

CHAPTER - V

COLERIDGE - II

During the 17th century, the terms 'Imagination' and 'Fancy' had often enough been used in a vaguely synonymous way to refer to the realm of fairy tale or make-believe. Yet here and there (as in the opening of Hobbes's *Leviathan*) the term 'imagination' had tended to distinguish itself from 'fancy' and settle toward a meaning centered in the sober liberalism of sense impressions and the survival of these in memory. This was in accord with medieval and Renaissance tradition, where *imaginatio* and *phantasia* had all along been fairly close together, but where, so far as a distinction of this kind had been made, it was *phantasia* which meant the lighter and less responsible kind of imaging. In the light of 17th century reasonableness, 'fancy' suffered the decline in reputation imagination held its own and even slide into a new place of respect in sensationalist aesthetics. It followed that during the 18th century, whenever the distinction between 'imagination' and 'fancy' was being made - and it often was honours were likely to fall to the term 'imagination'. A certain softness and warmth and depth of good feeling grew around the term 'imagination' in its Addisonian sense; it stayed close to the heart of 18th century poetry. A corresponding coldness and brittleness and a suggestion of unreliable frolic invested the related but opposed term 'fancy'. As 18th century 'imagination' moved through the stages of association theory to which we have alluded in an earlier chapter, the honours accorded the two terms were now and then reversed - 'fancy' assuming the higher role of reference to a more creative mental power, imagination, the humbler reference to the mind's more reportorial kinds of drudgework. But such an assignment of honours was a little noticed exception. The relative dignity of the two terms 'imagination' and 'fancy' was so well established in English usage by the end of the 18th century that no matter what revised meanings Wordsworth and Coleridge and others

might assign to them, it was almost inevitable that the superior term should be 'imagination'.

II

An early and somewhat haphazard attempt on the part of Wordsworth to discriminate between imagination ("Impressive effects out of simple elements" and fancy ("pleasure and surprise... excited by sudden varieties of situation and accumulated imagery") appears in a note to "The Thorn" in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. But the first word in the major critical discussion by Wordsworth and Coleridge occurs in the Preface to the *Poems* of 1815, when Wordsworth breaks out in an excited correction of William Taylor's *British Synonyms Discriminated*, 1813. Taylor had unfortunately written :

A man has imagination in proportion as he can distinctly copy in idea the impressions of sense: it is the faculty which images within the mind the phenomena of sensation. A man has fancy in proportion as he can call up, connect, or associate, at pleasure, those internal images (*phantazein* is to cause to appear) so as to complete ideal representations of absent objects. Imagination is the power of depicting, and fancy of evoking and combining. The imagination is formed by patient observation; the fancy by a voluntary activity in shifting the scenery of the mind. The more accurate the imagination, the more safely may a painter, or a poet, undertake a delineation, or a description, without the presence of the objects to be characterized. The more versatile the fancy, the more original and striking will be the decoration produced.

That summed up a century more or less of settled usage and compromise opinion. Wordsworth's objection was in part simply that the terms, as an antithetic pair, were turned upside down. "Imagination", not "fancy", should be used to refer to the creative or poetic principle.

Furthermore, and this was really the critical issue (though how far Wordsworth distinguished the merely semantic from the critical may be questioned), the very distinction between the two terms was made at too low a level. The higher power (What Taylor called "fancy") had to be something better than the mere power of wilfully (capriciously) "evoking or combining" images - "shifting the scenery of the mind" - making "decorations." There was a "higher" creative power than that. And this was the "imagination".

"Fancy does not require that the materials which she makes use of should be susceptible of change in their constitution, from her touch; and, where they admit of modification, it is enough for her purpose if it be slight, limited, and evanescent.

The law under which the processes of Fancy are carried on is as capricious as the accidents of things, and the effects are surprising, playful, ludicrous, amusing, tender, or pathetic, as the objects happen to be appositely produced or fortuitously combined. Fancy depends upon the rapidity and profusion with which she scatters her thoughts and images; trusting that their number, and the felicity with which they are linked together, will make amends for the want of individual value: or she prides herself upon the curious subtilty and the successful elaboration with which she can detect their lurking affinities."

(Wordsworth's *Preface* of 1815 is quoted from *Wordsworth's literary Criticism*, p. 155-65)

(Even fancy was far from being the uncreative or unoriginal thing, the mere juggler, which William Taylor would have made it.) But imagination | Imagination was a "conferring", an "abstracting" a "modifying", and "endowing" power. The imagination "unites" and "coalesces". It "shapes and creates." In the language of his friend Charles Lamb, the imagination "draws all things to one it makes things animate or inanimate, beings with their attributes, subjects with their accessories, take one colour and serve to one effect".(*Lamb's Works*, I. 96).

