

# Coleridge's Criticism

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## Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to explore Coleridge's critical potentialities and significant contributions to literary theory and criticism. The first question that will be stressed here is the reasons, conscious and unconscious alike, that have driven a leading romantic poet of his caliber to shift from verse writing to devote his time almost exclusively to criticism, public culture, religion or politics. Of equal interest is the nature of his critical enterprise whether theoretical or practical and its intellectual, epistemological and artistic foundations. The final section is a general view of the impact his critical writings have left on the literary scene and the different reactions writers hold toward his practices.

**Keywords:** Coleridgean phenomenon, Criticism, Conception of Poetry, Literary theory, Defamiliarization, Absenting, Aesthetic pleasure, Signifiers and signifieds

*Reviewers are usually people who could have been poets, historians, biographers, if they could. They have tried their talents at one thing or another and have failed; therefore they turn critics.*

*Coleridge*

## 1. An introduction to Coleridge

### 1.1 Introduction

S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834) belongs to the long list of writers in western literature whose writings combine the creative and critical faculties --Dryden, Pope, Dr. Johnson, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Arnold, Wilde, Shaw, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Auden, Koestler, Zola, Ibsen ... etc. In his study of this phenomenon in literature, Eliot reminds us of the inextricable relation between the two activities when he states that "the larger part of the labor of an author in composing his work is critical labor; the labor of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing" and that "many creative writers" (and Eliot himself and Coleridge are at their head) "have a critical activity which is not all discharged into their work" (Note 1) At a certain stage in his life, Coleridge worked as a critical reviewer for *The Critical Review*. He tells us about the "terrible burden, having been an hireling in *The Critical Review*." (Note 2) But there will be a time in the foreseeable future when his creative ability begins to wane, or that is what he says anyway, and it is this critical faculty that proves to be the last stronghold he can lean on. In contrast to many other writers who have practiced the creative and critical activities concurrently, Coleridge engages a distinct position here in that he exclusively devotes his energy to one faculty at a time. Another factor can be added here is the striking variety and width of his knowledge and interests and the incompatible reactions he has aroused. Coleridge is known, as Holmes rightly puts it, for his "enormous reading, his knowledge of classical and European literature, his scientific interests.. (Note 3)."

### 1.2 Coleridge the poet and the critic

Such is his erudite and wide-ranging mind that a scholar of great reputation like George Saintsbury chooses Coleridge's name to be aligned with those of Aristotle and Longinus as "the great critics." (Note 4)

Any passing glance at Coleridge's verse and criticism testifies to the validity of the above-quoted impassioned statements. In his own poems he casually raises many critical questions about the nature of imagination, dream,

creative writing and self-introspection. In his "Apologia pro Vita sua" (1800), for instance, there is an interesting introspection of the poetic process which will be further elaborated in other poems. The critical tone of the following lines is self-evident and spares us the effort of further explicating:

**The poet in his lone yet genial hour  
Gives to his eyes a magnifying power  
Or rather he emancipates his eyes  
From the black shapeless accidents of size  
In unctuous cones of kindling coal,  
Or smoke up wreathing from the pipe's trim bole  
His gifted ken can see**

**Phantoms of sublimity.** (Note 5)

Another example is his controversial poem "Kubla Khan" (1798) which, for all its extravagant images and surrealist visions, does talk about a critical view of the nature of the artist, dream and imagination. It runs as follows:

**To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the Palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes under holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.** (Note 6)

The nature of inspiration and creativity presented here has been a favorite topic for classical writers, particularly Plato. To be sure, "Kubla Khan" has its unmistakable starting-point in Plato's *Ion* where the artist (the poet) is described in similar terms, "these Melody-Poets pen those beautiful Songs of theirs, only when they are out of their sober Minds. But as soon as they proceed to give Voice and Motion to those Songs, adding to their Words the Harmony of Musick and the Measure of Dance, they are immediately transported; and possessed by some Divine Power, are like the Priestesses of Bacchus, who...no longer draw Water, but Honey and Milk out of the Springs and Fountains." (Note 7) This is a roundabout way of saying that the creative process is a curious and ambiguous phenomenon where the writer or the poet, if you will, is both conscious and half-conscious of what he is doing. It will be recapitulated succinctly by Eliot's statement already given.

The interrelation or interaction between the creative and critical voices is a source of unease for Coleridge as he has apprehensions that the final outcome could be detrimental to his final achievement, "I hope, Philosophy and Poetry, will not neutralize each other, and leave one an inert mass." (Note 8) In Coleridge's case, such apprehensions are justifiable and legitimate as it is obvious for any discerning reader of his complete works that the critical faculty virtually eclipses the creative one and often thrives at its expense. Hence the dedication of his full time to criticism and its controversies, away from the distracting imaginative flights of verse and its formal constrictions.

