CHAPTER – I

The Early Poems : Formless Contents

Coleridge’s poetry began in the 1780’s in the revolutionary idealism propounded by the French Revolution ("The Destruction of the Bastille") and poems in the tradition of the 18th century sentimentalists. Imitative and derivative in the matter of ideas and style, most of these early poems are laborious and marred by a florid diction. These early verses exhibit all the cleverness and imitativeness of the brilliant young man who in Eliot’s sharp distinction wants to be a poet rather than to write poems, everything is technique and manner, hardly anything significant and substance. In fact, his early verses can be judged in his own words that while ‘such verses are strivings of mind and struggles after the Intense and Vivid are a fair promise of better things’, they are still no more than a putting of thought into verse. (Preface to PW 3)

Nevertheless, Coleridge’s early poems are inlaid with the germs of the latent talent that is to reveal itself in the years to come. Like most young poets he was searching for his own voice and his revolt against poetic diction was necessary because he had been so much in its power. In those initial years, he later recalls that he had realised ‘...the superiority of an austere and more natural style’ (BL I 3) but was unable to achieve it. Twenty years later, Coleridge again acknowledged the stylistic faults but also put his finger upon a deeper reason for the weakness of these early poems:

My judgement was stronger than were my powers of realising its dictates, and the faults of my language, though indeed partly owing to a wrong choice of subjects and the desire of giving a poetic colouring to abstract and metaphysical truths in which a new world then seemed to open upon me, did yet, in part likewise, originate in unfeigned diffidence of my own comparative talent. (BL I 3)
An indolent dreamer, fretful and inordinately passionate right from his early childhood, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's mind had been habituated to the vast; he had given his mind 'a love of the great and the whole' (L.I.354) by forming his faith in the affirmative. It is this very nature of the mind, a faith in the affirmative of whatever he chanced upon, be it the romances of giants and magicians and genii, or the philosophy of mysticism in the writings of the Neoplatonists, or the infidel rationality promulgated by Voltaire, or the stately and sublime works of Shakespeare and Milton, or the poetry of Bowles with its unconventional treatment of nature, or the revolutionary ideals of Godwin or the doctrine of Unitarianism professed by Priestley—all find a congenial soil in the Coleridgean mind so as to spread out their roots and express themselves. It took some years before the poet could blend all these cross-currents of thoughts into an integrated form of a philosophy which, notwithstanding its diverse origins, was uniquely Coleridgean.

A young impressionable mind as his was, Coleridge, at Christ Hospital, was introduced into the poems of Shakespeare and Milton, by the severe master, Rev. James Bowyer from whom he learnt that 'poetry has a logic of its own as severe as that of science, and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more and more fugitive causes'. (BL I 4) His favorites poetry at the age of seventeen was the sonnets of William Lisle Bowles and he points out that 'there is no poet so influential on a young contemporary whose poems themselves assumes the properties of flesh and blood'. (BL I 7).

At Cambridge, Coleridge's interests were too many and too diverse to allow of remarkable achievement in any particular direction. Cambridge being at that time in the ferment of left wing politics, poetry, theology, science and metaphysics all engaged him in their turn. It is probably in these years, he studied Plato and Neoplatonists along with Jacob Boehme and other of the Christian mystics. He too sported infidel after reading Voltaire, and then in rapid succession, followed Locke, Berkeley, Leibnitz and Hartley. There are evidences too that he was initially impressed by the arguments of the physician poet Dr Erasmus Darwin:
The arguments (of Dr. Darwin) against the existence of a God and the evidences of revealed religion were such as had startled me at fifteen, but had become the object of my smile at twenty. (LI 177)

Therefore, the initial years of Coleridge's poetic career were the years of a confusion of powers in the paradox of thoughts, opinions, ideas, scepticism and belief, rationality and superstition, theism and atheism. A well-defined aesthetic notion is difficult to emerge out of such opposing surges of thoughts and ideas. Coleridge's mind was such that it would allow itself to be swept off into the prevailing current of thoughts, his mind would flow out in diverse channels, and only after such voyages into the extremes, would it find a direction for itself.

As mentioned earlier, Coleridge's early verses stand significant examples of the influences of all the works he happened to read through. He imitated them indiscriminately, but gradually evolved a style of his own, a voice of his own which would soon make itself heard in the poetry of the creative years of his companionship with the Wordsworths at Alfoxden.

