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Anglican Inheritances of Coleridge's Poetics: New Perspectives on the Concept of Imagination

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ABSTRACT

Coleridge's first major poetry is significant for it serves to indicate his slow but firm transition towards the epistemological ideas of Plato and Platonic philosophers. Coleridge's readings in these years reflect his appreciation for seventeenth-century English Platonists like Ralph Cudworth, especially for his prose work the True Intellectual System of the Universe for many of its ideas on the forms of the phenomenal world- which combine Platonic and Aristotelian cosmology- are echoed in Coleridge's poetry of these years [1] . Besides the definitive Platonism of Cudworth and also of the works of the late Berkeley we cannot fail to notice elements of an important literary-philosophical genre that runs into the poetry of the period. Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained impressed Coleridge and remained a sort of life-long fascination for him. Milton gave him a notion of the degree to which the poetic symbol could be expressive of a certain category of theological truth. Secondly, another major work of the eighteenth century seems to have left a strong impress on his poetry as well as the development of his epistemological ideas on the imagination.

Keywords: Imagination, theology, Platonists, appreciation

Introduction

The concept of Romantic imagination is famous in literature yet it was made so famous because of Coleridge's critical interventions and his exemplary demo of Wordsworth's revolutionary verse style, incorporating the secular, revolutionary, Anglican discourse of Romantic imagination. Coleridge's lectures and critical opinion instituted the new concept of imagination. It may be argued that this discourse of a secular Anglican imagination was already developed by precursors like Mark Akenside and Thomas Gray. Coleridge exemplifies the Wordsworthian metaphors and his own mediaeval romanticism to valorize this discourse.

Coleridge's first major poetry is significant for it serves to indicate his slow but firm transition towards the epistemological ideas of Plato and Platonic philosophers. Coleridge's readings in these years reflect his appreciation

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for seventeenth-century English Platonists like Ralph Cudworth, especially for his prose work the *True Intellectual System of the Universe* for many of its ideas on the forms of the phenomenal world- which combine Platonic and Aristotelian cosmology- are echoed in Coleridge's poetry of these years[1]. Besides the definitive Platonism of Cudworth and also of the works of the late Berkeley we cannot fail to notice elements of an important literary-philosophical genre that runs into the poetry of the period. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* impressed Coleridge and remained a sort of life-long fascination for him. Milton gave him a notion of the degree to which the poetic symbol could be expressive of a certain category of theological truth.

Secondly, another major work of the eighteenth century seems to have left a strong impress on his poetry as well as the development of his epistemological ideas on the imagination. This was Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*[2]. Akenside's poem absorbs many philosophical ideas so that in its final form it never ceases to reveal the complexly fascinating experience of the creative process. It includes the thoughts central to Platonism as well as the empiricist theories of Locke and Hume which define Imagination in terms of mechanical

In Milton and Akenside Coleridge found the idea of Imagination most satisfactorily propounded and it was through the eyes of such writers, his intellectual predecessors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that he began to intuit it. What the predecessor poets did was to show that Plato was the archetypal source of the idea of Imagination. In a letter written to Sotheby Coleridge thus writes:

How little the commentators of Milton have availed themselves of the writings of Plato/Milton's Darling commentators only hunt out verbal parallelisms abest (the spirit is wanting).[3]

From 1795 to 1796, Coleridge was reading Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1684) and Bishop George Berkeley's later works, *Siris* (1744). The influence of these two works may be discerned in Coleridge's famous poetry of the period where it is immediately apparent, even in verbal echoes or parallels in thought. But we find instead of Berkeley's attempts to deduce mathematical verities from a higher ontological ground Coleridge prefers the methodology of Kant which assumes the mental faculties as the postulates for a transcendental philosophy.

Reason and Understanding which emerge as the keynotes of Kantian transcendentalism may be shown to have evolved out of the tenets of the English divines. It is like a glorious resurrection of ideas in the frame of new systems and structures of thought. It shows that in the history of thought what is indicative of life, of the revelation of the living idea, is expressed in the new text again and again, in another form. Coleridge states, therefore, what he had identified in English thought in a germinal form and what he finds worked out into a new philosophical paradigm in

the writings of German transcendentalists:

Reason cannot exist without Understanding; nor does it or can it manifest itself but in and through the understanding, which in our elder writers is called discourse, or the discursive faculty, as by Hooker, Lord Bacon and Hobbes: and an understanding enlightened by reason Shakespeare gives as the contradistinguishing character of man, under the name discourse of reason.[4]