### *1.3 Coleridge's shift to prose writings and criticism*

Are good poets necessarily successful critics? Arthur Symons raises this ticklish question, depending on the illuminating precedent of Coleridge and Baudelaire? (Note 9) No doubt the translator or the critic of a particular field is expected to have a first-hand experience in it and full awareness of its mechanism and practices. Only through such a comprehension of the text in question can one achieve the critical task properly. But as far as poetry is concerned, its practice may turn into a constricting, limiting force rather than being a merit. This is simply because of the fact that the practitioner / critic of poetry may be tempted to judge other poems according to his own practice of poetry and his own criteria of what to be presented in poetry. Or worse still; he might have some hidden sense of jealousy towards certain texts he wishes to have written himself. Hence the indiscriminate

and biased judgments of poems and poets one often comes across in the criticism of practicing poets. Coleridge is one of these as will be shown in due course.

Coleridge's gradual shift to prose writings and criticism is a fertile field for speculations and guessing, particularly the possibility that this critical activity could be some sort of substitution or compensation for the loss of poetic inspiration and creativity. Here it is apt to recall Coleridge's own confession that in writing the *Biographia Literaria*, he sought "a refuge from bodily pain and mismanaged sensibility in abstruse researches." (Note 10) Biographical data (particularly the dates of the publication of his famous poems "The Ancient Mariner" (1797), "Kubla Khan" (1798), "The Nightingale" (1798) and "Dejection" (1802) betray a dwindling of his poetic ability at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coleridge himself helps us a lot about this matter when he tells us about his poetic incapacity or even sterility, "The poet is dead in me". Coleridge told Godwin in 1801, "As to Poetry, I have altogether abandoned it ... being convinced that I never had the essentials of poetic genius, and that I mistook a strong desire for original power." (Note 11) Rare is Coleridge's courage in admitting this creative cul-de-sac especially when we remember in the history of English literature many writers who have this problem but are always anxious to avoid mentioning this defeat and keep reiterating their former achievements. Coupled with this is another intellectual cause which proves to be no less painful. It is his religious uncertainty which is expressed in poems like "Human life: On the Denial of Immortality" where his Satreian skepticism is openly disclosed:

**0 Man ! Thou vessel purposeless, unmeant,  
Yet drone — hire strange of phantom purposes!  
Surplus of Nature's dread activity  
Blank accident! nothing's anomaly !**

This is the religious crisis in Coleridge's life at its peak. It is this which reveals to him "the unfathomable hell within" (Note 12), to use his own description. The serious attempt to find an answer to these ontological questions encourages him to pursue philosophical and intellectual texts rather than simply devoting himself to verse-writing only. Given this painful situation he finds himself in, it is logical to infer that the pursuit of intellectual and philosophical interests becomes a must, an inevitable path and a sole option. An additional reason is his opium-addiction and its repercussions of physical pain and financial straits. So, what he calls "an interim report" (Note 13) serves to gratify his financial needs and release the surplus of intellectual activity. Finally in this regard, it is necessary to refer to a more general cause that does not apply only to Coleridge's case since it is a generic problem, pertaining to the particularity of the creative faculty as a whole. It is what the archetypal Canadian critic, Northrop Fry, specifies as the intrinsic "muteness" of all arts, verbal or plastic, while criticism is the only field that is "articulate." (Note 14) Indeed, there are many and disparate things that could be raised and "articulated" in criticism while in creative literature they seem out of place or irrelevant. Hence the "silence" of many creative works, so to speak, as a result of the painful recognition that they are intrinsically inarticulate. (Note 15) There is always an unbridgeable gap between the object and the symbol as far as creative literature is concerned. Conversely, the vast space and infinite field of criticism is Coleridge's last and most rewarding resort of finding vent for all those potentialities of philosophical speculations and intellectual perceptions and insights that have been gathering momentum in his restless and hyper-sensitive ego.

## **2. Coleridge's Relationship with Wordsworth**

### *2.1 The personal and artistic relation between the two romantic poets*

"That Coleridge's name is often associated with Wordsworth's not only through intellectual and artistic rapprochement (the two collaborated in writing *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798) but also through domestic affairs (Coleridge's sweetheart and wife, Sara Hutchinson, being Wordsworth's sister-in-law) is one of the memorable and rewarding coincidences in literature. This relation will be crucial in coloring his life with alternating fits of euphoria and depression and the development of his writing. Indeed, it is a relation that has provided in its fluctuations and mutations the mainstream of his criticism with respect to poetry, the theory of poetic language and Wordsworth's position as a poet and a theorist. Coleridge's critical arguments about Wordsworth represent polar opposites in proportion to the degree of affection or estrangement tying the two. For all his claims of pseudo scientific objectivity, Coleridge's judgments of literary products in question remain highly idiosyncratic and subject to his own emotional and psychological status. There was a time in which Coleridge saw Wordsworth as a genius and mentor in creative and critical practices. But passions and literary envies play havoc in such a relation so that the personal and impersonal get confused and interwoven. Wordsworth's relation with Sara Hutchinson and her preference of Wordsworth to Coleridge or even the suspicion that she is sexually

