

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Coleridge's "Biographia Literaria"
Chapter 13 and 14

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CHAPTER III
On the imagination, or esemplastic power

*O Adam, One Almighty is, from whom
All things proceed, and up to him return,
If not depriv'd from good, created all
Such to perfection, one first matter all,
Endued with various forms, various degrees
Of substance; and, in things that live, of life;
But more refin'd, more spiritous and pure,
As nearer to him plac'd, or nearer tending,
Lack in their several spheres activity,
Till body up to spirit work, in hands
Proportion'd to each kind, so from the root
Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
More airy: last the bright consummated flower
Spreads odorous breathes: flowers and their fruit,
Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd,
To vital spirits aspire: to animal,
To intellectual: give both life and sense,
Fancy and understanding; whence the soul
REASON receives, and reason is her being;
Discursive or intuitive. [13]*

"Sunt dicuntur si res corporales ad sua materialia continentur, veritate in fluxu consistunt, neque habent substantiale quicquam, quomodoque et Platonicis illis recte agere."
"Itaque spiritus, praeter puram mathematicam et philosophicam subjectam, colligit quaedam metaphysicae naturae propriae, cum adhibentur et materiae materialis principia quaedam superiora et, ut sic dicam, formale adduntur: quodvisque omnino veritates rerum corporales et solis axiomatibus logicis et geometricis, necnon de magno et parvo, toto et parte, figura et situ, colligit non possunt, sed alia de causa et effectu, ac ingenio et passione, accedente adhibent, quibus ordinatae rationi subesse: et principium rerum, ut entelichias an vim apprehensas, non referat, modo transmittuntur, per solam Veritatem notionem intelligibiliter replicat." [13]

Hello, my name is Rashi Shrivastava and today we will be continuing with Literary Criticism, to be specific, Romantic criticism, and the focus today will be on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's work *Biographia Literaria*. But before we move on to him, let us recollect what we did in Wordsworth's class. So in Wordsworth, we studied his essay *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. Before moving on to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, it is important that we understand Coleridge's relationship to Wordsworth and why he wrote *Biographia Literaria* as a consequence of that relationship with Wordsworth.

To be precise, *Biographia Literaria* that was published in 1817 was an evaluation and exposition of Wordsworth's poetry. Coleridge was a great admirer of Wordsworth and he declared Wordsworth to be the third greatest English poet after Shakespeare and Milton. However, in spite of such admiration Coleridge did not agree to some of the ideas proposed by Wordsworth in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, such as, he disagrees with the use of the language of men, and he objects to Wordsworth's eulogisation of the language of rustics.

According to him, he says that Wordsworth is making a contradictory statement where on one hand, he wants us to use the language of rustics, the language of men, but on the other

hand, Wordsworth is also proposing something known as selection, and this is something we talked about in the previous session.

Coleridge establishes that the basic difference between prose and poetry is meter. He reiterates that meter is not just some superficial charm that adds variety to poetry. In fact, meter is the basic difference between prose and poetry, something that Wordsworth had done away with. So in short, Coleridge felt that Wordsworth was not practicing what he was preaching.

After this relation between Coleridge and Wordsworth, we can now move to the main text *Biographia Literaria* and we can study that in detail. So as I said, it was published in 1817 and it can be said to be a literary autobiography of Coleridge. In fact, it is an autobiography, it is a work of literary criticism, and it is also a work of metaphysical speculation.

Here, in this text, we will study two major and important chapters of *Biographia Literaria*. In chapters 13 and 14, he will give the major ideas that were prevalent in *Biographia Literaria*; the ideas of fancy and imagination and the idea of poetry and poem, along with the idea of the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’.

Let us start with a brief introduction about *Biographia Literaria* and about the idea that Coleridge had while writing down *Biographia Literaria*, before we move to the two main chapters of study. So first of all, what is this work? We must remember that Coleridge was greatly influenced by German intellectuals and writers such as Kant and Schelling, and most importantly, Immanuel Kant, because we will see a reflection of Kantian ideas on to the ideas produced by Coleridge.

So *Biographia Literaria* was actually a perceptive criticism on Wordsworth’s poetry and it was a statement on the theory of creative imagination that was put forward by Coleridge. So as opposed to Wordsworth's theory of poetry and poetic diction, here, Coleridge is putting forth his theory of creative imagination. In fact, Arthur Symonds has justly described this work to be the greatest book of English criticism. The theory of creative imagination was given in chapters 13 and 14, which we will study in detail today.

In this text, Coleridge attempts to define nature and the self. He tries to draw a relation between the objective and the subjective. According to him, nature was objective while the self was subjective, and it was a culmination of nature and self or all, or of the objective and the subjective that resulted in the creation of pure knowledge.

