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978-0-521-29809-4 - Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

*The Rainbow and the
Imagination*

It seems widely agreed today that Coleridge and Wordsworth stand at a critical point in the history of ideas of creativity. One writer, for example, sees Coleridge as central to the transformation of 'imitative' into 'creative' theories of art.¹ For another, the change is characterized by a tendency to 'pose and answer aesthetic questions in terms of the relation of art to the artist rather than to external nature, or to the audience.'² Yet a third has described their Romanticism as a permanent and unalterable revolution in human thought, analogous to a boiling-point, where what follows is inevitably a change of state.³ Others again have transposed this change into a different key, and seen it in terms of a new attitude to childhood and therefore to education.⁴ With such a variety of convincing interpretations of the shift of thought that we find in Coleridge and Wordsworth, it is worth reminding ourselves that even the English Romantic movement cannot be all things to all critics.

E. H. Carr once commented that 'the fact that a mountain looks different when seen from different angles does not mean either that it has no shape, or an infinity of shapes.' It is, I believe, possible to find a unity in the complex of ideas evolved over more than a decade by Coleridge and Wordsworth without our having to succumb to the temptation to clarify their thinking into a spuriously attractive simplicity which it did not actually possess. A. O. Lovejoy has doubted if there are any common factors in what has been loosely termed 'Romanticism',

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Chatto, 1961), Pt 1, Ch. 1.

² M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford, 1958), p. 3.

³ George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (Routledge, 1966), p. 22.

⁴ For instance, see William Walsh, *The Use of Imagination* (Chatto, 1959); and Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* (Peregrine, Penguin Books, 1967).

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and has warned us to speak rather of specific 'romanticisms'.¹ In this sense I think it may be helpful to see the work of Coleridge and Wordsworth—even when in disagreement—as part of the same 'romanticism'. For example, a cherished popular notion about 'Romantic' artists is that they believed themselves to be 'inspired'—in the sense of forgoing some conscious control of their work. But for Coleridge, as for Wordsworth, however much art may have reflected, at times, a transcendent vision, it was always the product of close conscious organization. For us, the unique quality of their collaboration lies in the peculiar extent to which both partners were, in their own ways, continually trying to account for what they felt was actually going on in their minds when they wrote a poem. Poetic creation and self-analysis were, for them, two sides of the same process. In volumes of notebooks; thousands of letters; books on criticism, philosophy, and religion; in lectures on drama, education and art; Coleridge has left us virtually a running commentary on the way his mind developed. From Wordsworth we have not merely the two Prefaces of 1800 and 1815, but *The Prelude*. What they have recorded for us in minute and scrupulous detail is the *structure* of creativity: how previous artistic schemata are matched with, or modified by new ideas; how the influence of method and tradition produces not repetition, but constant innovation and change; how symbol and myth tap responses deeper, if more ambiguous, than those of rational argument or conventional philosophy. If we have come to realize that major scientific or mathematical geniuses are 'creative' in the same sense that an artist is 'creative', we are, whether we know it or not, responding to a model of the way the human mind worked that comes to us from Coleridge and Wordsworth. It is that model of creativity that is the subject of this book. Coleridge called it 'Imagination'. It took him almost a lifetime to define what he meant by it—and even then his answer is not a fully consistent one. Nevertheless, it is this model—or to be exact, complex of symbols—that is 'the mountain' we must look at if we are to make sense of the revolution in ideas of 'creativity' that they initiated. But in

¹ A. O. Lovejoy, 'On the Discrimination of Romanticisms', *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1948).

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order to do this, we must first of all try to understand why it was that, with a very few notable exceptions,¹ when the nineteenth century looked at Coleridge and Wordsworth they did not see any such revolution or ‘boiling-point’ of consciousness at all.

Over and over again, for example, we find that to nineteenth-century readers it was the ‘incantatory magic’ of Coleridge in *The Ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan*, and *Christabel* that appealed. What he seemed to offer them was a dream-world. It is significant that two of those three poems had been published as unfinished fragments. As a result, readers were able to respond to their beauty and—even more important—their ‘feeling’, while being free to interpret their structure in any way they chose, or even to ignore it altogether. The essential unity of Coleridge’s thought was dismembered by the Victorians, who tended to carry off only such portions as were easy to digest. While the ‘faerie’ and ‘dream’ aspects of Coleridge influenced the poets, his philosophy and theology, disastrously severed from his poetry, had become the preserve of the ‘Coleridgeans’—a small, if influential group of scholars such as F. D. Maurice and his Oxford tutor, Julius Hare. Once this divorce between his poetry and philosophy had been achieved, for whatever reason, Coleridge’s concept of the Imagination could then be set aside as no more than a dictum of esoteric literary criticism.

