

S.T. Coleridge's Attitudes toward Nature and Their Effect on Him as a Poet

Dr. Mutasem T. Q. Al-Khader*

Associate Professor
Al-Quds Open University
P.O. Box (65) Tulkarm
Palestine Authority, Palestine

Abstract

This study demonstrates the vital relationship between Coleridge and nature at the beginning of his career as a poet. Coleridge later changed his attitude toward nature and began to consider it a spiritless object. He was innovative and creative when he established organic relations with nature, as manifested in his great poems such as "Frost at Midnight" and "Kubla Khan," but when Coleridge distrusted nature and his views about it converged, he ceased to be a poet, or at least stopped creating great poems. He realized that his imagination regenerated whenever he was with nature, but for unknown reasons, he ignored the axiom that nature for the romantic poet is like water for fish.

Keywords: Attitudes, Coleridge, Dejection, Nature, Relationship, Romantic

1. Introduction

The relationship between Coleridge and nature forms an important component in Coleridge's poetry and prose writing. Coleridge's views about the poet's creativity and its relation to nature are profound because he was both a poet and a philosopher. Therefore, as the title of this article shows, I will limit my study to Coleridge's vacillating outlook toward nature. However, Coleridge is a devotee to nature, and a (Schulz, 1964) "sense of fraternity with man and nature permeates" his nature poems (p. 131). Thus, Wordsworth considered him to be:

The most intense of Nature's worshippers,
In many things my brother, chiefly here
In this my deep devotion. (ll. 2: 513-15)

It is significant that, for Coleridge, nature (Lawrence, 1999) "holds a special key to comprehending the meaning of life" and the "human happiness." However, I will cite several references from Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode", as it is a poetic expression of the relationship between the poet's perceptive mind and the external world—that is, the relationship between the subjective and the objective.

2. Coleridge's Views about Imagination and Its Relationship with Nature

Coleridge's ideas about the nature of imagination are central to his critical theory, but at the same time, he goes beyond a traditional concern with imagination and considers it to be the only mediator in the field of creativity and aesthetics. Thus, as a romantic poet to whom nature is an integral part of creativity, Coleridge tries to analyze and logically explain the relationship between imagination and nature that he intuitively experienced in his poems. In *Biographia Literaria* (1962), he gives his well-known definition of imagination:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Vol. 1, p. 12)

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This definition is not easy to comprehend because it embodies Coleridge's beliefs about imagination that are related to his philosophical influences. Thus, critics have written thousands of pages on this concentrated material.

I think one can understand from the above definition that the primary imagination provides the secondary imagination with the raw materials from what comes to a creative person from his senses. These senses are then processed into a coherent, unified organic wholeness. In other words, the poet (Beer, 1977) "can see into the life of things" through his imagination (p. 93), and he is thus able to convert ordinary, familiar aspects of nature into poetry. Pater (2008) comments on the two types of imagination and called the secondary and the primary imagination as the "productive process" and the "simpler process", respectively (p. 72), but the two processes coalesce in poetic creation. The secondary imagination or poetic imagination is the power that modifies (Emmet, 1967) "images supplied through sensation, yet making something new and individual out of them" (p. 165). The relationship between nature and poetic imagination is clarified in the following lines quoted from Sir John Davies (*Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 2) in which imagination is a mental faculty that synthesizes antitheses:

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,
As fire converts to fire the things it burns,
As we our food into our nature change.

From their gross matter she abstracts their forms,
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;
Which to her proper nature she transforms,
To bear them light on her celestial wings.

