Coleridge's Meta-language: The Non-representational Turn in Romantic Poetry

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I pass like night from land to land;
I have strange power of speech.

These lines from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* describe the fascinating quality of Coleridge's poetry which draws the reader into a world that lies between utterance and non-utterance - a world which is co-created by the reader. But where, according to Coleridge, does this "strange power" originate? In the utterance or in the imagination? How do ideas transfigure into images which 'communicate' rather than 'say'? In this essay I would like to discuss two indicative statements made outside the *Biographia Literaria*, which are helpful for our understanding of Coleridge's aesthetic philosophy and seminal ideas about poetry, poetic representation and the role of the poet.

The first statement occurs in *Aids to Reflection* where Coleridge says, "For if words are not things, they are living powers, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanised."[1]

This statement clearly indicates the poet's awareness that words not only denote outward things, but also bring to life the imaginative faculty of a reader or a listener, thus opening up a world of ideas far

1 Coleridge, Aids to Reflection, (London: G. Bell and Sons LTD. 1913),Preface, Pg.XIX.

beyond the one circumscribed by the text. In a letter to James Gillman junior the same idea is reiterated in Coleridge's assertion that words relate to thoughts, not things.[2] They may thus convey multiplicity of meanings, subject to the particular associations of the individual. Such a theory could have nullified altogether the possibility of any definite meaning which may be communicated by the poet to the reader. But such dislocations of meaning, so dear to modern critical theory, did not form a part of Coleridge's philosophy. To him, the mesmeric power of poetic language acted as a spell which could draw the reader into the charmed circle of the poetic vision. In the appendix to the first *Lay Sermon* Coleridge said:

> "Join with me Reader! in the fervent prayer, that we may seek within us, what we can never find elsewhere, that we may find within us what no words can put there, that one only true religion, which elevateth Knowing into Being, the Being and the Life of all genuine Science."[3]

In other words he invites the reader into a privileged realm of true intelligence, the gates to which are unlocked by the "strange power of speech" to be found in poetry, or evocative prose; but the final revelation comes in the moment of recognition occasioned by the coming together of the poet's and the reader's or listener's imagination. Though Coleridge is indebted to German idealism, he was critical of the emphasis on pure reason, which he found in Kant,

> …I could never believe it was possible for him to have meant no more by his *Noumenon*, or thing in itself, than his mere words express; or that in his own conception he

2 E.L. Griggs, ed. Coleridge: Letters (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) Vol. VI, pg.630.

3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Statesman's Manual; or. The Bible The Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society, With an Appendix, containing Comments and Essays Connected with the Study of the Inspired Writings(London: Gale and Fenner, J. M. Richardson, 1816) Pg. XXX, https://books.google.co.in

> confined the whole plastic power to the forms of the intellect, leaving for the external cause, for the *material* [stuff] of our sensations, a matter without form, which is doubtless inconceivable.[4]

He was more attracted to the myth-making, 'plastic' powers of mystics like Jacob Boehmen. In Chapter IX of *BiographiaLiteraria*, he acknowledges his debt to them for having taught him the potency of symbols.[5] From them he seemed to have gleaned that no true philosophy can be expressed, except through symbols. But going beyond symbolical language, his originality as a poet lies in his use of non-utterance, particularly in the eloquent silences of his so-called fragments, which provide a space for the readers' imagination to come into play. The non-endings of some of his so called fragments are crucial to the cognitive process which transforms "Being" (*esse*) into "Knowing" (*sciere*).[6]

For Coleridge, whose poetry came from an intrinsic desire to write himself into his verse, in a language that is rich in suggestive power, the desire to express is always balanced by reticence in what he articulates. Recent scholarship has claimed that this may have been a matter of creative choice as well as political prudence. Writing in an age of repressive political paranoia, living in a society still largely guided by Christian morality, pursued by the reputation of radicalism, he mastered the art of making silences speak. His tantalizing fragments tease the reader's imagination, thereby giving to his poems a life beyond the physical boundaries of the text. They haunt and entice the readers into deep introspection, grasping at meanings which take shape in the profound depths of the subconscious.