Moving to Chapter 13, let us talk about fancy and imagination. Let us consider fancy and imagination. What were these terms and why did Coleridge draw a relation between fancy and imagination? I would like to quote by saying that, “Fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties instead of being, according to the general belief, either, two names with one meaning or at furthest the lower and higher degree of one and the same power”.

So in short, what Coleridge was proposing is that fancy and imagination were not synonymous to each other, in fact, they were two completely different objects, where fancy was a little bit lower in hierarchy to imagination. They were completely different things as Coleridge has put forward. Fancy is something that he takes from 18th century view of imagination, something that is mechanical and was determined by the law of association.

He assigns a minor role to fancy, but we can see that fancy for him holds a pejorative term. In fact, he sees it as something that is not very great as compared to imagination. In contrast to fancy, imagination was essentially creative. In fact, some critics have said that Coleridge considered Milton to have an imaginative mind, while Abraham Cowley had a fanciful mind.

Moving to imagination that Coleridge further divides into primary and secondary imagination. Let us move to that area in the text where he talks about imagination.

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to make you enter it. All success attend you, for if hard thinking and hard reading are yours, you have deserved it.

"Your affectionate, etc."

In consequence of this very judicious letter, which produced complete conviction on my mind, I shall content myself for the present with stating the main result of the chapter, which I have reserved for this future publication, a detailed prospectus of which the reader will find at the close of the second volume.

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 recreate; or where this process is unaided, it resembles, yea well as all events is analogous to stability and to unity. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other concern to play with, but figures and definitions. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; which 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.



Let us focus on the highlighted area. “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”. If we consider this statement given by Coleridge, it is

important to understand the relation that he draws to Descartes, the philosopher, who gave this very popular statement, “I think, therefore, I am”.

So here, primary imagination is being reduced or rather is being elevated to the elemental power of basic human perception that enables us to identify, discriminate and synthesize to produce order out of disorder. It is a living example of the term, I am. It is a living power and prime agent of all human perception. Secondary imagination, also known as artistic imagination, coexists with the conscious will and is different in degree and mode of operation from primary imagination.

It is also important to understand that imagination has been defined by Coleridge as an esemplastic power. Esemplastic is a term that Coleridge himself has coined, which means unifying. So imagination is a unifying power. 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. So on one hand, where imagination perhaps is said to be more original, fancy is based on memory.

This is the major point with which he ends his Chapter 13, talking about the important factor of fancy and imagination.

Moving over to Chapter 14, we will understand Coleridge's relationship with the German scholars and how they affected this idea of imagination and fancy. But before that, it is important that we take a look at Kant's theory of imagination and understanding, also known as Kant's theory of imagination and reason. Now, this theory was the groundwork on which Coleridge based his work of fancy and imagination.

So on one hand, we have Kant, who has given similar entities and on the other hand we have Coleridge, who perhaps is drawing from them and developing new ideas along similar lines. So where Coleridge gave fancy, Kant had already given reproductive imagination. Where Coleridge termed primary imagination, Kant had already given productive imagination. And similarly, what Coleridge called secondary imagination, Kant had already called reason.

In fact, reason and secondary imagination were mediated by rationality and understanding by means of symbol. So this is an important groundwork from where Coleridge draws his inspiration to talk about fancy and imagination.

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CHAPTER XIV

Occasion of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and the objects originally proposed—Preface to the second edition—The ensuing controversy, its causes and necessary—Philosophic definitions of a Poem and Poetry with scholia.

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The middle terms, which are chains of light and shade, which mean-light or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself—in which of us I do not recollect—that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of education, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the *LYRICAL BALLADS*, in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and situations supernatural, or at least unusual; not so as to transfer from our several natures a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to prevent for these shades of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the hitherto of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish interests, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

With this view I wrote *THE ANCIENT MARINER*, and was preparing among other poems, *THE DARK LADY*, and *CHRISTABEL*, in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal, than I had done in any first attempt. But Mr. Wordsworth's industry had proved so much more successful, and the number of his poems so much greater, that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneity matter. Mr. Wordsworth added two or three poems written in his own character, in the impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction, which is characteristic of his genius. In this form the *LYRICAL BALLADS* were published, and were presented by him, as an experiment, whether subjects, which have thus nature rejected the usual ornaments and extra-collegial style of poems in general, might not be so managed in the language of ordinary life as to produce the pleasurable interest, which it is the peculiar business of poetry to impart. To the second edition he added a preface of considerable length, in which, notwithstanding some passages



Now, let us move to Chapter 14. Chapter 14 begins with an interesting dialogue and an interesting phrase, where Coleridge has almost coined this phrase known as the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. We will get into the origin of this phrase and how it came into existence, and why did Coleridge coin it?