Thus does she, when from individual states
She doth abstract the universal kinds;
Which then re-clothed in divers names and fates
Steal access through our senses to our minds. (pp. 12-13)

The above lines show the poet's assimilation of nature's spirit that (Literary Remains, 1836) "enables him [the poet] to understand her [nature]" [p. 224] and give him the ability to create. At his happy moment of joy, the poet's imagination embraces what is in nature and turns it into art by shaping the flux received into a new unity, while his/her soul is emancipated from its bodily prison and the material world so that the outer objects become no more than a medium through which the poet attains illumination and a deeper sense of existence. This is the power (Parrish, 1985) "that could transmute the mist and snow, the sun, the moon and the stars, into symbolic cluster" (p. 116). This shows (Lowe, 1955) the "amazing discrepancy between the stuff of poetry and poetry itself, an incongruity which we shall meet a hundred times" (p. 68). In his critical article, "On Poesy or Art," Coleridge (1962) illustrates the organic relationship between the poet's creative "I AM" and nature:

Now Art...is the mediatrix between, and reconciler of, *Nature and man*. It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation.... Now so to place these images, totalized, and fitted to the limits of the human mind, as to elicit from, and super induce upon, the forms themselves the moral reflexions to which they approximate, to make the external internal, and the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature, -- this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts. (pp. 253, 258)

Thus, the pivotal role of imagination is to make "the external internal, and the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature." Nature, of course, does not only refer to the observable reality, but also to its spirit to which the poet connects and through which is able to reconcile the universal and the particular to become one.

3. Coleridge's High Consideration of Nature's Role in Poetic Creativity

Coleridge considers nature to be vital in artistic creativity because (*Lectures On Shakespeare*, 1936) "art cannot exist without, or apart from, nature" (p. 45). Even when Coleridge defines poetry (*Lectures On Shakespeare*, 1936), he considers it an art "of presenting, in words, external nature and human thoughts and affections" (p. 398). He describes the relationship between the poet and nature (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2):

Nature has the proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feel, that every Thing has a Life of its own, & that we are all one Life. A poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified* with the great appearances in Nature--& not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similes. (p. 864)

Coleridge (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 1) believes "the inward & visible" elements in nature as signs to "shew & vivify the inward & spiritual grace" (p. 588). Imagination is ("On Poesy and Art," 1963) "the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation; color, form, motion, and sound, are the elements which it combines, and it stamps them into unity in the mould of a moral idea" (p. 253). These Coleridgean ideas show that nature's role in poetic creativity is essential because it stimulates the poet to find symbols in nature that reflect his emotions and feelings. Thus, (House, 1953) "shapes and shifts and colours of nature" are used to represent and symbolize "emotional and mental states" (p. 14). The deeper relationship between the poet and nature's spirit, the deeper the joy is, and the more a person forgets his bodily senses and (Potkay, 2009) "the self's cognitive grasp of itself" is dimmed:

I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily. (p. 180, ll. 38-41)¹

Coleridge feels free when he is with nature:

And there I felt thee! on that sea-cliff's verge,
Whose pines, scarce travelled by the breeze above,
...

O Liberty! my spirit felt thee there. (p. 247, ll. 99-100, 105)

One can infer from Coleridge's views about nature that there are two worlds for the romantic poet: that of the matters of the nature observable by ordinary people and the poet himself before his elevation. This nature lies beneath. Another nature lies above when the poet's imagination elevates him to see nature's spirit. Imagination molds the worlds above and below and brings the former slightly beneath to be grasped, as the latter is elevated above. For example, the "water-snakes" in *The Ancient Mariner* are elevated from being biological creatures to being symbols of beauty and imagination. The same is true about the spiritual world of the beautiful, which becomes tangible through the "water-snakes." The poet's creativity unveils nature's spirit, which embodies beauty, and thus the two worlds of the objective and the subjective coalesce. However, nature's spirit is revealed to a person endowed with imagination, so nature remains lifeless and without beauty for that person who sees only the crust of nature:

And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.
I looked upon the rotting sea. (p. 197, ll. 238-40)