attached"(Note 16) to him is a turning- point in the two men's attitudes. Coleridge refers to this problem in his notes "I knew the horrid phantasm to be a mere phantasm and yet what anguish, what gnawings of despair, what throbbings and lancinations of positive jealousy." (Note 17) This has a wide-ranging effect on Coleridge's psychological and artistic status as well as his later literary own productivity. There is a growing sense of inferiority when compared with Wordsworth's achievement. He tells Francis Wrangham "that Wordsworth is a great, true Poet — I am only a kind of a Metaphysician." (Note 18) But criticism can be utilized as useful means of attaining a status that can match Wordsworth, let alone eclipse him in the range, depth, and influence. Critical writing here is associated with deep, half-articulate motives for self-assertion in an unequal if not desperate conflict.

There is much to be said about this relation between the two men and its formidable impact on Coleridge's transition to criticism and cultural and religious studies. When the two romantic poets and critics (Wordsworth and Coleridge) collaborated in their *The Lyrical Ballads*, their lines of thinking, or rather Coleridge's critical perceptions of Wordsworth's poetry and criticism were similar and had a lot in common. Indeed, Coleridge at first does not hide his great admiration of Wordsworth's genius. At this stage, it is not surprising to see Coleridge's striking celebration and glorification of his friend's achievement. Here Coleridge confers the apotheosis on Wordsworth's writing as it puts in practice what Coleridge deems as essential in poetry: the proper synthesis between what is factual and imaginative, circumstantial and eternal, rational and intuitive:

**It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth of height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations .** (Note 19)

Moreover, there is in Wordsworth's literary practice a great extent of originality as Coleridge cogently argues. Apart from mixing the rationalistic and intuitive elements in his poetry, Wordsworth seems to Coleridge's sympathetic critical view as one of the few writers who could produce philosophical poetry, "Wordsworth is a Poet, a most original Poet — he no more resembles Milton than Milton resembles Shakespeare: he is himself and I dare affirm that he will hereafter be admitted as the first & great philosophical Poet . . ." (Note 20) The truth of the matter is that Coleridge's initial maxims, formulations and introspective jottings are tinged by Wordsworth's views of the poetic theory. Take for instance, Coleridge's rationalization of the creative process which combines what is conscious and deliberate with the unconscious and inspired:

**He (the poet) must out of his own mind create forms according to the severe laws of the intellect, in order to generate in himself the co-ordination of freedom and law, that involution of obedience in the prescript, and the prescript in their impulse to obey, which assimilates him to nature, and enables him to understand her. 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.** (Note 21)

## 2.2 Wordsworth and Coleridge Conception of Poetry

Wordsworth's often-quoted definition of poetry runs as follows: it is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility" and Coleridge could only substitute tranquility by "absenting".

The striking subjectivity of Coleridge's criticism is felt through his general preferences or judgments and his critical reactions to Wordsworth's writings in particular. The above-mentioned statements that highlight the best side of Wordsworth's gift turn out to be short- termed. His quarrel with Wordsworth that coincides with his journey to Germany (1798) and its formidable consequences on his thinking show that the incubatory stage of his criticism is over and that now he considers himself as a full-fledged critic. Since then things have began to take a new turn. Thus, the revolutionary aspects of Wordsworth's poetry are reconsidered and harshly attacked while the whole experiments of *The Lyrical Ballads* seem now as simply "an unmitigated failure." (Note 22) Worse still, he implicitly charges Wordsworth with plagiarism since he calls Wordsworth's preface "half a child of my brain." (Note 23) Gradually, the glittering and lovely image he has often presented of Wordsworth's achievement starts to vanish and is replaced by a characteristically unfavorable, if not hostile attitude. Thus Coleridge writes in a letter in 1811 describing Wordsworth as the supreme example of "the artist who lost faith in the imagination as an ultimate value and created a poetry which avoids reliance upon it." (Note 24) It is this mingling between the personal and impersonal that prompts the critic Abrams to conclude that the disagreement between the two men "lies in fundamentals, not in the details." (Note 25) This is true, but these "fundamental" differences could have been overlooked if they had been on friendly terms as the earlier writings about

Wordsworth have testified.

