

ARTICLE IV.

COLERIDGE AND HIS POETIC WORK.

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LIFE AND CHARACTER.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, son of Rev. John C. Coleridge, of Devonshire, England (Ottery St. Mary), Headmaster of the Grammar School, was, from the first, a character of unique and even eccentric interest. As he says of his own boyhood, "I never thought as a child, never had the language of a child." As a mere lad, he was inquisitive as to the nature and reasons of things, speculative and imaginative, cogitating or dreaming when his companions were playing.

At school at "Christ's Hospital," we find him at Cambridge, in 1791, which university, for some unexplained reason, he suddenly left, enlisting as a private in the Fifteenth Light Dragoons, returning, however, to Cambridge in April, 1794. In 1795, he entered on the rôle of a lecturer at Bristol, a city of importance in the history of Coleridge, as it was there he met Southey, whom he had seen at Oxford, and Lovell, the publisher, which two married sisters of the lady, Miss Fricker, whom Coleridge was yet to marry. His lectures, "Conciones ad Populum," as they were called, were designed to be popular, political discussions, in the service of what he deemed to be the rights and liberties of the people. In 1796, a journalist in the pages of *The Watchman* and, later, in *The Morning Post* and *Morning Chronicle* and *The Friend*, all of these schemes were unsuccessful, as might have been supposed,

by reason of the poet's unfitness for such a line of work, and the capricious nature of his mind and plans. It was in these years that he had in view, with Southey and others, his pantisocratic scheme, a semi-socialistic and political plan to be carried out in republican America, on the banks of the Susquehanna, a species of romantic adventure, as it would seem, especially attractive to British literary minds. Coleridge, in this respect, was a fanatic, making plans involving large capital, when he had scarcely funds enough at his command to meet his ordinary expenses.

In 1797-1800, he began what has been called his critical career, as a student of philosophy at Göttingen, studying the German language and civilization, and, especially, German metaphysics. His well-executed translation of the dramas of Schiller, shortly after his return to England, revealed the practical results he had reached in the mastery of German.

At Keswick, 1800-04, we reach the crisis of his life, for it was now, when his literary ambitions were at the highest, that we find him succumbing more and more slavishly to that accursed opium-habit which was, at length, to occasion the loss of physical and mental vigor, the miscarriage of his best schemes, and the consequent loss of all heart and hope. There are few, if any, examples in our literary history sadder than that of Coleridge, in this respect, and he thus belongs to that list of unfortunate English authors that so strikingly represents the self-inflicted loss of mental and moral strength. It is not strange that it was at this time (1802) that he wrote his pathetic "Dejection: An Ode," a kind of Elegy on his own misfortunes, due to physical causes.

"A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
 A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
 Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
 In word, or sigh, or tear. . . .
 My genial spirits fail;
 And what can these avail
 To lift the smothering weight from off my breast? . . .
 There was a time when, though my path was rough,
 This joy within me dallied with distress,
 And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
 Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
 For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
 And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
 But now afflictions bow me down to earth,
 Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth."

In England again in 1806, a physical and mental wreck, he remained there till 1816, when he committed himself, in sheer desperation, to the guardian care of a Mr. Gilman, of Highgate, to whose kind ministries Coleridge owed it that he secured any measure of bodily improvement. The letter which he wrote to Gilman as he was about placing himself in his hands, and the picture of this opium-ruined genius coming to Gilman's home, with the proof-sheets of his beautiful poem "Christabel" in his hands, form one of the most touching scenes in English literary history. Feeling, as he did, that now, for the first time, there was some hope of restoration to health and congenial labor, he wrote, in his letter to Godwin, as follows: "If I should leave you restored to my moral and bodily health, it is not myself only that will love and honor you; every friend I have (and, thank God! in spite of this wretched vice, I have many and warm ones, who were friends of my youth and have never deserted me) will thank you with reverence." Such complete restoration, however, was not to come, as for nearly a score of years, in this quiet home, under partial emancipation from his opium-habit and in modified literary activity, he passed his life, and finally closed it in 1834. It was in 1817 that his "Biographia

