

Explication of *Biographia Literaria*- Chapter 14- Part-2

***Biographia Literaria*: Brief Summary of the Chapters**

Published in 1817, *Biographia Literaria* is considered to be Coleridge's seminal work, which elaborates his conceptions of poetry, imagination and creativity, based on early philosophical thinking and the nineteenth century theoretical thought.

Coleridge begins his treatise by referring to James Boyer, his secondary school teacher at the grammar school named Christ's Hospital. The years at this school forms the basis for his poem "Frost at Midnight". Coleridge believes the school to be the place that stifled his creative potential due to formal education.

He explains that creativity and intellectual freedom exist beyond the bars of the school windows, and real education can be obtained from experiences from the world outside. He reiterates the need for maintaining relationship with Nature to be able to question and receive answers related to the role of Nature in being the teacher of a child. Children should be given the freedom to roam about rather than remain enclosed within buildings. This would ensure the innate freedom of the spirit.

Having made the initial introduction, Coleridge proceeds to explain the evolution of his critical precepts. He mentions about his early connection with the Associationist psychology of David Hartley that holds the view that "new ideas emerge from associations inherent in combinations of older ideas". This means that new ideas are inherent in combinations of earlier ideas.

Coleridge later refutes this notion because he believes that the human mind is not a mere container for ideas that exist, but an active agent in the perception of reality. Since reality becomes apparent from a discourse with Nature, Coleridge arrives at the conclusion that reality is, in one way, constructed. This pronouncement is more or less similar to Cartesian (named after René Descartes) way of thinking.

Coleridge then moves on to define imagination. He calls it an "esemplastic power", which is the power that enables the human soul to understand the universe in its raw form, a spiritual unity. He believes that the spiritual unity of the universe is the only ultimate "object" to be perceived, which means that any other objects could be regarded as fancy or the products of other correlative functions of the human mind.

After propounding his thoughts on the terms "imagination" and "fancy", Coleridge provides a critique of Wordsworth's poetry. Coleridge asserts that Wordsworth's claim that his poetry, in "common language" for ordinary people is not true. Wordsworth's poetry is as artificial as the poetry of any other poet because they are written consciously by the poet.

In spite of the drawbacks in the *Preface*, Wordsworth stands out as an eminent poet, probably the finest of the time. According to Coleridge, Wordsworth is able to transform ordinary natural imagery into the extraordinary. Coleridge explains that his own poetic endeavour is to render the supernatural, the realistic using natural language.

Coleridge rejects Wordsworth's dictate that the language of poetry should be taken from the utterances of men in real life. He asserts that there is no distinction between the natural and unconscious language of prose and the metrical composition of poetry. All language innately possesses meter and rhyme. He analyses some of the poems of

Wordsworth where the use of ordinary language could be replaced by more compelling metrical expressions.

To conclude, *Biographia Literaria* is considered to be one of the most influential principles on poetic creativity and artistic expression. Concentrating on philosophy, Coleridge does not in any way take away the implications his discussion on creativity. Coleridge's definition of his own creative spirit to be natural, unforced and unpredictable provides insight into his deliberate break with tradition.

- **Coleridge's Disagreements with Wordsworth**

Coleridge differs from Wordsworth on the following:

- 1) What constitutes the language of "real life"?
- 2) Whether the feelings of lesser educated farmers, probably of the early eighteenth century are more genuine than the feelings of people in the higher classes?
- 3) Whether Aristotle's principles of poetry do or do not govern poems and poetry?
- 4) What is to be done about language that is dull and garrulous in everyday conversation, which is still dull and garrulous in poems? Wordsworth appears to refine the language so to say. Coleridge is against refinement of all that is coarse in language because it renders it the same as the language of higher classes.
- 5) Wordsworth's poetry is about "low rustic" people, feelings, ideas that disproves his own philosophic assertions because Coleridge refutes refinement of all that is coarse in language.
- 6) The rustics' focus on facts while individuals at higher levels of education, work and experience focus on the connections between facts and the connection of facts to governing laws, hence focusing on a higher order of thought, ideas, language, conversation.
- 7) These support Coleridge's view point that there is a difference between the language of prose and poetry, while Wordsworth asserts that there is no difference.