### 2.3 *The difference of opinion between the two writers*

But the difference of opinion between the two writers (and this is foregrounded here as it engages a great space in the *Biographia Literaria*) does not stem only from idiosyncratic and personal reasons if we recall that Coleridge's critical insight has been sharpened by his philosophical readings of German philosophers like Kant, Schlegel and Fichte. Obviously, there is an ideological and methodological basis for appreciating or depreciating the literary text even though Coleridge himself does not always abide by his own principles and tenets. Discussing Wordsworth's Preface, he writes to Southey, "I rather suggest that somewhere there is a radical difference in our critical opinions concerning poetry." He elaborates these differential matters between them when he scrutinizes Wordsworth's theory of imagination and finds it inadequate "is it not the less true that Fancy, as she is an active, is also, under her own laws and in her own spirit, a creative faculty? Worse still, Wordsworth indicates not only that fancy is creative, but that imagination is "associative" both powers alike serve to modify, to create, and to associate." (Note 26) Apart from the minimizing space given to imagination in Wordsworth's writings, Coleridge raises a further serious objection against his theory of the language proper to be used in poetry. Wordsworth's definition of the poet as an ordinary man speaking an ordinary, unadorned language is memorable. In his "Poetic language and the language of Ordinary Men" Coleridge brings home the fact that Wordsworth's own actual practice of the language is far from being ordinary and he virtually contradicts himself. As he puts it, when I turn to the following stanza in "The Thorn":

**At all times of the day and night  
This wretched woman thither goes  
And she is known to every star,  
And every wind that blows:  
And there, beside the thorn, she sits;  
When the blue day-lights in the skies;  
Or frosty air is keen and still;  
And to herself she cries,  
Oh misery Oh misery!**

and compare this with the language of ordinary men . . . I am reminded of the sublime prayer and hymn of praise, which Milton . . . presents as a fair specimen of common extemporary devotion." (Note 27) Thus, the formal qualities of Wordsworth's poetry which he has often praised as exemplifying the tenets of romantic movement of which Coleridge has been an active part turn into something else, a serious drawback. Criticism as practiced by Coleridge can not be separated from his psychological status and idiosyncrasy at the time of writing the statement and judgment since his own criteria never cease shifting and modifying in accordance with his own biases and views at the time of writing them.

### 3. Coleridge's Criticism

In Coleridge's practical criticism of Shakespeare's poetic language and dramatic characters, one can get a better glimpse of the characteristics of his critical writings. The objectivity Eliot recommends in his description of the real critic "a literary critic should have no emotion except those immediately evoked by a work of art" (Note 28) is not always found in his criticism. In dealing with Shakespeare's characters, Coleridge sometimes allows himself to have full empathy or identification with the character in question and does not maintain the distance that has to be kept between the writing subject and the material given. His acknowledgement that he himself has "a smack of Hamlet" (Note 29) is too well-known and recurrent a statement to be elaborated further. The reason for Coleridge's admiration of Hamlet's character is a matter of personal predilection or idiosyncrasy. It is a point that needs to be verified critically but Coleridge does not feel bound to support his claims except that which appeals to him. The greatness of Hamlet, so runs Coleridge's argument, lies in the fact Shakespeare here "intended to portray a person in whose view the external world, and all its incidents and objects, were comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind. Hamlet beheld external things in the same way that a man of vivid imagination, who shuts his eyes, sees what has previously made an impression on his organs." (Note 30) not this a self-reflection of the critic himself in his ceaseless shutting his eyes about the painful realities of his domestic and public life rather than the situation of the dramatis persona? Indeed, it is this particular trait in Coleridge's criticism that debilitates a lot of his critical arguments and inevitably arouses apprehensions as regards their objectivity. He is

nowadays viewed as representing the contrast to Dr. Johnson or Dryden in that he represents a personal and particular, rather than a general, sensibility when he speaks for his ideal reader," His criticism tends to be about himself; sometimes it is all too literally." (Note 31) Be that as it may, it is arguments of this sort that render Coleridge's criticism psychological as he dabbles here in one of the tricky and murky areas in literature, "the Mona Lisa of literature", in Eliot's phrase. (Note 32) Therefore, Coleridge's criticism betrays a careful synthesis between "the psychological and metaphysical" (Note 33) which represents a persistent dilemma. Coleridge himself hints at this particular point since he is after all his own critic when he specifies the ingredients of his own criticism as lying in the blend between two realms "metaphysics and psychology have long been my hobby-horse" (Note 34) His psychological interests date back to the time when "he came under the spell of the associationist psychology of David Hartley and David Hume and their mechanistic view of the formation of human character and personality." (Note 35)

However, he undertakes to fulfill a hard task here, i.e., to rectify many fallacies pertaining to one of the great names in literature, i.e., to give evidence that "Shakespeare (is) no mere child of nature." (Note 36) The intellectual and psychological side of Shakespeare's achievement embedded in his statements drives Coleridge to give very uncommon and egotistic conclusions, "I am deeply convinced that no man, however wide his erudition, however patient his antiquarian researches, can possibly understand, or be worthy of understanding the writings of Shakespeare." (Note 37) The tone of self-complacency and excessive pride is too obvious. But his own judgments of Shakespeare's writing do not substantiate these claims and sometimes run counter to them. Consider the following example in his comment on the language of Shakespeare in his "Venus and Adonis", Coleridge finds that Shakespeare writes "as if he were of another planet, claiming you to gaze on the movements of Venus and Adonis as you would on the twinkling dances of two vernal butterflies." (Note 38) Here, criticism does not fully elucidate; rather it becomes itself a poetic piece instead of serving and clarifying another. What is noteworthy here is that Coleridge's own identification with the material discussed is projected on what he sees. Shakespeare's success in creating memorable characters like Hamlet, Lear or Othello is due to the trait in Coleridge's disposition, the identification with the dramatic personae. In Othello's famous lines,

