The Paradox of Romanticism in Coleridge's Aesthetics: Modernization and Romanticism

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Preface: Romanticism and Modernization

What is the nature of Romanticism? What is its meaning to us living in the 21st century? Though these questions can be answered from various points of view, they seem to be worth asking only in the framework of thought that Romanticism should be the most fundamental and comprehensive criticism of modernization. For it is the problems caused by modernization that are not only what those in the Romantic period tackled, but also what we tackle today.

In the broadest sense, modernization can be thought to be what has irreversibly proceeded in the fields of politics, economy, social life, and ideas, first in the West and then in the rest of the world since the Renaissance. In each of these fields, as the most essential factor of the process, we respectively notice the establishment of parliamentary democracy, the development of capitalism, the transition of social system from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, and the liberation from traditional values. And behind these factors, we also notice, there lies the common basic process of the expansion of the freedom of an individual to live according to his own values.

The freedom of an individual is, in essence, that for an individual to pursue the satisfaction of his desires, which is most manifestly represented as the right of private property. In the process of modernization, for the purpose of the expansion of this freedom, every part of the world should be rationalized to the farthest extent possible.

Those factors of modernization mentioned above are actually all in the direction of the realization of this purpose.

People living in the process of modernization, therefore, cannot help suffering from almost limitless desire, as the traditional value system which used to work to control human desire within the framework of its world view has been eroded by the process itself. It is this situation that is behind those problems caused by modernization which the Romantics and we alike have faced. Today we can search every part of the universe on the monitor of a mobile phone or a PC as the object of our desire. We are still in the process of modernization, so what Romanticism offers can only be meaningful to us when it reaches the very bases of modernization.

Romanticism developed nearly a hundred years after the Scientific Revolution, and just in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, which is enough to show how essential a relation Romanticism has with modernization. Then what were the problems caused by modernization in the Romantic period? And what were the answers offered by Romanticism to these problems?

I. The Newtonian World View and Romanticism

To understand the nature of Romanticism as the most fundamental and comprehensive criticism of modernization, it is essential to understand the impact on it of the Newtonian world view, because modernization could not have proceeded without the prevalence of the Newtonian world view. In our modern world which is completely controlled and regulated by money as a quantitative value standard, life seems to be in essential relation to the Newtonian world view, in which nature is considered as the mathematically constructed machine that can be the means to satisfy human desire. Even after the development of twentieth century physics, we are still living within the framework of the Newtonian world view, and cannot go outside it. But

we can at least inquire how it necessarily came into existence.

It may look as if the establishment of Newtonian mechanics had brought about the Newtonian world view, but actually it was inside the Newtonian world view that Newton could formulate his laws. So it is behind the process to the establishment of Newtonian mechanics that we must see the fundamental change of world views, that is, the change from the medieval one to the modern one.

Calling this change 'revolution', Alexandre Koyré argues:

> I shall therefore characterize this revolution by two closely connected and even complementary features: (a) the destruction of the cosmos, and therefore the disappearance from science — at least in principle, if not always in fact — of all considerations based on this concept, and (*b*) the geometrization of space, that is, the substitution of the homogeneous and abstract — however now considered as real — dimension space of the Euclidean geometry for the concrete and differentiated place-continuum of pre-Galilean physics and astronomy.[1]

According to this characterization, we can understand the essence of this change as the mathematization of nature, but to us who live in an already mathematized world, it is very difficult to understand the meaning of the disappearance of the cosmos. Koyré explains:

> . . . the world of science, the real world, is no more seen, or conceived, as a finite and hierarchically ordered, therefore qualitatively and ontologically differentiated, whole, but as an open, indefinite, and even infinite universe, united not by its immanent structure but only by the identity of its fundamental contents and laws; a universe in which, in contradistinction to the traditional conception with its separation and opposition of the two worlds of becoming and being, that is, of the heavens and the earth, all its components appear as placed on the same onto-

logical level . . .[2]

The characteristics of the cosmos explained above can only be understood when they are considered in relation to the medieval social order.

