

The Reception of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in Coleridge's *Remorse*

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Abstract

The present study explores the influences of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* on Coleridge's *Remorse* in terms of *poetic dialogue*. Poetic dialogue is an open-ended poetic collaboration between authors consisting of various poetic forms of literature (Magnuson, 1988). The study of such literary collaboration is usually concerned with contemporary authors. This study, however, proposes that poetic dialogue is possible between Coleridge and precedent poets. Magnuson (1988)'s theory of poetic dialogue found that there are two collaborative processes of the negation and application of the character. In the process of negation, Coleridge denies the image of being surrounded by a swarm of dangers of hornets in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Coleridge changes the figurative expression of hornets to the figurative expression of coldness to express his romantic imagination. In the process of the application of the character, Coleridge uses Dalila's argument which evades responsibility in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. The main character in Coleridge's *Remorse*, Ordonio, changes the focus of the argument from individual fault to something that can happen to everyone. This, in turn, increases Ordonio's affliction later. Coleridge transfuses Dalila's character into Ordonio so that the degree of tragedy increases. With these poetic dialogues in mind, the paper concludes that Milton is an interlocutor of poetic dialogue as if Milton is in front of Coleridge. Coleridge can conduct dialogue with Milton, allude to and revise Milton's poems, and generate open-ended dialogic poems. This dialogue, in turn, would change and enlarge Milton's poetic space.

Keywords: Milton, Coleridge, reception, poetic dialogue, collaboration, poetic sustainability

1. Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is greatly influenced by John Milton as with other romantic poets (Bloom, 2010). The influence of other poets on Coleridge, or his relationship with poets, has been studied in four areas: 1). source study that seeks the original source, 2). study of relationship among poets or poetry, 3). study of the anxiety of influence led by the Yale school, and 4). study of the literary collaboration which focuses on creative dialogic process among poems and poets (Bloom, 2010; Magnuson, 1988; Thompson, 2010). This paper deals with the collaboration between Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, and Coleridge's *Remorse*.

The key term in this paper is *poetic dialogue*, or collaboration. A Coleridgean critic Paul Magnuson refers to dialogue as "the essential generative condition" (Magnuson, 1988, p. x) of dialogical poets that shares themes and voices. Magnuson also refers to collaboration as "the connections of individual poems as answer and response" (Magnuson, 1988, p. 7). Magnuson describes on poetic dialogue:

two poets are speaking simultaneously. Each alludes to the other's poetry as well as to his own, and each poem turns upon a previous one. After listening to the other poet, each has the opportunity of responding. (Magnuson, 1988, p. ix)

The relationship of the two poets is, in McFarland's term, *symbiotic* (McFarland, 1972, p. 264). Magnuson also suggests that the readers can distinguish the section of the poems of poetic dialogue by negation, questioning, and interruption. Thus, this open-ended interchange is defined as the continuing dialogue of the poems that connect individual poems or fragments of poems collaboratively as answer and response on similar themes. Many Coleridgean critics such as Thomas McFarland, Paul Magnuson, Gene Ruoff, Richard Matlak and others have positively argued on Coleridge's collaborative relationship with other poets (Magnuson, 1988; Matlak, 1997; McFarland, 1972; Ruoff, 1989; Thompson, 2010). This poetic dialogue is based on the premise that two poets live in the same period.

The question is whether Milton and Coleridge, poets of different times, can have poetic dialogue. This paper takes the position that it is possible for poets living in different times to have poetic dialogue on the condition that the later poet repeatedly reads and thinks of the predecessor's poems as they were talking face-to-face, and develops a profound understanding of their predecessor and their poems. John Beer points out that with his unique dialogic inclination, Coleridge "was sometimes prone to respond very directly to the author he was reading" (Beer, 2007, p. 46). Coleridge was a person who actively read and responded to a text as if he was talking to the author face-to-face. Hence dialogue between Milton and Coleridge could be possible. Through Coleridge's dialogical reading and responding, Milton's works might also change and develop. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Coleridge's *Remorse* are selected as the main texts for analysis in this paper. Both authors referred to these as dramatic poems. Coleridge's *Remorse* was originally written for stage production, but Coleridge himself clearly mentions in the preface that his *Remorse* is both a play and a dramatic poem (Coleridge, 2001, p. 1067).

