

CRITICAL CANONS: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF COLERIDGE'S IMAGINATION

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“Where’re I find the good, the true, the fair,
I ask no names. God’s spirit dwelled there,
The union founded undivided three.
Each for itself, and all in each, to see
In man, and nature is philosophy.” 1

The first among the ‘twins’, is undoubtedly Coleridge. Now we have to pick up the big ‘both in genius and in mind’. In criticism as well as in poetry Coleridge stands first. His unlimited knowledge, and his wonderful imagination, his heavenly creative capacity, and everything else did melt to form the greatest poet critic of the world. “There is no figure in the whole history of English Literature, who is so intrinsically fascinating”. 2

“It is Coleridge’s distinction to have been the only significant figure in English literature to unite the three or four professions of poet, Critic, metaphysician, and theologian. Mathew Arnold and T.S. Eliot approach most nearly to his scope, but neither appears to have and Coleridge’s speculative bent”. 3

More than any other English Critic, Coleridge became the focus for the varied currents that together produced the Romantic Movement. Almost all the “Romantic” impulses that found expression during the eighteenth century came to his capacious attention, they affected his development and he theirs. Coleridge had his fingers in all the currents of “romanticism” such as-the medievalism, the general interest is in what is dim and distant in time or place, democratic idealism, the “return to nature”, the leaning towards intro-section-all separate movements whose common ground seems to have been man’s desire for infinite extension of experience.

On being confronted with the common opinion that Coleridge was a great critic one’s first impulse is to ask in what way he was great. The answers which have been given to this question reveal two distinct schools of thought. According to one of them he is to be admired mainly for having made penetrating observation on particular works and authors, according to the other his reputation seems to rest instead on his successful and suggestive treatment of abstract literary problems. The two points of view are not mutually contradictory. They reflect

the preference of those who hold them for either practical or theoretical criticism, and it might even be argued that it is a sign of greatness in a critic to have satisfied so many on each count.

“For six wonderful years he was a poet and one of the immortals. That immortality remains. But he was also, both during the brief culmination of his powers and in the long succeeding period of shattered energy and fragmentary production, a critic of the first rank. In virtue of that faculty along he was not only an expounder but a creator, and, like all creative work, his criticism has a substantive artistic value, as inherent vitality” 4

The body of criticism which he contributed to literature has to be pieced together from fragmentary records, some of it from published writings, some from records of his conversation and notes taken at his lectures. But even so it is of lasting value and interest. What a great artist says about his own art is never negligible. Coleridge was a great literary artist. One whose mastery of his art in practice it was impossible to deny, any more than it was possible to deny his subtlety of intellect and copiousness of eloquence. Coleridge’s criticism was not limited to the theoretical aesthetic and philosophical aspects of his subject. He delivered several series of lectures on poetry and drama. In these, philosophical criticism was mingled with discussions, often details, of individual works. It is a great pity that of all those lectures none was written out for publication by himself. Posterity as retrieved, however a considerable bulk of the material. Coleridge left partial notes, some of them fairly full, others sketchy; friends or reporters took notes, one admirer, J.P. Collier, undertook to preserve complete shorthand reports of some of the lectures. Of all this material the most significant is the criticism of Shakespeare.

In 1795 his political lectures, delivered at Bristol, were published as ‘Concerns ad peplum. Or address to the people’. Here he hardly says anything but politics. In 1796 he published the short-lived periodical ‘The watchman’ in 1809 he published ‘The friend’, a periodical. In 1816 he published ‘The Statesman’s Manual; or the Bible the Best Guide to political skill and foresight’. In 1817 ‘Biographia Literaria’ came out. In 1825 he published ‘Aids to Reflection’. A revised edition of ‘The Friend’ appeared in 1818. In 1830 ‘Constitution of Church and State’ appeared. Apart from these published works the majority of his critical utterances lie in his ‘Note Books’, in various ‘Lectures’, in thousands of ‘Letters’ written to his friends and relatives, ‘Table-talks; in ‘Anima Poetee’ and a bulk of his manuscripts.

For eighteenth century critics, a poem is simply there, and it is the variety or uniformity of human reactions to it that is worth discussing. But with Coleridge, creation is central. There is no hypothesis of the idle reader, or the average readers, in his criticism, corresponding to Johnson’s consensus of informed opinion down the ages. There is just Coleridge whether he is reading Shakespeare or Words Worth or Jeremy Taylor; we are frankly invited to see in them what Coleridge sees in them. There might be no ‘problem of the reader’, at all, so unaware he is of any such thing. But then, for Coleridge a poem is not a machine and you cannot write it off, as Johnson or I.A. Richards would do, by taking it to pieces and showing that it does not work. Coleridge hardly even tells you whether he thinks a poem good or bad. In his own words:

“When no criticism is pretended to, and the Mind in
its simplicity gives itself up to a Poem as to a work of nature, poetry
gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood” 5

One great feature of his criticism is its scope. He busied himself with no one aspect of the subject to the exclusion of others. Gifted with a naturally theorizing and generalized mind, he was

concerned in the first place with general principles and wished to see literary judgment established on foundations more solid and more universal than English thought had known before. Impatient alike with eighteenth-century formalism, with the ‘de gustibus’ critics and the beauty-blemish school, he sought the foundations for Critical judgment in general aesthetic principles that should be applicable to other arts as well as to literature. And beyond this he wished to set the principles of aesthetic within the larger framework of a metaphysical system.

As a critic Coleridge endeavors to discover the nature and origin of all artistic activity. All art originates from imagination, and he examines the nature and function of imagination. While pursuing some of the poems of Wordsworth in the Lyrical Ballads, the idea came to him that fancy and imagination were two different things. Imagination is a creative power in man, while fancy only juxtaposes things according to memory and the laws of association.