The hierarchically ordered world view of this cosmos was closely connected with and supported by the hierarchically ordered feudal system and church system. It is on the basis of understanding the nature of this hierarchically ordered system that we can understand any other characteristic of the cosmos, such as the cosmos as a qualitatively and ontologically differentiated whole. The cosmos was essentially a system of values in which each position, whether social or natural, had its own meaning in the whole system. Each being in the system realizes its essence in its own position in the system. Even motions and activities were understood in relation to the essences of the moving or acting beings. In such a system one can find how he should live, through the social status to which he belongs. In every social status, one's way of life is formalized by tradition.

St. Thomas Aquinas's system can exactly be said to be the expression of such a cosmos. He neo-Platonized Aristotle's doctrine of form and matter by making it a hierarchically ordered system descending from God to mere matter in which faith and reason, supported by this order, could both work as the way to God without contradiction. So it is the appearance of Ockham's thought that what really exist in the universe are individual things and that universals are mere signs of ideas in the mind, that tells the beginning of the dissolution of the cosmos. Ockham separated faith and reason, and asserted that God and eternal spiritual beings exist only as the objects of faith, and that reason works merely as a logic which establishes the necessary relations between signs. In Ockham's world there is no room for a hierarchically ordered system.

Behind the dissolution of the hierarchically ordered system of the cosmos, we can think of the penetration into the system of monetary

economy from without. The medieval hierarchical order was, in essence, a system of values such as is meant by the term, a "qualitatively and ontologically differentiated" whole. But in the communication with other systems, which is necessary for the justification of the system itself, money gains a dominant position as the quantitative, and therefore objective and transcendental, standard of values. So paradoxically if money penetrates into the system, the system begins to be dissolved, because each component of the system now is and seeks to be controlled from without by money as the quantitative and more universal standard of values.

An image of the universe is actually nothing other than a reflection of human relations, and therefore is the reflection of a value system. Then it can naturally be said that the quantitative value standard brings about the quantitatively calculable image of the universe. The result was the appearance of an infinite and homogeneous space in which each position lost its own unique meaning as it became nothing but a point in such a space. There, in the space, existed only separated individual beings, like atoms. In such a situation each individual person must face the world as an infinite homogeneous space with faith and reason as separated faculties of the mind, the ground for the validity of both of which he must find in the mind itself, not in the external world. Subject and object are now definitely separated, and paradoxically the scope of the world coincides with that of self-consciousness.

Faith became that of Protestantism, in which God was the internal god that should be found in one's mind by being aware of the sinfulness and the weakness of human nature. In the hierarchically ordered medieval system God existed at the top of the order to which man could reach by way of both faith and reason, through the church as a visible means. But with the order being eroded and dissolved, and with the external world becoming the infinite and homogeneous expanse of space, there was no other way for the evocation of God as the perfect and almighty being than by finding and emphasizing the

imperfection and the powerlessness on the side of man.

Paradoxically the more one realizes the sinfulness in oneself, the surer one can be of his being saved by God.[3] With the change of world view, faith changed its nature. In the hierarchically ordered medieval system as a system of values, one was assured by the system itself of one's being saved by God through faith, staying in one's position in the cosmos, following the way of life formalized according to one's status in the social system, which is enough to show how the faith in the medieval system worked for the control of human desire. Therefore with the dissolution of the cosmos, one lost the way by which to control one's own desire, facing the world with money as the only standard of values and as the incentive of limitless desire.

The emphasis on human weakness and imperfection caused a sense of awe which was necessary to evoke the absolute being, and this sense could work as the most effective way to diminish desire to the minimum and then give full satisfaction to it through the conviction of salvation. This paradoxical working of the mind also appears in Romanticism, but in a different context, after the age of the Enlightenment.

II. The Enlightenment and Romanticism

When each individual faces the infinite and homogeneous space with reason separated from faith, he must use reason methodically, that is, according to the manual for certainty in his own mind. Reason now is the faculty in each individual's mind, while in the hierarchically ordered medieval system reason was the order of the world itself where human reason existed only as a part of it. In the medieval system the certainty of Aristotelian syllogism for knowing the truth of the world was assured by the system itself. But with the dissolution of this system there was nothing in the external world that could ensure the certainty of one's knowledge of it, and so one could not but depend on one's

internal standard for certainty according to which one could proceed step by step.

