Biographia Literaria: Coleridge's Theory of Imagination

Biographia Literaria is Samuel Coleridge's 'unplanned' masterpiece. However exaggerated J.A. Appleyard's (Author of *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature*, 1965) estimation of the *Biographia* as 'unread and largely unreadable', his general characterization of it as an 'immethodical miscellany' is a fair account of how both critics and readers tend to respond.

Biographia has 'no aesthetic unity', which can be inferred from the history of its conception. According to Coleridge Biographia began as a preface to the editions of poems he was preparing in 1815 and which eventually became *Sybilline Leaves*.
E.L. Greggs Explains:

On 29 July, he announced that the preface to the poems had been extended to 'An autobiographical literaria', containing his opinion opinions on 'Poetry and poetical criticism' and an account of the 'Controversy concerning Wordsworth's Poems and Theory'. A disquisition on the 'powers of association' and on the 'generic' difference between fancy and imagination he did not 'altogether insert'. By 17 Sept., when his work was complete, the 'philosophical Part', which in August he 'meant to comprise in a few Pages', had become 'a sizeable Proportion of the whole'. As a result he suggested a more comprehensive title: 'Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life, Principles, and Opinions, chiefly on the subjects of Poetry and Philosophy'.

The Biographia Literaria was composed at that period of time when his health was most deranged, and his mind most subjected to the influence of bodily disorder.
Central to the narrative is concern about the reconciliation between head and the heart, concern with this reconciliation, in general, moves everything towards a discussion of the imagination; and in spite of its disappointing brevity, Chapter 13 offers central insights into imagination, which is principle of growth and creativity.

Chapter 13 begins with the phrase "On the imagination, or esemplastic power". Oxford dictionary defines the adjective esemplastic as: "moulding into one; unifying"

Coleridge refers to the "esemplastic power of the imagination", "esemplastic" meaning "shaping into One". Imagination- Coleridge's "esemplastic" power is intuitive, unitive, faculty that sees the Whole behind the parts, the One behind the many. Where reason analyzes and reduces into parts, Imagination puts the parts back together into a Whole and takes us to the hidden metaphysical unity behind multiplicity. Fancy, by contrast, is rational and decorative. A similie within a secular humanist poem in which one "part" of the Whole is compared to another "part" of the Whole is an example of such decorative fancy. Imagination is the capacity to image in a creative, Whole-seeking way, and in doing so to perceive the Oneness of the universe.

The "Esemplastic power," in "all its degrees and determinations", is the culmination of Volume I. It had become the Central pillar of Coleridge's investigations from 1800 (or even earlier) until the time of *Biographia*. Yet it was also to be the imagination as differentiated from fancy in a special way, not in the way Wordsworth differentiated them in the 1815 Preface. This is the important point of cohesion for the book as a whole. Coleridge first comes to this point at the end of Chapter 4 and again at the end of Chapter 13. Significantly, these two places mark the "entrance" and "exit" of the philosophical chapters, their beginning and end.

"On the imagination, or esemplastic power"
"***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. 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 re-create; 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."***
(Coleridge, XIII)

Coleridge divides the concept of the imagination into what he refers to as the primary and the secondary imagination. What Coleridge means by the primary imagination is our basic mental capacity to see and organize stimuli from the world around us.

Although Coleridge seems not to have been aware of the analysis of the imaginative or associative power made by Germans like Hissmann in his early history of associationism and Johann Georg Sulzer in his *Allgemeine Theorie der schonen Kunste* (1771-4; 1792-9), he was familiar with all others like Locke, Berkley, Addison and Bacon and others. And all of them were interrelated, almost tangled, in their common sources, and influences. Coleridge thought of himself in short, as one trying to bring order out of what in England, seemed a long and vexed attempt to establish specific concepts and terms for what had been floating in the intellectual atmosphere.

It is hard to say which previous analysis Coleridge is reflecting most in the Biographia. In wording and in concept the distinctions among the function of imagination made by Tetens and Schelling seem the best candidates. But here, as in many cases, if Coleridge had a main source he also had many other sources and his own thoughts as well.

An analysis of the primary and secondary levels of imagination is the only conclusive point Coleridge salvages from the promised "deduction" of that power in Chapter 13. The primary imagination is the power behind what Coleridge elsewhere calls "the mystery of perception". It is "the living Power and prime agent of all human Perception". Its synthetic power operates through the most direct contact of the mind and the nature. From a series of sense images not necessarily visual the primary imagination forms an intelligible view of the world. It is the primary imagination that creates or repeats "in the finite mind" what we do associate, the objects and process of nature, which themselves are products of "the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am". The bit-by bit pattern of sensory information becomes a comprehension of the creation of God. We learn too, the symbols of language, of music, and of facial expressions, of those things created by others, that have merged into everyday experience. The primary imagination is spontaneous, involuntary what Coleridge calls "the necessary imagination". It is a reflex or instinct of the mind and what Kant calls an empirical -as distinct from a transcendental- degree of the imagination. It "unifies" by bringing together sensory data into larger units of understanding, a process that in Coleridge parallel's Kant's "unity of the manifold".

Coleridge uses the term secondary imagination to refer to human ability to transcend this primary organization, to reassemble perceptual elements or fragments and create new meaning. The secondary imagination is basically the creative or poetic imagination.