Literaria" appeared, with its invaluable criticisms on poetry. In 1818 he lectured in London, his discussions covering the wide province of European civilization and literature, and English letters, and kindred topics,—his Shakesperian critiques forming one of the best contributions ever made to this special department of study. It was natural that in 1825, far on in his life of study and meditation, his "Aids to Reflection" should appear, interrupted as the work had been by poverty, disease, opium, and want of method as a man and student. Of his closing years, the details need not be given. It was when he knew that his end was near, that he characteristically wrote, "Hooker wished to live to finish his 'Ecclesiastical Polity'; so, I own, I wish life and strength had been spared to me to complete my philosophy." On July 25, 1834, he died, in the midst of his unfinished plans, "more of a great man," says Thomas Arnold, "than any one who has lived within the four seas in my memory." This may be extreme eulogium, but serves to show what an impression Coleridge made on so cautious and candid a critic as Arnold—praise, it may be added, in which Arnold of Rugby is by no means alone. The summary of his life and character as a man and an author is found in his want of will power, in what has been called, singularly enough, by De Quincey, his lack of "fiber." From whatever point of view we examine his career, this defect comes into prominence, expressing itself in various forms, as indifference, indecision, caprice, and visionary scheming, an almost total absence of the regular and resolute. It appears in the wayward freaks of his boyhood; in his fitful life at Cambridge; in his entering the English army; in his slavish surrender to opium; in his tours through Europe; in his choice of friends and pursuits, and in the general tenor of his life.

It was this that lay at the basis of his domestic unhap-

piness, naturally expected from a marriage partly forced upon him, and partly of his own fanciful choosing. Just as good Richard Hooker was kindly informed by Mrs. Churchman, who was nursing him in his illness, that she had a promising daughter who, if desired, could do it just as well, and the affable English divine acquiesced, to his ultimate sorrow; so, as two sisters had, respectively, married Southey and Lovell, and there was a remaining sister who was seeking an evangelical alliance, Coleridge was courteously informed of the fact, took the hint, and out of sympathy with the belated maiden closed the social contract. So his great pantisocratic scheme in the New World was the offspring of this want of will, he not knowing from one day to the next where he would settle or what he would do. So, in authorship, his plans were equally vacillating; with theology and philosophy one day, and poetry the next; with translations of dramas one day, and dreaming the next. It was thus impossible for him to complete any plan, to leave any such thing as a finished philosophical system or connected body of literary work.

There are two elements of special attractiveness in his character that should be noted. One was his *tenderness of spirit*, as evinced by his interest in children, expressed in his poem "To the Children of Christ's Hospital"; by his sympathy for the suffering, as expressed in his poem "To an Unfortunate Woman"; by his anxiety lest he might be a burden to his friends; by his deep interest in rising and struggling authors, and by his domestic life, even after discord entered. A further feature was his *reverence of spirit*, as he wrote "An Evening Prayer" for children; a series of "Meditative Poems" and "Religious Musings," declaring, as he was dying, "As God hears me, the originating . . . and sustaining wish . . . in my heart was to exalt the glory of his name," and, he added, "to promote the improvement of mankind." Thus he lived

and died, his own worst enemy, a great experimenter in the realm of thought; and leaving the English world yet in doubt as to what he might have done, had his splendid faculties been fully under his control.

HIS POETRY.

It is now in place to examine Coleridge's poetic work, even though, by the general consent of critics, his ablest work was in the province of prose; such productions as his "Aids to Reflection" and his "Lectures on Shakespeare" giving him a high place among English writers. Fully three-fourths of his authorship was of this order. In the threefold division of an author's life and work given us by Mr. Traill, his biographer, the first period is called *The Poetical*, extending from 1772 to 1779, the date of the beginning of his German life and his more specifically critical and philosophic labors. Thus we find him, in common with Pope and others, "lisp[ing] in numbers" in his boyhood, the results of which are given us in what are called his "Juvenile Poems." Such important selections as his "Monody on the Death of Chatterton," his twelve Sonnets, his "Religious Musings," and "Ode to the Departing Year" belong to this earlier era; as, indeed, "The Ancient Mariner," the First Part of "Christabel," "Kubla Kahn," and "The Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni." In fact, this poetic period, though so early, included some of the best years of his life, before he became involved in the mazes of German metaphysics and in the deeper mazes induced by opium. It is now (in 1794) that he was working with Southey and Lovell in Bristol, in the composition of "The Fall of Robespierre," an experiment in dramatic writing that did no credit to any one of its three composers. It was shortly after (1796-97) that his acquaintance with Wordsworth assumed permanent form, one of its happiest results being the joint preparation of