Bacon's experience was a methodically organized experience the validity of which for knowing the external world was assured only by its procedure. Descartes tried to reduce the phenomena of the external world to the formulas of analytic geometry as the internal truth standard, thinking that through such reduction alone our knowledge of the external world could be certain. However different they may appear from each other in their methods, they are in common in considering the world as a machine by means of which man should improve his welfare in this world. This means that reason, separated from faith, is directed to work only for the development and satisfaction of human desire, not for the restriction of it. Bacon was well aware of this. Thus concerning the "end" of knowledge, he says:

> . . . I would address one general admonition to all; that they consider what are the true ends of knowledge, and that they seek it not either for pleasure of the mind, or for contention, or for superiority to others, or for profit, or fame, or power, or any of these inferior things; but for the benefit and use of life; and that they perfect and govern it in charity.[4]

In Bacon's thought, reason is supposed to work for ends serving the satisfaction of human desire. So he thought it necessary to control human desire by subjecting it to higher ends, such as "the benefit and use of life". In the hierarchically ordered medieval system ends were included in the system itself, among which the end of eternal life was the most important. Bacon's setting of the end of knowledge for the benefit of man's life in this world betrays the process of dissolution itself of the medieval system. Bacon, therefore, attacked Aristotelian syllogism as a useless one, whose validity was only assured by the existence of a hierarchical world order.

It should be noted that Copernicus's system was not supported by

observation, that is, experience, but by the simple regularity of its mathematical expression. This means that the standard of truth for the expression of the reality of the universe was no longer the hierarchical world order, but the rationality of mathematics, though Copernicus still believed in the existence of celestial orbs. Once the mathematical expression was accepted, the qualitatively expressed difference between the celestial and the terrestrial worlds lost its meaning, and the universe was now an infinite and homogeneous space in which matter was scattered as bodies like atoms moving according to the mathematically expressed laws. This is the essence of what we now call "the Newtonian world view", whose mathematical formulation was completed by Newtonian mechanics.

Newtonian mechanics with its universal laws offered the final grounds for belief to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was based on the belief in reason, reason in the individual liberated from tradition and conventions. This reason was considered valid in its two faculties, the faculty to know the world, and the faculty to control desire for the ordering of human relations. Of these, the former was considered as the basis for the latter, as would be shown by Locke's and the Encyclopedists' ideas of knowledge.

Hobbes, though a materialist, shared with the Protestants their pessimistic view on the situation of human desire of his age, thinking that human beings, left in their natural state with the instinct of self-preservation, struggle with one another to bring the society into disorder. But Locke, seeing the fruitful results of the Scientific Revolution, could believe that the human mind, starting from the state of the *tabula rasa*, could discover the way to bring one's interest into harmony with others' by increasing man's knowledge of the world through experience. In the process of the Enlightenment this belief in reason steadily overcomes the pessimism of Hobbes and the Protestants.

Though Newton himself, under the influence of the Cambridge Platonists and unlike Descartes, thought that the universe was filled

with a spiritual power derived from God, he formulated the workings of this power as mathematical laws, on the basis of his definition of space and time as their homogeneous extension. These laws provided a comprehensive system of mechanics which could explain not only the motions on the earth, but also those throughout the universe. So at least in theory it was possible to predict any future event in the universe, including the workings of spiritual forces, i.e., mental phenomena. This possibility completed the Newtonian world view as one of mechanical determinism.

The universe is now thought to be a mathematically designed machine the function of every part of which is known to man. With this knowledge man can make use of the universe as if he used a machine for his welfare, that is, for the satisfaction of his desire. So for human desire the universe is no more than a means, and has no built-in structure of values for the control of it. But the Enlightenment thinking had no other way to answer this question than by depending upon Newton. On this Isaiah Berlin says:

> It was quite natural that people should point to Newton, who had found physics in a similar state, with a great many criss-crossing hypotheses, founded upon a great deal of classical scholastic error. With a very few masterly strokes he had managed to reduce this enormous chaos to comparative order. . . . Surely if this kind of order could be instituted in the world of physics, the same methods would produce equally splendid and lasting results in the worlds of morals, politics, aesthetics, and in the rest of the chaotic world of human opinion . . .[5]

This means that in "the worlds of morals, politics, aesthetics, and the rest of human opinion" which compose our mental world as a system of values, man can find the same mechanical laws as those in the physical world. Just as man's understanding of nature progresses through the knowledge based on Newton's laws, so does his under-

standing of his own nature through which man can control his desire to make the world in order. Thus the belief in reason of the Enlightenment led to the belief in progress through knowledge, which necessarily brought about the idea of the perfectibility of man, such as that of Godwin. But it is ironically suggestive that Godwin's perfectibility remained as an eternal possibility for perfection, that is, relative perfectibility.[6]

