Coleridge's Imagination in "The Rime of Ancient Mariner"

Dr. Ahmad A. Shteywi(*)

Coleridge was a poet as well as a philosopher whether or not we believe in his conviction that "no man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher" (Biographia Literaria, II, 19-hereafter BL). In order to understand him as a philosopher, therefore, I think it is necessary to study his philosophy of literature. As a way of understanding his poetic and literary theory I will touch on his concept of imagination defined in chapter 13 of Biographia Literaria, and apply it to one of the supernatural poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (hereafter "The AM"). Hence the aim of my study is to analyze the poem in connection with his theory of imagination. My main concern is with how imagination works in the poem.

It must be understood that much has been done on Coleridge's imagination and "The AM." Most critics, however, treat Coleridge's imagination and the poem separately. In other words, they do not attempt to show how the imagination comes out and how it works in the poem. As Brett points out, they "have neglected Coleridge's critical theory in considering his own rather than other people's poetry,

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(*) assistant professor, department of english, mu'tah university, Jordan.

because they feel that his philosophical interests were at war with his imaginative powers; that he became a philosopher only when he ceased to be a poet" (79).

Before getting into further discussion of "The AM, we must refer to the famous definition of imagination as the function of literature at the end of chapter 13 of the **BL**:

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 a 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 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.

Here the distinction between the primary imagination and the secondary imagination is confusing because the latter is an "echo" of the former, part of the same creative power, and "identical" as well. The secondary imagination is co-existing with the conscious will. Thus as critics point out, the former "refers to the unconscious unifying involved in perception and common to all mankind," whereas the latter "refers to the more conscious, restricted use of the imagination in art, to the same creative and energizing power as it is

directed to the world of material phenomena... (Bate, 161). This distinction, however, seems meaningless because as we shall see, the opposition between the conscious and the unconscious is reconciled by "the modifying powers of imagination."

Coleridge's famous definition of imagination as the poetic creation that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" has become the basis of the concept of Romantic imagination. I will attempt in what follows to take up some instances of the imaginative process dissolving, diffusing, and unifying experience in "The AM."

The function of Coleridge's imagination can be seen in terms of its mediatory role between the philosophical level in chapter 12 and poetic level in chapter 13 of the BL. Therefore we need to look at chapter 12 in which Coleridge is concerned with bipolar opposition between subject and object, form and content, inside and outside, self and other, etc. from which Western philosophy comes. " All knowledge," says Coleridge, "rests on the co-incidence of an object with a subject" (BL I, 174). The objective he calls "NATURE." On the other hand, in the subjective he associates "SELF or INTELLIGENCE". Thus he sets up the anti-thetical tension between the two opposites, but at the same time he seeks the reconciliation of both. Coleridge goes on to say that "in all acts of positive knowledge there is required a reciprocal concurrence of both, of the conscious being, and of that which is in itself unconscious... During the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united" (BL, I, 174). Our problem is, then, to explain how this concurrence is

made possible. The dialectical opposites are capable of synthesis because they are differences among the same. When the opposites are separated out, they are reconciled and united into one.

Coleridge names imagination "esemplastic power." How do we interpret this esemplastic power ? By that Coleridge probably means a "plastic" power, as described in "Eolian Harp," that makes the concurrence possible. Imagination or esemplastic power then is a power that combines the subject with the object, conscious with unconscious, active with passive in the mind. As McFarland points out, imagination . "connects the inner world of "I am" with the outer world of "it is" (95). That is to say, it combines Natura Naturans with Natura Naturata.

Coleridge's subject-object nexus, according to Richards, "introduces no such split between the ingredients of the mind... And the perceiving and the forming are the same . The subject (the self) has gone into what it perceives, and what it perceives is, in this sense, itself. So the object becomes the subject and the subject the object" (56-57). It might help us to understand the synthesis of the dialectical opposites if we consider the mirror-image. As we look at the mirror, the subject I becomes the object. But the object I, usurping the original position of the subject, is actually the subject I. It is important to note that Coleridge's theory of imagination rests on the reconciliation of opposites which is a fundamental principle of his philosophy. when the opposites are separated out, they are reconciled and united into one.

Imagination is a power that does more than combines. It modifies and transforms. The "modifying colours of imagination" contributes to "the sudden charm, which accidents of light anq shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combing both" (BL, II, 5). As we shall see later, the opposition between light and shade, moon and sun plays a key role in the poetic creation of the "The AM " where two powers of the mind active and passive, are at work. And this is made possible through. The reconciling faculty of imagination.