"The Lyrical Ballads," published in 1798; the far larger part, however, being by Wordsworth. "The Ancient Mariner," as we are told, had been planned and partially composed as Coleridge and Wordsworth roamed at will over the Quantock Hills. These "Miscellaneous Poems," or "Poems on Various Subjects," as they were called in the first edition (1797), exhibit most of the marks of immaturity, with exceptional features of real poetic fervor. As Saintsbury bluntly expresses it, "'Religious Musings,' though it has had its admirers, is terribly poor stuff; 'The Monody on the Death of Chatterton' might have been written by fifty people during the century before it. 'The Destiny of Nations' is a feeble rant, but 'The Ode on the Departing Year' strikes a very different note." It was this occasional striking "of a different note" by Coleridge that, despite all his poetic defects, kept alive his fame, and led the English people to be on the alert for something from his pen still better, that "different note" being at length so different, in "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel," as to satisfy, in part, the expectations of the public.

It is not a little to the praise of Coleridge that when (in 1798) he prepared and issued a second edition of his poems, though adding twelve new selections, he omitted nineteen of the first edition of fifty pieces, candidly stating in the preface that his former poems have been "rightly charged with a profusion of double epithets and a general turgidness."

Hence his main poetic period was in 1797-98, practically but two years, the years in which those poems were produced on which his fame at present rests, his translation of Schiller's "Wallenstein" (in 1799) belonging essentially to the same productive period. His unwonted poetic effort in these few years and the high character of it revealed his capability in this direction, while also seeming to anticipate, in part, the mentally deadening effect of

opium; dating, especially, from his life at Keswick, in 1800. The close of the eighteenth century was practically the close of his poetic career, though it was after this that he completed his "Christabel." Apparently forecasting his sad experiences yet to be passed, he applied himself with all the energy at his command, it being but occasionally after this that he roused himself for a season from the influence of the deadly drug whose slave he had become. The only marvel is, and it has not been sufficiently emphasized, that it was from 1800 on, when he was in the later stages of the opium-habit and consequently waning health, that he wrote his notable Lectures on Shakespeare and other topics and his various prose productions, the closing years of his life at Highgate being marked by intervals of extraordinary sanity and literary activity. This is true, though he was really a broken-hearted mourner at the funeral of his own splendid faculties. Such a living death is without parallel in the scope of English letters.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS POETRY.

In turning now to a discussion of the chief characteristics of his verse, it may be noted, at the outset, that most of these features are common to his verse and prose, constitutional or acquired, and thus affecting, in one way or another, every separate product of his pen, his self-induced physical habits determining the action of his mind.

Glancing first at *the defects*, we mark:—

1. The Political or Semi-Political Type of his Verse, as in "The Destruction of the Bastile"; "The French Revolution"; his Sonnets to Erskine, Sheridan, and Kosciusko; "The Destiny of Nations"; his "Ode to France," and most of his dramatic verse, as "The Fall of Robespierre." This is not to say that acceptable verse of a high order cannot be expressed on civic themes and for political ends, as in the soul-stirring sonnets of Milton and Words-

worth, but that Coleridge did not, as a rule, so express it, and was not capable of so doing. Despite his well-meaning enthusiasm on the French Revolution, as a movement on behalf of civil liberty; and his equally well-meaning though visionary schemes as to his Pantisocracy, the ideal home of freedom of faith and action, his talent was wholly elsewhere; the natural action of his mind being introspective, and not excursive and far-reaching. Moreover, his political theories were so changeable, through Republicanism and Toryism and Socialism and other Isms, that he had no well-defined cause to plead—no clear, ringing note of appeal, as Milton had in the days of Cromwell; so that where we should find genuine passion and sublime outbursts of loyalty and civic pride, we meet with the veriest platitudes and truisms on liberty and country. In his twelve sonnets, there is no one that rises to the level of a masterly poem, being devoid of strong thought and stirring expression, while they are often marred by that overwrought diction to which he was too prone.