Imagination :

"... recoils from everything but the plastic, the pliant, and the indefinite.... When the Imagination frames a comparison ... a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows - and continues to grow - upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and feature, than upon expression and effect; less upon casual and outstanding, than upon inherent and internal, properties: moreover, the images invariably modify each other... the Imagination is conscious of an indestructible dominion; - the Soul may fall away from it, not being able to sustain its grandeur; but if once felt and acknowledged, by no act of any other faculty of the mind can it be relaxed, impaired, or diminished.

In short, where the 18th century had been content with a distinction between a faithfully reportorial imaging faculty, and an unfaithful, or playfully inventive fancy, Wordsworth raised the level of the whole distinction. Simple reproduction interested him not at all. He distinguished two modes of imaging, both inventive. The difference was that one was frolicsome, and inferior, the other was totally serious, and superior.

It was this concession to fancy, though it was only incidental to Wordsworth's aim of elevating the imagination, that became a point of grievance with Coleridge. In Chapter XII of his *Biographia*, he comes down on Wordsworth's venture with a heavy hand.

"If, by the power of evoking and combining, Mr. Wordsworth means the same as, and no more than, I meant by the aggregative and associative, I continue to deny, that it belongs at all to the imagination; and I am disposed to conjecture, that he has mistaken the co-presence of fancy with imagination for the operation of the latter singly".

After giving Wordsworth the grand credit of having originally

inspired his own whole theory of the imagination, Coleridge had already drawn a patronizing distinction between Wordsworth's purpose of considering only the "influences" or "effects" of fancy and imagination "as they are manifested in poetry," and his own more psychologic purpose of investigating "the seminal principle" - that is, the process of imaginative creation, rather than poems themselves. It is our own view that Coleridge did not differ vitally from Wordsworth about "imagination", and that the two may well be considered together, although Coleridge no doubt may be conveniently accepted as the more articulate and more theoretical spokesman of the two.

II

Coleridge traces the growth of his mind from Hartleyan associationism to neo-Platonic and then to German transcendental idealism. All this is undertaken in preparation for the grand purpose of expounding "the nature and genesis of the imagination," And he states his "main result" in the following .

"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 finite I A.M. 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 recreate; 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."

"Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode

of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association."

For similar but briefer Coleridgean definitions of "*imagination*" and "*fancy*" one may also see *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, edited by T.M. Raysor. Does Coleridge mean the same thing that Wordsworth means in the more informal and literary statement of the 1815 Preface? Or does Coleridge mean something far more profound? The question is complicated by the presence of German ideas in Coleridge's mind.

It is not the issue of plagiarism (though that is present for the biographer of Coleridge) which we would here pursue, but the relation of his theory to certain presiding metaphysical notions of his time, and especially to the notions of Kant and Schelling. It is true that a number of clear and even detailed borrowings by Coleridge from the Germans are to be noted, but let us say in advance that the importance of his debt is not always in proportion to its fragrance or its definability.

The lecture *On Poetry or Art* of 1818, for instance, is a fairly close paraphrase of Schelling's Academy Oration *On the Relation of the Formative Arts to Nature* (1807). One of the most amusing betrayals of Coleridge's way with sources is his coinage of the term *esemplastic* (unifying or coadunative) of the *Biographia* on the model of Schelling's *In-Eins-Bildung* and apparently with the mistaken notion also that the term is authorized by the German word *Einbildungskraft*. One of Coleridge's clearest debts to Kant appears in his *Principles of Genial Criticism* (1814), where both doctrine and examples, concerning pleasure, taste, beauty, and disinterest are taken directly from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Yet this aesthetic borrowing has no very

important relation to Coleridge's own literary aesthetic. The main relation of Coleridge's literary theory to Kant lies in the direction not of the *Critique of Judgement* but in that of Kant's general epistemology and ontology in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. "The writings of the illustrious sage of Konigsberg, the founder of the Critical Philosophy," says Coleridge in the *Biographia*, "more than any other work, at once invigorated and disciplined my understanding." It may be worth adding that the ideas concerned had been rather widely foreshadowed throughout the neo-Platonic tradition, a tradition in which Coleridge was deeply versed, and one in which Kant himself stood as the theistic and transcendental champion of the age against Spinozan immanentism and pantheism.