II

George Watson, in his discussion of Coleridge's early poems, maintains that his 'schoolboy poems are largely deliberate imitations of classical models, and they include parodies as well as imitations from the start.' (Watson 47)

"Dura Navis" of 1787 reveals a typically schoolboy exercise in solemnity in the manner of Horace.

Hast thou forseen the Storms impending rage

When to the clouds the waves ambitious rise
And seen with Heaven a doubtful war to wage,

Whilst total darkness overspreads the skies (PW 2 II 9-12)

"Lines in the manner of Spenser" rattles with the archaic diction in imitation of Spenser

Sleep, softly breathing God! his downy wing

Was fluttering now, as quickly to depart,

When twanged as arrow from loves mystic string

With pathless wound it pierced him to the heart. (PW 95 II 28-31)

"Julia" written in Christ Hospital in 1789 is an obvious imitation of the Augustan tradition in verse, though the mood is lighter:

Twere vain to tell, how Julia pin'd away

Unhappy Fair! that is one luckless day-

From future Almanacks the day be crost!

At once her lover and her lap-dog lost. (PW 7 II 29-32)

In early November 1791, Coleridge, in a letter to brother George Coleridge writes:

I am reading Pindar and composing Greek verses, like a mad dog. I am very fond of Greek verse........ (LI 17)

His declamatory "Monody on the death of Chatterton" written in 1790 is a Pindaric imitation where he laments the death of the young poet Chatterton and expresses the hope that he, who will also be a poet, will be better able to resist the pains of neglect.

Grant me, like thee, the lyre to sound,

Like thee, with fire divine to glow-

But Ah! when rage the Waves of Woe,

Grant me with firm breast to oppose their hate

And soar beyond the storms with upright eye elate (PW 15 II 86-90)
The poem was recorded in Bower’s *Golden Book* in the first version, but Coleridge returned to it and revised it at various times during his poetic career. For poets of the later eighteenth century, Milton was the type of sublime poet. The most celebrated theoretical expression of the sublime in the eighteenth century aesthetics is Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Coleridge was profoundly influenced by this work and the source of sublimity it traced to whatever is fitted in any sort to excite, the idea of pain, and danger, whatever is conversant about terrible objects. In fact, the eighteenth century notion of sublimity was the production of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. Coleridge’s “Devonshire Roads” is a furious ode in the imitation of Miltonic sublimity.

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When the sad fiends thro’ Hell’s sulphurous roads
Took the first survey of their new abodes;
Or when the fallen Archangel fierce
Dar’d through the realms of night to pierce
What time the Bloodhound lur’d by Human scent
Thro’ all Confusion’s quagmires floundering went. (PW 27 ll 9-14)
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The unnatural, cumbersome style led to Coleridge’s own confession that the poems have been rightly charged with a profusion of double epithets, and a general turgidness.

Commenting on the quality of his writings, Coleridge writes to his brother George in 1791 that Mr Tomkins, the finest writer in Europe, when shown his early verses, ‘might have read it by the light of my blushes’ (L I 10). His early verses, including Miltonic approximations, are a handful of couplets lacking the fine balance of Pope and maintaining just a lurching equilibrium instead. These are melancholy pieces in the eighteenth century mood. These are either imitations of Spenser or Ossian, or comic efforts in which the humour depends on the discrepancy between a swelling portentous manner and an almost idiotically trifling subject. The “Monody On A Tea Kettle” written in 1790 justifies
Coleridge was sixteen when Dr. Darwin’s *The Love Of The Plants*, burst on the literary world in April 1789. Coleridge confirms in *Biographia Literaria* that he took an early interest in Darwin’s poem, and he was impressed, but he was quite critical of the style, which he found ‘cold, glittering, transitory’.( BL I 12) He proceeded to satirize this gaudy style in his “Monody on a Tea Kettle”, a mock dirge on the loss of a rusty tea-kettle spoilt by over-heating. Desmond King Hele, in his discussion of the influence of Darwin on Coleridge’s poem, tell us how the ‘Monody’ relies heavily on the diction of *Loves of the Plants* which ‘stirs Coleridge to parody’.