Therefore, when this interaction between the internal and the external occurs, nature is no longer lifeless because the poet turns the ("On Poesy or Art," 1963) "*natura naturata*," that is, the sum total of the "Facts and Phaenomena of the Senses," into "*natura Naturans*," that is, the Goddess Nature. "If the artist copies the mere nature, the *natura naturata*, what idle rivalry!...Believe me, you must master the essence, the *natura naturans*, which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul on man" (p. 255). Nature becomes enlivened through the poet's imagination and spiritual powers, and is transformed into "*Natura Naturans*" with its own spirit and embodiment of its creator:

... so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God

Utters, who from eternity doth teach. (p. 242, ll. 58-61)

If a person limits himself with the lifeless nature that is, "*Natura Naturata*," he sees nature as a place full of dryness and becomes (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2) "a lazy Looker-on on an external World" (p. 709).

¹ Hereafter, I use in parenthesis pages or page and line numbers to refer to quotations from Coleridge, E. H. (ed.). (1967). *Coleridge: Poetical Work*. London: Oxford University Press.

However, when the poet connects with nature, he does not copy a (*Lectures on Shakespeare*, 1936) "a cold formal copy" (p. 447), but is in (Coburn, 1957) "communion of the Spirit with the Spirit in Nature" (*Coleridge's Notebooks*, no. 5428). Coleridge believes ("On Poesy or Art," 1963):

The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure, and discourses to us by symbols—the *Natur-geist*, or spirit of nature, as we unconsciously imitate those whom we love; for so only can he hope to produce any work truly natural in object and truly human in the effect" (p. 259).

Thus, the poet is not just a tabula rasa or copier from nature like a wax-work figure, but rather a sensitive instrument upon which nature plays. He is like the "Lute" in "The Eolian Harp" which is "caress'd" by the breeze and produces "the long sequacious notes / Over delicious surges sink and rise" (p. 101, ll.18-19). The following (Reid, 2006) "seminal entry" (p. 1) taken from Coleridge's *Anima Poetae* explains this (Coburn, 1957):

In looking at objects of nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon, dim glimmering through the window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me, that already and forever exists, *than* observing anything new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling, as if that new phenomenon were the dim awaking for a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature. (*Coleridge's Notebooks*, no. 2546)

Moreover, Coleridge believes that nature is holy and sacred because the "Infinite" is revealed through its various forms and elements (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 1):

I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all *little*--!--My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great*--something one & *indivisible*--and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!--But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!--'Struck with the deepest calm of Joy' I stand. (p. 349)

These forms in nature are the "Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought" (p. 405, l. 21). The same ideas of full love and gratitude towards nature are expressed in the following (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2):

In simple earnest, I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks & hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me -- a sort of bottom-wind, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves. (p. 916)

These Coleridgean ideas show that nature is always good, and thus, "No sound is dissonant which tell of Life" (p. 181, l. 176).

4. Coleridge's Reversed Attitude toward Nature and Its Consequences

Coleridge's mood began to change after his visit to Germany in the fall of 1798. The unique relationship between Coleridge and nature began to wane, as expressed in (Griggs, 1957, Vol. 2):

These Mountains too, these Vales, these Woods, these Lakes, Scenes full of Beauty & of Loftiness Where all my Life I fondly hop'd to live -I were sunk low indeed, did they no solace give; But oft I seem to feel, & evermore I fear, They are not to me now the Things, which once they were. (p. 797)

According to Abram (1958) and various other critics, Coleridge reversed "the basic orientation of" his "aesthetic philosophy" (p. 69) by emphasizing the sole role of the subjective. This is a landmark in his changed attitude toward nature from seeing nature as lively and a giver to be a perceiver:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours her wedding garment, Ours her shroud. (p. 365, ll. 47-49)

The same idea is expressed in Coleridge's *Lectures on Shakespeare* (1936):

One character belongs to all true poets, that they write from a principle within, not originating in anything without...For the principal and only genuine excitement ought to come from within, --from the moved and sympathetic imagination. (pp. 48, 66)

