

Explication of *Biographia Literaria*- Chapter 14- Part-1

Introduction

In chapter fourteen of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge discusses the nature of poetry and its function in detail; however, philosophically. He poses a number of questions regarding the nature and function of poetry and then answers them. Coleridge's view of poetry has been elaborated in this chapter.

Coleridge also analyses the differences between poetry and prose. He examines the ways in which poetry differs from other kinds of artistic activity, and the role and significance of nature as an essential significant part of a legitimate poem. He is the first poet and a critic to pronounce that every work of art is an organic whole.

The Essay

While Wordsworth and Coleridge lived as neighbours, they often talked about two fundamental points of poetry namely, the power of exciting the sympathy of the readers by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and creating interest in reading poetry by using colours of imagination. It occurred to them that a series of poems might be composed and these compositions could be discussed under these two criteria.

The emotions arising from incidents that have the influence of the supernatural in the poems would naturally call for supposing them to be real. For the poems that excite the sympathy of the readers, the characters and incidents depicted would be taken from every village and its vicinity. The meditative and reclusive mind of the poet would search for the characters and the incidents or notice them when they presented themselves.

The plan of the *Lyrical Ballads* originated from this pattern of thinking. It was decided that Coleridge's endeavours would be directed to persons and characters that are supernatural, or at least romantic. He was supposed to treat his subject in such a way as to elicit from his readers that it is "willing suspension of disbelief" for the moment, which constitutes poetic truth.

Wordsworth, on the other hand was to give the chance of novelty to things of the everyday, and 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 the readers.

Coleridge composed "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and a few other poems for the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's contribution to the collection of poems far exceeded Coleridge's efforts. To the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth added a *Preface* of considerable length, in which he stated that "the language of real life" was the only suitable language for all kind of poetry, and he rejected the use of artificial language and ornamentation, phrases and forms of style that were not part of the language of the ordinary people. This statement of Wordsworth was controversial.

Critics pointed out the "meanness of language and inanity of thought" in Wordsworth's poems. If the language used in the poems had been so bad, the poems would have been forgotten long ago and the *Preface* would have sunk into oblivion along with them, but this did not happen. Coleridge did not agree with several parts of

Wordsworth's *Preface*. He found the dictum of Wordsworth to be erroneous in principle and contradictory because the author's own practice was in opposition to what he maintained in the poems he had composed for the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Coleridge's Views on Prose and Poetry

A poem, according to Coleridge contains the same elements as a prose composition. The difference therefore must consist in the different combinations of the words, in consequence of a different object proposed. According to the difference of the aim of the composition, the difference of the combination would be ascertained.

The object may be to facilitate the recollection of the given facts or observation by artificial arrangement. Then the composition will be a poem merely because it is distinguished from prose by meter, or by rhyme or by both together. The distinction of form between prose and poetry is superficial. The difference of content can form an additional ground of distinction.

The immediate end of a composition may be truth or pleasure. A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to science by proposing for its immediate object, pleasure and not truth. A poem provides delight from the whole and not from each component part.

A proper poem is one whose parts mutually support and explain each other. A series of striking lines or *distiches* which make a separate whole instead of a harmonising part cannot be called a poem. The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity or by the restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the journey itself.

Coleridge's Definition of a Poem

Coleridge tries to bring out a clear distinction between prose and poetry and he also gives his own definition of a poem. His attitude to meter is not clear as he is in a dual state of mind. His language is hesitating and sometimes almost self-contradictory. A poem, according to him uses the same medium as a prose composition, namely words. So the difference between the two must lie in the different use of words in consequence of their different objects. He quotes the following lines of a poem:

*Thirty days hath September,
April, June and November....*

The lines of the poem provide details of the days in the several months and the others of the same class and purpose. As a particular pleasure is found in anticipating the recurrence of sounds and qualities, all compositions that provide find this charm superadded. Though the use of meter and rhyme in such poems facilitate memory, there is nothing in the content of the poem which necessitates their use in it. The difference in the objects of poetry and the works of science can be comprehended.

The immediate object of a work of science is to convey truth and the immediate object of a poem is pleasure but a work of science may also give pleasure to the readers, and the poem contains a profound truth. They may be called their ultimate objects. The ideal condition would be where both of them fuse together into one. Meter should suit the language and the content of the poem and be a super addition only for the sake of

ornament or memory. Pleasure may be the immediate object of a work not metrically composed as in novels and romances.

A legitimate poem is one, in which the separate parts mutually support and explain each other, and harmonise with the known influences of metrical arrangements. A series of striking lines or *distiches*, which absorbing enough in themselves, making a separate whole and not harmonising with the rest of the composition cannot be called a poem.

Secondly, an unsustained composition, from which the reader collects rapidly the general result, which is not attracted by the component parts cannot be considered a poem. In a long poem, all the parts cannot be equally gratifying." Therefore, Coleridge says, "a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry." Whatever specific meaning or significance is attached to the word poetry, a poem of any length can neither be, nor ought to be called poetry.

If a harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry. This can be achieved by an intentional selection and artificial arrangement of words that would excite a more continuous and equal attention, which is more effective than the language of prose. In order to know what poetry is, it is essential to examine the qualities and functions of a poet.

Coleridge's Definition of a Poet

The poet, in the ideal sense of the term, is one who brings the soul of man into activity with the subordination of the faculties according to their relative worth and dignity. He imparts a tone and spirit of unity that blends and fuses each faculty into the other by the synthetic and magical power of imagination.

