SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE’S BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Coleridge (1772-1834) coauthored with Wordsworth the famous Lyrical Ballads. A distinguished poet and critic, his Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions (1817) is one of the most significant treatises on the nature of poetry and the poet.

2. “Coleridge clearly exemplifies the shift in critical focus in the early nineteenth century, from the poem to the character of the poet, from the rules and the conventions of poetry to the activity of poem-making,” Kaplan and Anderson write (258).

II. BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA: CHAPTER XIV

1. In relating the origins of Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge in this chapter employs the MIMETIC APPROACH since he delineates the two distinct subject matters and incidents which he and Wordsworth were to imitate.

   Coleridge says that the power of poetry to be twofold: That is, it can arouse reader sympathy by “faithful adherence to the truth of nature” (258) and by “giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination” (258).

   Wordsworth was to assume the first task by rendering the familiar as marvelous and beautiful, while Coleridge was to accept the second task of making the unfamiliar credible.

(1) Coleridge’s poems “should be directed to persons and characters supernatural or at least romantic” but would be presented with such “a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (258).

(2) Wordsworth would take an opposing approach; his “subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life,” but he would “give them “the charm of novelty” so that they would “excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural” (258).
2. In this most memorable of all critical phrases—“to produce . . . the willing suspension of disbelief [in the reader] for the moment which constitutes poetic faith”—Coleridge moves into the AFFECTIVE domain. In essence, he contends that a reader picks up every literary work knowing it is fiction (that is, disbelieving that it is reality), but the reader willingly suspends this disbelief while reading in order to gain the pleasure which the literary work promises. This suspension of disbelief is the “poetic faith” which every reader must accord an author, until the author through the work violates this faith.

3. Coleridge then gives his definition of a poem:

   (1) This definition first uses the AFFECTIVE THEORY: A poem seeks to produce “immediate” “pleasure” in the reader, not to teach a “truth” (261). This assertion runs counter to all of the critics we have read since Horace, including Wordsworth.

   (2) The second part of the definition uses the OBJECTIVE THEORY: A poem has “organic unity,” a conception, the editors states, which “harken[s] back to Aristotle” (257). Organic unity means that all of the parts of a poem must fit together as the parts of an organism fit together, where, if you remove one part, the organism dies.

4. “A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth” [AFFECTIVE] (261).
   Such a “legitimate poem . . . must be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement” [OBJECTIVE] (261).

5. To Coleridge, the essence of poetry is not found in the Objective or Affective approaches. Rather it is found in what goes on in the mind of the poet—the EXPRESSIVE approach.
   Thus, Coleridge states, “What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution to the other” (262).
   To Coleridge the true poet is characterized by “poetic genius” (262), what he later calls “poetic IMAGINATION” (262). Coleridge then describes what goes on in the poet’s mind when a poem is being created.
   Imagination, he says, “sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet’s own mind” (262).
   The “poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity. . . . He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination” (262).
   “Imagination . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and of freshness, with old and familiar objects . . . and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature . . .” (262).
Imagination is “the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole” (263)

III. CHAPTER XIII

1. In Chapter 13, Coleridge divides the Imagination into two parts: the Primary Imagination and Secondary Imagination.

2. Most critics find this distinction less significant than the words he uses to suggest how poetic Imagination works to create a poem’s organic unity. Coleridge writes that poetic imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; . . . it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) [being imitated] are essentially fixed and dead” (263).

3. The idea here is that everything is the world is “dead” (263), and only the poet’s Imagination can bring aspects of the world alive, which is the meaning of the word which Coleridge uses, “vital” (263).

4. The discussion of Fancy and Imagination is Coleridge’s attempt to distinguish and define those “faculties” that are the source of all mental activity, including the creative.

5. He dismisses Fancy as the mere shuffling of sense data and memory by means of one’s talent; such mechanical shuffling produces creatures not found in nature, such as unicorns.

6. Imagination he conceives of according to the Kantian distinction between the Verstand (understanding of familiar perceptions and concepts) and Vernunft (direct apprehension of universal truths).

7. The Verstand faculty is possessed by every human being, who intuitively realizes the oneness of an object (automobile, house) or a concept (New York City, General Motors).

8. The Vernunft faculty is a superior intuitive power that conceives of the oneness of universals (truth, God).

9. Corresponding to the Verstand is the Primary Imagination, and to the Vernunft, the Secondary Imagination.

10. The Secondary Imagination is the creative gift possessed by poetic genius.
IV. CHAPTER XV

1. In this chapter, Coleridge through his examination of two of Shakespeare’s poems is seen as the practical critic doing, what he terms, “practical criticism” (263).

2. However, in his comments on Shakespeare, Coleridge will further explain or reinforce some of his main ideas about the poetic process. Two stand out, both relating to the poet’s mind.

(1) Coleridge contends that poetic genius is basically inborn. A poet’s “imagination” “may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learned. It is in these that “poeta nascitur non fit [The poet is born not made]” (264). [EXPRESSIVE]

(2) The poet must be a philosopher: “No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher” (267).

V. CHAPTER XVII

1. In this chapter Coleridge attacks Wordsworth’s idea that the “language” of poems should be “taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life” (269) [OBJECTIVE THEORY about what type of language should be used in a poem].

2. Coleridge attacks Wordsworth’s assumption that “the shepherd-farmers in the vales of Cumberland and Westmoreland” got their language from being close to nature. He said that they probably picked it up from “religious EDUCATION, which has rendered few books familiar, but the Bible and the liturgy or hymn book” (270).

3. Coleridge asserts that, unlike Wordsworth, he did not believe “every man” is likely to be improved by a country life or by country labors” (271).

4. Coleridge then argues that a “rustic’s language” is typically so barren that it can “convey” only “fewer and more indiscriminate” ideas than an educated person (275).

5. The “rustic, from the more imperfect development of is faculties, and from the lower state of their cultivation, aims almost solely to convey insulated facts, either those of his scanty experience or his traditional belief; while the education man chiefly seeks to discover and express those connections of things . . . from which some more or less general [universal] law is deducible” (275). Furthermore, “the distinct knowledge of an uneducated rustic would furnish a very scanty vocabulary” (275).

6. Coleridge then questions whether, given the limitations of most uneducated rural people, their “language . . . could be transferred to any species of poem, except the drama” (277); in drama, Coleridge’s implication is, such colloquial language could be imitated in order to characterize a rustic as comical.