**Let him do his spite:  
My services, which I have done the signori,  
Shall out tongue his complaints. T'is yet to know,  
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,  
I shall promulgate, I fetch my life and being  
From men of royal siege ... (I, ii, 16-21)**

Coleridge has the following to say, "I ask where was Shakespeare to observe such language as this? If he did observe it, it was with the inward eye of mediation upon his nature: for the time he became Othello, and spoke as Othello, in such circumstances, he must have spoken." (Note 39) This contradicts his views of Shakespeare as the writer who keeps his personal self aloof from his writings "Shakespeare is the Spinozistic deity an omnipresent recreativeness." (Note 40) The yardstick in assessing Shakespeare's success, as has become evident by now, is the skillful use of imagination in both fictional character and writer. Coleridge judges Mercutio's character in *Romeo and Juliet* in accordance with the degree of "feeling" and "poetic nature" manipulated. Once again the great extent of subjectivity is evident in his assessment of this character "He is a man possessing all the elements of a poet: the whole world was, as it were, subject to his law of association . . . This faculty, moreover, is combined with the manners and feelings of a perfect gentleman, himself unconscious of his powers. By his loss, it was contrived that the whole catastrophe of the tragedy should be brought about." (Note 41) This is an indirect way of saying that the whole play is defective as the minor character outweighs the protagonist, which is not the case as any fair reading or assessment of the play shows. Elsewhere, Coleridge identifies Shakespeare's success as a great dramatist in the synthesis which he deems indispensable for any successful literary creation: keen observation of the factual and imaginative faculty that assimilates anything in its workshop and changes it into a lasting creation. Again he sees in Shakespeare's achievement a struggle between the intellectual and imaginative, a projection of his own status as an artist "the creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other. At length in the drama they were reconciled and fought each other with its shield before the breast of the other." (Note 42) Although written in prose, a statement of this sort betrays the highly poetic latent in Coleridge and definitely shows that prose is not always functional as he states: it can be enjoyed for its own sake, not for anything beyond it.

## 4. Coleridge's Theoretical Views

### 4.1 Coleridge as a prominent figure in literary theory and criticism

Leaving aside his practical criticism, we now turn to his theoretical views which have established his name as one of the prominent figures in literary theory and criticism. Here his theoretical findings and meditations follow his own intellectual bent, painful existential crises and the assimilation of the aesthetics of German philosophy. As a theorist, Coleridge's notes, marginalia, lectures, published works, especially his *Bibliographia Literaria* and studies of Shakespeare, cover a variety of topics, such as, the nature of the mind, imagination and fancy, the nature of words and their effect on the creative mind. These interests run counter to the tenets of neo-classicism and its postulates of logic, reason and balance. We have already seen part of the heated dispute with Wordsworth which is basically ascribed to the minimizing of imagination's role in Wordsworth's poetry and criticism. Indeed the principle of imagination and nature of the mind and creativity engage a great part in Coleridge's critical theory. Modern critics like I.A. Richards have adopted and celebrated this Coleridgean principle for the prime value it carries for critical studies. Indeed he has devoted the main corpus of one of his books to point out the intellectual and psychological grounds of Coleridge's writings.

### 4.2 Coleridge's contributions to literary theory

One of Coleridge's significant contributions to literary theory is his view of the imagination and the way it is conceptualized. It is worthwhile to note that this foregrounding of imagination can be taken as a demarcation line between his thinking and those of Aristotle or the neoclassicists, particularly his emphasis on the "unique laws proper to the work of art so that no predetermined code can wholly deal with it." (Note 43) Coleridge's concept of the imagination covers a wide area of disciplines - -- aesthetics, psychology, philosophy, metaphysics . . etc. What is characteristic here is his concept of the imagination and its difference from "fancy." He puts the matter this way:

**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 external act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination, 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", in order to recreate.**

**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 which we express by the word CHOICE** (Note 44)

It is evident here that the priority Coleridge gives to imagination and what it can offer to the literary work is a pretty central issue. Whether it is primary or secondary, imagination is, after all, a "re-creating" power while "fancy" is much inferior in that it is fixed. The difference between the two is expressly put in Appleyard's phrase, "Imagination is the Modifying Power while Fancy the aggregating power." (Note 45) Here it is necessary to point out that the imaginative faculty is not a sufficient condition for the existence of poetry as "there are other uses of the imagination which are not poetic." (Note 46) It goes without saying that Coleridge's manipulation of imagination and its vital role is a rewording and successful manipulation of Kant's views in his philosophical books. For instance, the German philosopher in *Critique of Judgment* has already highlighted this issue when he states that "the imagination has significance in its own right, showing the poetic use of the act of imagination in creating a beautiful object in art and in our aesthetic judgment of a beautiful object in nature." (Note 47) Significant and indispensable as it is, this imagination should not be left unbridled; otherwise there would be a state of anarchy. What is needed is the complementary faculty of "reason" which helps to keep the imagination "to remain undamaged even in its defeat." (Note 48)