We may see the relation of Coleridge's "imagination" and "fancy" to German ideas better if we set beside the definitions already quoted from of the *Biographia* the following passage, defining two Kantian terms, "Understanding" (*Verstand*) and "Reason" (*Vernunft*), from an early essay by Coleridge in *The Friend* :

"By understanding, I mean the faculty of thinking and forming judgements on the notices furnished by the sense, according to certain rules existing in itself, which rules constitute its distinct nature. By the pure reason, I mean the power by which we become possessed of principles - the eternal verities of Plato and Descartes, and of ideas, not images."

Complete Works, II, 164.

And along with this let us set down the development of these ideas, in Coleridge's later religious and philosophic work entitled *Aids to Reflection*. (London, 1913) p. 148.

1. Understanding is discursive. 2. The Understanding in all its judgements refers to some other Faculty as its ultimate Authority. 3.

Understanding is the Faculty of Reflection.

1. "Reason is fixed. 2. The Reason in all its decisions appeals to itself, as the ground and substance of their truth. (Hebrews vi, 13.) . 3. Reason of Contemplation. Reason indeed is much nearer to SENSE than to Understanding: for Reason (says our great HOOKER) is a direct aspect of Truth, an inward Beholding, having a similar relation to the Intelligible or Spiritual, as SENSE has to the Material or Phenomenal".

Let four terms, the, "Primary Imagination" ↔ "Understanding," "Secondary Imagination" ↔ "Reason", stand as a kind of ascending series, with affinities between the first (or lower) and the second (or upper) pair indicated by the sign ↔. And let "Fancy" ride as a kind of side effort or false parallel to "Secondary Imagination". The Platonic sensory knowledge (*eikasia*), more or less the equivalent of the Kantian immediate sensory intuition (*Anschauung*), does not appear in the Coleridgean system, but so far as it might be distinguished in itself it would be conceived as a shadowy beginning which is substantiated or shaped up into the world of our everyday external experience (horses and houses) by the faculty of Primary Imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) working in accord with the schemes or laws of the scientific Understanding. This "Imagination" is a primary creative act, a willed activity of spirit, a self-consciousness, a "self-realizing intuition, 'joining and coalescing the otherwise separated parts of our self, the outer unconscious, and the inner conscious, the object and the subject. To support this part of the interpretation, we turn back to the Theses of *Biographia*.

"There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. (In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the

IMAGINATION." (I.86).

The two powers between which the Imagination mediates are the "subject" and "object" and the two opposing the counter-acting forces described in the involved Schellingian terms of, before it is interrupted by the letter from the friend. Primary Imagination is a human creative act which we may take as a type of and participation in the Divine Act.

III

Every human being, then, is, so far as he perceive anything at all, a creator and an idealizing agent. What then about the special role of the artist (the poet or maker) ? What more can he do ? What kind of "imagination" does he enjoy ?

"... in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary control over it." (Chapter VI, I, 86)

We conceive the "Secondary Imagination", a higher plastic power. This rewords the perceptual products of primary imagination into concrete expressions (symbols) of those "ideas" - the self, the absolute, the world, and God - which are otherwise, conceptually, given by that superior part of the transcendental mind the Reason. Nature, especially as seen by the poet, symbolizes the spiritual life of man and hence too that higher life in which the spiritual life of man participates, "the one life within us and abroad." The ideas of such a life were, as Kant conceived them, framed by the Reason only as regulative hypotheses. But for Coleridge (as for the German post-Kantians, Schelling, Fichte, and Hegel), these ideas were realities (*noumena*) and the Reason was the faculty of philosophic insight into them - as Secondary Imagination gave them symbolic embodiments. Kant had distinguished this imagination, under the name of the "aesthetic", from the "productive" (Coleridge's "primary Imagination") and from the

"reproductive" (Coleridge's "fancy").

Various other writings of Coleridge give more poetically coloured and less difficult accounts of that higher meaning of nature which he conceived it to be the role of poetic imagination to create and in creating know.

"Certainly the Fine Arts belong to the outware world, for they all operate by the images of sight and sound, and other sensible impressions; and without a delicate tact for these, no man ever was, or could be, either a Musician or a Poet; nor could he attain to excellence in any one of these Arts; but as certainly he must always be a poor and unsuccessful cultivator of the Arts if he is not impelled first by a mighty, inward power, a feeling, quod nequeo monstrare, et sentio tantum; nor can he make great advances in his Art, if, in the course of his progress, the obscure impulse does not gradually become a bright, and clear, and living Idea" (*Preliminary Treatise on Method*, 1818, III, 21, ed. Alice Synder, London, 1934, pp.62-3).