The primary and secondary imagination are in effect the same in that they are "living power," working first to create the eternal world in its totality and then to create, from that material, fresh creation which would have in them the same life and truth.

Coleridge, like Wordsworth, is much concerned with man in relation to nature. The problem of the interaction between man and nature is whether nature gives man life by projecting into him its dynamic, enlivening power of imagination, or whether man gives nature life by into his dynamic, enlivening power of imagination. Coleridge would probably have it both ways. We have a good reason to believe that. In "Dejection: An Ode," Coleridge says, in nature "We receive what we give/And in our life alone does Nature live."

Thus nature and man are embodying each other in the creation of imagination; so we have nature as the agent acting upon imagination as the agent acting upon nature. This is an example of the

way Coleridge's imagination works in his poetry .The imagination has a power to recognize the life in nature, which then gives imagination a power to recognize nature. Since nature is endowed with life, it becomes a part of our body, and in the same way our body becomes a part of nature.

So far I have attempted to explore the concept of Coleridge's imagination, and now it is clear that it is an interaction between man and nature. It must be noted that to give imagination its unifying power, the mind must be active in perception because imagination depends upon active mind which derives from, to use Coleridge's word, "deep feeling and profound intellect."

Now with this concept of Coleridge ' s imagination in mind, I will turn my attention to "The AM" to see how it works in the poem by reference to the mental process involved in poetic creation. Coleridge himself describes the poem as a work of "pure imagination" I. am concerned with the secondary imagination which "struggles idealize and to unify." For imagination is a unifying power which "gives unity to variety; it sees all things in one" (Table Talk, June 23, 1834).

It is interesting to note that Coleridge himself says about the poem in BL:

... my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure

for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith (11,6).

What we know from this statement is that Coleridge tries to reproduce poetic truth from our "inward nature."

We might ask ourselves: Who is the Mariner? Where is he going? Why does Coleridge create the Mariner? It has been argued that "the poem has no reference to reality" (Warren, 64). And Bowra makes similar statement: "No one expects the events of dream to have the kind of necessary connection which we find in waking life" (57).

At one time the journey taken by the mariner seems to be real ,and at another when the ship enters an unknown world, it seems that Coleridge creates a spiritual world beyond the world. So Coleridge's imagination leads us to roam freely from within to beyond the world. He creates a vision of supernatural world through which his imagination expands the mind and enlarge the conciousness.

"The AM"has been interpreted in various ways. Most critics are concerned with the central events of the poem in terms of what actually happens. They pay particular attention to the nature of the Mariner's crime. As Brett complains, "no one seems to have considered it in the light of Coleridge's own poetic theory"(78).

Nature images in Coleridge's poetry are in general associated with the creation of imagination. The movement of a poem can be understood to a certain point as a series of imaginations created by moonlight. Let us take up, for example, the second to last stanza of

Part 1 where the moon first appears in the poem. When the south wind springs up, the Albatross follows:

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,

It perched for vespers nine;

While all the night, through fog-smoke

White,

Glimmered the white Moon-shine.

Here we see Cloeridge's imagination at work. It "diffuses,"and "dissipates"because advent of mist, cloud, and wind diffuse over surrounding nature under the imagination power of moon. This stanza tells of the harmonious relationship between man and nature in which he lives.

There are two contrasting elements which dominates the universe. The one is the light represented by the sun; the other dark represented by the moon. The image of light is associated with positive qualities such as day, good, life, happiness, and love, etc, whereas the image of dark is associated with negative qualities such as night, evil, death, unhappiness, hate, etc. men are living in the world of opposition between light and dark which are in perfect harmony with each other.

If we follow this assumption, it is a mistake, as warren does, to equate the moon with something bad. He says that the good events take place under the aegis of the moon, the bad events under that of the sun. (87). But we must notice that it is at the first rising of the

moon, at the last stanza of Part 1 that the Mariner kills the Albatross. The sun appears after the crime happened. Warren himself recognizes later that when the shipmates turned the Marine's face with a ghastly pang and one after another they dropped down (Part III, stanza 4), unhappy events under the aegis of the supposedly beneficient moon"take place. He asks, "does this violate the symbolism of the moon? It seems that there are no consistant association with the sun and the moon throughout the poem.

