

## DISCUSSIONS AND BOOK REVIEWS :

### ON COLERIDGE'S AESTHETICS

VINAYAK KRISHNA GOKAK

Shri Phanibhushan Chakravarthi has written a fairly long review of my book, *Coleridge's Aesthetics* (publ. Abhinav Prakashan E-36. Hauz Khas. New Delhi-16) in the February (1976) number of *Social Science Review*, Calcutta, Here is my note in reply.

His references to my career (and of my tribe as a whole) are rather tangential. His guesses and presumptions are always loaded against me. He says that my range of Coleridge studies is limited and then adds : "This is only a guess". Because I have been a professor, he remarks "several parts of the book read like notes". In fact I have never taught Coleridge's aesthetics to any class. I studied the subject because I loved it and I wrote out my six lectures on it when I was invited to deliver the Tagore lectures by Borada University. (The ex-chief justice also reads me homily on 'lectures' and their 'development', not caring to realise that publishers and printing presses take their own time to consider M. S. S. and to print them.) It would be easy for me also to say that his review is marked by the frustration of one who was compelled to choose the judicial line and give up the teaching profession ; by the abundant legal quibbling of a judge and by an unusual lack of the judicial temper in one who has held some important position in the judicial line. But I desist from making such a statement. He presumes that I have not read Ch. xviii in *Biographia* when I have actually referred to the full context of the quotation on Page 53 and quote on page 66 only that portion of it which is relevant to the formulation of the principle of Taste, the

meaning of which can never be restricted to style alone as the reviewer would like to do. In my book there are 58 quotations directly taken from B. L., one from Coleridge's other essays and three or four from the books by I. A. Richards and Fogle for want of adequate library facilities at the spot where the M. S. was prepared. I. A. Richards quotes the passage on Taste without giving the page reference to B. L. Shall we say that he has 'lifted' the passage?

The reviewer has strange ideas about the meaning of the word 'Aesthetics'. He thinks that 'aesthetics' means "the principles relating to the perception and exposition of the elements of beauty in a work of art, and the artistic pleasure given by it." What about Nature? Is not beauty perceived in Nature? Half the field of beauty at least is omitted from the statement. Again, the great Oxford Dictionary speaks of 'aesthetics' as the science, philosophy or theory of taste or of the perception of the beautiful in Nature and Art. Now, 'philosophy' can vary from downright realism to transcendentalism, from individual to individual. The practical side of this 'science' or the psychology attached to this 'philosophy' will depend on the brand of philosophy that one accepts. Then will follow what the reviewer calls an explanation of the aesthetic pleasure and of its sources in a work of art. Each explanation of this kind will have to be based on the particular brand of philosophy and psychology accepted by the writer who sets out to explain. Otherwise there can be no explanation worth the name. I have, therefore, summed up Coleridge's philosophy in Ch. I and the psychology the accepted for this purpose in Ch. II, IV and VI. I am concerned, as is apparent, mainly with his theory of poetry rather than with his theory of criticism. Chapters III and V have been devoted to an application of the findings in Coleridge's philosophy and psychology to the sources of aesthetic pleasure in work of art. The reviewer's fundamental error consists in assuming that aesthetics can exist without any reference to philosophy or psychology.

The reviewer fails to understand what my book is about. What he calls the criticism of individual poets and dramatists, including Wordsworth and Shakespeare, has been well-known for over a century. The same is true regarding Coleridge's enunciation of first principles regarding topics like poetic Diction. On the other hand, not much work has been done regarding the general theory of aesthetics that lay at the back of Coleridge's mind—a theory which finds a fairly adequate formulation in B.L. It is amusing to find the reviewer admiring the brilliance of the occasional observations of Coleridge on poets and principles, believing, at the same time, that they can proceed from a mind which has no general theory to support them. In fact, the reviewer himself refers to some

remarks of Coleridge which are repeated in B. L. and elsewhere too. The mere fact of repetition shows that these are not just 'occasional' statements.