Major Concerns of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*

- The three chapters – fourteen, seventeen and eighteen are concerned primarily with a refutation of Wordsworth's theories that
 - a) poetry should be written in the language of real life, the language of "the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings." Whether this is applicable to all poetry, or only to a certain kind has never been disputed. Besides, the word 'real' sounds ambiguous.
 - b) rustic life is the best poetical material, for in such conditions men live under nature's intimate influence and
 - c) there is no essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.
- **Chapter fourteen** deals with the distinction between poetry and a poem, which Coleridge thinks is necessary to analyse before he goes on to criticise

Wordsworth's criticism. **Chapter eighteen** is concerned with the language of prose and verse, while **chapter seventeen** deals with the other theories. The chapter describes the complementary aims that Wordsworth and Coleridge set for themselves while composing the *Lyrical Ballads*.

- Coleridge vindicates Wordsworth's poetical reputation and asserts his right to attach a preface since the bulk of the contribution has come from him. Coleridge then explains the function of philosophical disquisition as analysis first and synthesis later and states his proposition that "a poem contains as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed". He explicates his organic theory of a poem namely the inter-dependence of the parts. This excludes a sequence of *distichs* like the compositions of the eighteenth-century poets, where each *distich* is detachable and autonomous. Coleridge puts forward an organic, as opposed to a mechanical, theory of poetry.

A Comparison of the Views of Wordsworth and Coleridge

- Coleridge is indebted to Wordsworth in the study of imagination.
- Wordsworth concentrates on the practice of poetry, primarily the influence of imagination on poetry. Coleridge is the first critic to study the nature of imagination and evaluate its role in artistic creativity.
- Wordsworth uses the terms fancy and imagination as synonyms and does not classify imagination as primary and secondary. Coleridge explains the differences between *fancy* and *imagination*, and the roles they play in creative expression. He explores the division of imagination into the Primary Imagination and the Secondary Imagination and provides fresh insights into their function. Coleridge is the first critic to have given an intense and philosophical explanation to creativity. He gives importance to the actual process of creation than the finished product.
- Wordsworth writes in a subjective manner and examines his state of mind before writing a work. This explains the reason for his love of nature and his position as a true worshipper of nature. Wordsworth believes in a primordial relationship between the mind of man and nature around him. Coleridge, on the other hand, is quite objective. His works are the products of factual and biographical descriptions that surround his life.
- Wordsworth's writings are highly sequential and logical and they confine to a single thought process, which is characteristic of his creative endeavours. Coleridge writes in fragments and he is unable to maintain a single thought probably due to the use of opium, for which he is notorious.
- Wordsworth expresses neither anger nor rebellion in his writings. He does not attack any person or any theory but seeks to establish his own views, while Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria* dedicates some chapters to oppose and assess Wordsworth's ideals.
- Wordsworth mentions in the *Preface* that there is no difference between the language of prose and poetry as they both are one and the same thing, but

Coleridge differentiates these two concepts on the basis that poetry comprises of meter and rhyme, while prose does not contain these.

- Wordsworth, in his *Preface* believes that a “real” language that can communicate to the common or rustic people should be the language of poetry. However, Coleridge believes that there is no “real” language as language differs based on education, culture, and belief among other factors, but that a “lingua communis” or common language should be used for poetry.
- Wordsworth’s *Preface* could be regarded as the manifesto of Romanticism because it records the divergent attitude to poetry in the works of the Romantics, but Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* is largely an autobiographical work, which strayed from its immediate purpose along the course of the work and turned out to be his lengthy philosophic treatise on the creative process and imagination. It also showcased Coleridge’s powers as critic.
- Wordsworth believes that poetry should contain events from real, common and everyday life; in contrast, Coleridge believes that this feature is too limiting.
- Wordsworth believes that a poem should be spontaneous and that it should arise out of powerful emotions, which are recollected in tranquility. Coleridge believes that poetry deals with the communication of both truth and pleasure and that some poems may even lack pleasure and communicate only truth.
- Wordsworth admonishes simplicity of diction and style, which is evident in the *Preface* but Coleridge is known for the use of convoluted, esoteric and philosophical language in *Biographia Literaria*.