"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 of man... In the objects of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements steps, and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness, and therefore to the full development of the intelligential act; and man's mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered through the images of nature." (*On Poetry or Art in Biographia*, II 257-8).

"To have a genius is to live in the universal, to know no self but that which is reflected not only from the faces of all around us, our fellow creatures, but reflected from the flowers, the

trees, the beasts, yea from the very surface of the waters and the sands of the desert. A man of genius finds a reflex of himself, were it only in the mystery of being." (*The Philosophical Lectures*, ed. K. Coburn, 1949, p.179).

"In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim awaking of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature." (*Anima Poetae*, Boston, 1895, p. 115).

Or the emphasis might fall sadly on the waning or loss of that inner power of investiture.

O Lady I we receive but what we give
 And in our life alone does Nature live :
 Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud !
 And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
 Than that inanimate cold world allowed
 To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
 Ah! 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 sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
 Of all sweet sounds the life and element !

(Compare Wordsworth's *Ode : Imitations* ... "There was a time when meadow, grove and stream ...").

All these statements about the meaning of art and the meaning of

nature refer to a kind of union between the two. They could all be developed under the aspect of union, the Schellingian emphasis on coalescence, on reconciliation. And it is precisely this emphasis that is the most distinctive feature of Coleridge's theory. This, though it was a tenet of absolute idealism, was capable of working out, and in Coleridge's thinking to some extent did work out, into a dualistic and variously applicable theory of poems. Reconciliation of what? Primarily and generically of the two sides of self, conscious and unconscious, subject and object - and of certain related abstract entities. In-Eins-Bildung, said Schelling, *des Einem mit dem Vielen*. In-Eins-Bildung des Realen und Idealen. Or, to give the antithesis a warmer color, In-Eins-Bildung (coadunation) of *man* and *nature*. Coleridge's lecture *On Poesy or Art* (1818) is in parts a close paraphrase of Schelling's oration *On the Relation of the Formative Arts to Nature*.

"Art itself might be defined as of a middle quality between a thought and a thing, or, as I have said before, the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human. It is the figured language of thought, and is distinguished from nature by the unity of all parts in one thought or idea."

In a passage of the *Biographia* much celebrated recently, Coleridge writes his most enthusiastic and expansive account of the aesthetic "reconciliation."

"Imagination... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and of freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the

manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry." (Chapter XIV, II, 12) T.S. Eliot quotes the passage in his essay on Marvell and also by I.A. Richard.

IV

The theory of imagination elaborated by Coleridge, and less precisely but in substantially the same way, by Wordsworth, was an excellent description of their own best poetry in its formal, structural, and metaphoric aspect. One might redescribe this structure approximately in these terms : It is a structure which makes only a restrained use of the central overt statement of similitude which had been so important in all poetry up to that time. Both tenor and vehicle are wrought in a parallel process out of the same material. The landscape is both the occasion of subjective reflection or transcendental insight and the source of figures by which the reflection or insight is defined. In such a structure, finally, the element of tension in disparity may not be prominent. The interest derives not from our being aware of disparity in stated likeness, but in the opposite activity of our discerning the design and the unity latent in a multiform sensuous picture. This is no doubt a form of "reconciliation." At the same time there are certain clearly anti-"metaphysical" tendencies here - the absence of overt definition, the reduction of disparity, the play of phenomena on the one hand and of "spirit" on the other, rather than of entities conceived substantially.

The romantic nature poems are all poems of a certain symbolic furniture and of a certain philosophy - the philosophy of immanence or pantheism which appears in Coleridge's *Aeolian Harp* and in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, and the related idealism of Coleridge's *Dejection*. For Coleridge, as for the Germans, there was a powerful temptation to equate philosophy and poetry. It is notorious that he proposed to write an essay on poetry which would "supersede all the books of metaphysics, and all the books of morals too." It would be in

reality a "disguised system of morals and politics." In his chapter of the *Biographia* on Shakespeare, he says, "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher." This was Coleridge's dabbling in that grandiose absorption of metaphysics into *Dichtung and Kunst*, or into a philosophy of these, such as we have noted among the Germans. The modern intuitional critic will object to this as an over-conceptualization of poetry. The modern "Aristotelian" will say, in his own language, that such a theory of poetry is not a theory of the poetic object as something specifically different from anything else, that the theory deals only with the poetic process and furthermore assimilates this to metaphysics and to other non-poetic mental processes. To which it may be added that Coleridge himself, in Chapter XIV of the *Biographia*, offers his own definition of the poem as a "composition" having "for its immediate object pleasure not truth," but that by this definition he would have had trouble discriminating between a poem by Wordsworth and one by Bowles. It was only when the general norms of content - passion and thought - were invoked that he could tell a good poem from a bad one.