Thus, this paper will examine the poetic dialogue between Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Coleridge's *Remorse* in terms of poetic dialogue, and show how Milton's *Samson Agonistes* still influenced Coleridge's works in his age. It will also show how Coleridge's reception of Milton would affect the *poetic sustainability* of Milton. According to *Oxford English dictionary*, the word sustainable means the ability "of being maintained at a certain rate or level" ("sustainable," 2009) and it has also an ecological meaning of "human economic activity and culture that do not lead to environmental degradation, esp. avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources" ("sustainable," 2009). Sustainability is a sort of human action that maintains the outer world in the long term. Hence in this paper poetic sustainability means the ability to maintain the poetic space of a poet in the long term.

2. The Influence of Milton's Poetry on Coleridge

Before examining the poetic dialogue, the paper will clarify the relationship between Milton and Coleridge. Milton influenced Coleridge throughout his life. Along with Spenser and Shakespeare, Milton was one of the poetic icons for Romantic poets, especially Coleridge (Coleridge, 1992, p. 886). Milton's definition of poetry that "it ought to be simple, sensuous, and impassioned" (Coleridge, 1987, pp. 138-139; Coleridge, 1957, p. 3287) had a strong impression on Coleridge and he sometimes referred to Milton's definition of poetry and argued for Milton's position. Milton's poems also helped Coleridge develop his theory of imagination. One example is a description of death by Coleridge as "substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd" (Milton, 1957a, p. 248) from *Paradise Lost*, Book 2. Here Coleridge suggests that when the mind is not fixed on any images permanently, imagination appears (Coleridge, 1987, p. 311). Coleridge suggested the psychological explanation of readers' mind as Miltonic imagination. Another example is the holographic characteristic of creative imagination:

The Figtree, not that kind for Fruit renown'd,
But such as at this day to *Indians* known
In *Malabar* or *Decan* spreads her Arms
Branching so broad and long, that in the ground
The bended Twigs take root, and Daughters grow
About the Mother Tree, a Pillar'd shade
High overarch't, and echoing Walks between;
There oft the *Indian* Herdsman shunning heat
Shelters in cool, and tends his pasturing Herds
At Loopholes cut through thickest shade: (Milton, 1957a, pp. 403-404)

Coleridge cited the Indian fig-tree passage from *Paradise Lost*, Book 9, as an example of how the sense of the whole scene pervades each part of the passage (Coleridge, 1983, pp. 127-128). Coleridge also mentions the epic imagination found in *Paradise Lost*, Book 6. Coleridge indicated the line "far off his coming shone" (Milton, 1957a, p. 341) in the scene of the approach of Christ, and mentioned that the line "makes the whole one image" (Coleridge, 1990, p. 490) and it exemplifies the unity of the epic imagination. Thus Milton's poems and thoughts repeatedly appeared in Coleridge's writings as an ideal poetic character.

Coleridge was influenced by three aspects of *Samson Agonistes* in particular: the imitation of ancient Greek drama, ideal characteristics of the character *Samson Agonistes*, and by the non-colloquial language. For the imitation of the ancient Greek drama, Coleridge thought Milton's preference of Euripides was natural, because

Euripides's tragic elements of many passions such as love, conjugal affection and jealousy are adequate for Milton's ideal drama, *Samson Agonistes* (Coleridge, 1990, pp. 402-403). Coleridge thought the characteristics of *Samson Agonistes* as ideal (Coleridge, 1992, p. 168). Coleridge also mentioned the non-colloquial language use of *Samson Agonistes* (Coleridge, 1990, pp. 345-346). Coleridge set *Samson Agonistes* and Massinger's play in two poles of dramatic poetry in terms of use of colloquial language. Coleridge mockingly confessed that when he wrote *Remorse*, though he tried to imitate Shakespeare's style, which was in the midpoint of the two poles, he found that his lines were similar to Massinger's colloquial lines. This would be a Coleridgean joke. However, it is possible to think that Coleridge was thinking of *Samson Agonistes* in the back of his mind when he wrote *Remorse*. In other words, poetic imagination appeared in figures and allusions such as Ordonio's affliction and his argument which allude the image of hornets and Dalila's argument. The structure of the dramatic poetry could be actively worked in Coleridge's dialogic generative process with *Samson Agonistes*.