The case of Wordsworth is parallel, and even more striking. We can see what has happened in Matthew Arnold’s poem on the death of Wordsworth in 1850:

Ah, since dark days still bring to light
 Man’s prudence and man’s fiery might,
 Time may restore us in his course
 Goethe’s sage mind and Byron’s force:
 But where will Europe’s latter hour
 Again find Wordsworth’s healing power?
 Others will teach us how to dare,
 And against fear our breast to steel:
 Others will strengthen us to bear—
 But who, ah who, will make us feel?

¹ For example, F. J. A. Hort’s essay, ‘Coleridge’, *Cambridge Essays*, Vol. II (1856).

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Wordsworth's distinguishing characteristic is his 'healing power'—and he is healing because he teaches us how to 'feel'. Arnold's view of Wordsworth here is, by and large, typical of Victorian England. As we shall see, John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography* takes a very similar line when he recounts how Wordsworth helped him to recover from his breakdown. What is interesting is to see how, once Arnold and Mill have reached this view of Wordsworth, certain other conclusions about him follow almost inevitably. In his essay on Wordsworth, Arnold, like John Stuart Mill, has grave reservations about the quality of the *Immortality Ode*, and he dismisses *The Prelude* together with *The Excursion* as 'by no means Wordsworth's best work.' In confirmation of the popularity of this view, one common nineteenth-century edition of Wordsworth's *Poetical Works* omits *The Prelude* altogether, with the comment that it is 'not generally considered equal to his former poems.'¹ The poems Arnold singles out instead for special praise are, similarly, as representative of the best 'orthodox' taste of the period as we are likely to find. He writes:

If I had to pick out poems of a kind most perfectly to show Wordsworth's unique power, I should rather choose poems such as *Michael*, *The Fountain*, *The Highland Reaper*. And poems with the peculiar and unique beauty which distinguishes these, Wordsworth produced in considerable number...²

What Arnold has selected are short or medium-length lyric poems of 'feeling'. Nowhere does he suggest that they might form parts of a larger unity—that they are linked by a theory of human growth or creativity (and they are not, in any case, good examples of this). Though he sees Wordsworth as greater than Coleridge or Keats by virtue of his 'ampler body of powerful work', he makes it clear that 'ampler' is purely a measurement of quantity—not a qualitative assessment of any organic unity. Similarly Wordsworth's 'philosophy' is dismissed. In spite of Wordsworth's repeated stress on the essential unity of all his

¹ The 'Albion' Edition (Frederick Warne).

² 'Wordsworth', *The Portable Matthew Arnold*, ed. Trilling (Viking, 1949), p. 352.

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work,¹ he has already been selected and anthologized into a succession of noble and feeling fragments.

We have noticed how similar John Stuart Mill's idea of Wordsworth was to Arnold's, but the philosopher in him drove him to be more explicit, so that the contradiction that is only latent in Arnold is brought out and formulated by Mill. In the *Autobiography* Mill acknowledges that it was Wordsworth who taught him to 'feel' again. In his earlier essay 'What is Poetry?', moreover, he explains that this 'feeling' is the essence of poetry—to be distinguished from its common companions 'eloquence' and 'narrative'. But in another essay, 'Two Kinds of Poetry', Mill comes out with the curious declaration that Wordsworth is not a 'natural' poet in the way that Shelley, for instance, is. 'In Wordsworth,' he writes, 'the poetry is almost always the mere setting of the thought.' What he means by this, he explains, is that Wordsworth is almost always trying to enunciate a proposition, rather than express a 'feeling'. If Mill here is being inconsistent, it is only because he was being peculiarly honest. Both the propositions he makes about Wordsworth seem to him to be true. That Wordsworth had taught him to feel value once again, he could vouch for from his own experience; yet if the expression of deep emotion, undiluted by argument, be the purest poetry, then Wordsworth was not as 'natural' or as 'pure' a poet as Shelley. Yet so firmly was 'poetry' identified with 'feeling' in Mill's mind that he could not bring himself to question his premises. What was, for Wordsworth and Coleridge alike, a total affirmation of man's experience, became for the Victorians a 'mystical' assertion. The values asserted by poetry were not open to intellectual questioning. We find appearing in John Stuart Mill the doctrine of 'Two Truths': 'Poetry' he was forced to say, represented a different order of truth from 'science'; each could express truths that were not open to question by the other.