Coleridge remarks that "in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name 'imagination' to a superior degree of faculty, joined to a superior voluntary control over it", which is another way of saying that the poetic or secondary imagination co-exists with "the conscious will". This wilful and poetic imagination differs "only in degree" from the primary. And in the next chapter (14) he reemphasizes the instigation and control of the will, saying that, in the poet "this power" is first put in action by the will and understanding". Therefore, related to this self- will, a true exercise or exertion, the secondary imagination limits itself to a select number of individuals.

The poetic or secondary imagination becomes the fullest exercise of the self and of its inner powers. It is "free will, our only absolute self", that controls and directs the creative activity of the art. This gives poetry and all human creation a moral dimension, amoral responsibility. The secondary imagination creates new images and symbols and through these it reconciles the self conscious mind to that picture of the world already formed involuntarily and provided by the primary imagination. The process of art joins nature with self conscious mind in one seamless product. The common man, equipped with only the primary imagination, cannot create (although he may appreciate) this complex and richer degree of imaginative vision. This is part of Coleridge's argument against Wordsworth's "rustic" and against the language that rustic use.
"Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language."(Wordsworth 4)

The best part of human language is not a product the primary imagination, but of a "voluntary" act performed by a mind self-consciously aware of its own imaginative potential.

As a "repetition" in the finite mind and operating in conjunction with the "passive remembrance", the primary imagination, the agent of perception, basically produces a copy of what has been created in nature by other individuals. Once we perceive or experience the *Iliad*, for example, we can more or less reproduce it. There's no originality in the primary imagination; it repeats and copies. But the secondary or poetic imagination "dissolves, diffuses and dissipates" what has been perceived "in order to create", "to idealize and to unify". The secondary imagination produces a true imitation, not a mere copy. This distinction holds an essential key to understand Coleridge's theory of productivity and originality in arts.

Coleridge reminds us that the primary and secondary imagination are still of one "kind". They are not independent. The secondary imagination must rely on the primary or "necessary" imagination for its raw materials
Secondary Imagination is also what Jung means by archetypal power, the capacity to echo, perhaps replicate the original *creatio* through the generative power of an image.

"Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association." **(Coleridge, XIII)**

Fancy is what today we call taste or at best aesthetics: the arrangement of form and colour in pleasing proportions.

The difference between imagination and fancy, according to Coleridge, is one of kind rather than degree. During the 17th century, the terms 'imagination' and 'fancy' had almost been used in a synonymous sense. The 18th century accorded a superior sense first to one term and then to the other, but finally, by the end of the century imagination came to be firmly established as the superior term. It was Wordsworth's reading of a poem in manuscript that aroused Coleridge's interest in the problem of imagination and fancy. The poem had a deep impact upon him. Pondering over the reasons for this, he concludes that "fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names, with one meaning, or at furthest, the lower and higher degree of our and the same power." As illustration, he asserts that "Milton had a highly imaginative, Cowley a very fanciful mind".

Coleridge considers fancy to be inferior of the two. He does not see it as a creative power at all. It only combines what it perceives into pleasing shapes. Unlike the imagination it neither fuses nor unifies. It is "the arbitrary bringing together of things that be remote and forming them into unity. Elsewhere, Coleridge describes fancy as "the faculty of bringing together images dissimilar in the main by some one point or more of likeness." In Coleridge's view, fancy is a kind of memory that arbitrarily brings together images, which continue to their separate and individual properties. Coleridge illustrates his views on the difference between fancy and imagination by citing two passages from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. As an example of fancy, he quotes:

"Full gently now she takes him by the hand
A lily prisoned in a goal of snow
On Ivory in an alabaster band
So white a friend engirds so white a fee."

Coleridge points out that in these lines, the images do not interpenetrate into one another. Citing the following lines to illustrate the working of the imagination,

"Look! How a bright star shooteth from the sky
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye."

Coleridge remarks, "How many images and feelings are here brought together without effort and without discord- the beauty of Adonis- the rapidity of the flight- the yearning yet helplessness of the enamoured gazer- and a shadowy, ideal character thrown over the whole." Fancy for Coleridge, is the "drapery" of poetic genius, but imagination is its very soul, which forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

Coleridge's theory of fancy and imagination had to face a barrage of criticisms. Firstly, L.G. Salingar writes: "In Coleridge's original, pantheist scheme of Imagination and Fancy it is difficult to see, however, where Fancy comes in at all. For if we are categorically, 'all one Life,' why should we need a special faculty to recognize as much; and why should this faculty be shared by some races and not by others?

Coleridge's later philosophy removes this objection to some extent (by making the imagination approach the Whole progressively, 'struggle' to reach it); but only to introduce another. For if, as Biographia argues, (Chapter 13) the imagination (and imagination alone) springs from the 'primary Imagination' or power of perceiving, where does Fancy derive from?" Salingar is quite logical. Perception originates in imagination (primary imagination);

and if this is so wherefrom does fancy come from? If we say that fancy derives from perception, then we have to say that there is virtually no difference between imagination and fancy, for the simple reason that, in that case, there is no other spring but (primary) imagination. But we do not understand why Coleridge would not accept this position.

Coleridge's theory of imagination like Wordsworth identifies poets as gifted individuals and separates them from the rest. However, we are left to imagine whether this gift of secondary imagination is innate or can be acquired. Coleridge's theory of imagination also renders a vague difference between fancy and imagination. Furthermore, human faculty of perception and imagination work in tandem and as a single process. It's unnecessary to compartmentalize the creative process of human mind.

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