Chapter 4: Coleridge on Symbolism

Coleridge may be regarded as the father of Symbolist ideas in English criticism. Though his greatness as a critic has been recognized for a long time, there have hardly been any attempts to evaluate fully the numerous critical insights we find scattered through his writings. Perhaps the lack of systematic exposition and Coleridge's own scepticism prevented the full appreciation of his genius by his contemporaries; even later he did not have much of a following. In recent years, however, considerable attention has been given to Coleridge by critics, particularly to what he has to say about imagination and its role in the creation of poetry. Most of our critics today, even those as different from each other as Eliot, Richards, Hulme, Ransom and Brooks, owe a deep debt to Coleridge.

Coleridge is important to Symbolism because he had arrived at many of the important ideas associated with it at a time when the French Symbolists had just begun giving poetry a new direction. As Joseph Chiari has remarked, Coleridge had raced along the plains from which the French Symbolists were to glean painfully later on. But brilliant as Coleridge is, we cannot expect a systematic exposition or theory of symbolism from him; symbolism was only one of the many things that engaged his attention. The great thing, however, is the fact that here was a poet who also possessed rare critical and intellectual powers investigating certain fundamental problems of poetic creation. What he found and said anticipates the work of the Symbolists.
The Symbol seems to have interested Coleridge early, and he gave a homely definition of it as 'that which means what it says, and something more beside'. The nature of the deeper meaning to be found in the Symbol was not revealed here, but Coleridge thought about it later. He found a mystical element in the Symbol, and that element he seems to have associated with the aesthetic value; the idea comes out in a remark like the following:

The Mystics ... define beauty as the subjection of matter to spirit so as to be transformed into a symbol, in and through which the spirit reveals itself.

The poet's imagination could bring about that 'subjection of matter to spirit'; it could see through objects and find the deeper reality within,

For all that meets the bodily sight I deem
Symbolical, one mighty alphabet
For infant minds; and we, in this low world,
Placed with our backs to bright Reality,
That we may learn with young unwounded ken
The substance from its shadow.

Here Coleridge comes close to the Baudelairean conception of 'correspondences', of things which are symbols of a deeper reality. Symbolism, at least in its early stages, had the revelation of spiritual truths as one of its principal aims. This implied an interpretative role for the poet, with which he was not completely satisfied. There was a shift in attitude later, and the active part played by the poet in symbolization came to be emphasized. The poet was not to be merely an instrument for noting down correspondences or analogies, but a creator who made use of objects or images to symbolize his vision of Reality. This view led to the idea that the poet's mind could reflect, through the power of symbolic imagination, the reality that earlier poets had regarded as external to the poet.

1 'Biographia Literaria', ed. Shawcross, II, 239.
2 'The Destiny of Nations'.
That is, the poet's mind can supply him with the deepest truths. The poet can find, within himself, the 'correspondances' or 'meanings' of objects he perceives, and thus get at Reality. In one of his reflective moods, Coleridge wrote:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolical language for something within me that already and for ever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomena were the dim awaking of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature. It is still interesting as a word — a symbol.  

Coleridge later developed this conception of the creative power of the poetic mind. To him, as to the major French Symbolists, the poetic mind, the relative status and play of the creative faculties, is the source as well as the test of art. Coleridge would agree with a view like that of Mallarmé, of the poem as a mind-created structure. It is not surprising, therefore, that his discussion of poetry is associated with the systematic development of the mental processes of the poet.

The essential faculty of the mind which distinguishes the poet Coleridge calls 'reason', and he gives it the highest place. 'The term is perhaps unfortunate, since the usual connotation of the word is the exact opposite of Coleridge's:  

reason, as Coleridge uses the word, is what Blake calls vision'. What we call reason, the power of rational thinking, Coleridge called 'understanding'. He made an important distinction between the two faculties of 'reason' and 'understanding'. Coleridge, keenly interested in the working of the human mind, found his conception of the mind was related to his general conception of nature. In nature he distinguished between the 'universal' and the 'particular'  

3 'Anima Poetae', p.136.
Coleridge seems to use the word 'universal' when he is speaking of a principle existing separately, and the word 'particular' when he is speaking of the 'act' or object in which the universal becomes manifest. He wanted to maintain that the mind could grasp both the universal and the particular: hence his assertion of the existence of two faculties, 'reason' and 'understanding'. The latter is discursive rather than immediate, and helps us to grasp the world of material phenomena, the former is 'the immediate and inward beholding of the spiritual as sense is of the material. The 'understanding' classifies, analyzes, and generalizes on observations; it is concerned only with

... the quantities, qualities and relations of particulars in time and space. The understanding, therefore, is the science of phenomena, and of their subsumption under distinct kinds and sorts (genera and species). .... The reason, on the other hand, is the science of the universal.