So the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ for the moment refers to the willingness to suspend one's critical faculties and to believe in something unreal. To be precise, this is the sacrifice of realism and logic for the sake of excitement. The origin of this phrase can be traced down to Aristotle's idea of catharsis where the audience accepts fiction as reality by attaching their real emotions onto it.

Why did Coleridge give rise to such a frame? This term resulted from an experiment that Coleridge and Wordsworth had conducted with each other where both had to produce poetry, where Coleridge had to produce poetry based on supernatural elements and he was writing poems like “The Dark Lady” and “Christabel”, Wordsworth had to produce poetry based on semblance of truth, and as a result of which he produced *Lyrical Ballads*.

However, while writing down *Lyrical Ballads* and in its publication, Wordsworth came with an altogether new theory called the theory of poetry and poetic diction that we saw in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Now, this is something that Coleridge did not concur with and he moved on to explain the basic difference between poetry and a poem and this is what we will see in Chapter 14.

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of apparently a contrary import, he was understood to contend for the extension of this style to poetry of all kinds, and to reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of speech that were not included in what he (and I must add) I think, adopting an approved expression called the language of real life. From this pretence, perfidious to poems in which it was impossible to deny the presence of ornate phrases, however mistaken the doctrine might be deemed, arose the whole long-continued controversy, for from the compactness of perceived power with supposed laxity I explain the irregularity and in some instances, I guess to say, the acrimonious passions, with which the controversy has been conducted by the readers.

Had Mr. Wordsworth's poems been the silly, the childish things, which they were for a long time described as being had they been really distinguished from the compositions of other poets merely by measures of language and matter of thought, had they indeed contained nothing more than what is found in the parables and pretended similes of them, they must have sunk at once, a dead weight into the slough of oblivion, and have dragged the praise along with them. But year after year increased the number of Mr. Wordsworth's admirers. They were found too not in the lower classes of the reading public, but chiefly among young men of strong sensibility and meditative habits, and their admiration (inflamed perhaps in some degree by opposition) was distinguished by its sincerity. I might almost say, by its religious fervour. These facts, and the intellectual energy of the author, which was more or less concisely felt, where it was outwardly and even homesteadly denied, meeting with sentiments of aversion to his opinions, and of scorn at their consequences, produced an oddity of criticism, which would of itself have borne up the poems by the violence with which it whirled them round and round. With many parts of this preface in the sense attributed to them and which the world undoubtedly seem to authorize, I never concurred, but on the contrary objected to them as common or prosaic, and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same preface, and to the author's own practice in the greater part of the poems themselves. Mr. Wordsworth in his recent collection has, I find, degraded this prefatory dissertation to the end of his second volume, to be read or not at the reader's choice. But he has not, so far as I can discover, announced any change in his poetic creed. At all events, considering it as the source of a controversy, in which I have been concerned more than I deserve by the frequent conjunction of my name with his, I think it expedient to declare once for all, in what points I coincide with the opinions expressed in that preface, and in what points I altogether differ. But in order to render myself intelligible I must presently, in as few words as possible, explain my views, first of a Poem, and secondly, of Poetry itself, in kind, and in manner.

The office of philosophical disputation consists in just distinction; while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware, that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts, and thus the technical process of philosophy. But having so done, we must then reunite them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the result of philosophy. A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed. According to the difference of the object will be the difference of the combination. It is possible, that the object may be merely to facilitate the recollection of any given facts or observations by artificial arrangement; and the composition



The basic distinction between poetry and poem. If we consider poetry, we see poetry can be said to be most forms of imaginative literature and fine arts with an immediate end of pleasure. The important part is the immediate end of pleasure because objective is something that we have to keep in mind while differentiating between poetry and a poem.

Poetry can or cannot include unrhymed imaginative writing, whereas, on the other hand, a poem has elements of imaginative prose composition in a different manner, for a different perspective, with an objective that may be recollection, communication of truth or even pleasure.

So in short, poetry and poem are more or less the same, but with a difference in their combination and objective. A poem is more organic, where each part of it mutually supports and explains every other part of it, and the source of this organic process is the poet.

Pleasure and truth that Coleridge seems to see as separate were given by both poetry and science. Science played a major role during that time because of the industrial revolution that we talked about in the first session and we will see even while reading *Biographia Literaria* that even Coleridge makes use of the terminology of science of the jargon of science, when he wants to explain his ideas of literature.

