Preface

In the whole range of the poetical works of Coleridge lies hidden the Odyssey of a great soul who struggled throughout his tragic career to acquire and wield "that synthetic and magical power" which is called Imagination. His importance as a cultural arbiter has remained almost undiminished in the "culture of criticism", as acknowledged by modern critics like Raymond Williams, F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards, among others. A.C. Goodson rightly ascertains the position of this great Romantic poet and critic with reference to one of his archetypical creations: "Coleridge is the Ancient Mariner of English critical tradition, an ancestral voice inspiring allegiance from generation to generation" (Goodson, Introd. XI).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), "logician, metaphysician, bard" was the most erudite of all the romantics. A veritable "library cormorant", he had read almost everything-travel books, science, metaphysics, economics, theology and poetry. Hence over the centuries, Coleridge critics have spilt much ink on the erudition of a mind that lies buried in his major poetical works. These critical works, scholarly though they are, tend to take us away from the heart of his poetical works. In Coleridge's treatment of the Sublime in Nature and his superb handling of the Supernatural (partly derived from his readings of the Occult, partly from his adventurous spirit and more significantly from contemporary Depth-Psychology), I find a special appeal and charm. I have concentrated on a study of his poems, because, I felt that though Coleridge also happened to be a critic, philosopher, revolutionary, dreamer, lecturer, he was predominantly a poet. In fact his metaphysical preoccupations and pursuits were undertaken to enhance his poetic powers and stir up the deep wells of his thought for creative purposes. That is why I felt that a concerted attempt to correlate all the diverse strains of thoughts criss-crossing
Coleridge’s mind would bring us closer to a fuller understanding of his poetry. This would also enable readers, who have a general apathy towards Coleridge study (critical interpretations of his works often tend to make the poet appear more baffling and confusing than he originally was) to get a more comprehensive and objective analysis of his poetic genius.

What strikes me as the most interesting aspect of Coleridge’s genius is the remarkable development of his mind, which finds a perpetually faithful reflection in his poetry. The myriad-minded genius that he was, such development encompasses a vast range of thought—philosophical, religious, political, aesthetic and moral. Moreover his personal affections keep shifting almost mercurially from Robert Southey to Sara Fricker to the Wordsworth to Sara Hutchinson and this points to the complicated workings of the complicated Coleridgian mind.

He would burst into raptures over a new acquaintance, continue a creative honeymoon for some years, and then, finding a more congenial communion, would be equally despondent over that relationship and finally abandon it forever to build up a new one on the ruins of a former. It astonishes us that the very same mind that that conceived of metaphysics as the requisite study for a poet, finds( in a few years) the same discipline obsessively telling on and eating into his poetic powers. The same mind that considered his friendship with Wordsworth most rewarding finds it burdensome within a brief span of some years. Isn’t it hard to reconcile the man who, charged with the ideals of the French Revolution, openly condemned the English attack on the French and the man, who, unable to pay his growing debts, enlisted himself in the Light Dragoons of the English Army as a trooper with a feigned name? The very person who ‘sported infidel’ in
his youth became a profound believer by the time he commenced writing *Biographia Literaria*?

To most readers, these self-contradictions seem to be baffling and confusing. But I find these aspects of his mind most fascinating because such apparent incompatibility is nothing but the mark of a vibrating and effervescent mind acquiring increasing complexity with age, experience and wisdom. In fact, Coleridge's mind was that of a pilgrim, wandering in the maze and mystery of life's complexities, yearning to seek the unity that underlies multiplicity, and finding the equilibrium through the thesis and antithesis of life's dialectics. He was acutely conscious of the discord growing within and without the mind, which it was his task to explain and resolve. If the contraries remained unresolved in his mind, it could perhaps be inferred that being a profound philosopher, his humility urged him to believe that this universe is too Great and Whole for a single intellect to comprehend its full potential. Kathleen Raine in her introduction to Coleridge's poetry interprets the issue of Coleridge's 'unfinished' undertakings:

"... but 'finish' implies the realization of some finite end, and Coleridge's ends were ocean-like and boundless. Even as a child Coleridge tells of himself, through the thought of the stars in the night sky, and his reading of fairy tales and genii, 'my mind had been habituated to the vast'; and his thought is no more finished, or capable of completion, than the Universe. His trains of thought lead often to a point at which Coleridge stops short, because of the very extent of the horizon that still open before him."
Coleridge was hampered by the very vastness of his own mental processes. (Raine 11-12)