The idea of the *dunamis* was revived in Germany by Kant and his followers.[5] Though Coleridge refers to the Dynamic Philosophy as being no other than the system of Pythagoras and Plato 'purified from impure mixtures', he is also using the word 'revived'. It appears just before the paraphrase of the Schellingian deduction which also refers to the operative aspects of one "dynamic' power, which Schelling calls the "Ground' or as it is better known, the solute. The broader philosophical debate which Coleridge has in mind is of course the one in which two major schools of Western psychology came into collision: the mechanical and the idealistic. Coleridge belonged to a nation whose thinkers were mostly proponents of the mechanical system of psychology and this was a matter of great difficulty for the full vocation of Coleridge's genius as a man of thought. He discounts a system which is more congenial to the Englishman's temperament and practical attitude to life.[6] Coleridge only half belonged to his country in matters of philosophy: the dreamy visionary state of mind which he felt more at home was alien to the islander's temper, it was more German but German in the sense that it repossessed for itself the soul of European thought which was born with the Greeks.

For my part I would remain satisfied to have explained this system (of German transcendental philosophy), to have made the system sufficiently intelligible to my countrymen.[7]

Since we assume that this system was present in Coleridge's mind we may, accordingly, suggest a hypothetical structure for it and deduce from it the position of Imagination. In this section we shall consider those elements of the system which Coleridge derived from Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato. The episteme which acts as the foundation for Imagination is of course the logos, the word as the creative fiat. In the *Biographia* Coleridge argues that the *logos* from which he derives the idea of Imagination is the *logos* of Plato and of John and Paul. This is a significant point for he does not consider the *logos* of Plato essentially different from that of John or Paul. This belief in the opinion that the Christian *logos* was derived from Plato is stated in a later work: *The Aids to Reflection*. The *logos* incarnate of John is Jesus the Divine Mediator, the one who assures for the Christian the second creation or birth in the divine image.[8] 'Mediation' is a key concept in Coleridge's religious thinking but it is also at the centre of

ideas on imagination and poetry. Jesus stands as the symbol of mediation

by means of which the 'will' is reconciled to 'reason' as the soul seeks its summit in the Divine Image. Imagination analogically is a mediating power, which reconciles the soul to the spirit which tries to objectify itself to the consciousness of the poet.

It is a power that has the function of fusing into one - its emergence in the poet's mind unites all contrary or opposite elements of experience together forward with a feeling of wholeness. All poetic inspiration also derives from the logos or the Ground which manifests itself as a harmony of polarised units, of distinctions and contrary states of representation and reveals itself as a unity. It is this antecedent unity of poetic creativity that anticipates Coleridge's concept of Imagination.

The history of ideas reveals that the notion the polarity of this one dynamic power which was a central theological idea in Greek thought went underground and came back in the thought of men like Eckhart and Bruno, who were labelled as heretics by the Catholic Church. But it was re-introduced in establishment philosophy after a gap of several centuries by Immanuel Kant in Germany. Coleridge came into contact with the concept of polarity in the writings of Boehme and Bruno whom he had read in school as well as in his early manhood. The theory of polarity was also a central concept of the Cambridge Platonists with whose writings Coleridge became familiar during 1795-1796. Above all, his understanding of polarity was strengthened by his reading of the works of Giordano Bruno. Coleridge himself acknowledged this in the *Biographia Literaria*.

The Coleridgean definition of Imagination occurs in Chapter XIII of the *Biographia*. There is a fuller description of the power of Imagination in Chapter XIV. Coleridge however also refers to Secondary Imagination in Chapter IV. Taking all of these major references into account we can hope to objectify his definition in the context of broader spectrum of philosophy. The reference to Imagination is again, we may note in passing, not unique to *Biographia* ad has a history of evolution in Coleridge's texts from a very early period. What, therefore, we had only seen in its tentative and incipient form in the *Lectures* and *Notes* upon Shakespeare as a definition of poetry and the poetic mind in operation and as a definition which, as already containing the ideas of psychic plasticity, of moulding and of unifying capacity, emerges as the concept of Imagination in *Biographia*.

But in spite of having drawn upon the entire western philosophical tradition and his contemporary Romantic heritage, Coleridge could not fully convince the readers about his system of Imagination. So the fundamental problem in understanding his theory or inferences in the *Biographia* (Chapters XIII and XIV) has still remained and the inadequacies in the arguments need to be explored in favour of understanding the lacuna in the system of thought.

