

# Reflections on the Romantic Imagination

— In Search of the Medium between  
the Individual and the Universal —

I.

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## ESSAY I.

To understand the nature of Romanticism, the best way is to understand the nature of the Romantic imagination, because the imagination is what the Romantics put the highest value on as the power of the mind working in their creative activities. And to understand the nature of the Romantic imagination, the best way is to make clear the implications of the definition of imagination in its highest dignity, which is given by S. T. Coleridge in the thirteenth chapter of his *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.<sup>1)</sup>

From this definition we could understand that the imagination works in its highest dignity as the power of creation which acts by mediating between the finite and the infinite. Then what does the imagination create by this act of mediation, and how? For the answer of this question, Coleridge further considers the

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 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*.<sup>2)</sup>

The imagination creates symbols in its act of mediation, that is, the mediation this time between the senses and the reason which is considered as essentially the same as that between the finite and the infinite. So symbols are “consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*”.

To produce such symbols, the imagination must be energized by the reason whose energy is permanent and self-circling. For Coleridge gives the reason a completely different definition from that of the Enlightenment thinkers. Distinguishing the reason from the understanding, Coleridge says:

. . . 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 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 the understanding develops only if materials are supplied by senses and sensations, and therefore remains the knowledge of the particulars, the reason is the science of the universal, that is, the knowledge of the laws of the whole considered as one, for it has “the ideas of Oneness and Allness as its two elements or primary factors”.

Through this distinction, Coleridge thought, he could overcome Locke’s idea of human understanding and Hartley’s associationism, and therefore save the concept of reason from the influence of the Enlightenment thinkers. To Coleridge the reason should from the first have the elements of universal character. So:

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 theoretic and practical, which the Reason presents to itself, as a form *of* itself.

(*Collected Works* 6, p. 61, f. n.)

It is “ideas” that the reason presents to itself as the form of itself. And the reason has the permanent and self-circling energies, so naturally ideas are “not merely formal but dynamic”, and “every principle is actuated by an idea; and every idea is living, productive, partaketh of infinity, and (as Bacon has sublimely observed) containth an endless power of semination”.<sup>3)</sup> 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)

An idea partakes of infinity, and is “one with the power and Life of Nature”, but it has no adequate correspondent in the world of senses. So the question is how to mediate between the world of ideas, that is, the reality, and the world of senses, that is, the world of phenomena. The agent of this mediation is, as we have seen, the imagination which, actuated by the reason, educes ideas, and produces a system of symbols by “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”. So symbols thus produced must have the power of this mediation in themselves. 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, p. 30)

A symbol mediates between the individual and the universal, the temporal and the eternal, that is, between the finite and the

infinite, and therefore “partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible”. Then the essence of the mediation by a symbol is the expression of the unseen reality in the images of the sense.

Now we could see that Coleridge’s thinking around the mediation by the power of the imagination centers on the expression through symbols. Coleridge considers even religion as a form of symbolic expression, and that in its highest dignity:

... 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 the power of expression of the universal in the individual, and therefore is itself the symbol of the supreme being. And:

... 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)

Now it seems that we have come to the most fundamental paradox of Romanticism. It looks as if it is the fine arts such as poetry, music, painting, etc. that need religion as their power

to be symbolic expressions which mediate between the universal and the individual. But if faith is enough for religion to realize this mediation, there is no need of religion to depend on the power of symbolic expression, and no need of various forms of symbolic expression themselves.

Then why did Coleridge dare concentrate his considerations on the imagination as the power of symbolic expression? This question can be solved only in the consideration of the Romantic imagination in the religious context.

## ESSAY II.

Seeing that the most essential function of the Romantic imagination is the mediation between the individual and the universal, the finite and the infinite, and the temporal and the eternal, we understand that the problem of the Romantic imagination should also be considered in the religious context. For it is exactly this mediation that has been supposed to be what should be achieved by religion. There is in this mediation something beyond logical thinking that only faith can achieve.

The relation between the finite and the infinite is not analogous or proportionate. There is a gap between them which can only be bridged by what has an element of leap in its power. Unlike logic which is carried out step by step and never permitted to contain a leap in its process for the sake of certainty, faith from the first has a leap as its essential element. If logic is enough for transcendence, there is no need of faith, therefore of religion.

What makes man aware of the necessity of faith is not what can be solved by logical thinking, but what comes from the fundamental irrationality of human existence which can only be realized as deep negative emotional states such as anxiety and

anomie. These states of mind necessarily cause the feeling of awe before something beyond human power, such as the absolute God or the infinite universe.

The state of mind of the people at the age of the Reformation is clearly described by Erich Fromm in his *Fear of Freedom*. According to Fromm, after the collapse of the medieval social system of communities, the individual must face the world with the deep feeling of insecurity, powerlessness, doubt, aloneness, and anxiety. And here come the doctrines of Lutheranism and Calvinism, which first give expression to and increase these feelings and then offer solutions which enable the individual to cope with them.