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will be a poem, merely because it is distinguished from prose by metre, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly. In this, the lowest error a man might commit the name of a poem to the well-known manifestation of the days in the several months.

*Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November; "* etc.

and others of the same class and purpose. And as a particular pleasure is found in anticipating the recurrence of words and quantities, all compositions that have this charm super added, whatever be their contents, may be entitled poems.

So much for the superficial form. A difference of object and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction. The immediate purpose may be the communication of truths, either of such absolute and demonstrable, as in works of science, or of facts experienced and recorded, as in history, romance, and that of the highest and most permanent kind, may result from the attainment of the end, but it is not itself the immediate end. In other works the communication of pleasure may be the immediate purpose; and though truth, either moral or intellectual, ought to be the ultimate end, yet this will distinguish the character of the author, not the class in which the work belongs. Their object is that state of society, in which the immediate purpose would be fulfilled by the pervasion of the proper ultimate end, in which no claim of fiction or imagery could exempt the BATHYLUS even of an Amator, or the ALEXIS of Virgil, from disgust and aversion!

But the communication of pleasure may be the immediate object of a work not metrically composed, and that object may have been in a high degree attained, as in novels and romances. Would that the mere supposition of metre, with or without rhyme, suffice those to the name of poems! The answer is, that nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise. If metre be superadded, all other parts must be made consistent with it. They must be such, as to justify the perpetual and distinct attention to each part, which an exact correspondence of accent and sound are calculated to excite. The final definition then, as deduced, may be thus worded. A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species—(though the object is common to both)—is distinguished by proposing to itself each delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.

Controversy is not seldom excited in consequence of the disputants attaching each a different meaning to the same word, and in few instances has this been more striking, than in disputes concerning the present subject. If a man chooses to call every composition a poem, which is rhyme, or measure, or both, I must have his opinion uncontroverted. The distinction is at least competent to characterize the writer's sentiment. If it were subjoined, that the whole is likewise entertaining or affecting, as a tale, or as a series of interesting reflections, I of course admit this as another fit epithet of a poem, and an additional mark. But if the definition sought for be that of a legitimate poem, I answer, it must be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other, all in their proper harmonious with, and supporting the purpose and known influence of natural arrangement. The philosophic critics of all ages coincide with the ultimate judgment of all countries, in equally denying the praises of a poem, on the one hand, to a series of striking lines or discourses, each of which, absorbing its



So that brings us to the end of Chapter 14, where the major ideas discussed are the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and the distinction between poetry and poem.

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whole attention of the reader to itself, becomes disjointed from its context, and forms a separate whole, instead of a harmonious part; and on the other hand, in an unmetrical composition, from which the reader collects equally the general truth, unassisted by the component parts. The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptian made the emblem of medicinal power, or like the path of sound through the air—at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. *Præceptis est libæ serpens, says Petronius more happily. The serpent, like him, balances the preceding work, and it is not easy to conceive more meaning condensed in fewer words.*

But if this should be admitted as a satisfactory character of a poem, we have still to seek for a definition of poetry. The writings of Plato and honey Taylor, and Butler's Theory of the Earth, furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the counterbalancing objects of a poem. The first chapter of Isaiah—indeed a very large portion of the whole book—is poetry in the most emphatic sense; yet it would be not less straitened than strange to assert, that pleasure, and not truth was the immediate object of the prophet. In short, whatever specific import we attach to the word, Poetry, there will be found involved in it, as a necessary consequence, that a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry. Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry, and this can be no otherwise effected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement, as will partake of one, though not a peculiar property of poetry. And this again can be no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written.

My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in some of the remarks on the Fancy and Imagination in the early part of this work. What is poetry?—is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet?—that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthesis and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their impulsive, though gentle and unobtruded, control, *laxis effere habens*, reveals "itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of senseless, with difference; of the general with the concrete; of the idea with the image; of the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while a blend and harmonious the natural and the artificial, still subordinate art to nature, the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. Doubtless, as Sir



Now, since we are looking at Romantic criticism, and Wordsworth and Coleridge are two major aspects of this age, let us draw a comparison between them. So according to critics, when a comparison is drawn between the literary criticism produced by Wordsworth and that of Coleridge is that Wordsworth is limited in scope as compared to Coleridge.

Wordsworth is subjective, but Coleridge is both subjective and objective. Coleridge is concerned with shape, form and embodiment, which were relatively new ideas at that time, and this makes him to be a precursor of the New Critics, not forgetting that he always considered meter to be an integral part of the poetic process. That is where we shall end this session. And we have now looked at Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Thank you.