Research Objectives

Coleridge's famous definition of the Romantic imagination suggests that imagination is a free and voluntary faculty that uses the impressions and experiences of the world and nature to create new formations.[9] Coleridge exemplifies this process through some of his own poetry and with references to Wordsworth. Yet we argue that the imagination as Coleridge conceived it derives from the observations on the faculty that is found in contemporary Berkeleyan idealism and the general idealism of British poet philosophers like Ralph Cudworth, Berkeley and above all Mark Akenside, a lesser-known poet yet one of the most foundational authors who shaped Romantic idealism. The *Biographia* reveals the deeper resources of this theory and Coleridge's own judgement on the themes inherent in the definition. It shows that he was more indebted to his own British philosophical and poetic legacies than what the definition apparently betrays.

We will, on the one hand, discuss that Coleridge's definition of imagination was inadequately formulated as it relies heavily and impressionable on German and Protestant philosophical positions. But on the other, in order to understand Coleridge's theory of imagination we will go beyond the *Biographia* and look for his inferences from the classical and the scholastic tradition in his later works such as *Aids to Reflection*.

Not only Imagination, but we would also like to discuss Coleridge's concept of 'semasiology' or study of the notion of word. We will explore this Anglican theological concept and try to show why Coleridge may be considered as the first existentialist philosopher of the Anglican tradition.

Work Plan

I have arranged the chapters so as first to understand the rich, archaeological basis of the theory of Esemplastic Imagination in an effort which may be appropriately termed as an archaeology of ideas. The word *archeus* from which archaeology is derived stands for the primordial dynamic principle which, according to Heraclitus, is the divinely telic, plastic theme on which the art of the universe appears to rest. The word of the *archeus*, the arch of thought, therefore, becomes an animating idea of the whole system of things. The vision of this archeus of thought leads us to appreciate Coleridge's aesthetic, literary and philosophical remarks in a more comprehensive way. This dissertation seeks to enlarge our scope of understanding the significance of Coleridge's thoughts in an elemental way.

How Romantic pre-cursors influenced the notion of "imagination"

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exemplary demo of Wordsworth's revolutionary verse style, incorporating the secular, revolutionary, Anglican discourse of Romantic imagination. Coleridge's lectures and critical opinion instituted the new concept of imagination. I argue that this discourse of a secular Anglican imagination was already developed by precursors like Mark Akenside and Thomas Gray. Coleridge exemplifies the Wordsworthian metaphors and his own medieval romanticism to valorize this discourse

Protestant mysticism, the concept of mesothesis, and imagination

Coleridge successfully defended his notion of the imagination by referring to medieval philosophers like Meister Eckhart and neo-platonic philosophers, and protestant-inspired German mystics like Boehme to suggest that 'imagination' means representing freedom of the will, i.e., a mesothesis of freedom and form, the two polarities. Hence, I argue that Coleridge's definition of imagination was tied to the institutional and politically affiliated philosophies of history.

The inadequate arguments of Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*

Coleridge's definition of imagination is inadequately formulated as it relies heavily and impressionable on German and Protestant philosophical positions. The notion of a romantic imagination that survives in the 19th century and thereafter, is already conditioned by the discourse of the German enlightenment and idealism and is never rationally or logically independently viewed as a psychological category

Anglicanism and Coleridge's Contribution to Semiotics

Coleridge also defined a 'semasiology' or study of the notion of word. The Word refers to the medium of poetry and imagination. In Coleridge's theory the word is also viewed as an Anglican, theological concept. Coleridge shows that the word represents the basic medium of expression and the only medium of understanding the truth of God. Hence the word is an existential reality that is necessary for ontological discourse. For this reason, Coleridge may be considered as the first existentialist philosopher of the Anglican tradition.

Conclusions

The thesis proposes to situate Coleridge's thoughts in the post-Enlightenment British and Romantic contexts in order to assess the rise and development of the concept of Imagination, a concept which was first proposed by Plato, used by the Protestant mystics and revived by the German transcendentalists. Coleridge was seeking to establish the idea in his own personal and Romantic contexts.

References:

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The Friend, ed., Barbara. E. Rooke, Vol I, See. Introduction, p XII.

"*Biographia* ed., J. Shawcross, Vol 1, Chap XIII, p. 196. "The venerable sage of Konigsberg has preceded march of this master-thought. (He)proceeds to the idea of negative quantities and the transfer of them to metaphysical investigation'. Again, 'transcendental philosophy demands that two forces should be conceived counteract each other by their essential nature'.

Biographia, ed., Shawcross, Vol I, Chap. KII, pp. 191-192. Coleridge says: “Great indeed are obstacles which an English metaphysician has to encounter...”

Ibid, Chap IX, p. 104. [8] *The Aids to Reflection*, ed, E.H. (Coleridg. Moral and Religious Aphoristns, pp. 75-76.

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