3. The Dialogue between Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Coleridge's *Remorse*

The study of Coleridge's poetic collaboration, originated in McFarland's study (1972), has mainly focused on two or more poets' direct poetic dialogue (Magnuson, 1988; Matlak, 1997; McFarland, 1972; Ruoff, 1989; Thompson, 2010). The poetic dialogues found in those studies are among contemporary poets. Thompson (2010) shows that the poetic dialogue is possible between two poets when only one poet, John Thelwall, addresses another, Coleridge. This paper examines the poetic dialogue between two poets who do not live in the same age, provided that one poet, Coleridge, has unique inclination to respond to the author of the book (Beer, 2007). Magnuson (1988) constructs the theory of poetic dialogue between romantic poets. His theory focuses on how poets create new poems, inspired by other poets or poems. In his theory, when poets have a real dialogue or literary dialogue, some lines or imagination in a poem or a fragment of a poem trigger another new poem as a response to the original poem. Magnuson (1988) shows several turning points of the poetic dialogue such as negation or denial, a question, reduction or exclusion, an appropriation or relocation, and reiteration or reverberation. This paper focuses on the turning points of *negation* and the *relocation*. The negation means a turn of poems where "the previous text is denied and an alternative offered" (Magnuson, 1988, p. 22). When two poems deal with the similar theme or lines, but the later poem denies some components of the previous poem and incorporates a new element, the poetic dialogue of negation occurs. The later poet might respond to the previous poet to create new and important poetic imagination. The relocation means the turn of a poetic dialogue where the figure of the previous poem is replaced "within a new context, by situating it within a new landscape and thereby changing its significance" (Magnuson, 1988, p. 26). When the figure of a poem or a similar figure comes out in another poem within the new setting, the poetic dialogue of relocation occurs.

There are two examples of poetic dialogue of negation and relocation found in *Samson Agonistes* and *Remorse*. First, the poetic dialogue of negation occurs between the lines of a swarm of hornets in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and that of icy cold in Coleridge's *Remorse*. In *Samson Agonistes*, a lot of figures of speech of small creatures such as bees and serpents are found. This may come from the tradition of the ancient Greek dramas, which Milton followed. Bees, hornets, and wasps are frequently found both in the ancient Greek dramas and *Samson Agonistes*. When Samson sat alone on the bank, he expressed his worries:

I seek
 This unfrequented place to find some ease;
 Ease to the body some, none to the mind
 From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
 Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,
 But rush upon me thronging, (Milton, 1957b, p. 552)

Here the hornets are the metaphor of "restless thoughts," Samson's uneasy mind. Samson grieves his illustrious past, unfortunate state of the present and his blindness. The metaphor of hornets represent Samson's affliction. Samson similarly grieves his glorious past, his unfortunate present and his blindness when Manoa leaves him:

Thoughts my Tormentors arm'd with deadly stings
 Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts,
 Exasperate, exulcerate, and raise
 Dire inflammation which no cooling herb
 Or med'cinal liquor can assuage,

Nor breath of Vernal Air from snowy *Alp*. (Milton, 1957b, p. 566)

This would be also the figurative expression of a hornet or a wasp. Pliny the elder gives an explanation of wasps in *The Natural History* that “wasps hunt larger flies and after cutting off their heads carry away the rest of the body” (Pliny, 1940, p. 477; see Book 11). Wasps, which have deadly stings, cut off or mangle the corpse of other insects. If a person is stung by a bee, the affected part becomes exulcerated. Spring is when bees become active, as Pliny mentioned that it is early May (Pliny, 1940, p. 441; see Book 11). The figurative expressions in both passages refer to Samson’s affliction triggered by distracting thoughts. What is important here, however, is the sense of being surrounded by a swarm of dangers.

In Coleridge’s *Remorse*, when Ordonio the main character talks with a Moorish murderer about the murder of his own brother, which Ordonio planned, Ordonio regrets his past actions and shows his affliction:

It [the murder of Ordonio’s brother] seizes me—by Hell I will go on!

What—would’st thou stop, man? thy pale looks won’t save thee!

(*a pause.*)

Oh cold—cold—cold! shot thro’ with icy cold! (Coleridge, 2001, p. 1264) (brackets mine)

Ordonio feels as if he is surrounded by a dangerous icy cold. The line “Oh cold—cold—cold! shot through with icy cold!” (Coleridge, 2001, p. 1264) is an echo of “O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon” (Milton, 1957b, p. 553) in *Samson Agonistes*, but this passage could be considered as Coleridge’s response to the hornet metaphor in *Samson Agonistes*. Coleridge recognized that Milton intentionally imitated the ancient Greek drama, but Coleridge himself does not need to do so. Rather, Coleridge intended to follow colloquial and contemporary style that can appeal to his contemporary audience. The coldness would meet the taste of nineteenth century audience who favored the magnificent Gothic scenery. In addition, Ordonio’s lines are Miltonic imagination Coleridge suggested with a fig-tree passage in *Paradise Lost*, i.e., “co-presence of the whole picture flash’d at once upon the eye” (Coleridge, 1983, p. 128). So Coleridge negated the figurative expression of hornets and used the figurative expression of coldness instead at the scene of the main character’s affliction so that Coleridge expresses his own romantic imagination. This is not a mere influence but dialogue, because Coleridge directly responded to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. Coleridge addresses Milton, not others.