Features of Coleridge’s Criticism

a. Philosophical and Psychological Basis

Coleridge was dissatisfied with the existing mode of criticism and therefore he turned to philosophy and enunciated principles that sprang from the soul and touched the deeper sources of inspiration and creation. Coleridge mentions: “metaphysics and psychology have long been my hobby-horse.” He attributes special powers to the human mind and thinks that artistic creation is an inner process, so he emphasis on the seminal principle of creation. He makes use of psychological knowledge in defining *fancy* and *imagination* and hence emphasises “method” in criticism.

“Method” means an awareness of the relationship between different things and also between parts of a single entity. T.S.Eliot mentions that “Coleridge, with his authority due to his great reading, probably did much more than Wordsworth to bring attention to the profundity of the philosophical problems into which the study of poetry may take us.” Eliot was probably referring to the use of poetry and the use of criticism.

Coleridge goes to the length of saying that poetry “owes it whole charm, and all its beauty and all its power, to the philosophical principles of method.” The statement is significant if “method” denotes unity and unifying power and “method” is hence similar to the workings of creative imagination.

b. Descriptive Criticism

Coleridge applies his own theories of poetry and drama into practice and tries to project their validity. Without his descriptive criticism, his theoretical criticism might have

appeared a metaphysical abstraction. His descriptive criticism, in terms of subject, falls into three groups. First, Shakespearean criticism, principally in the 1811 -12 lectures delivered on William Shakespeare and John Milton as well as various marginal writings together with chapter fifteen of the *Biographia Literaria*.

Second, Coleridge emerges a critic of Wordsworth in the *Biographia Literaria* in chapters fourteen, seventeen to twenty and twenty-two. Third, there are a series of miscellaneous comments on various English poets of the seventeenth century in his lectures, notes and even formal treatises. For instance, the tribute Coleridge pays to Samuel Daniel in the eighteenth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, and Herberts Temple in the nineteenth chapter.

In this connection, George Watson says, "...as a descriptive critic, his achievement is brilliant but sporadic and offers no single example worthy to be advanced as a model....No English critic has so excelled at providing profitable points of departure for the twentieth century critic".

c. Theoretical Criticism

Coleridge differs from almost all the English critics before him in his interest in theoretical criticism. No English critic before John Dryden has concerned himself with the question of poetic process. For the critics of the eighteenth century, a poem is simply there and it is the variety and uniformity of human reaction to it that is worth discussing. For Coleridge, the process of creation is important.

The aim of Coleridge as a critic is not so much the analysis of a finished product but the search for a theoretical certainty. He mentions in chapter twenty-three of *Biographia Literaria* that his aim is "to establish the principle of writing rather than to furnish rules how to pass judgement on what has been written by others." Coleridge's views of the creative act may be summarised in this manner. The truth that the poet seeks is not objective, that it exists neither in the mind of the poet nor in what he sees around him, but in "the identity of both" the one acting upon the other is a perceptual self-duplication."

Coleridge's Deficiencies as a Critic

There are some deficiencies in the critical writings of Coleridge. These deficiencies are mainly due to the weakness of his nature and temperament. He lacks concentration and does not possess the capacity for sustained work. His critical work suffers from lack of system. His style of writing makes it more difficult for the reader to understand him. It is never smooth and holds the quality of the art of conversation.

Coleridge's views are too philosophical, which makes him a difficult critic. The fragmentary and unsystematic method of Coleridge was not appreciated by the Victorians. He appealed to a few writers and a few critics. Some great modern critics such as T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, F. L. Lucas, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom have departed from his Romanticism.