### 4.3 Coleridge's definition of aesthetic pleasure

This Coleridgean contribution to literary theory can only be appreciated and given its due right when one thinks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century new criticism and its basic tenets portended and foreshadowed by Coleridge's intuitive thinking. In fact many formulations and rubrics of this criticism capitalize very much on his theories, knowingly or unknowingly. A relevant point here is Coleridge's emphasis on "pleasure" that will pave the way for modern aesthetics. In fact the principle of pleasure is seen as the only touchstone for distinguishing between the two realms of thought, science and literature. As he puts it, "the object of science is the communication of truth while the object of poetry is the communication of pleasure." (Note 49) Of course the pleasure Coleridge has in mind is

spiritual and aesthetic, not the sensual and hedonistic. To be more precise, Coleridge is rightly a critic who, for all his shortcomings, has anticipated the emergence of more than one trend in criticism: formalism and its offshoot, "new criticism", and psychological criticism. Any excerpt randomly selected from his critical texts testifies to this effect. "Language" argues Coleridge, "is the armory of the human mind, and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests." (Note 50) This celebration of the language and its vast prospects is the background of the linguistic and formalistic criticism popular nowadays to the extent that we hear nowadays what Jameson calls "the prison house of the language." While explaining Wordsworth's linguistic theory in poetry, Coleridge in fact initiates what Russian formalist nowadays call "defamiliarization", i.e., the concept of making the commonplace sound uncommon, popularized by the Russian formalists. Here is Coleridge's view of this vital issue, "Mr. Wordsworth intends...to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us." (Note 51) Not only do formalists get their cue from Coleridge's critical insights as the ones already given, but also theorists like Ezra Pound (the leader of imagists) follow his example when he calls for diminishing or nullifying the distance between the signifiers and signifieds, the verbal symbols and objects. As Coleridge puts it in one of his letters, he contends that there is a need "to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things . . . elevating, as it were, Words into Things, Living Things too." (Note 52)

Another relevant point worth stressing here is Coleridge's distinct definition of the aesthetic pleasure stemming basically from the unity and assonance of the parts in one congruous whole. 20<sup>th</sup> century critics such as Ransom, Tate, Brooks and Beardsley can only paraphrase his statements of the poem which run as follows "The poem is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part . . . and in its scrupulous balance of partness and wholeness." (Note 53) The beholder's or recipient's aesthetic pleasure is a focal issue in Coleridge's perception of the text since Coleridge finds that it must seek "to arouse that sublime faculty by which a great mind becomes that on which it mediates." (Note 54)

#### 4.4 Coleridge's critical speculations about psychological matters

Seen from another perspective, Coleridge's critical speculations even have a lot to say about psychological matters. He tries to rationalize the mental processes of both creator and reader and the impact on both. What has facilitated this for him is his own first-hand experience of the illusive nature of writing and the various sensations and motives associated with it. His writings and speculations can be considered as a pioneering attempt that future writers and theorists like Koestler can but echo his findings as seen in the *Act of Creation*, its nature, conditions and manifestations. Drawing upon subtle and profound philosophical grounds, Coleridge succeeds in raising many thorny issues in creativity and to a great extent convinces the recipient about the power of his authenticity. Take the problem of the creative mind as postulated by Freud, Barthes and Kristeva. If Freud's conceptualizations emphasize the association between genius and pain or what he calls the "sublimation" of what is painful and morbid, Coleridge is one of the earliest writers who has groped his way amidst this confusing maze by stating that, "a close examination will often defect, that the irritability, which has been attributed to the author's genius, as its cause, did really originate in ill conformation of body, obtuse pain, or constitutional defect of pleasurable sensation" (Note 55) Is not this a convincing elaboration of the problematic relation between aesthetic and artistic pleasure and bodily pain?

### 5. Coleridge as a Controversial Figure

#### 5.1 Views of critics about Coleridge

Of all the prominent critics in Western literature, Coleridge remains the most controversial figure about whom various and even contradictory views and judgments are offered in accordance with the critic's or scholar's own intellectual background and artistic perspective. Among the writers who have held Coleridge in good stead is T.S. Eliot whose "The Perfect Critic" is a great homage to this romantic critic and his postulates, "He was perhaps the greatest of English critics, and in a sense the last." What mitigates this otherwise sweeping and unparalleled judgment from a critic known for his reservations against any thing romantic is the word "perhaps." Eliot enumerates a number of rare qualifications that can only be found in Coleridge "his natural abilities, and some of his preferences are probably more remarkable than those of any other modern critic." (Note 56) Moreover such rare talents, in Eliot's view, entitle him to survive any other critic in the years to come. The contemporaneousness of Coleridge's achievement is referred to in passing, and above all his ability to transcend the limits of his age since he is ahead of that age in dealing with issues that are pivotal in our thinking such as writing, its pleasure, the writing ego, the reasons behind embarking on such an enterprise and its rewards and buffets. In another context, Eliot puts him on equal footing with the neo-classical critic, Dr. Samuel Johnson