What Luther and Calvin emphasize is the fundamental evilness and powerlessness of man. Fromm quotes what Luther says about St. Paul's letter to the Romans:

The essence of this letter is: to destroy, to uproot, and to annihilate all wisdom and justice of the flesh, may it appear—in our eyes and in those of others—ever so remarkable and sincere . . . What matters is that our justice and wisdom which unfold before our eyes are being destroyed and uprooted from our heart and from our vain self.<sup>1)</sup>

But this emphasis on man's evilness and powerlessness to do anything good reveals us a necessary condition of God's grace. For "only if man humiliates himself and demolishes his individual will and pride will God's grace descend upon him."<sup>2)</sup> This grace is faith which is given to man by God as the certainty of salvation, that is, the faith brought about by the revelation.

Luther's faith is the complete submission to God which can only be brought about by the feeling of awe caused by the conviction of the unbridgeable gap between imperfect man and



perfect God. But this means that the more one realizes one's sinfulness, the surer one is of the coming of God's salvation. It is this paradox of faith that gives religion an element of leap in its power which can mediate between the finite and the infinite. And it is this leap that is the essence of the mystery of religion which is called the revelation.

This faith which is based on the deep emotion of awe caused by the realization of the abyss between the finite human being and the infinite God, however, has completely lost its power during the age of the Enlightenment, the age of reason, especially after the Scientific Revolution.

The Enlightenment is characterized by the belief in reason and progress. By reason one can accumulate one's knowledge of the world gradually but firmly. As Locke's idea of human understanding shows, through experience man can make progress in his knowledge from his original state of the mind of *tabula rasa*. In this framework of thinking which results in the publication of encyclopaedia there is no room for the faith based on the feeling of awe which comes from the conviction of human evilness and powerlessness.

The view of nature after the Scientific Revolution was largely that of mechanical determinism which was based on the success of Newtonian mechanics, and was precisely formulated by Laplace. This universe is universally determined by Newton's law of universal gravitation. Laplace himself mechanically proved the stability of the solar system, and thus expelled the adjusting hand of God from the universe. In this view of nature there is no room left for the role of God, especially for that of the Last Judgement, and therefore no room for the mystery necessary for the leap in faith.

The belief in progress will necessarily bring about the idea of the perfectibility of man. This idea was implied in Locke's view

of education, was developed by Hartley's associationist psychology, but was radically proposed by Godwin in Britain. But as Mine Okaji points out, Godwin's perfectibility remained the perpetual possibility for perfection, that is, the relative perfectibility.<sup>3)</sup> This means that Godwin thought it better for man to be in the eternal progress rather than to be in the state of perfection. Godwin could be optimistic about man's future because he thought that man need not be absolutely perfect like God who doesn't exist.

During the age of Enlightenment religion could survive in the form of deism in which God is supposed to be the Creator who implanted laws in nature at the time of creation but left it without further interventions. And there were cases in the religious thinking of this period in which God was identified with reason, nature, or natural laws. These ideas of God could well be understood by human reason, and were, therefore, compatible with the Enlightenment view of nature represented by Laplace. But from these religious ideas was removed the most essential element of religion, that is, the faith based on the revelation which paradoxically comes from the feeling of awe before God who is beyond human reason.

At the end of the eighteenth century reason was already in serious doubt, or it can be said that the limit of reason had been thoroughly elucidated. Actually this originated in Locke who denied the power of human understanding to grasp the real essences of things, and therefore to know the reality of the universe. As far as one depends on the empirical method, there is no way to make it certain that what one knows is the real reality. Here comes Hume's scepticism the central idea of which is that certainty depends not on reason but on habit, and therefore remains relative. And Kant's criticism of reason limited human knowledge within the framework of categories,

and denied its possibility of reaching the things in themselves.

While the reason of the Enlightenment increased man's knowledge of the world, and his power to control nature, and therefore expelled from the universe the mystery which is necessary for the faith coming from the revelation, it could not replace the faith as the power to mediate between the finite and the infinite, the individual and the universal, and the temporal and the eternal.

Romanticism can now be characterized by its presentation of various media which are supposed to be able to bridge what are essentially unbridgeable. What the Romantics emphasized, were imagination, symbol, language, art (beauty), life (organism), and, in Germany, nation, to which were given the role of this mediation. And the question of why among those media the imagination always took the central position should now be considered in relation to the modern ego, or self-consciousness, or subject.

(To be continued.)

## Notes

### ESSAY I.

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 7, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. J. Bate (Princeton, NJ, 1983), I, p. 304.
- 2) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 6, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton, NJ, 1972), p. 29.
- 3) *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4

### ESSAY II.

- 1) Fromm, E., *Fear of Freedom* (London, Routledge paperback, 1960), pp. 63-64.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 3) Okaji, M., *The Idea of "Perfectibility of Man"*, in *The World of English Romanticism*, ed. Dr. M. Okamoto (Tokyo, Seibido), pp. 66-67.

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