2. We note, further, a half-dozen poems excepted, that there is no sign of a clear and strong Poetic Instinct; no evident presence of "the faculty divine" or of the "vision divine"; no interior poetic perception, that sees at once the hidden beauty of thoughts and things and is able to embody it in poetic form; little governing poetic passion, that makes a poem an impersonation, and sways the soul of the reader who yields himself to it without reserve. Here and there, as in "Christabel" and "The Ancient Mariner," there is a temporary and partial manifestation of it; but it is no sooner evident than it is gone, and the heaven-soaring poet descends at once to the earth, and abides there. If he failed to accept what he regarded as Wordsworth's too practical, everyday theory of verse, he failed to exhibit any higher theory of his own, so as to show to the English world what poetry should be. It is

clear that nothing can atone for the absence of this poetic gift and function. The fact that Coleridge's "Lectures on Poetry: its Genius and Expression" are far above the average order, and still well worth the reading, is proof in point that he had but little of the genius which he extols, and whose presence he himself regarded as an element of poetic power and success.

3. An additional defect is The Fragmentary Nature of his Poetry, as, indeed, of his Prose. It is fitful and capricious, marked by that "dispersiveness" of which critics have spoken; so that when he wrote a representative poem, it was almost as much of a surprise to himself as to his friends. "Christabel" is an unfinished poem; so favorable a judge as his own son Hartley insisting that he could not have finished it, if he would. So, with "Kubla Khan" and other poems, his poetry throughout having this unfinished character. Such fragments came, undoubtedly, from his divided interests as a prose writer and poet; as a day-dreamer and social reformer; as an author and a critic; as a metaphysician, theologian, and versifier; as a romancer and realist. His favorite ideal of the possible combination of the natural and supernatural was of this order. From financial straits and other causes he even essayed the rôle of a Unitarian preacher at Shrewsbury, for which office, indeed, he showed some talent, and which he was induced to remit by the offer of financial aid. A glance at the later portraits of the poet will reveal that he had the clerical face and dress, and was, to this extent, "approved," as Emerson would say, to the ministry. Shortly after this, he was at Keswick, gradually surrendering body and soul to the ravages of opium, and thus unfitting himself for any high and acceptable service in the cause of truth or humane letters.

There is, however, a *more favorable* view of the poetry of Coleridge, and we note:—

1. That his Poetic Diction is often chaste and expressive enough to call for special emphasis. Critics have freely spoken of the melody and music of his lines, of his metrical skill displayed in conveying thought which in itself is but little above the ordinary. We hear of his "cadence-changes," of his "gorgeous meter," while so good a judge as Swinburne, himself a notable example of an English metrist, speaks in high praise of the lyric aptness of Coleridge as a versifier.

One of the evidences of this rhythmic diction and sense of the harmony of verse is seen in the large variety of his meters. In this respect he is superior to Pope, who carried the English couplet to such an extreme. Hence, if we turn to the poems of Coleridge, we are at once impressed with this variety, as seen in couplet and quatrain; rhyme and blank verse; the six-line, eight-line, and the nine-line stanza, after the manner of Spenser; and sonnets, with their requisite fourteen lines. In "The Ancient Mariner," while the prevailing form of stanza is the quatrain, other varieties are found; as, also, in "Christabel," are found couplets and quatrains freely interchanged. In fact, all the accepted kinds of foot and line are present, and adapted, in the main, to the changing character of the thought involved. Coleridge, in his justly celebrated "Lectures on Poetry," discusses the subject on the side of Poetic Genius and Poetic Expression. Whatever may be said as to his lack of the former in any marked degree, no one can justly deny him a good degree of excellence in the latter. He had the language-sense, a poetic taste to choose the right and give it its right place in the line, and thus fulfill one of the prime conditions of poetry.