By and large, this was the view of poetry that prevailed in

¹ See, in particular, Wordsworth's description of his work as a 'gothic cathedral': 'Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add, that his minor pieces, which have been long before the public, being now properly arranged, will be found by the attentive reader to have such connexion with the main work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in these edifices.' (Preface to *The Excursion*, 1814.)

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the nineteenth century—with all the tenacity of a half-truth. To this climate of thought Wordsworth's own bold claim that poetry went hand-in-hand with science was simply incomprehensible:

If the labours of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the poet will sleep then no more than at present, but he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself.¹

Yet Wordsworth, as almost always, is being quite specific here. To see what he meant by carrying 'sensation into the midst of the objects of science' we need look, for instance, no further than a short poem he wrote on 26 March 1802, the night before he started the *Immortality Ode*—and which, since he used the last lines as a motto for the *Ode*, was clearly linked with it in his own mind:

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky;
 So was it when my life began;
 So is it now I am a man:
 So be it when I shall grow old
 Or let me die!
 The child is father of the man:
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

The body is a changing, living, dying organism. If we are to find continuity in life we shall find it in the way we perceive the world. We exist as a network of relationships: how the child sees things will determine the kind of man he becomes. The child's joy at the rainbow modifies the entire way he grows up. As an example of perception Wordsworth chooses the rainbow, and in so doing enters a controversy that had been raging futilely and intermittently throughout the eighteenth century.

At the root of the problem lay Newton's *Opticks*. Though in fact this had not been published until 1704, Newton's simple experiments with a prism, and the discovery of the spectrum, had been known to Locke as early as 1690 when he re-drafted

¹ Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802.

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his 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding'.¹ Newton did not, in fact, revolutionize the conception of the rainbow (most of his results were known or guessed already), but he came to stand for the eighteenth century as a profoundly ambiguous symbol of the whole scientific revolution of which he was only a part. It seemed at first sight that the epistemological implications of Newtonian science served to confirm Locke's model of the mind as a *tabula rasa*—totally passive in itself, and acted upon only by the external stimuli of the senses. That this was not the necessary conclusion from Newton's discoveries we shall see in a moment—yet, even assuming with most of the eighteenth century that this were so, the emotional responses to Newton within this thought-framework differed widely.

Broadly—and at the risk of over-simplifying—we can distinguish a polarization of reactions. For some, one apparent implication of Newton could be described in these terms:

The world that people had thought themselves living in—a world rich with colour and sound, redolent with fragrance, filled with gladness, love and beauty, speaking everywhere of purposive harmony and creative ideals—was crowded now into minute corners in the brains of scattered organic beings. The really important world outside was a world hard, cold, colourless, silent, and dead; a world of quantity, a world of mathematically computable motions in mechanical regularity.²

We do not know if this was how Newton felt, but this was undoubtedly how it seemed to many near-contemporaries. Addison, writing on 'The Pleasures of the Imagination' in 1712 (*Spectator* 413) produces an image that was to become a classic expression of this aspect of man's new predicament:

Things would make but a poor appearance to the eye, if we saw them only in their proper figures and motions. And what reason can we assign for their exciting in us many of those ideas which are different from anything that exists in the objects themselves (for such are light and colours), were it not to add supernumerary ornaments to the universe, and make it more agreeable to the imagination? We are everywhere entertained with pleasing shows and apparitions, we discover imaginary glories in the heavens, and in the earth, and see some

¹ See Marjorie Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse* (Archon Books, 1963), p. 7.

² E. A. Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Routledge, 1932), pp. 236–7.

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of this visionary beauty poured out over the whole creation; but what a rough and unsightly sketch of Nature should we be entertained with, did all her colouring disappear, and the several distinctions of light and shade vanish? In short, our souls are at present delightfully lost and bewildered in a pleasing delusion, and we walk about like the enchanted hero of a romance, who sees beautiful castles, woods, and meadows; and at the same time hears the warbling of birds, and the purling of streams; but upon the finishing of some secret spell, the fantastic scene breaks up, and the disconsolate knight finds himself on a barren heath, or in a solitary desert.