Second, the poetic dialogue of relocation occurs between the lines of Dalila’s argument in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* and that of Ordonio’s argument in Coleridge’s *Remorse*. Coleridge divided the concept of remorse in two ways: good or bad, or true repentance and poisonous repentance. Coleridge explains the meaning of remorse as “By REMORSE I mean the Anguish & Disquietude arising from the Self-contradiction introduced into the Soul by Guilt—a feeling, which is good or bad according as the Will makes use of it” (Coleridge, 1956, pp. 433-434). Ordonio keeps his true repentance till the half of the drama, Act 3 scene 1, when he thinks the Moor betrays him and his crime is exposed. After that Ordonio’s remorse changes to poisonous repentance. Ordonio loses his temper, shouts to his father and shows his affliction. However, after Ordonio’s remorse changes to poisonous repentance, his affliction is expressed differently:

Ordonio: What? if one reptile sting another reptile?

Where is the crime? The goodly face of nature

Hath one disfiguring stain the less upon it.

Are we not all predestin’d Transiency,

And cold Dishonor? Grant it, that this hand

Had given a morsel to the hungry worms

Somewhat too early—Where’s the crime of this? (Coleridge, 2001, p. 1287)

Ordonio is no more surrounded by a swarm of dangers. Instead, he keeps off the swarm of dangers and challenges them with his logic. Ordonio’s defiance has the same structure as Dalila’s argument in *Samson Agonistes* to evade her responsibility (Nicolson, 1998; Revard, 2014):

it was a weakness

In me, but incident to all our sex,

Curiosity, inquisitive, importune

Of secrets, then with like infirmity

To publish them, both common female faults:
 Was it not weakness also to make known
 For importunity, that is for naught,
 Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety?
 To what I did thou show'd'st me first the way.
 But I to enemies reveal'd, and should not.

Nor shouldst thou have trusted that to woman's frailty: (Milton, 1957b, p. 570)

Dalila switches the focus of the argument from individual fault to a general issue, and evades her responsibility. Ordonio employs the same rhetoric. He switches the focus of the argument from individual fault, "somewhat too early" (Coleridge, 2001, p. 1287), to a general issue that people might do the same thing, thereby attempting to evade his responsibility. A similar kind of debate continues in Ordonio's lines. The poetic figure of Ordonio here is the application of the character of *Samson Agonistes*, Dalila. Those Ordonio's lines are also responses to *Samson Agonistes*. Coleridge, with Dalila's argument in mind, elaborated his version of arguments and addressed Milton in dialogue. Ordonio justifies himself to evade the responsibility which comes from his fault, yet ironically his justification later increases his affliction. In this poetic dialogue, Coleridge applies Dalila's character to Ordonio's character so that the degree of the tragedy increases.

4. Conclusion

It is certain that Coleridge addressed Milton through passages in *Remorse*. Coleridge-Milton dialogue proceeds by negation of a metaphor and relocation of the character. The question in this paper is how Milton's *Samson Agonistes* still influences Coleridge's *Remorse* in his age. Milton was understood as a poetic icon for Coleridge. Milton was an interlocutor of poetic dialogue as if Milton was close to Coleridge. Milton made it possible for Coleridge to conduct dialogue with, allude to and revise Milton's poems, and generate open-ended dialogic poems. This dialogue, in turn, would change and enlarge Milton's poetic space given that Milton's poetic figure is formed by the inner poetic figure Milton creates for himself and the outer poetic figure other people such as his contemporaries, later poets, critics and readers create. Coleridge enters into the outer poetic figure of Milton, and has poetic dialogue with Milton's poems. Coleridge produces the dialogic poems outside the domain of Milton's poetic space. Given all that, what Coleridge does to Milton through poetic dialogue is to enhance and enrich Milton's poems and to enlarge Milton's poetic space. In a different term, Coleridge improves Milton's sustainability, the long-term maintenance of Milton's literary works. Through Coleridge-Milton dialogue, Milton has his poetic space reinforced and enlarged. The dialogue makes it possible for Milton to sustain his poems longer, and in a later period larger on international scale and cultures. This is the effect of the reception generated through poetic dialogue between Milton and Coleridge.

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