whom Eliot holds "with most reverence" (Note 57) Mathew Arnold who is unanimously considered as one of the most influential English critics, asserts that Coleridge's great usefulness lay in his supplying in England for many years and under critical circumstances, by the spectacle of this effort of his, a stimulus to all minds, capable of profiting by it in the generation which grew around him. (Note 58) - Hayman in his *The Armed Vision* elevates Coleridge's stature to a lofty plane. Not only is his greatness recognized and guaranteed, but also his *Biographia Literaria* is viewed as "the bible of modern criticism, and contemporary critics have tended to see it as the greatest book of criticism in English." (Note 59) Significantly enough, his "genius" is a recurrent term in many judgments of his disciples and admirers as felt through Lamb's characteristic appraisal when he emphatically states that "the neighborhood of such a man is as exciting as the presence of fifty ordinary persons. It is enough to be within the whiff and wind of his genius for us not to possess our souls in quiet" (Note 60) Conversely, there are those critics and thinkers who find that his criticism is derivative and appropriated from German thought and philosophy. He himself does not seek to conceal this fact. The names of Kant, Berkley, Schlegel and Fichte are common and recurrent in his writings. So are their philosophical postulates and findings. Indeed, many studies have been devoted to tracing these "borrowings" and acts of sometimes systematic plagiarism. The most relentless view of his criticism, as expected, comes from Leavis's pen when he gives his verdict that Coleridge's "currency as an academic classic is something of a scandal" (Note 61)

### 5.2 The advantages and disadvantages of the Coleridgean phenomenon

This is not the proper place to uphold or refute this view or that. As has become evident by now the approach adopted throughout these pages is more or less descriptive, showing only the advantages and disadvantages of the Coleridgean phenomenon and locating it in its proper and wide historical context. At any rate, a brief idea or for that matter an assessment of his contribution to criticism and literary theory is helpful and illuminating. On the theoretical level, Coleridge's name has been influential in paving the way for many modern trends in criticism such as the formalists, new critics and psychological critics. They have benefited in one way or another from his dealings with and treatment of the text and the forces at work outside it. Indeed he is an early writer in his frequent calls for close reading, author-reader relation and the role played by "good sense" and "interpretative faculty" in appreciating the given text. He is an early figure in calling for reconciliation between author and reader as well as the interdependence of reader and work as seen in his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. All this has been done without the benefit of linguistic and psychoanalytic data made accessible in modern studies. His only guiding imagination and common sense prove to be of great help in appreciating and judging the given text although some of his judgments are not always sound.

### 5.3 Coleridge's practical criticism

His criticism, particularly the practical one, in its final entirety, suffers from many loopholes and sometimes carelessness which are evident in his idiosyncratic practices and unpredictable and dismissive judgments of both writers and dramatis personae. Some of his views, on the whole, are often distracting and inconsistent. They are solipsistic and erratic and often need verification. Many of these judgments have something to do with his psychological and emotional status which is far from stable or consistent. The opium addiction only helps in aggravating his physical capacity. All these will be felt through his critical arguments. It has already been pointed out that Coleridge finds in Hamlet a kind of alter ego or double, a point that is definitely out of place in any serious criticism per se. His egotistic and even exhibitionistic tendency is felt throughout every critical text he has written. The following is one of the glaring if not the flamboyantly striking examples of the common typically Coleridgean line of thinking:

**However in ability I may be the same who have followed me, I own I am proud that I was the first in time who publicly demonstrated to the full extent of the position, that the supposed irregularity and extravagancies of Shakespeare were the mere dream of a pedantry that arraigned the eagle because it has not the dimensions of the swan. In all the successive courses of lectures delivered by me — it has been, and still remains, my object to prove that in all parts . . . the judgment of Shakespeare is commensurate with his genius, nay that his genius reveals itself in his judgment, as in its not exalted form. (Note 62)**