4 BiographiaLiteraria, Chapter IX, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985) Pg.233.

5 Ibid, Pg. 229-230

6 BiographiaLiteraria, op. cit. Pg.229

The Mariner in *The Rime* is driven by the compulsion to tell his tale again and again in an impulse to utter his personal vision.[7] But, the written word is frozen within the leaves of a text, open to interpretations in which the intervention of the authoritative poetic voice may be pushed to the margin by the interpretative freedom of the reader. Between the covers of any volume of Coleridge's poetry lies a predominantly black and white world which translates into the reader's mind as a living, breathing space, animated by feelings, landscapes, colours, straining at the limits of individual choice. It is as if, in each of them, he offers us "A sight to dream of, not to tell!"[8] His best poems contain such uncharted realms of vivid sensations and psychotic experiences which reach out from the pages of the text and live on in the mind of the reader as imaginatively apprehended experiences over which the poet does not have unchallenged control, but neither is he completely absent from the representation.

This connection between the imaginative worlds of the poet and the reader is probably what Martin Heidegger means, when he says that "to be a work means to set up a world". Yet, he also points out,

> The world is not the mere collection of the countable or the uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home.[9]

7 Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Ll. 582-85.

8 Christabel, Ll. 247

9 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of The Work of Art", from Poetry, gLanguage, Thought (1971). Reprinted with permission from Harper Collins Publishers Inc., in Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism, eds. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) Pg. 193.

He sees the existence of the world, not in its objective presence, but in the individual's consciousness of its being, a consciousness that is "brought forth" in the work of art. The work material, language, in the case of poetry, not only sets up, but also sets forth, the world as it is conceptualized and represented by the mediating consciousness of its creator; but, it is reimagined by the sensitive reader who is not just a passive receiver, but a co-creator of the mindscape which is brought into existence. As the poem transcends the world of things to the world of essences, which are set forth in the material and non-material dimensions of the literary experience, it is subtly guided by the controlling imagination of the poet, ensuring that his original vision is not completely effaced by the readings to which the poem is subjected.

Coleridge's comments on poets and poetic language, scattered over his innumerable prose works, shows us how he kept faith in the communicative power of poetry. He believed its words and its silences, could work within the readers' mind, holding them in fascination and compelling them towards a shared understanding of the vision which the poet strives to embody.

The source of this confidence may be understood through the next pronouncement which I shall examine at some length. It is a notebook entry in 1804 where he wrote,

> Idly talk they who speak of Poets as mere Indulgers of Fancy, Imagination, Superstition, etc.-They are the Bridlers by Delight, the Purifiers, they that combine them with *reason* & order, the true Protoplasts, Gods of love who tame the Chaos.[10]

A 'bridler' is a gear to control the direction in which a horse moves, and hence seems to suggest the poets control over the readers'

10 Kathleen Coburn, ed. The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957)Vol. II entry no.2355 21.539.

imaginative adventures. But 'to bridle' is to become excited and agitated; Coleridge here seems to be regarding such agitation as a positive excitement of the imagination through the words of the poet. Taken together, these connotations of the word 'bridler' (probably the poet's own coinage), may mean that the poet both brings alive and subtly guides the stream of thoughts experienced by the reader.

"Protoplast"- a biological term - provides another key to the passage. The inmost part of a cell, it is the building block of life. Coleridge seems to be likening the poet to this generative impulse. In an age of enlightened materialism he sees the poet's relevance in the synthesising power of his imagination (Gods of love who tame chaos). The passage contains one of the key propositions of his theory of poetry. It points out the affective power of poetry which, like the compelling mariner in Coleridge's poem, holds the reader captive and makes him confront unfamiliar territories of thoughts, which he may otherwise choose to avoid.