In my dissertation spread over seven chapters, I have tried to analyse Coleridge’s major poems, in, as far as possible, a chronological sequence because Coleridge himself considered ‘the chronological order the best for arranging a poet’s work’ since the interest arose ‘.....from watching the progress, maturity, and even the decay of genius’. (Table Talk 286)

His poetry can be read as an emanation of the frequent bouts of passionate elation, emotional exuberance as well as addiction to opium, illness, insomnia, mental fatigue and depression. The series of letters that Coleridge wrote to his relatives, friends and contemporaries and the notebooks where he randomly jotted down his flitting thoughts, offer glimpses of a mind shrouded in mystery. I have attempted to plumb the depth of this mysterious self to unravel the creative chemistry on the basis of these primary materials and his biography.

In my first chapter I have tried to throw light upon Coleridge the revolutionary, the dreamer, the idealist and sentimentalist who also happens to be a poet. Most of these early poems show the influence of his predecessors in poetry, especially Milton. Here we find a young intellectual taking up poetry as a pursuit of pastime in a life otherwise busy with diverse preoccupations. These are just imitative and derivative in quality and bear little sign of his individual talent—his original thought and the style of his later years. But precisely at this phase of Coleridge’s life, we find the young poet developing creative kinship with master predecessors like Shakespeare and Milton. Steeped in the classical works and the literary tradition and myths, Coleridge would soon unfurl his individual
genius. Influenced by the cross-currents of thoughts and ideas, Coleridge's mind was naturally in a state of confusion, and the well defined aesthetic notion is difficult to emerge out of such opposing surges of thoughts. But from his forerunners, Coleridge was definitely learning as a practitioner the requisite elevation, passion, drama and impact in poetry.

In the second chapter, I have dwelt upon the poems composed around 1794-96, when Coleridge seems to have acquired some grasp over style and technique, though the ideas he voices do not ring with the conviction that can be discerned in his mature works. This period of Coleridge's poetic career saw his supposedly happy marriage followed by his distressed reaction to the failure of his scheme of Pantisocracy, the frustration of his idealism about the French Revolution, and the soothing environment of the blissful cottage at Somerset. The poems of this phase abound in images and formulations of the sensory perceptions which are in Coleridge's own distinction, rather the products of Fancy than of Imagination. Nevertheless, in the poems of this period we find Coleridge giving up his Utopian dreams and waking up to a greater sense of reality. The world of Nature and that of his immediate perception are more often chosen as subjects to replace the more remote and far-fetched issues. The conversation poem "The Eolian Harp" contains lines which speak volumes of Coleridge's belief in Unitarianism and his lifelong and relentless search after the vast potentialities of Nature that can unify not only the diverse and discordant elements in Nature, but also correlate the Mind of Man with the disparate surroundings. The idea of the Unity of the Cosmos and the metaphysical links between Nature and Man, and the supreme faculty of Imagination are also voiced in Religious Musings and Destiny Of Nations, two disastrously tedious poetic efforts in the
style of Milton. These works are significant as they indicate the trend of his most serious thinking at this period. Here for the first time one can trace the growth of a poet’s mind as an agency through which the cosmic order, the omnipresent Love, finds an avenue of expression.

The third chapter provides in the first section, a study of the poem “This Lime Tree Bower My Prison”, and in the second, that of his widely acclaimed, discussed, analysed and dissected work, The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner. This period in Coleridge’s life is remarkable for his creative collaboration with friend Wordsworth and the publication of the Lyrical Ballads. The power of the mind and the faculty of Imagination is perhaps hinted at in “This Lime Tree Bower” where the poet compensates for his inability to join his friends by letting his mind (Imagination) wander along with his friends in their walk. In The Rime, Coleridge for the first time, states the grand paradoxes of life and represents with poetic faith the unifying principle underlying such dualities. Coleridge in The Rime has already acquired the strange mesmerizing power of speech which his mariner is invested with. His treatment of the Supernatural in The Rime first induces us to consider the same as a form of poetically exploring the unfathomable mysteries of Nature and also of the human psyche.

Since Mind has already been the focus of the poet’s attention and his poetic endeavours have mostly tended to internalise Nature and externalise the Mind I have in the fourth chapter attempted an assessment of Coleridge’s poetic masterpiece “Kubla Khan” in the light of the streaming consciousness of his mind. John Livingstone Lowes’s in-depth analysis of Coleridge’s immense erudition which run in the backdrop of this supposed fragment of a poem has aided my efforts to trace the shifting thought-patterns
underlying the poetic projection. I have however shown how his elusive thought-patterns are superbly controlled by the exercise of his Imagination. In its streaming continuity, the poem attempts to link the unconscious with the conscious in a partly passive process of associating elements from Memory and partly active process of fusing them with Imagination.