Coleridge started to consider nature—contrary to what he used to believe—to be a lifeless object stripped of all notions of sublimity, and he began to doubt the role of nature in poetic creativity:

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within. (p. 365, ll. 45-46)

In this new attitude toward nature, Coleridge denied attributing emotions to external objects and missed his mark because, as a romantic poet, he could find (Knight, 1968) "in nature which helps move beyond nature, an aspect of the divine purpose" (p. 85). In Coleridge's new outlook, nature is an "inanimate cold world" (p. 365, l. 51) and

from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth--
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweeter and potent voice, of its own birth,
(pp. 365, ll. 53-57)

Coleridge even began to consider nature as an obstacle before the poet's imagination (Coleridge, 1936, *Lectures On Shakespeare*):

For the principal and only genuine excitement ought to come from within,--from the moved and sympathetic imagination; whereas, where so much is addressed to the mere external senses of seeing and hearing, the spiritual vision is apt to languish, and the attraction from without will withdraw the mind from the proper and only legitimate interest which is intended to spring from within. (p. 66)

Therefore, Coleridge began to lose his romantic poetic vision because, as Cassirer (1975) says, "Nature does not bestow its gifts upon him [poet or artist]" (p. 100) who does not believe that its elements are dynamic. Coleridge would have never composed great poems without his organic relationship with nature (Barth, 1985): "Had he [Coleridge] not opened himself to the voice of nature... he would never have found his own voice" (p. 185). Coleridge's poetic creativity seems, in Prickett's opinion, (1979) "to come from establishing a rapport with the external world—through recognizing a kinship with other creatures, or from the rising wind in the aelian harp" (p. 156).

Thus, Oguro (2007) is justified to inquiring whether Coleridge contradicted himself by saying that "he could live 'only by feeding abroad'" (p. 75) and then returning to glorify the poet's inwardness as the main source of "Joy," which becomes, for Coleridge, a synonym for poetic creativity and experience. The word "Joy" is repeated five times in stanza five in "Dejection":

Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,
...
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
...
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud-- (pp. 365-366, ll. 64, 67, 71)

Coleridge frequently changed positions from one side to another, that is, from being a believer in the powers of nature to denying such power. Even in "Dejection" in which he criticized nature as a perceiver, he contradicts himself by praising nature in the same poem as a giver of "Joy":

Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud-- (p366, ll. 67-70)

Despite the fact that Coleridge began severing ties with nature and that his poetic imagination started to wane consequently, he admitted throughout his life the organic (Thompson, 2005) "interaction between the poet and nature."

Perhaps, as some critics suggest, Coleridge declared a rupture in relationship with nature as a result of his (Hill, 1983) "inability to feel, to respond sympathetically to natural joy" (p. 194). This sentiment is reflected in Coleridge's letter to Purkins (2013, *Coleridge's Letters*, No. 490): "nothing pleases long, and novelty itself begins to cease to act like novelty. Life and all its forms move, in his diseased moments, like shadows before him, cold, colourless, and unsubstantial." Perhaps, there is truth in what Fruman (1985) says: "Coleridge had no theory of human nature in mind," and he often contradicts himself.

To support , Fruman quotes Coleridge: "'The great business of real unostentatious Virtue, ... is not to eradicate any genuine instinct or appetite of human nature; but to establish a concord and unity betwixt all parts of our nature, to give a Feeling of a Passion to our purer Intellect, and to Intellectualize our feelings and passions'", and "'all that is fully human must come from within.'" Elsewhere, Coleridge says, "'No! Nature is not God; she is a devil in a strait waistcoat'" (pp. 69, 73-74). I think what Coleridge would like to convey in "Dejection" and other prose writing about nature is a message and not just a rejection of its dominance. He would like to tell us that the external world is insufficient to fulfill the poet's desire to express his emotions and feelings. Therefore, nature is not the only source for poetic imagination (Coleridge, 1836, *Literary Remains*):

Images in Dante are not only taken from obvious nature, and are all intelligible to all, but are ever conjoined with the universal feeling received from nature, and therefore affect the general feelings of all men. (p. 160)

Thus, Coleridge believed (Coburn, 1957) that poetry is the production "*of the imagination actuated by the pure reason*, to which there neither is nor can be an adequate correspondent in the world of the senses" (*Coleridge's Notebooks*, no. 6742).

