

Wordsworth and Coleridge: Contradictions and Concurrence in Poetic Notions

Aleena Rosmin Abraham
Student

School of Letters
Mahatma Gandhi University
Kottayam, Kerala.

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the contradictions and concurrences of the theoretic postulations pinpointed by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their works *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and *Biographia Literaria* (1816) respectively. It also attempts to state and explain their major postulations regarding the subject matter, language and purpose of literature as stated in their works. Wordsworth and Coleridge came together early in life. It was in 1796, that they were frequently together, and out of their mutual interactions arose the various theories which Wordsworth incorporated in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge claimed credit for these theories and said they were “half the child of his brain”. But later on his views underwent a change and he no longer agreed with Wordsworth’s theories and also criticized them in Chapter XVII and XV111 of the *Biographia Literaria*. A glimpse of this criticism and Coleridge’s counter postulations are also given in this paper.

Key words: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Fancy, Imagination Lyrical Ballads

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge are the giants of English Literature since the time of their reign from the first half of the nineteenth century until now. They excelled not only in the field of poetry but also in theories. Both of them were exceptionally remarkable in postulating their own theories and ideologies regarding poetry. *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and *Biographia Literaria* (1816) were the outcome of their hard work and efforts. In both these works, Wordsworth and Coleridge respectively put forward their own viewpoints and notions regarding the purpose of literature. They pinpointed everything from the form and structure of poetry to the apt subject matter of poetry in these works.

William Wordsworth, who rallied for “the language of common people” within poetry and argued against the poetic bigotries of the period, was born in the year 1770 at Cockermouth, United Kingdom. Wordsworth’s literary theory were written between the years of 1798 - 1815.

These years witnessed the publication of his works including *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *Essay on Epitaphs* (1810), *Preface to The Excursion* (1814) etc... *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is the most crucial among all these works and it has always been regarded as the most genuine assertion of the ideals of romantic movement in English Poetry. In this essay Wordsworth distinguished his three most important postulations about the subject matter, language and purpose of poetry.

Wordsworth was often imbued with the French Revolution and remained sympathetic to the French cause until the rise of Napoleon. This shifted his attention from kings and noblemen to the ordinary people. The common man in the street became the center and main subject of his poetry. He made his characters to claim their rights. Thus he posited his first notion about the theme and subject matter of poetry. He said that a poet should choose “incidents and situations from common life” as the theme of their poetry. They should choose low and rustic life, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a condition of greater coherence and thus can be more precisely contemplated and more strongly conveyed. And also in that condition the passions of men are subsumed with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

Secondly, Wordsworth focussed on the language of poetry. He was of the opinion that “the language too of these men is adopted” and should throw over them a certain colouring of imagination so that ordinary things and emotions will be seen as extraordinary and unusual. The speciality of the language of the common men is that such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of the language is originally derived.

Thirdly, Wordsworth gave importance to the essential difference between the languages of prose and poetry. He argued that the greater portion of a good poem does not differ from prose as far as the use of language and the order of words go, but the use of metre adds charm and intensifies feelings and emotions. Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference. That is, according to Wordsworth, the subject matter of poetry should be taken from real life (incidents and situations from common life) and it should be written in the language spoken by common people (common speech) with a certain colouring of imagination so that we can represent ordinary things and emotions as extraordinary. Wordsworth defined poetry thus: “Good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility”. Poetry is not a matter of rules and regulations neither is it an intellectual activity. So Wordsworth rejected the diction of 18th century poetry; it lacked the spontaneity of expression of passion of the earlier poets.

Coleridge, who was rather engaged in attempting to establish the principles of writing rather than to furnish rules on how to pass judgement on what has been written by others, was born in the year 1772. He, along with Wordsworth and Southey , is known to be a member of Lake School of Poetry. Coleridge was against the postulations put forward by Wordsworth. He pointed out that not all Wordsworth’s characters are chosen from low or rustic life. Further he stated that the language and the sentiments of this common men do not necessarily arise from their abode or occupation. They are creditable to reasons which would result in alike sentiments and language, even if these characters were living in a different place and doing different occupations. These reasons are mainly two: a man’s individuality and a solid religious education. In the opinion of Coleridge, a man will not be benefited from a life in rural solitudes unless he has a natural sensibility and suitable education. In the absence of these advantages, in rural conditions the mind hardens and a man grows selfish, sensual, gross and hard hearted.