The sooty swain has felt the fire’s fierce rage;-
Yes he is gone, and all my woes increase;
I heard the water issuing from the wound-
No more the tea shall pour its fragrant streams around (PW 18 ll 13-16)

With regard to Coleridge’s early imitative verses, Prof. M. H. Abram’s words in his article “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” are of paramount importance:

Coleridge had compounded Biblical Prophecy, the hieratic stance of Milton, and the formal rhetoric, allegorical tactics and calculated disorder of what he called, the ‘sublime ode’ of Gray and Collins, in the effort to endow his subjects with the requisite elevation, passion, drama and impact. (Abrams 542)

III

The years in Cambridge were the years of Pantisocracy, devotion to the ideal of the French Revolution, the publication of *The Watchman*, the approach to becoming a unitarian minister. In the strange welter of the confusing theories of Hartley, Berkeley, Plato and Plotinus, we are aware of the quality of an eager searching mind, engaged in the pursuit of truth. His passionate hatred of tyranny,
slavery and oppression fired by the ideals of the French Revolution urged him, like Milton, to use his mighty pen in support of Science, Freedom and the Truth in Christ. To these three causes did Coleridge dedicate his early poems.

In “Destruction of the Bastille” Coleridge’s optimistic ardour regarding the Revolution runs through the sweeping verses:

Yes! Liberty the soul of life shall reign,
Shall throb in every pulse, shall flow thro every vein. (PW 11 ll 29-30)

Human liberty, equality and fraternity that the revolution aimed at, would not be limited to the geographical barriers of the country alone; its message would be global:

Till every land from pole to pole
Shall boast one independent soul! (PW 11 ll 37-38)

Finally there is a kind wish for his own country,

And still, as erst, let favoured Britain be

First ever of the first and freest of the free! (PW 11 39-40)

The same rhapsodizing at the hopeful prospect of stabilizing an egalitarian society in Susquehanna in collaboration with Robert Southey, finds expression in “On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy in America”

............... In other climes

Where dawns, with hope serene, a brighter day

Then e’er saw Albion in her happiest times,

With mental eye exulting now explore,

And soon with kindred mind shall haste to enjoy

(Free from the ills which here our peace destroy)

Content and Bliss on Transatlantic shore. (PW 69 ll 8-14)
Ironically, the whole story of Pantisocracy turned out to be very tragical mirth; for before the scheme was eventually dropped, it had already brought about a disastrous marriage in its trail. The initial enthusiasm over the French Revolution would also be converted in "France: an Ode" (April 1798) to rebuke revolutionary France for her unprovoked invasion of Switzerland:

To mix with kings in the low dust of sway.

Yell in the hunt, and share the murderous prey (246 ll 81-82)

In his disillusionment comes a good deal of excited and vigorous verse

The sensual and the dark rebel in vein,

Slaves by their own compulsion! In mad game

They burst their manacles and wear the name

Of freedom, graven on a heavier chain. (247 ll 85-88)

Earlier in 1794, in the poem "To a young Lady" first published in The Watchman, Coleridge goes out to describe the frenzied ardour of the revolution which had claimed his youthful mind.

When slumbering freedom roused by high disdain

With giant Fury burst her triple chain!

Fierce on her front the blasting Dogstar glow'd;

Her banners, like a midnight meteor, flow'd

Amid the yelling of the storm-rent skies!

She came and scatter'd battles from her eyes!

And swept with wild hand Tyraen lyre:

Red from the Tyrant's wound I shook the lance

And strode in joy the reeking plains of France (65 ll 17-26)
Now wearied at the excesses developed by the revolutionaries, the poet seeks an alternative abode for himself. Like the poet in “Kubla Khan”, he would also resort to the world of his imagination where he would build castles in air with the power of his imagination.

Fallen is the Oppressor, friendless, ghastly, low,
And my heart aches, though Mercy struck the blow.
With wearied thought once more I seek the shade
Where peaceful Virtue weaves the Myrtle braid.
And O! if Eyes whose holy glances roll,
Swift messengers, and eloquent of soul,
If Smiles more winning, and the gentler Mien
Than the love-wilder’d Maniac’s brain hath seen
Shaping celestial forms in vacant air,
If these demand the empassioned Poet’s care- (65 ll 27–36)

Here gradually we find the traces of Coleridge’s emerging concept of the all-creating Imagination. In the picture of the eyes of an empassioned poet rolling in ‘holy glance’, we foresee the picture of the maniacal poet in the fury of creation in “Kubla Khan”. ‘Instead of identifying himself with public causes or pinning his idealism upon a real-life sect or nation, like the French,’ Marilyn Butler writes on Coleridge, the rebel-turned-reactionary, ‘he preferred now to internalize it’ (Butler 80).

