

9/5/2020
 Lecture No - (23)
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Topic: S. T. Coleridge as a critic

If we compare the critical writings of Coleridge vis-à-vis the writings of such critics as Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincey, the first strain that will emerge is that of fragmentation. But these fragments when collected together have the quality to remain intact and shining even in the face of the strong gust of the passing years. "The fragments were extremely valuable," Rickett is right to point out, "for his critical faculty was second to none, and in purely literary subjects he is easily first in our age of great critics."

Coleridge differs from almost all the English critics before him in his interest in theoretical criticism. No English critic since Dryden had much concerned himself with the question of the poetic process, whom he even surpassed in this regard because Dryden's interest being a passing one owing to his obsession with Hobbesian psychology, Coleridge's contribution remains paramount. If, on the one hand, the

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critics before him concerned themselves more with the variety or uniformity of human reaction to a given poem and discussion thereof, ^{for} Coleridge, on the other, creation is central. There is, no ~~consensus~~ ^{informed} consensus of ~~informed~~ ^{informed} opinion (à la Johnson), no hypothesis of the ideal reader, or average reader.

For Coleridge, only ~~a~~ a theory of poetic creation matters: he analyses not so much poems as they exist, but the creative act that makes them what they are. This interest in the "seminal principle" of poetic creation is a very great contribution of Coleridge to English critical thought. Coleridge's views of the creative act may be summarized as follows. He asserts that the truth that the poet seeks is neither subjective nor objective i.e., it exists neither in the mind of the poet nor in what he sees around him, but in "the identity of both" — the one acting upon the other in a perpetual self duplication.

Coleridge was much influenced by the German critics such as Lessing whose criticism had a "definite metaphysic" of its own. These men held the view that

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"genius is organic not mechanical as mere talent is; genius arrives therefore by instincts at that harmonious blend of things which we call art. genius, like Nature, is self-organizing; and art is the self-expression of the creative power of Nature." This metaphysic brought into vogue by Lessing was further elaborated by Kant, Schiller and Schelling. Guided by this German ~~the~~ school of thought, Criticism, in the hands of Coleridge, ceases to be a merely arbitrary bundle of whims and prejudices, and in such papers as "An Essay on Test" "On Beauty" and "On Poesy of Art", the nature of artistic pleasure is analysed with clarity and subtlety." This fact does not suggest, however, that Coleridge only imitated these German critics while indulging in ^{practising} criticism. The Kantian influence ^{not-}withstanding, he tells about his boyhood when he learned from his school teacher that "poetry... had a logic of its own as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex".

Coleridge was himself to admit that "Metaphysics and psychology have long been

my hobby-horse". He attributes the special powers to the human mind and thinks that artistic creation is an inner process. (4)

Among the contributions of Coleridge may be enumerated his forays into the field of semantics which gives him the position of a pioneer in the field. I. A. Richards points out in his book "Coleridge on Imagination": "With Coleridge we step across the threshold of a general theoretical study of language capable of opening to us new powers over our minds comparable to those which systematic physical enquiries are giving us over our environment."

Coleridge's descriptive criticism has a value of its own. In his descriptive criticism he applies his own theory of poetry and drama into practice to validate it. This can be divided into three groups: (a) the not so clearly enunciated Shakespeare criticism, (b) critique of Wordsworth in the "Biographia Literaria" chapters XIV, XVII-XIX and XXII. and (c) vast miscellany comments on various poets in lectures, notes and even formal treatises such as tribute to Daniel and views on Herbert's "Temple".

However, the final estimate of Coleridge must take into account his failings also which include lack of concentration and lack of system. Nevertheless as A. C. Rickett says "...for Coleridge... criticism connotes interpretation; it is less a vehicle for finding faults than for discovering beauties."

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