. It is above form, and is its essence, the universal in the individual, or the individuality itself, —the glance and the exponent of the indwelling power.

(*BL*, II, p. 259)

It is "spirit of nature" that the artist must imitate. So as in the case of natural philosophy, nature must be spiritualized, and therefore nature must be expressed as "identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-consciousness". Then only by the expressive power of intelligence can nature be imitated in its highest sense, that is, as the repetition in the human mind of the eternal act of creation in the supreme intelligence.

II. Expression and Life

Art imitates nature, but only when the artist imitates "spirit of nature". And in the process of imitating the spirit of nature,

there must be the activity of intelligence expressing itself to itself which is also the activity of imagination repeating “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”.

Now we must ask what gives this power of expression to intelligence to make it act as imagination. What power is working in the process of expression? If this power working in intelligence can spiritualize nature, for nature to be spiritualized the same power must work in nature. Coleridge’s answer to this question must surely be “life” of which in his *Theory of Life* he presents his own definition as follows:

... the most comprehensive formula to which life is reducible, would be that of 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 combines the two and acts throughout both, will, of course, be defined by the *tendency to individuation*.¹⁾

We notice that this definition of life of Coleridge’s is exactly of the same nature as his idea of beauty. As we have seen, beauty to him is, “in the abstract, the unity of the manifold”. So he could say that “in the concrete, it is the union of the shapely (*formosum*) with the vital”. Both in beauty and life the same principle is working. And in the work produced by the imitation of “spirit of nature” there must be “the idea which puts

the form together” but which “is above form, and is its essence, the universal in the individual, or the individuality itself,— the glance and the exponent of the indwelling power”. So in the process of spiritualization of nature the power of life must be working as the principle of individuation.

From the definition of life above shown, we also understand that to Coleridge life is the power of expression, the self-expressive power which “discloses itself from within as a principle of *unity* in the *many*”. He further explains this expressive nature of life:

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)

In the most general form the power of life expresses itself in degrees according to the realization of the tendency to individuation. There must be a progressive order in nature which consists in the intensity of life.

Coleridge traces this order from noble metals as in the lowest degree to man:

. . . 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)

So:

... , 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 expresses 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, that is, nature's ultimate object, whose relation to a final cause is the same as the relation of nature herself to the supreme intelligence. So it must be that 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".²⁾

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)

The power of life works according to this principle of polarity and unity, to express itself in each stage as the tendency to the ultimate production of the highest and most comprehensive individuality.

Then, according to the principle of polarity and unity, Coleridge traces the progress of nature from chaos “as one homogeneous drop” which suggests “the great fundamental truth that all things spring from, and subsist in, the endless strife between indifference and difference”.³⁾ From the beginning life contains in its principle the possibility of expressing in nature the truth of the creation in the universe. And the principle works 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”.⁴⁾

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. And in self-consciousness is the activity of intelligence expressing itself to itself. Intelligence acts as imagination which is “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception”, and “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”. Imagination is a living power, so in this highest stage life retains its fundamental principle.

In Man the centripetal and individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself centred 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 height, so the depth. The intensities

must be at once opposite and equal. As the liberty, so must be the reverence for law. 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)

Then man retains in the active form of intelligence, i.e., imagination, the principle of life of polarity and unity, so the artist can imitate nature in its dynamism, that is, the polarity and unity of difference and indifference. And so he can imitate "spirit of nature", that is, the beautiful in nature.

Conclusion: Imitation and Creation

As we have seen, Coleridge accepts the idea of mimesis that art imitates nature, as the basic framework for the development of his theory of art. And his idea of imitation is essentially related to his view of the mind and nature, especially to his insight into the nature of intelligence and life, so Coleridge could distinguish imitation from copy which is the mere reproduction of the original by the mind working passively, and present imitation as a form of expressing activity of intelligence in which is the presence of the supreme being.