The liberty which he strove for, is no longer to be found across the Channel, among ‘factious Blasphemy’s obscener slaves’, but in his own imagination by an entirely new empathy with his surroundings,

..................on that sea-cliff’s verge
Whose pines, scarce travelled by the breeze above,
Had made one murmur with the distant surge!
Yes, while I stood and gazed, my temples bare
And shot my being through earth, sea and air,
Possessing all things with intensest love,
O Liberty! My spirit felt thee there. (247 ll 99-105)

The process of discovery of the self and elevation of the self’s truth against the disturbing system of the generalized external truth has already set on. Prof. I.A. Richards comments on the remarkable subtlety of the Coleridgean mind.

He was naturally a psychologist, abnormally aware of and curious about the happenings in his own mind, with a delight in and a talent for systematic thinking that are as uncommon. He had moreover, a mind which gave him, in its incessant activity, more remarkable material to inquire into than is ordinarily combined with such a capacity to inquire. He lived at time when a deep and a general change was occurring in man’s conception of himself and of his World, and he spent his powers upon the elaboration of a speculative apparatus that would be a kind of microscope with which to study this change and others.

( Richards 2 )

The social and political moralizing would soon be abandoned and a sensuous-moral apprehension of the natural surrounding would be more congenial for his enquiring poetic spirit.

IV

The poems so far discussed suffer a discrepancy, a gap which remains when thought is put into the language as into a container. As the poet grows, the gap closes. The thought is in the language and the
language is of the thought. For Coleridge, this growth was entailed with being introduced into the sonnets of William Lisle Bowles and Cowper ‘..... the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction; the first who reconciled the heart with the head’. (BL I 13) In the words of Patricia Adair, ‘Bowles not only helped Coleridge to find a natural and lyrical voice’ but also ‘the association between the poet’s feeling and the natural scene around him also enabled him........to bridge the gulf between subject and object, the internal and the external world. The struggle to reanimate the dead world, to join together what the mechanistic philosophy had put asunder, was, indeed to be the life-long search of both Coleridge’s poetry and philosophy. (Adair 26 27) The sonnet form, so traditional and given, was not fit for themes intended to be contemporary and even revolutionary. At any rate, the relation between words and feeling, expression and thought, in these poems, is almost exactly the opposite of what Coleridge explicitly recommended when he wrote

The heart should have fed upon the truth, as insects on a leaf till it be tinged with the colour, and show its food in even the minutest fibre.

One can understand why Coleridge should have written as he did at the end of an immense letter to John Thelwall.

I love sonnets; but upon my honour I do not love my sonnets. (LI 287)

Perhaps he realised that he needed to connect the feeling, reflective mind and Nature. In the Introduction to the Sonnets, 1797, Coleridge stresses this indispensable characteristics of a sonnet:

In a sonnet then we require a development of some lonely feeling, whatever causes it may have been excited but those sonnets appear to me the most exquisite, in which moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings are deduced from, and associated with, the Scenery of Nature. They create a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world......Hence the sonnets of Bowles derive their marked superiority over all
other sonnets; hence they domesticate with the heart, and become, as it were, a part of our identity. (Campbell ed. PW 543)

In a letter to Robert Southey, Coleridge again states the importance of the sonnets of Bowles.

It is among the chief excellences of Bowles that his imagery appears almost always prompted by the surrounding scenery. (L1)

Following in the line of Bowles, Coleridge also seems to turn his attention from the distant ideologies and abstract notions to the more homely setting of this natural scenery. In poems like “Song of the Pixies” or “Sonnet to the River Otter”, he draws upon his personal experience and describes the scenes of his childhood with a kind of ease and spontaneity quite lacking in his earlier works.