2. A further mark of excellence is the Mystical and Romantic Element apparent in his verse, so that the expression applied to "Kubla Khan," a "dream-poem," might aptly be applied to scores of others; notably, to

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," "The Tale of the Dark Ladie," "The Three Graves," "Alice Du Clos," and "Phantom or Fact." These titles are suggestive of the fanciful and mythical, of the office of the poetic imagination in the line of romance, of what has been called "psychological curiosity." Such a title as "The Sibylline Leaves" is of a similar type. One of his earliest poems, "The Songs of the Pixies," a race of beings invisibly small and hurtful or helpful to man, is a poem of this kind. He speaks of himself as a boy "reading or fancying; half, one; half, the other." It is this half real and half unreal feature that gives to our author's verse a kind of ethereal or semi-spiritual type, reminding us, at times, of some of the Prose Tales of Hawthorne or Poe, often embodied in what Whipple has called "his exquisite delineations of the heart." "If I were asked," says Devey, "to individualize the character of Coleridge's poetry, I should place its distinctive feature in bringing into prominence the relation of man with the spiritual universe." It is this unearthly element that is so often seen, and which so often holds the reader to the page when more regular and historical methods would fail to do so. That such a feature should be found in a poet whose special lore lay in the sphere of metaphysical studies is, at first, somewhat surprising, until we recall the fact that much of the philosophizing of that day was vague and purely speculative, leading to no definite result in the establishment of truth. If to this we add the poet's constitutional tendencies and the peculiarity of his personal habits, we can readily see that there was full scope for the fantastic. Even as a prose writer, he was unrealistic, and thereby vitiated much of his influence.

3. Emphasis may also be laid on the prominence given in his verse to Natural Life and Scenery—to sketches of the outer world of sea and earth and sky. There is no

more pleasing and effective element in Coleridge's poetry than this, and it saves from oblivion much of his verse that would otherwise be forgotten. Some of his poems evince this throughout, while others possess it in occasional lines. It is here that he betrays his relation to the Lake School of Poets, and is proud to do so. It is here that he comes into closest sympathy with Wordsworth and others who have extolled the charms and glories of physical phenomena. It was when wandering over the Quantock Hills that "The Lyrical Ballads" and "The Ancient Mariner" were practically composed. Inquiring where "Domestic Peace" may be found, he writes:—

" In a cottaged vale she dwells,
Listening to the Sabbath bells."

In his lines on "Fears in Solitude," he describes the far retreat from war and tumult, as—

" A green and silent spot, amid the hills,
A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place
No singing skylark ever poised himself. . . .
Oh! 'tis a quiet, spirit-healing nook!
Which all, methinks, would love; but chiefly he,
The humble man, who, in his youthful years,
Knew just so much of folly, as had made
His early manhood more securely wise."

His "Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni" has justly become an English classic. His "Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement" are lines in which he pours forth in tenderest strain his reluctant withdrawal from the scenes he loved, and in the center of which he would fain spend his days—a place where, as he writes—

" We could hear
At silent noon, at eve, and early morn,
The sea's faint murmur. . . .
A spot which you might aptly call
The Valley of Seclusion."

So, in writing to his brother of the old home at Ottery St. Mary, he says:—

"A blessed lot hath he, who having passed
His youth and early manhood in the stir
And turmoil of the world, retreats, at length,
To the same dwelling where his father dwelt."

So, on through his verse, ever and anon he breaks forth in praise in that his lot was cast among the hills and lakes of England. It is this fact as much as any other that intensifies the sadness of the sight of this child lover of nature, when in his closing life at Highgate he was bereft of heart and hope by the fatal curse of opium.

4. A final feature deserving mention is the poet's Vigorous Invectives against National Sin and Wrong—his impassioned pleading for the Rights of Man. It was this element in his nature that explains his attitude toward the French Revolution and socialistic projects, though at times he was led thereby to gross extremes. Thus in his "Ode to the Departing Year," he scored the unholy ambition of nations, and hesitated not to warn England. In his "Fears in Solitude," he wrote—

"We have offended, oh, my countrymen! . . .
From east to west
A groan of accusation pierces Heaven. . . .
We have drunk up, demure as at a grace,
Pollutions from the brimming cup of wealth. . . .
Yet bartering freedom and the poor man's life
For gold, as at a market! . . .
We gabble o'er the oaths we mean to break;
For all must swear—all and in every place,
College and wharf, council and justice—court;
All, all must swear, the briber and the bribed.
Merchant and lawyer, senator and priest,
The rich, the poor, the old man and the young,
All, all make up one scheme of perjury
That faith doth reel."

Thus the terrible arraignment continues, and lest he be accused of malice, he adds:—