Art imitates nature, only when the artist imitates "spirit of nature". And to imitate the spirit of nature, the mind of the artist must spiritualize nature to the degree that all nature is "demonstrated identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-

consciousness". This means that in the process of imitation there must be in the artist's mind the act of intelligence of expressing 'itself to itself' as the self-conscious activity. So:

. . . this is the true exposition of the rule that the artist must first eloin himself from nature in order to return to her with full effect. Why this? Because if he were to begin by mere painful copying, he would produce masks only, not forms breathing life. He must out of his own mind create forms according to the severe laws of the intellect, in order to generate in himself that co-ordination of freedom and law, that involution of obedience in the prescript, and of the prescript in the impulse to obey, which assimilates him to nature, and enables him to understand her.

(*BL*, II, p. 258)

To imitate "spirit of nature" is to "imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure". If the artist copies "the mere nature", that is, the given, external forms of nature, "he would produce masks only, not forms breathing life". So he must "eloin himself from nature" to create forms "out of his own mind" "according to the severe laws of the intellect". And this is only possible by way of intelligence expressing itself to itself as self-consciousness, that is, by the activity of imagination of repeating in the human mind "the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM". Coleridge continues:

He merely absent himself for a season from her, that his own spirit, which has the same ground with nature, may learn her unspoken language in its main radicals, before he approaches to her endless compositions of them.

(*BL*, II, p. 258)

The artist's own spirit has the same ground with nature as life by whose power nature presents man's spirit as her ultimate production in which is the presence of the supreme intelligence, so to learn nature's "unspoken language in its main radicals" he must first find the principle of life in its highest realization in his own mind. So:

... not to acquire cold notions—lifeless technical rules—but living and life-producing ideas, which shall contain their own evidence, the certainty that they are essentially one with germinal causes in nature,—his consciousness being the focus and mirror of both,—for this does the artist for a time abandon the external real in order to return to it with a complete sympathy with its internal and actual. For of all we see, hear, feel and touch the substance is and must be in ourselves; and therefore there is no alternative in reason between the dreary . . . belief that every thing around us is but a phantom, or that the life which is in us is in them likewise; and that to know is to resemble, when we speak of objects out of ourselves, even as within ourselves to learn is, according to Plato, only to recollect; . . .

(*BL*, II, pp. 258–9)

The artist's consciousness must be the focus and mirror of both "living and life-producing ideas" and "germinal causes in nature" which are essentially one. And for this he must "abandon the external real" for a time, and "recollect" what is internal as the substance. He then return to what he sees, hears, feels, and touches, i.e., the external real, "with a complete sympathy with its internal and actual". This is the essential

process of what Coleridge considers as true imitation. The artist creates his works by synthesizing the external as materials and the internal as forms.

Imitation is creation only when there is the power of life working in man and nature.

Notes

Preface

- 1) Coleridge, S.T., *On Poesy or Art*, *BL*, II, p. 255.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 257.

I.

- 1) Coleridge, S.T., *Biographia Literaria*, *BL*, I, p. 171.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 4) *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 183

II.

- 1) Coleridge, S.T., *Theory of Life*, *Complete Works*, I, pp. 386–7.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 391.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 401.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 411.

Conclusion

Abbreviations

- BL Biographia Literaria*, ed. by J. Shawcross, 2 vols., (Oxford, 1907).
Complete Works The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. by W. G. T. Shedd, 7 vols., (New York, 1871).

Coleridge's Works

- The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by K. Coburn and B. Winer, Vols. 1-7, 10, 12, 13, and 14, (Princeton, NJ, 1969~).
The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. by W. G. T. Shedd, 7 vols., (New York, 1871).
Collected Letters of S. T. Coleridge, ed. by E. G. Griggs, 6 vols., (Oxford, 1956~71).
Imagination in Coleridge, ed. by J. S. Hill, (London, 1978).
The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge, ed. by K. Coburn, 3 double vols., (London and New York, 1957-73).
The Portable Coleridge, ed. by I. A. Richards, (New York, 1950).
Aids to Reflection, second ed., (London, 1831).
Biographia Literaria, ed. by J. Shawcross, 2 vols., (Oxford, 1907).
The Philosophical Lectures of S. T. Coleridge, ed. by K. Coburn, (London, 1949).