In the Newtonian world view thus completed there is now no room for the transcendental area in which to find such absolute value standards as higher causes and objectives, including God. The universe is now an infinite, yet a closed system, because the same laws can be applied throughout it, and its outside is unthinkable. Hume's skepticism and Kant's criticism of reason show that in the Newtonian world there can be no absolute standard of truth. What this situation means to human desire is that as no absolute value standard is possible, all the values in the universe cannot but be relative to each other, and that human desire should be satisfied only by perpetual efforts to produce differences as sources of relative values within a global system which is realized as capitalism.

If the Enlightenment belief in reason based on the Newtonian world view could effectively cope with this paradox lying between infinite human desire and relative values, did the Romantic reaction with its own paradox follow as a necessary process?

III. Romanticism in Coleridge's Aesthetics

Romanticism can be defined as the whole of thoughts which criticize modernization by presenting ways to recover the absolute standard of values in the world. It shares with the Enlightenment the problems caused by modernization proceeding in the Newtonian world view, as Nicholas Roe suggests concerning the life of Coleridge, arguing that to write the life of Coleridge is to write that of "a man who . . . was

himself in quest of the science which would render coherent the contradictions he found in himself and in the universe".[7] Since he could no longer depend upon the reason of the Enlightenment which he called understanding, Coleridge, like other Romantics, resorted to imagination as the highest faculty of the mind:

> 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.[8]

In this definition, the infinity of the absolute being, the I AM, is seen in the eternity of its act of creation, while the absoluteness of the absolute being is seen in its creativity itself as creativity includes the idea of origin as the ground of absoluteness. For the finite mind to touch something absolute it is necessary to have the mental faculty for creation, that is, imagination.

It can also be said that in this scheme, by offering the absolute standard, originality, through its acts of creation, imagination mediates between the individual and the universal, between the finite and the infinite, and between the temporal and the eternal. Then it is natural that of imagination should be required the role of mediating the oppositions brought about by the dissolution of the cosmos, such as those between man and nature, between subject and object, and between consciousness and existence.

From this we can understand that Coleridge's solutions to the problems of his age were essentially of an aesthetic nature, for aesthetics comes from a mental attitude which believes that those insoluble questions arising from the contradictions in the real world can only be solved imaginatively, that is, symbolically by creative acts of imagination. It is in this attitude that to art is given a completely new meaning. In the Christian tradition only God had the faculty of creation, and what man could do in art was to imitate the created,

following the ways formalized in tradition. But now to man is given creativity, and so is originality. Art in our sense comes only from this change of attitude. To us art must be an independent activity liberated from religion and morals.

In the infinite homogeneous space of the Newtonian world view we can find creativity and origin as the ground of absoluteness only in each individual's inner self. Then the meaning of originality transforms into what is equivalent to that of individuality, on which are based both Edward Young's idea of "original composition" and Reynolds' criticism of it,[9] and from which comes the paradox of modern art that individuality is universality.

Coleridge tries to explain the creative nature of imagination on the ground of his idea of self-consciousness. He proposes "SUM or I AM" as the first principle for the construction of his "Dynamic Philosophy", and he tries to express it indiscriminately "by the words, spirit, self, and self-consciousness", saying that a subject "becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself".[10] Only if we consider self-consciousness, the substance of imagination, as the perpetual process of self-construction of the active subject, can we give creativity to it. But we must note that this process is considered to be an inward activity of the mind.

Coleridge tries to give a new meaning to the traditional concept of imitation by distinguishing it from copying, saying:

> If the artist copies the mere nature, the *natura naturata*, what idle rivalry! . . . Believe me, you must master the essence, *natura naturans*, which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man. . . . 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, . . . ; for so only can he hope to produce any work truly natural in the object and truly human in the effect.[11]

Like Schelling, Coleridge recalls the old scholastic distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, and gives it a new meaning by considering the former as nature in the Newtonian world view, and the latter as "nature in the active sense".[12] During the eighteenth century this new attitude to see the depth of nature as a creative process developing from its origin appeared as what Lovejoy called "the temporalizing of the Chain of Being",[13] which led to the idea of evolution, and through which Coleridge could find the creative process as the same absolute value standard in nature as that in man.