Coleridge's inflated ego which is felt in every line of the excerpt we have quoted at length can turn into a sort of a hallucination. In his recurrent memorable statements, he claims to see himself as a sort of savior "a new Moses, destined to lead his followers through the wilderness, striking springs from the rocks of their eighteenth — century rationalism" He boasts in one of his letters to Davy "if I write what I ought to do on it, the work would supersede all the Books of Metaphysics, hitherto written and all the Books of Morals too" (Note 63) There is a

great measure of bias and/ or arbitrariness in his views and judgments of others, particularly his fellow poets and critics. His friendship with Wordsworth and their subsequent quarrel is a case in point here. We have already seen how many long chapters of the *Biographia Literaria* are directed toward one target: recognition of his genius to be followed by long arguments intended to give the lie to Wordsworth's poetic theory and philosophical views. Keats has his own share in this critical onslaught. In Coleridge's view, Keats is stripped of anything that authorizes him to be a great poet, "It is a sin to claim so! There is no greater Sin after the 7 deadly than to flatter oneself into an idea of being a great Poet . . . how comfortable a feel it is that such a crime must bring its heavy Penalty!" (Note 64) Writers like Dryden, Pope and Dr. Johnson are not exempted from these derogatory and satirical views. His prejudice against these neo-classical writers and their rationalistic views is unparalleled and critically unjustified. He deplorably fails to see anything good in their writings. Thus Pope and Dryden are yoked in his sarcastic statement:

**Only if Pope was a Poet as Lord  
Byron swears, then Dryden, I admit, was a very  
great Poet** (Note 65)

#### 5.4 Coleridge's conception of Scott's writing

The success of Scott's writing in Coleridge's conception is partly due to his ability to titillate the sensibilities and demands of his audience, rather than to any intrinsic quality, "his work was well-adapted to the weaknesses of his public. In Wordsworth, imagination predominated — Scott is almost wholly confined to fancy. Hence Scott's failures in harmony, appropriateness, organic probability which must stem from imagination." (Note 66) This uncommon type of criticism where the demerits of Scott's art are accentuated only is once again felt in his judgment of Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost". What is striking here is the vantage point from which Coleridge views it. The poem appears to Coleridge as a totally subjective one since "John Milton himself is in every line of "Paradise Lost". There is a subjectivity of the poet, as of Milton, who is himself before himself in everything he writes." (Note 67) It is too much to hear or find such a judgment of a critic like Coleridge in his assessment of the epic and its implications of the presence of the writing ego. This epic poem has more to refer to than the self-referentiality suggested by Coleridge. No less eerie is the verdict about Spenser's famous poem. The mind of the master of "The Faerie Queene" appears to Coleridge's eye as "constitutionally tender, delicate, and, in comparison with his three compeers, I had almost said, effeminate." (Note 68)

## 6. Conclusion

In sum it is possible to say that Coleridge's criticism is marked by a great extent of particularity and subjectivity i.e., it is full of digressions, anecdotes, personal reminiscences, some of which are impromptu. Such is the indulgences in highly personal judgments that the final impression they leave on the reader or recipient is sometimes negative. For instance, the obviousness of Coleridge's views about "Hamlet's lecture of 2January 1812 whispered to the reporter that the talk was a satire on the lecturer himself (Note 69) In most cases he has a deep and sharp insight in the texts tackled, particularly some of Milton's poetry and situations which have a lot in common with Coleridge's own attitudes as a man and artist. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* Coleridge manipulates his creative and critical skills to the full as he finds the material at his disposal appeal to his deep own intuition, while in others he has a remarkable bent to depend mainly on common sense, wit and sensibility. The language of his criticism, though mainly written in prose, does carry the suggestiveness and multifacetedness of the poetic text. In other words his critical text aspires to be self-contained and adjacent if not parallel to the original one as practiced by our contemporary critics. It is the formal and figurative language of his criticism that actually refutes the artificial dividing line between poetry and prose. It is a prose that is no less effective than his verse. When he picks up a certain text which is worthwhile of admiration, he praises it lavishly and wholeheartedly, accumulating all types of quotations, maxims and proverbs to verify and substantiate what he is after. Often he falls in self-contradictory judgments and views. His definition of prose "The words in prose ought to express the intended meaning, and no more; if they attract attention to themselves, it is, in general a fault"(Note 70) is exemplary in that there are so many texts in prose, and Coleridge's own at their lead ,whose lyrical beauty and grace are unquestionable. Indeed they do not betray any sense of inferiority when contrasted with those of verse. This demarcation line set by Coleridge here will be echoed by Sartre's differentiation between the poets' use of the language and that of prose writers when he asserts the poets's refusal to "utilize" the language or dreaming of "naming" the world as in the case of prose writers. (Note 71) At any rate, the striking thing about Coleridge's aforementioned judgment of prose is what is already known about his own interest in and admiration of prose fiction, in particular Jane Austen (Note 72) and her "pure" novels. In such works prose is not always used for mere communicative purposes nor does it suffer the secondariness Sartre emphasizes. Above all, the

*Biographia Literaria* occasionally does refer to itself and accordingly it is a seminal text in what is nowadays called "metacriticism", i.e., the criticism that is basically self-referential and has a lot to say about its own problematics, practices, strategies, and interests. As such, Coleridge's criticism occupies a very important position in its field thanks to his keen perception and knowledgeable and comprehensive mind in tackling critical issues both in his own age and the ages to come. For all his subjectivity and even moodiness in passing his own judgments, Coleridge deserves the significant niche he has been aptly put though the term "perfect" already used by his admirers needs further and substantial modification in order to be properly justified.

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