

Reflections on the Romantic Imagination

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

II.

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ESSAY III.

During the eighteenth century a completely new meaning was given to art and, therefore, to the aesthetic ideas. In Britain philosophical thinkings on this matter were concentrated on the problem of taste. In relation to the Romantic imagination Coleridge's definition of taste seems to be the most comprehensive and complete. In his *On the Principles of Genial Criticism*, he says:

TASTE is the intermediate faculty which connects the active with the passive powers of our nature, the intellect with the senses; and its appointed function is to elevate the *images* of the latter, while it realizes the *ideas* of the former.¹⁾

Taste mediates between the senses and the intellect. So in this function it is of the same nature as imagination. Taste can be said to be a form of imagination when the latter works in the process of artistic creation. Then the way taste functions should be questioned in relation to this process.

Coleridge takes up the traditional aesthetic concept of imitation, and tries to attach a meaning of his own to it. In *On*

Poesy or Art, distinguishing imitation from copy, he says:

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

Here, like Schelling, Coleridge recalls the old scholastic distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* for the explanation of the ground of artistic creation. Taste really functions only when the artist imitates the essence of nature, *natura naturans*, because it "presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man". Then what should be explained is the nature of this bond which makes possible the artist's imitation of the essence of nature.

—in speaking of the world without us as distinguished from ourselves, the aggregate of phenomena ponderable and imponderable, is called nature in the passive sense,—in the language of the old schools, *natura naturata*—while the sum or aggregate of the powers inferred as the sufficient causes of the forms (which by Aristotle and his followers were called the substantial forms) is nature in the active sense, or *natura naturans*.²⁾

Natura naturata is "nature in the passive sense", while *natura naturans* is "nature in the active sense". So this distinction just corresponds to that of "our nature" between "the passive" and

“the active” powers, that is, between the senses and the intellect, in his definition of taste. “Nature in the higher sense” and “the soul of man” are of the same nature as the active agent. Then if taste functions as the mediator between the senses and the intellect in the artist’s act of imitating nature, he can imitate the essence of nature. On this Coleridge further explains:

The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure, and discourses to 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)

To Coleridge the essence of nature is its spirit “which is active through form and figure”. Through the faculty of taste which “connects the active with the passive powers of our nature, the intellect with the senses”, the artist can imitate the spirit of nature. And conversely we can say that it is in the creative activities of the artist that the mediation between the individual and the universal is realized.

But to imitate the essence of nature, a certain attitude of the mind is required of the artist.

... this is the true exposition of the rule that the artist must first elide 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, . . .

(*BL*, II, p. 258)

And:

He merely absents 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. Yes, not to acquire cold notions—lifeless technical rules—but living life-producing ideas, which shall contain their own evidence, the certainty that they are essentially one with the 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, . . .

(*BL*, II, p. 258–9)

This attitude of the artist of abandoning “the external real”, the appearances or phenomena of nature, is here thought to be the necessary condition for his imitation of the essence of nature, and therefore, for the function of taste. As far as the artist’s mind is under the control of the images of the senses, it remains passive, and the faculty of taste of connecting “the active with the passive powers of our nature” does not work. It is only through this attitude in which the artist can be free from any particular interest that his mind can penetrate into the depth of his own self. Coleridge describes this state of the mind from his own experience as follows:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature / It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is *Λογος*, the Creator! <and the Evolver!>³⁾

The creative activity of the artist, that is, the imitation of the essence of nature can now be identified with the expression through symbols of the eternal truth of man's inner nature. The agent of this expression is the imagination whose mediatory activities make the function of taste possible.

ESSAY IV.

Now it should be questioned why Coleridge thinks the artist should dare abandon the external nature and try to find the essence of nature in the mind of himself? To understand this we must take it into consideration that Coleridge could not help starting his speculations on the ground of the mediatory power of imagination from the reflection on the function of the mind of the individual self, like other modern thinkers. The empiricists start from the reflection on the individual experiences of each self, and find the fundamental difficulty in the mediation, while the rationalists start from that on the clearness of ideas to the mind of the individual self, and finally find the same difficulty. Sharing this difficulty, Coleridge tries to solve it in his own reflection on the structure of the self.

Coleridge tried to explain the active and creative nature of imagination on the ground of his idea of self-consciousness. The 12th chapter of *Biographia Literaria* is devoted to the preparatory considerations for the definition of imagination in the next chapter. There, for the construction of “the Dynamic Philosophy” planned as the third treatise of his *Logosophia*, Coleridge 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 very same act it becomes a subject.¹⁾

Self-consciousness is now considered to be identical with the act of a subject of constructing itself to itself in which being and knowing are identical. Once constructed objectively, a subject has become an object to itself, and a subject itself is now in a state of nothingness. To fill this state, a subject must again construct itself to itself, and the process continues endlessly. It is this process that can be identified with the creative activities of imagination, that is, reason’s presenting of ideas to itself.

Then what is the relation of self-consciousness to the universal? In the 12th chapter also of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge identifies subject with self and intelligence, and consciousness with representation, considering intelligence as “exclusively representative”.²⁾ So self-consciousness can be considered as the self-representation of intelligence in which intelligence

becomes intelligence by the act of expressing itself to itself. Then “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” in Coleridge’s definition of imagination in the 13th chapter of *Biographia Literaria* can be identified with the process of the Supreme Intelligence expressing itself to itself. It is this process that imagination repeats in the human mind as self-consciousness or self-representation of intelligence. And it is this relation of the human mind with the Supreme Intelligence that could be the final ground of the mediation by symbols between the individual and the universal.

(To be continued)

Notes

ESSAY III.

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *On the Principles of Genial Criticism*, *BL*, p. 227.
- 2) Coleridge, S. T., *The Philosophical Lectures of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (London 1949), p. 370.
- 3) Coleridge, S. T., *The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (London and New York, 1957-73), 2, 2546.

ESSAY IV.

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 7, I, pp. 272-3.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 255.

Abbreviation

BL *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, (Oxford, 1907).

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).