In spite of his deficiencies, Coleridge's literary acumen remains unparalleled. I.A. Richards acknowledges that his "theory of anaesthesia", later renamed as "poetic inclusion" owes something to Coleridge's Secondary Imagination. The Imagists took over Coleridge's "fancy" as their territory of inquiry.

Critical Comments on Coleridge

The reputation of Coleridge as a critic is phenomenal. He is regarded by many scholars to be the best English critic, and one of the best in Europe. René Wellék believes that Coleridge's critical theories have been borrowed from Kant, Schelling and Schlegel. It is generally believed that Coleridge turned to criticism when his poetic powers began to fail. He says that "at crucial points in his writing, Coleridge used Kant, Schelling and Schlegel, reproducing the pattern of sentences and the exact vocabulary."

In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge makes a general acknowledgement to Schelling. George Watson comments: "The achievement of Coleridge is rightly held to be supreme among the English critics, but no one seeking to expound it can face critic with much confidence." He lays stress on the discursive nature of his critical writing. It is true that in all his critical writings, Coleridge shows a lack of system.

Watson observes: "The *Biographia Literaria* is as discursive and sporadic in its argument as almost to merit its subtitle "Biographical sketches. The important critical writings of Coleridge include *Biographia Literaria*, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, *The Friend*, *The Table Talk*, his contribution to Southey's *Omniana*, *Letters* and the posthumous *Anima Poetae*."

The Marxist critic Frederick Engels has observed that Coleridge's division of the imagination into the "primary" and "secondary" draws a distinction between creative acts that are unconscious and those that are intentional and deliberate.

Views of Some Critics

Saintsbury mentions: "So then there abide these three—Aristotle, Longinus, and Coleridge." According to Arthur Symons, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is "the greatest book of criticism in English." René Wellék is of the view that Coleridge is a link "between German Transcendentalism and English Romanticism." C'azamian observes: "No one before him in England had brought such mental breadth to the discussion of aesthetic values."

R.A. Scott-James admires Coleridge for his union of heart and head. Herbert Read considers Coleridge "as head and shoulders above every other English critic" and sees him anticipating existentialism and Freud". To F.L. Lucas, Coleridge's statements about imagination are "obscure and contorted, his classifications barren, his judgements nonsensical, his theories windy, cloudy, mysterious." T. S. Eliot pokes fun at Coleridge's "metaphysical hare-and-hounds." Allen Tate thinks that Coleridge has "bequeathed to later generations the 'fatal legacy' of indecision".

Coleridge's Achievements as a Critic

Coleridge is the first critic to introduce psychology and philosophy into literary criticism. He is interested in the study of the process of poetic creation and analysis of the principles of creative activity. For this purpose, he freely drew upon philosophy and psychology. He made philosophy the basis of literary inquiry and synthesised philosophy, psychology and literary criticism.

His literary theories are based on philosophy. He philosophised literary criticism and brought about a better understanding of the process of poetic creation and the nature and function of poetry. His unique contribution to literary criticism is his theory of imagination. William Wordsworth and Joseph Addison had examined the nature and

function of imagination. But these discussions appear insignificant when compared to Coleridge's treatment of subject. He is the first critic to differentiate between *imagination* and *fancy* and between Primary Imagination and Secondary Imagination.

Through his theory of imagination, he revolutionised the concept of artistic imitation. Poetic imitation is neither a copy of nature nor the creation of something entirely new, which is different from nature. Poetry is not imitation but creation based on the sensations and impressions received from the external world. Such impressions are shaped, ordered, and modified. Opposites are reconciled and harmonised by the imagination of the poet and in this way poetic creation takes place.

Coleridge resolved the problem of the relation between the form and content of poetry. Through his philosophical inquiry into the nature and value of poetry, he established that a poem is an organic whole and its form is determined by its content, and essential to that content.

Meter and rhyme are not "pleasure superadded". They are not merely something superfluous, which can be dispensed with, not mere decoration, but essential to pleasure, which is true poetic pleasure. This demonstration of the organic wholeness of a poem is one of his major contributions to literary theory.

.....