Another notebook entry dated 13th November 1809, hints at where the poet might find a fit register. He records "-the extenders of Consciousness – Sorrow, Sickness, Poetry, Religion".[11] Familiar with all four experiences in full measure, Coleridge was adept at creating poems which like the music of the "damsel with a Dulcimer"[12] opens up for the readers, worlds of infinite possibilities within himself. As he transformed his personal predicaments, psychological, as well as political, into the metaphorical, he used what the twentieth century American critic Eugene Jolas calls the "mediumistic" language of

11 Coburn, Coleridge: Notebooks, op.cit. Vol. III, entry no.3632 L 100

12 A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
……………………..
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me'
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice! – Kubla Khan, Ll. 37-47

poetry. Writing in a society where the healing methods of Franz Anton Mesmer had become a rage, Coleridge was acutely conscious of the power of non-verbal communication and the hypnotic possibilities of poetic language. Though critical of the insidiouslyhypnotic power of the political rhetoric practised by William Pitt, he was acutely aware of the power of poetic language over the minds of men. The pleasures and estranging effect of poetry may lead the reader into a world where buried instincts surface through the suggestive power of the language of night-time experiences like dreams and nightmares, which assume importance as symbols. It is a world where self–division is subtly suggested, even when the framework appears to follow conventional Christian morality. The crime, punishment and remorse of the Mariner, the terrible secret vision of Christabel, are famous examples of the curse that is brought upon those who transcend the boundaries set by society, religion or conventions. But they also suggest our inevitable fascination with such transgressive acts which lie buried within our instincts.

Eugene Jolas in *Workshop* pointed out the need to evolve a new kind of language capable of communicating the undercurrents of a troubled age by moving away from logical, representational narrative, to what he calls the "meta real value" of language.[13] This "meta real value" may be understood to belong to the pre-logical and suggestive realm of intuitive understanding, which, Jolas suggests, is to be found in the *language of night* that is the symbolic representations occurring in dreams, nightmares, and reveries. Such trans-rational states may result in a de-rationalised language that can encompass experiences beyond the scope of rational intellectual discourse. To Jolas the language of night is, therefore, a "mediumistic

13 Eugene Jolas, "Workshop" reprinted fromtransition23, 1933, in Imagining Language : An Anthology ed. Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery, (Cambridge, Massachussets: MIT Press, 1998) Pg.44.

organ" in the sense that it acts as what Coleridge would term "the extenders of consciousness". It brings within its range elements of the pre-logical, the daemonic, the sub-human and the supra-human and cosmic. It is a language created out of the re-interpretation and re-integration of the language of religious symbols, myths and trance-like states; Jolas rightly saw the beginning of such a language in the Romantic era. According to him,

> They were the first to emphasise the importance to the creator of irrationalism, of day-dream, of mysticism and mythos. The preoccupation with the dream, especially, haunted all romantics from Coleridge to Nerval, to Petrus Borel, to Novalis, to Tieck, to Jean Paul…….They interpreted the symbols through metaphysical categories.[14]

Coleridge chose the role of a man who wants to share his long, perilous inward journey with his readers, the pause between utterance and meaning, animating the reader with the excitement of discovery. His attitude is clear from his critique of Wordsworth's "common language of men" in the *BiographiaLiteraria*,

> The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man;[15]

The same idea, when transformed into poetry, finds expression in the masterly conclusion of *Constancy to an Ideal Object*,

> And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when
> The woodman winding westward up the glen

14 Ibid. pg.43

15 BiographiaLiteraria, Chapter XVII)Pg. 342. Coleridge was contesting Wordsworth's pronouncements regarding the common language of man.

At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head!
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows, he *makes* the shadow he pursues! Ll. 25-32

The importance of 'internalacts' which are generated by the imagination of a discerning reader, which is central to Coleridge's aesthetic principles, cannot be underestimated in the context of appreciating the power of his own poetry. Though he moved away from the radical politics of his younger years, his emphasis on the processes of the mind and the desire to use symbolic experiences to connect to an internal world free from the oppressions of politics or community, mark him out as one of the first moderns of English literature who pushed the boundaries of verbal representation, and realized the subversive as well as suggestive possibilities of meta-language.