But reality. Coleridge holds, is to be found in neither the universal nor the particular, but in the process of fulfilment where each declares the other.

If the poet's mind is to grasp this reality, it could do so only through some capacity which brings together and fuses what the two faculties have to offer.

To this essentially poetic capacity Coleridge gave the name 'imagination', and carefully distinguished it from 'fancy'. In arriving at this distinction, Coleridge gave considerable thought to the prevailing conception of poetic invention. Ever since the publication of David Hartley's version of the theory of association in 1749, a certain theory of literary work had become popular. Hartley had set out to demonstrate that all the complex contents and processes of the mind are derived from the elements of simple sensation combined with the single link of contiguity in original experience. Coleridge's description

of 'arising out of the properties of the material'. Organic form is the product of a development from within, which 'shapes as it develops itself from within'.

The difference is vividly illustrated in the following passage:

(One) might fit together a quarter of an orange, a quarter of an apple, and the like of a lemon and a pomegranate, and make it look like one round diverse coloured fruit. But nature, who works from within by evolution and assimilation according to a law, cannot do it. Nor could Shakespeare, for he worked in the spirit of nature, by evolving the germ within by the imaginative power according to an idea.

In attempting to reveal the nature of the power which could create organic forms in art, Coleridge was led to a new understanding of the poetic mind. All genuine creation, according to Coleridge, makes use of the generative tension of opponent forces which are synthesized without exclusion in a new whole. In what is perhaps his most specific single definition, Coleridge describes this creative power of imagination as

... that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanent and self-circulating energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors.  

The imagination is thus able to perform various functions simultaneously: it turns to the images and objects of the concrete world, which coming to us through the senses and understanding, appear fixed and dead, it senses the dynamic principle inherent in these objects (= the particulars), and it helps us to apprehend, through the reason, the universals. By fusing all these functions into a unity, the imagination enables the poet to gain access to Reality.

This view of imagination which gives a distinct cognitive position and value to the Symbol continues to be followed and respected by the modern Symbolists, for whom the imagination is still what Coleridge called it, 'the empowering faculty for our best poetry'. Even those moderns who are opposed to the idea of

the self-sufficiency of the poetic mind are not able to get away from it.

T.E. Hulme, for example, started from an explicitly anti-romantic standpoint, but in his essay on Bergson he returned to a theory of poetic creativity not completely different from Coleridge's. Hulme distinguishes between intuition and stock-perception, and characterizes poetic creativity as the former. The poet can break through the mere static recognition of the world about us which practical life demands; he sees through static appearances to the dynamic flux which characterizes essential reality. Like the Symbolists, Hulme is not only concerned with the poet's relation to reality, but also with his use of language. Language helps the poet to make his vision available to others who, without the poet, would not be able to see beyond the stereotyped world of practical life. But language is not, as it was considered generally by the Romantics, a mere instrument of expression, a vehicle for the communication of the poet's thoughts; it plays a more active part in poetic creation. Hulme takes the view that intuitions not only take linguistic form but that they are dependent upon language. Since thinking can take place only in a medium, it is possible that the poet cannot have a fresh perception of the world unless he 'dislocates' language in an effort to force fresh ways of expression from it. Thus, according to Hulme, the poet has not only to see the world in a new way but also to use language in a new way. Even here Hulme had been forestalled by Coleridge. Coleridge was one of the first persons to realize that words were not mere 'arbitrary signs'; he suggested that words be regarded as playing an active part in the organic growth of the mind, 'parts and germinations of the plant'. Also he 'would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things, elevating, as it were, Words into Things, and living things too'.

attitude to language Coleridge anticipates Mallarme's reverence for Words. In fact one could accept the view of a modern critic who sees in Coleridge the beginnings of the Symbolist attitude to language:

In this sort of emphasis on the act of speech as the realization of organic unity one can detect the rudiments of a modern symbolist tradition, carried on not so much by a chain of literary influence as by a growing intellectual need. It is a tradition not of subject matter or convention but of aesthetic standpoint not of dogma but of method. 17

17 Charles Fiedelson (Jr.): 'Symbolism and Modern American Literature', p. 75.