“The Song of the Pixies”, occasioned by a visit Coleridge paid to his native Devonshire in 1793 is a storehouse of pictures from memories of childhood. Patricia Adair, in the association of the Coleridge’s awareness as a poet and the murmur of bees, traces the same association that links moonlit magic, the strange cavern and the power of the poet who had fed on honey dew in “Kubla Khan”. The poem has a graceful lilting melody that matches the gentle flow of the ‘sleep – persuading stream’.

Then with quaint music hymn the parting gleam
By lonely Otter’s sleep-persuading stream;
Or where his wave with loud unquiet song
Dash’d o’er the rocky channel froths along
Or where, his silver waters smoothe’d to rest
The tall trees shadow sleeps upon his breast (43 ll 67–72)

“To a Beautiful Spring in a Village” promises a more truly Coleridgean presence. The rhythm moves with a continuity and streaming fluidity and the poetic diction does correct justice to the fresh observation:
Once more! Sweet stream! With slow foot wandering near
I bless thy milky waters cold and clear,
Escap'd the flashing of the moontide hours,
With one fresh garland of Pierian flowers
(Ere from thy zephyr haunted brink I turn)
My languid hand shall wreath thy mossy urn. (58 II 1–6)

In 1793, Coleridge reworked Bowles's "The River Itchin" as an address to the River Otter which flows through his birthplace Ottery St. Mary. The sonnets associate loss of childhood with memories of the river. There is a curious blend of the rhythm with the description of a typical action of the child, skimming a flat stone over the water

I skimm'd the smooth thin stone along the breast
Numbering its light leaps! (48 ll 4-5)

The whole picture is suffused with light and life and energy. In this sonnet, Coleridge acknowledges not only how deeply impressed on his mind such early memories are, but also sees their double nature: memories of childhood beguile or soothe the cares of the adult, but at the same time they make him wish to be a child again.

The associations of the natural scenery with memories of childhood bear evidence of the influence of the Association theory of Hartley, under whose spell Coleridge had been in his youth. Labelling himself 'a compleat necessitarian,' Coleridge, in these early sonnets was much inspired by Hartley's mechanistic theory, where the mind is a passive recipient of external sense impressions, which cast their images on the mind in random association with one another. In just a couple of years, however, Coleridge whose mind 'ached to behold something great and indivisible' would be disillusioned with the 'blind mechanism' of Hartley. The ever increasing importance he attached to the mind and its
dynamicity would culminate, after a disavowal of the Hartleyan system, in the ‘One Life’ imagery of “The Eolean Harp” which was to be composed shortly after.

Even Bowles’s sonnets which taught Coleridge to associate with, or deduce from the scenery of nature, moral, sentiments, affections or feelings, are attacked later by Coleridge in a letter to Sothbey for their ‘perpetual trick of moralizing everything’. Coleridge goes on

Never see or describe any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world, proves faintless of impression. Nature has her proper interest; and he will know what it is, who believes and feels that everything has a life of its own, and he will know what it is, who believes and feel that every thing has a life of its own, and that we are all one life. A poet’s heart and intellect should be combined, and unified, with the great appearances in Nature-and not merely held in solution and loose with mixture with them, in the shape of formal similes.......Bowles has indeed the sensibility of a poet, but he has not the passion of a great poet. ( L II 864 )

Thereafter, Coleridge is an explorer in the realms of the mind of man which is ‘a thousand times more beautiful than the earth on which he dwells’. This new and vital doctrine decisively marks the end of Coleridge’s poetic youth.

On the whole, we find Coleridge in the 1780s and early 90s in the process of gradually rejecting a whole poetic mode of abstraction and personification which appeared in his earlier poetry. In the lines he wrote in 1797 when he was probably at the height of his poetic powers we can detect the words that could only come from a mature poet who has found his own voice.

A young man by strong feelings is impelled to write on a particular subject and this is all his feelings do for him. They set him upon the business and then they leave him. He has such a high idea of what poetry ought to be, that he cannot conceive that such things as his
natural emotions may be allowed to find a place in it, his learning therefore, his fancy or rather conceit, and all his powers of buckram are put on the stretch. It appears to me, that strong feeling is not requisite to an Author's being profoundly pathetic, as taste and good sense.

Coleridge's mature poetry and sensibility grow out of his early imitations.

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WORKS CITED


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