There is no other to whom we can more fairly than to Coleridge apply that phrase of Mr. Eliot’s – that “his erudition is essential to his originality”.

Poetry “Calls the whole soul of man into activity”, he said, poets are “Gods of love that tame the chaos”. Activity, creativity, in whatever area of human experience, he sees as the basis of all joy-activity as against passivity – whether in the making of a poem, a critical insight, a social reform, a philosophical reconciliation, or a religious affirmation, for these constitute life itself. Vice-versa, without joy life becomes inert and creation dies. Life must be perpetually recreated. “What we are and what we are about to become” are for him the fundamental and unending questions.

Coleridge once wrote:

“To perceive and feel the beautiful, the pathetic and the sublime in nature, in thought, or in Action-this combined with the power of conveying such perceptions and feelings to the minds and hearts of others under the most pleasurable forms of Eye and Ear-this is poetic genius”. 6

Also in ‘Biographia Literaria’ he writes:

“A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its ‘immediate’ object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part”. 7

This definition regards pleasure, and not instruction or edification, as the goal of poetry. Thus Coleridge sets before us a new ideal of poetry. Critics like Horace, Sir Philip Sidney and Dr. Johnson regarded poetry more as a medium of instruction than as a source of delight. But Coleridge regards pleasure as the primary object of poetry. The truth it imparts comes to us through the medium of pleasure. Coleridge dismissed all the representational theories of art which are based on the concept of “truth to life”, Dr. Johnson, for instance, thinks that the end of literature should be “a just representation of things really existing and actions really performed”. But, according to Coleridge, verisimilitude is not the end of poetry. He lays a greater emphasis on its imaginative quality than on life-likeness. And lastly, poetry, according to Coleridge must combine the parts into a whole as one organic entity.

Thus, Coleridge’s contribution to the theory of poetry is significant. First, he puts an end for good to the age old controversy between instruction and delight being the end of poetry, and establishes that pleasure is the end of poetry, and that poetry has its own distinctive pleasure.

Secondly, he explodes the neo-classical view of poetry as imitation, and shows that it is an activity of the imagination which in turn is a shaping and unifying power, which dissolves, dissipates, and creates, Thirdly, he shows that in its very nature poetry must differ from prose. He controverts words worth's view that 'rhyme and meter' are merely super-added, and shows that they are an organic part of a poem, in the real sense of the word.

To literary criticism Coleridge gave a deep philosophic basis. His critical theories are based on metaphysics and psychology. He brought poetry closer to philosophy, and made criticism a part of philosophical enquiry. To quote I.A. Richards: "I assume that Coleridge's great merit as a critic a merit unique among English critics-is the strenuous persistence with which he reflected philosophically upon criticism"⁸

"The distinction of Coleridge, which puts him head and shoulders above every other English Critic, is due to his introduction of a philosophical method of criticism".⁹

At his best, both in criticism and in creation, he was able to take the materials of inner experience and to objectify them into works or fragments of truth or art-even in such poem as, 'Kubla Khan' which seems to have appeared out of air. Similarly 'The Ancient Mariner' clearly contains a large element of personal allegory-of fear, and guilt, and loneliness.

In Coleridge's own words

"All speculative truths begin with a postulate, even the truths of geometry. They all suppose an act of the will, for in the moral being lies the source of the intellectual. The first step to knowledge, or rather the previous condition of all insight into truth, is to dare commune with our very and permanent self"¹⁰

English criticism before Coleridge consisted either in passing structures on the basis of personal prejudices, or in the application of fixed rules intellectual analysis.

Coleridge goes to discover the creative power behind all art and literature. Thus he introduced a new movement in English criticism. His entire criticism rests on emotion and reveals the principle of imagination at work. The critics what? Function lies in examining this seminal principle of imagination and its expression in the form of literature. Coleridge's practical criticism reveals his unique power of critical analysis and his ability to discover literary beauty. Even where critics normally fail to find it. This ability we can see, when he critically examines Words Worth's poetry, in 'Biographia Literaria'.

Coleridge's critical theories have proved influential in a variety of ways, especially in our own time, even though, his interpreters often disagree widely with each other and find mutually incompatible positions in the meter's work-that perhaps in a measure of the seminal quality of Coleridge's mind.

It was Coleridge who, finally for the first time, resolved the age old problem of the relation between the form and content of poetry, though his philosophic inquiry into the nature and value of poetry, he established that a poem, is an organic whole, and that its form is determined by its content, and is essential to that content. Thus meter and rhyme, he showed, are

not merely ‘pleasure super-added’, not merely something superfluous which can be dispensed with, not mere decoration but essential to that pleasure which is the true poetic pleasure.

Similarly, his theory of ‘Willing Suspension of Disbelief’, is now universally accepted as correct, and the controversy on the subject has been finally set at rest.

Coleridge’s influence is largely a twentieth century one. He is a whole movement in himself, the first and last of his line, the one English critic to try, and to go on trying to apply Kantian aesthetics to the past and present of English letters.

“Perhaps there is something perverse about a professional pundit who had so little to say that was comprehensible to his own century; but a hundred years later, his manuscripts, as they belatedly see print, seen among the richest of our capital assets. They are the relics of a mind passionately in love with fee inquiry, concentrated and disciplined in its determination to decipher the secret of poetic discourse”. 11

Thus with his published and unpublished work, Coleridge enriched literary criticism, and himself became the greatest critic of the world. He is the bell ringer, of philosophic criticism, who is up first to call others to the church of literary criticism. His fame will last as long as literature and criticism last.

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