In my opinion, Coleridge's reversed outlook toward nature, however true and realistic it may be, proves to be destructive to Coleridge because he lost both his insight into the great powers in nature entwined within himself as a believer in nature's pedagogical role and spirituality, and the balance he achieved between the subjective and the objective in his great poems: the conversation poems and the Trio ("Kubla Khan," *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*) during his *annus mirabilis*. I think that this changed attitude toward nature is not a result of a deep Coleridgean philosophic meditation, but rather a pretext of his failure as a poet, which was a result, perhaps, of his deep intuition that his poetic powers were dwindling. Coleridge felt his loss and tried to find in nature whatever might inspire his heart to regain joy: "O let me rouse myself—If I even begin mechanically, & only by aid of memory look round and call each thing by a name—describe it, as a trial of skill in words—it may bring back fragments of former Feeling—For we can live only by feeding abroad" (*Coleridge's Notebooks*, no. 3420). But the result is a void because the poet's longing for organic wholeness is no longer present. Thus, the poet in Coleridge began to wither as a result of his attempt to confine nature within dead realities. Accordingly, Ruddick argues (1985), "*Dejection* is a poem in which the failure of the poet's 'genial spirits' is confessed in the context of a wild scene of disordered nature which acts as an externalization and independent confirmation of the poet's anguished state of mind" (p. 98), and Traill (Shaffer, 2000) "saw the end of Coleridge's poetic life, with 'Dejection: An Ode'." Suther (1965) noted Coleridge's tragic flaw, which brought an end to the poet in him:

He could no longer go out to nature. The poetic experience did not take place. And so, from the opposite extreme, from having attributed all the efficacy, all the life and passion of the poetic experience to a nature conceived as an immediate manifestation of the divine presence, he came to attribute all of the efficacy of the transaction to the poet, leaving nature a corpse. (p. 178)

Coleridge admitted clearly his loss and inability to write poetry (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 1): "I suffered from not writing, made me waste as many hours in dreaming about it...but I feel what I have lost—feel it deeply" (p. 362). Therefore, Coleridge's ship is wrecked as that of Sir Patrick Spense's, and thus Coleridge's lifelong friend Charles Lamb (Martin, 1890) called him a "damaged" archangel (p. 66).

5- Conclusion

The vital relationship between Coleridge and nature proved to be fruitful in his creative career as a poet. When he began to doubt nature's powers to aid his imagination, his abilities as a poet began to wane and he entered a stage of passivity toward nature in which he was (Griggs, Vol. 1) "*looking without seeing*" (p. 644).

Ultimately, he confessed: (Griggs, 1956, Vol. 2), "The Poet is dead in me—my imagination or (rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative" (p. 714). Coleridge realized the truth that his imagination regenerated whenever he was in communion with nature and with its rivers and mountains, and the subtle effects of its light and shades. Unfortunately, for some reason, Coleridge began intentionally to ignore the fact that nature is a bridge for him as a romantic poet to achieve his goal of becoming inspired, which enables him to create. Coleridge's outlook toward nature is similar to that of the Mariner who begins to see the beauty in nature when he appreciates the water snakes; but on the other hand, upon killing the Albatross and disconnecting himself from nature, the Mariner could see nothing but dryness and filthy creatures.

Coleridge lost himself as a poet when he changed his outlook toward nature from that of a creature full of life to being an inanimate, dead and spiritless object. However, the relationship between the romantic poet and nature remains a complex and compelling theme for anyone trying to unravel its complexity.

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