The Mariner kills the albatross, but we don't know why, perhaps he kills it impulsively. As a result of the crime, he is punished and suffers from severe isolation and agony:

Alone, alone, all, all alone

Alone on wide wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on

My soul in agony. (Part IV)

We wonder why the punishment is so severe. The Mariner's shipmates also undergo the punishment. One of the most inexorable punishment they suffer is thirst: "And every tongue, through utter drought,/ Was withered at the root;/ We could not speak. No more than if/ we had been choked with soot"(Part II).

We can assume that the bird is more than a bird representing nature which has been "hailed in God's name as if it had been a Christian soul." So the crime the Mariner commits, as has been

generally admitted, is a sin against nature, symbolically against God, for nature is created in God's image.

The isolation the Mariner feels is agony. In stanzas 15 and 16 Part VII, the word agony is used again for the Mariner's state of isolation. As Warren and other critics interpret it, the poem dramatizes fundamentally Christian salvation story of sin, punishment, and redemption. In this respect the journey through which the Mariner passes can be said to symbolize the archetypal images of human being with original sin. And I think the Mariner has a parallel relationship with Christian in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress who sets out the celestial city to the wicket-gate beneath the shining light in the distance.

After punishment the mariner is the process of redemption. His redemption begins to move with the moon "moving up the sky," and it culminates when his imagination as a result of blessing appreciates nature as beautiful under the moonlight. Imagination is created at a moment when unity between man and nature is established:

> O happy living things! No tongue
> Their beauty might declare:
> A spring of love gushed from my heart,
> And I blessed them unaware:
> Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
> And I blessed them unaware. (Part IV).

The mariner's redemption comes from his act of blessing the "happy living things" around him. The act of blessing is imaginative in its mode, and is a result of love and beauty in his heart.

In Part V, we have the image of rain and wind. In literature water as an image is traditionally associated with life. As the gloss says, "by grace of the holy mother, the ancient mariner is refreshed with rain." He is relieved of suffering by refreshing rain and becomes "a blessed ghost."

The use of wind in the poem is also significant for the imagination. The mariner tells of his hearing "a roaring wind," but strangely enough it does not come and touch him. We can only hear the sound even when there is "the coming wind." In Part V the mariner sees the beauty of the living things; now he hears the beauty of nature. Moreover the sound of nature helps to celebrate the mariner's regenerated sensitivity to nature:

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky

I heard the sky-lark sing;

Sometimes all little birds that are,

How they seemed to fill the sea and air

With their sweet jargoning

And now twas like all instruments

Now like a lonely flute;

And now it is an angle's song

That makes the heavens be mute. (Part V).

Nature inspires the mariner with its sounds, and awakens his imagination. Music crated by the wind has a profound association with inspiration or imagination in coleridge's poetry. One is reminded of the music, for example, of the Eolian Harp."

... And now, its strings

Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes

Over delicious surges sink and rise,

Such a soft floating witchery of sound

As twilight Elfins make...

Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air

Is music slambering on her instrument.

Beer says that the harmony between sight and sound is "characteristic of the mariner's vision," (163) which is succinctly expressed in "The Eolian Harp":

... The one life within us and abroad, which meets all motion and becomes its soul, A light in sound, a sound-like power in light, rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere....

According to beer, this unity of light and sound and the concept of the sun as a source of both harmonies are to seen in "The AM":

Around, around, flew each sweet sound,

Then darted to the sun:

Slowly the sound came back again

Now mix'd now one by one. (Part V)

In Part VI the wind that comes finally to the Mariner is a gentle breeze, "Like a meadow-gale of spring." It is the time of abiding grace. He achieves salvation through grace that he receives. We need to remind our selves of the events of grace: the ocean looks up to the moon for gracious care, in the same way the mariner later looks to God for the confirmation of his sighting of his home.

The narrative ends in Part VII when the mariner asks the hermit to shrieve him. He concludes his address to the wedding-guest with a brief sermon about how the man who hopes to pray well must love all creation as closely as he can to the way in which God loves it:

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things great and small;

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all.

The moral of the poem is succinctly expressed by the tone of this stanza. The stanza shows the mariner's full awareness of himself and all creation in nature, and it is a glorificaiton of man, nature, and God. If coleridge creates a vision in "The AM," it is the Mariner's vision-a vision of unity in which man, nature, and God can share the universal love.

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