This power reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of the opposites or the discordant qualities of sameness with difference; the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling, profound or vehement.

While this sensibility blends and harmonises the natural and the artificial, it still subordinates art to nature, the manner to the matter and the admiration of the poet to poetry. Finally, good sense is the body of poetic genius, fancy is its drapery, motion is its life, and imagination is the soul that is found everywhere and forms into one graceful and intelligent whole.

Distinction between Poem and Poetry

Coleridge mentions that "a poem contains the same elements as a prose composition." Both prose and poem use words. The difference between a poem and a prose composition cannot be in the medium, for each employs the same medium, which is a word. It must therefore "consist in a different combination of them in consequence of a different object being proposed." A poem combines words differently because it seeks to do something different.

Coleridge says, "of course all it may be seeking to do may be to facilitate memory. You may take a piece of prose and cast it into rhyme and metrical form in order to remember it better." Rhyming words of that kind with their recurring, "sounds and quantities" yield a particular pleasure to, though not of a very high order. If one wants to name a poem to the composition of this kind, there is no reason why one should not.

However, the use of rhyme is merely to increase pleasure. Coleridge mentions: "But we should know that such rhyming tags have the charm of meter and rhyme, meter and rhyme have been super added; they do not arise from the nature of the content, but have been imposed on it in order to make it more easily memorized." The use of rhyme helps to memorise a poem.

The Function of Poetry

The "superficial form" also known as the externalities, do not provide a profound logical reason for distinguishing different ways of handling language. Coleridge mentions: "A difference of objects and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction." The philosopher would seek to differentiate between two ways of handling language by asking what each seeks to achieve and how that aim determines its nature.

He says that the primary purpose is to communicate the truth or pleasure. A deep pleasure is attained by communicating the truth. Coleridge insists that one must distinguish between the ultimate and the immediate end. Similarly, if the immediate aim should be the communication of pleasure, truth should be the ultimate end. In an ideal society, anything that is not the truth would not yield pleasure.

It would be impossible for a literary work to communicate pleasure without having any concern with "truth, either moral or intellectual." The proper kind of distinction between different kinds of writing can therefore be logically discussed in terms of the difference in the immediate aim or function of each. The immediate aim of poetry is to give pleasure.

The Significance of Meter

Coleridge argues that in works that are not composed metrically, the immediate aim of the work could be the communication of pleasure. To the question whether such works that are converted to poems by adding meter without rhyme would sound appropriate, Coleridge replies that pleasure cannot be attained out of any work, which does not arise naturally from the total nature of that work. To superadd meter is to provide merely a superficial decorative charm.

It would be difficult to give permanent pleasure if all the parts of a work resonate. Rhyme and meter involve "an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound" which in turn "is calculated to excite" a "perpetual and distinct attention to each part." A poem therefore must possess an organic unity in such a way that while it is possible to appreciate each part to which the regular use of accent and sound draw attention, the pleasure in the whole develops out of such appreciation, which is simultaneously pleasurable and conducive to the total pattern of the complete poem

The Difference between a Poem and a Work of Scientific Prose

A poem differs from a work of scientific prose in having as its immediate object, pleasure and not truth and it differs from other kinds of writing, which have pleasure and not truth as their immediate aim. In a poem, the pleasure attained from the whole work is similar to the pleasure ingrained in each component part. A legitimate poem is a composition in which the rhyme and the meter are in complete relation to the total work. The constituent parts mutually support and explain each other in the right proportion, harmonising with and supporting the purpose of the metrical arrangement.

Coleridge puts an end to the controversy whether the ultimate aim of poetry is to instruct or delight or both. He affirms that the aim of poetry is definitely to give pleasure and further poetry has its own distinctive pleasure, where the pleasure arises from the parts and this pleasure of the parts supports and increases the pleasure of the whole.

Differences between a Poem and Poetry

Coleridge distinguishes a poem from poetry. For him, poetry is an activity of the poet's mind and a poem is merely one of the forms of its expression in words. Poetic activity is grounded on imagination. Poetry, in the larger sense brings the whole soul of man into activity with each faculty playing its proper part according to its relative worth and dignity.

This activity takes place whenever the Secondary Imagination comes into operation. Whenever the synthesising and the integrating powers of the Secondary Imagination are at work, all aspects of a subject are brought into a complex unity, and poetry, in this larger sense, materialises.

The employment of Secondary Imagination is important for poetic creativity. Coleridge discusses the poet's activity because he considers the poet to belong to the larger company of those who distinguish themselves by the activity of their imagination. A poem is the work of a poet who employs Secondary Imagination to achieve the harmony of meaning and the reconciliation of opposites, which Coleridge stresses.

A poem is also considered to be a specific work of art produced by a special handling of language. The harmony and reconciliation resulting from the special kind of creative awareness produced by the use of imagination cannot operate over an extended composition.

The meeting of blending and balancing, reconciliation of difference and sameness, the general and the concrete, the idea and the image, the individual and the representative, the sense of novelty and freshness of the old and the familiar objects and so on cannot take place for an indefinite period. A long poem therefore cannot be considered to be poetry. Coleridge says that there is no such thing as a long poem.

Rhyme and meter are appropriate to a poem considered in the larger sense of poetry because they are means of achieving harmony and reconciling of opposites. The objects of poetry are subject to the widest imaginative feeling.