A difficulty that has always been rather prominent for romantic scholarship lies in the fact that romantic poems do so pronouncedly contain and assert the philosophy of nature and of art which is supposedly also their formal principle. What the writers in the classical *Ars Poetica* tradition might try to do here and there, as in Pope's little series of handsprings on the theme of sound and sense, the romantic writers may approximate in a whole poem, and more subtly - and this, presumably, one would say they were led to do and were able to do because of the intimate union which they conceived to obtain between art and nature. The theory was endlessly reflexive and self-conscious. The assertion of the romantic poetries seems always to lurk not far from the embodiment in the poems and to be needed for the deciphering of the latter. Romantic poems tend to be about romantic imagination. Shelley's *West Wind* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* are triumphant instances of how the assertion may be dramatized and assimilated into structure.

Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, which may be read as a poem about imagination, gets along with so little assertion that its theme has perhaps not even been suspected until very recently. The assertion (the content) of a poem is, however, never the same as the embodiment (the poem itself, the achievement), and the first never assures us of the second.

V

The 18th century notion of sublimity as a subjective experience of genius had gotten along well enough with the emerging principle of association by emotive congruity. The latter principle was so well installed in critical thinking by the time of Wordsworth and Coleridge that they could hardly have avoided taking advantage of it. It is true that they did this with delicacy. Wordsworth in his 1800 Preface, after twice invoking the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", adds the tempering phrase "emotion recollected in tranquility," and he touches the same note in his verse.

And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

The music in my heart I bore
Long after it was heard no more.

In one of his later letters he professes: "I have never given way to my own feelings in personifying natural objects without bringing all that I have said to a rigorous after-test of good sense." Like the Germans, both Wordsworth and Coleridge must be largely exculpated as transmitters of 18th century sentimentalism. Nevertheless the critical theory of each contains some striking statements of the emotive principle. Thus, in the 1800 preface :

Another circumstance must be mentioned which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day ; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.

"the appropriate business of poetry,... " he says later, "and her duty, is to treat of things not as they are, but as they appear; not as they exist in themselves, but as they seem to exist to the sense, and to the passions." "You feel strongly," he writes to a minor poet; "trust to those feelings, and your poem will take its shape and proportions as a tree does from the vital principle that actuates it." (*Letters*, I, 537)

And Coleridge :

Association depends in a much greater degree on the recurrence of resembling states of feeling than trains of ideas. ... A metaphysical solution [like Hartley's] that does not instantly tell you something in the heart is grievously to be suspected... I almost think that ideas never recall ideas any more than leaves in a forest create each other's motion. The breeze it is runs thro' them - it is the soul or state of feeling. If I had said no one idea ever recalls another, I am confident that I could support the assertion." (*Letters*, I, 428)

What first struck Coleridge about Wordsworth's poetry was

"the union of deep feeling with profound thought ... and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere and with it the depth and height of the ideal world..." (*Biographic Literaria*, IV)

And apropos of Shakespeare :

Images become proofs of original genius only so far as they are modified by a predominant passion. (*Biographic Literaria*, XV).

He speaks of "modifying a series of thoughts by some one predominant thought or feeling." In the preceding chapter, his phrase is "a tone and spirit of unity." In his dramatic criticism, Coleridge likes to speak about the ruling passion of a character (Capulet or Lear), and like A.W. Schlegel, he replaces the old unities of time, space, and action by a "unity of interest."

If the Wordsworthian formula "emotion recollected in tranquillity" be taken in an approximately holo-morphic way, one may suppose that "emotion" refers to a kind of poetic content, and tranquil "recollection" to the control or shaping of this content - the formal poetic principle. In the Coleridgean formulas which we have just quoted, however, the emphasis is reversed. Emotion appears, or attempts to appear, as the organizing principle. The difference is crucial. As organization is a form of intelligibility, it is a basic question of poetic theory whether in fact emotion as such can become the formal or organizing principle of a poem without the disappearance of the principle.