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

> . . . this is the true exposition of the rule that the artist must first eloign 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.[14]

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 . . .[15]

As far as the artist's mind is under the control of "the external real", it remains passive to the images of the senses, that is, the appearance of the world, which is filled with various interests arising from human desire. Then "abandoning the external" means to liberate oneself from any particular interest of the world. It is only in this disinterested state of mind that the artist can penetrate into the depth of his inner self.

> 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 Awaking 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!〉 [16]

Only from the depth of his mind where he reaches by taking the attitude of disinterestedness, and where he finds the ground of absoluteness, can the artist produce work which bears both individuality and universality. But it is in this attitude of the artist that we see the ultimate paradox of the Romantic aesthetics.

It is natural that the "sublime" should take the central position in the Romantic aesthetics. The essence of the sublime is a state of mind caused by such negative, and therefore disinterested attitudes towards the external world as solitude, dejection, despondency, and especially awe, like that of the Protestants.

It is also in this aesthetic attitude that Romanticism offers solutions to the problems caused by the contradictions in the real world. This is why they could not help being essentially of an ironical nature, as is shown by Coleridge's failure in his Pantisocracy project. The essence of Romantic irony is the invalidity in the real world of an absolute

standard realized in the world of imagination.

Conclusion: Romanticism and Postmodernism

What we call the "postmodern" situation comes from the skepticism about the Romantic thought that there is any absolute ground in an individual's inner self. It began with Nietzsche, who thought that the fabrication of an absolute value standard in one's self deprives one of the pleasure of life. Nietzsche thought that such a fabrication began with Socrates, but his criticism was directed at the god of Protestantism, the reason of the Enlightenment, and the Romantic imagination, which were actually discovered in our internal world in the process of modernization. Both Nietzsche and Freud deconstructed our inner self, thinking that whatever we find in our inner self is the result of our relations with others, and is, therefore, already mediated by various interests, and is not what originates from there. On this assumption, postmodernism refuses to propose any positive values, and stays in a negative attitude by deconstructing any proposed values, and presenting the strategies for liberation from them.

Modernization is proceeding in our post-postmodern era. With the development of information technology, it is now spreading from America as a globalization which makes the entire world as a single market. Adam Smith, like the Enlightenment thinkers, thought that in the free market individuals act rationally for the satisfaction of their desire, which brings about order in the world by increasing the total amount of wealth. Romanticism criticized this in its aesthetics, by seeking to find the absolute value standard in an individual's inner self. But postmodernism deconstructed this inner self which had been supposed to contain a framework for the control of human desire.

Modernization is irreversibly proceeding, and we can find no other position to cope with it other than these three. But we can at least understand how these three came into being.

Abbreviation

BL S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Showcross, 2 vols, (London, Oxford UP, 1907).

Notes

1. Alexandre Koyré, *Newtonian Studies* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. Erich Fromm, *Fear of Freedom* (London, Routledge, 1960), p. 64.
4. Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration* in *Collected Works of Francis Bacon* Vol. IV. (London, Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 20–21.
5. Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, 1999), p. 24.
6. Mine Okaji, 'The Idea of "Perfectibility of Man"' in *The World of English Romanticism*, ed. M. Okamoto (Tokyo, Seibido, 1982), pp. 66–67.
7. Nicholas Roe, 'Introduction' in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life*, ed. N. Roe (New York, Oxford UP, 2001), p. 21.
8. *BL*, I, p. 202.
9. Tanehisa Otabe, *The Paradox of Art* (Tokyo, The University of Tokyo Press, 2001), pp. 82–94.
10. *BL*, I, pp. 179–183.
11. S. T. Coleridge, 'On Poesy or Art', *BL*, II, p. 257.
12. S. T. Coleridge, *The Philosophical Lectures of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (London, The Pilot Press, 1949), p. 370.
13. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The of Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1936), Ch.IX.
14. S. T. Coleridge, 'On Poesy or Art', *BL*, II, p. 258.
15. Ibid., pp. 258–59.
16. S. T. Coleridge, *The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn, 3 double vols., (Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, 1957–73), 2,2546.