There is a sense in which *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is not very far away from this idea of the imagination. Yet, at the same time, poets like Akenside and Thomson found in Newton a liberation. Science and beauty were revealed as coming together in a new and hitherto undreamed-of way. For those with understanding, a new beauty was created. The paradigm of this poetic rediscovery of colour was—invariably—the rainbow. For Thomson, joy in the colours of the rainbow was inseparable from the intellectual joy of understanding how it was formed—in contrast to ‘the swain’ who tries to chase it:

Meantime, refracted from yon eastern cloud,
 Bestriding earth, the grand ethereal bow
 Shoots up immense; and every hue unfolds,
 In fair proportion running from the red
 To where the violet fades into the sky.
 Here, awful Newton, the dissolving clouds
 Form, fronting on the sun, thy showery prism;
 And to the sage-instructed eye unfold
 The various twine of light, by thee disclosed
 From the white mingling maze. Not so the swain.
 He wondering views the bright enchantment bend
 Delightful, o’er the radiant fields, and runs
 To catch the falling glory; but amazed
 Beholds the amusive arch before him fly,
 Then vanish quite away.

(*Seasons*, ‘Spring’, 203–17)

Similarly, Akenside in his *Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744) boldly took science into verse, finding in physics an even greater pleasure than in the mere appearance of the rainbow:

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Nor ever yet

The melting rainbow's vernal-tinctur'd hues
 To me have shone so pleasing, as when first
 The hand of science pointed out the path
 In which the sun-beams gleaming from the west
 Fall on the watry cloud, whose darksome veil
 Involves the orient; and that trickling show'r
 Piercing thro' every crystalline convex
 Of clust'ring dew-drops to their flight oppos'd,
 Recoil at length where concave all behind
 Th' internal surface of each glassy orb
 Repells their forward passage into air;
 That thence direct they seek the radiant goal
 From which their course began; and, as they strike
 In diff'rent lines the gazer's obvious eye,
 Assume a diff'rent lustre, thro' the brede
 Of colours changing from the splendid rose
 To the pale violet's dejected hue.

(II, 103–20)

Akenside, like Thomson, could see in Newton's rainbow a marriage of visual and scientific sublimity; but neither this attitude, nor Addison's more ambiguous acceptance, went any further in solving the key problem of what actually happened in *perception* (as distinct from the mechanism of the eye). What was needed for this was not so much a scientific breakthrough—in the sense in which Newton's experiments with prisms had been—as a change in the way of thinking about the problem; and it is here that we return to Wordsworth.

Wordsworth's attitude towards Newton has for a long time seemed to puzzle commentators. Perhaps the most famous example of his apparently ambiguous attitude occurs in the accounts we have of the painter Benjamin Haydon's 'immortal dinner' which he gave on 28 December 1817. Haydon wrote in his diary afterwards:

The immortal dinner came off in my painting-room... Wordsworth was in fine cue, and we had a glorious set-to—on Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Virgil. Lamb got exceedingly merry and exquisitely witty, and his fun in the midst of Wordsworth's solemn intonations of oratory was like the sarcasm and wit of the fool in the intervals of Lear's passion... He then in a strain of humour beyond description,

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abused me for putting Newton's head into my picture; 'a fellow', said he, 'who believed nothing unless it was as clear as the three sides of a triangle.' And then he and Keats agreed that he had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to its prismatic colours. It was impossible to resist him, and we all drank 'Newton's health, and confusion to mathematics.'¹

Wordsworth himself, however, had clearly had some hesitations about the toast. Many years later, in October 1842, Haydon wrote to Wordsworth reminding him of the dinner, and of his reactions to Keats's proposal:

And don't you remember Keats proposing 'Confusion to the memory of Newton', and upon your insisting on an explanation before you drank it, his saying: 'Because he destroyed the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to a prism.'²

Was Wordsworth merely being pedantic, or did his demand for an explanation stem from the fact that, unlike Keats, he admired Newton? In Book III of *The Prelude* (1850) he paid tribute many years later to his statue in Trinity College chapel:

Newton with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever,
Voyaging through strange seas of thought alone.

(60-3)

By 1817 Wordsworth had passed very much out of Coleridge's orbit, and the creative side of their friendship was a thing of the past. The Preface to his *Poems* of 1815 advanced a theory of the Imagination that would have seemed conventional to many eighteenth-century critics, and did scant justice to his own best work—as Coleridge was quick to point out in his *Biographia Literaria* published the same year as Haydon's dinner. But during the great decade of their closest friendship, from the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 to Coleridge's starting *The Friend* in 1809, Wordsworth's theory of the Imagination owed much to Newton as well as to Coleridge. Keats was treading on dangerous ground in attacking Newton's rainbow.

¹ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Haydon*, ed. Elwin (Macdonald, 1950), pp. 316-17.

² *Correspondence and Table Talk of Benjamin Haydon*, Memoir by F. W. Haydon (Chatto, 1876), Vol. II, pp. 54-5.