In the fifth Chapter, I have focussed my analytical study on Christabel, another lengthy, unfinished poem in two parts. The first part of the poem was composed several years in advance of the second. Here I have ignored the chronological pattern because I want to give emphasize more on the poet’s growing perplexity of vision amidst life’s traumatic voyage. Christabel offers a continuation of the deep psychological interest in the origins of both evil action and moral restoration. Like William Blake, Coleridge was not satisfied with an ethical or psychological position (such as that of eighteenth century Evangelism) which attempted to exclude Evil from human nature. On the contrary, he felt that the energies of Evil had to be re-integrated for human nature to be complete, and Christabel was his last venture in mystery poems poetically realise this complex attitude to Evil. Coleridge achieved what he aimed at in the first part of Christabel but the second part is a failure as it bears signs of the gradual disintegration of the poet’s personality and paralysis of his will.

The sixth chapter in continuation of the same subject (Coleridge’s poetic decline) attempts to show that his poetic powers inspite of the poet’s awareness of the decline creativity, have not deserted him altogether. The ethereal voice of the Mystery poems is missing; nevertheless, in the conversation poems of 1798 and after, we find the poet speaking of his poetic conviction to his readers in an informal, friendly chit-chat of
conversation. In "Frost at Midnight", "Nightingale" and "Dejection: An Ode", we find Coleridge assuming more the role of a critic than that of a poet with a spontaneous creativity. In fact, these conversation pieces ring with a self-critical voice—these are but criticisms in poetic form. Coleridge at this stage is already on his journey from poetry to theory, from the effulgent domain of the imagination to the synthesizing realm of the intellect.

The concluding chapter (seventh) deals with Coleridge's last poems. Isolated and estranged from love and affection, the poet seems to grope about in the dark, seeking solace sometimes in the idealised love for Sara Hutchinson and sometimes in self-dedicatory religiosity. The creative founts of poetry having dried up, the poet at this phase devotes his attention to criticism at large. Since his poetry draws its substance from the mysterious half-lights, the 'accidents of light and shade' its magic begins to be dissipated and weakened, as the mysteries of Nature and life are replaced by hard realities both in society and in the poet's private life. The peculiar character of his poetic inspiration, its sudden outburst, its dramatic movements, the mysterious way in which it would come and go, leaving him incapable of completing what he has begun—the things suggest something that might well visit a youthful imagination, and then, when the flush of youth and youthful sensibility have waned, might itself melt away too. Like the sacred river in "Kubla Khan", the fountain of poetry spurs out with its sublime splendour from the depths of dreams and consciousness, but it also meanders in the maze and complexities of life and sinks forever into the sea of oblivion.

Critics tend to blame Coleridge's overtly metaphysical preoccupations for his loss of poetic power. Our studies however, lead us to believe that Coleridge's creativity
hampered, not by the vastness of his mental processes, but by his inability to infuse his verse with the flexibility required to match the shifting elusive thought patterns criss-crossing the impact of bitter experiences of personal life. Perhaps he was constrained by his own theoretical formulations of the Supreme faculty of the Imagination. The gradual intensifying angles of Coleridgean thoughts would endear him to any modern reader will certainly because in his mind the reader, because in his mind the reader certainly have found his own. But Colerige failed to give a proper creative form to interior effervescences, an ‘objective correlative’ to his complex mental context. He broke the barriers of contemporary ideas of poetics and poetic ideals; but he could not break the barriers of contemporary poetic form. Had he been as adventurous in his technique as he was in his Ideas (in his Mystery poems he left signs of such promise) we would have identified in his poetry the same characteristics that we discern in ‘modern’ poetry.

The poems of his last phase typify his decline and bankruptcy which was best expressed by Coleridge himself when he commented in an ironic self-referential manner on his physique: “a man of indolence capable of Energies”. The comment contains a transferred epithet to qualify his present state of uncreation.

Through the seven chapters, I have tried to examine the various phases in the poet’s journey from poetry to theory. Since he himself was a critic looking back and commenting on his own works quite pertinently, I have mostly chosen Coleridge’s own words to name the various chapters of my dissertation. These have been partly derived from his poetry, letters, and notebooks and partly from Biographia Literaria, the voluminous work of literary retrospection and introspection.
Works Cited:


-------- *Table Talk*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1917