Coleridge also refuted the view that the best part of language is derived from the nature with which the rustics hourly communicates. Coleridge was of the opinion that such a communication with nature implies reflection and pondering on it and the richness of vocabulary

arises from such a reflection. now the rural conditions of life do not require any reflection, hence the vocabulary of the rustics is poor. They can only express the barest facts of nature, and not the ideas and thoughts which result from reflection on such facts. He also argued that the best part of man's language does not result merely from communication with nature, but from education. Hence Coleridge stated that there is nothing special in the speech of those who live in close proximity to nature. What is essential is true education, and not the mere presence of nature.

Coleridge derived many of his theories and ideals from the German philosophers, especially from Schelling. He was proud to be called himself as 'a high German transcendentalist'. Most of the theories of Coleridge were written in his semi autobiographical work *Biographia Literaria* which got published in the year 1816. In this work, Coleridge employed the distinction between Fancy and Imagination. According to Coleridge, Imagination is the 'esemplastic' power, the power that is capable of unifying or building into one. It can be classified into the Primary and the Secondary.

Coleridge calls the Primary Imagination as "the living power and prime agent of all human perceptions". 'Perception' is the process of knowing the external universe through the senses, chiefly the eye and the ear, which nourished the mind with sensations received from the world outside. Primary Imagination functions involuntarily. It is merely the power of receiving impressions of the external world through the senses. It is an involuntary act of the mind. The Primary Imagination is universal and is possessed by all. The Secondary Imagination, on the other hand, is a peculiar and distinctive attribute of the artist. It is the Secondary Imagination that makes the artistic creation possible. It is voluntary and conscious in its working. Secondary Imagination works upon what is received by the Primary Imagination, its raw material is the sensations and impressions supplied to it by the Primary Imagination. By an effort of will and intellect, the Secondary Imagination selects and orders the raw material and re-shapes and remodels it into objects of beauty. This Secondary Imagination is at the root of all poetic activity. It is the power which harmonizes and reconciles opposites, and hence Coleridge calls it a magical, synthetic Power.

Coleridge differentiates between them by stating that the Primary and Secondary Imagination do not differ from each other in kind. The difference between them is one of degree. The Secondary Imagination is more active, more a result of volition, more conscious and more voluntary, than the primary one. The Primary Imagination, on the other hand, is universal, while the secondary is a peculiar privilege enjoyed by the artist.

Fancy, according to Coleridge, is a mode of memory liberated from the limitations of time and place. It picks and chooses images needed by it, irrespective of the time when, and the place where, these images entered the mind. It is a voluntary juxtaposition and aggression of images rather than their interpretation or fusion which is effected by the Imagination. Fancy is like our ordinary memory.

Coleridge further differentiates between Fancy and Imagination by stating that: Imagination and Fancy differs in kind. These are activities of different kinds. Fancy is not a creative power at all. It only combines what it perceives from the world outside and like the Imagination, it does not fuse and unify. Imagination creates new shapes and forms of beauty by fusing and unifying the different impressions it receives from the external world. Fancy is not creative. It is a kind of memory; it arbitrarily brings together images, and even when brought

together, they continue to retain their separate and individual properties. They receive no colouring and modification from the mind. It is merely a mechanical juxtaposition.

Coleridge define poetry as : “A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to the works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth.” Coleridge also supported the use of metre in poetry on one condition that metre must be organic and not a mere ornament. According to Coleridge, metre is a stimulant to the attention of the reader. It has a distancing power; it heightens and removes us from ordinary emotions, thus Coleridge tries to make extraordinary things and emotions as ordinary and hence he refutes Wordsworth’s views on the themes and language of poetry.

Works Cited

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria; Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. Nabu Press, 2010.

Ed. Dr. S.Sen. *William Wordsworth - Preface To The Lyrical Ballads : A Critical Evaluation*. Unique Publisher, 2014.

Ed. Gill, Stephen. *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Ed. Newlyn, Lucy. *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Nagarajan, N.S. *English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History*. Orient BlackSwan, 2012.