The reviewer reduces Coleridge's transcendentalism to the following gross entities : "The world of external phenomena.....might be called, Coleridge said, *Nature*, while the sum of all that was subjective, might compendiously be called self or intelligence". All philosophies can be ground down to an elementary crudeness in this fashion. The reviewer remarks that, in the light of modern psychology many of the links of Coleridge's theory appear to be fanciful". He further says that the exposition of the theory as given in the B.L. is made up of 'unverifiable speculations about the workings of the human mind'. This is clear proof that the reviewer has not understood Coleridge Transcendental philosophy, like Vedanta, is based upon assumptions which proceed from the experiences of mystics. Some of these can never be verified by reason for they are beyond reason. Nor can they be explained by modern psychology which has no use for the soul. It is not Coleridge who has got entangled into matters like "knowing, being, the representation in the finite mind of the infinite I Am", etc. Coleridge has mastered them. It is the reviewer who has got lost in trying to understand them. He probably feels that it is not worth while understanding them either. He says that Coleridge explains by what "process of reasoning he carried his speculations about imagination into the realm of Transcendentalism." This logical process which explains the supposed logical deficiencies of Hobbes, Hartly and others can always be countered and overcome by a more incisive logical process. What makes Coleridge's position essentially different from that of Hobbes, Hartley and others is his *act* of bringing together subject/object, knowing, being and I AM. and his *experience* of them together, not the reasoning. Not understanding this means a constitutional inability to understand Coleridge's theory.

The reviewer makes another astounding statement. He says that Coleridge does not use capital letters while referring to the Inner Sense. In Ch. XII of B. L., that the reviewer quotes from in this connection, (P. 172 Ch. XII Vol I Shawcross' edition of B. L.) Coleridge makes every letter of the two words a capital letter. 'SELF' is also given in capital letters in thesis 9 in the same chapter. For 'inner sense', the reviewer substitutes another phrase : "philosophic Consciousness" which is a vague and shapeless monster. Coleridge has defined precisely the connotation of "Inner Sense". The reviewer thinks that it would be an absurd statement to make if we were to say that "one may have more or less of soul than another". This itself shows his limited understanding

of transcendentalism. The soul is the evolving spiritual entity in man and it can evolve in different proportions in different persons.

I shall not discuss transcendentalism any more in this note. Any reader, who is not antipathetic to philosophies of this kind will find the entire position set forth clearly in my book. I am not out to prove that transcendentalism is a sound philosophy or that materialism is a hollow one. Nor am I interested in proving the superiority of one school of psychology over another. Having briefly summed up Coleridge's position in these matters, I have given a full and elaborate statement of what this means in the field of aesthetics and poetics. Coleridge made only incomplete statements and one could occasionally come across an inconsistency or obscurity.

I have written on the comprehensive plan that is implicit in Coleridge's statements. The reviewer objects to the prominence given to the Inner Sense. He does not realise that, without it, there is no transcendental philosophy. Briefly, the new points made by me are as follows :

(1) The reviewer accuses me of not having read recent Coleridge criticism. He himself has obviously not read Fogle, for he attributes disparagingly to me the 'invention of several planes of consciousness' which really comes from Fogle. What I have done is to show that Reason is only one of the faculties listed by Coleridge and that it is the Inner Sense that is fundamental to Coleridge's aesthetics. Let Coleridge speak for himself : (Thesis IX Ch XII) "*This principium commune essendi et cognoscendi* as subsisting in a WILL or primary ACT of self-duplication, is the mediate or indirect principle of every science ; but it is the immediate and direct principle of the ultimate science alone, i. e., of transcendental philosophy alone....In other words, philosophy would pass into religion and religion become inclusive of philosophy. We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the self in order to lose and find all self in God."

(2) The faculties are enumerated by Coleridge. (on P. 193-94. B. L. Vol. I. Shawcross). I have elucidated the special way in which Coleridge sees them work, the inter-connections that exist and the three planes on which they function.

(3) The 'fusions' affected by each faculty in the poetic process are explained.

(4) The reconcilements of disparate qualities in a work of art and the faculties to which they are traceable have been fully discussed.

(5) I have given a new explanation of primary and Secondary Imagination.

(6) I have established the identity of Coleridge's theory of the origin of poetry with his theory of the origin of Metre.

(7) I have commented on the the role of Taste.

It is amusing to find the reviewer insisting that any one, desirous of explaining Coleridge's theory should know "What made Coleridge adopt a metaphysical approach for his inquiry into the mysteries of the creative mind" and by what principles he attributed different functions to different faculties of the mind. This amounts to explaining why Coleridge is Coleridge and not Hobbes and why reason is reason and not will or imagination. The German impact was responsible for Coleridge's shift from Hobbes and Hartley to Schelling, from materialism to transcendentalism. But the new philosophy only gave him a satisfactory explanation of some of his own deepest impulses and experiences. An analysis of this kind lies outside the scope of my book. Such an analysis is an attempt to catch a glimpse of some of the deepest recesses of Coleridge's personality, viewing it in its formative stage. I am concerned in my book with an elucidation of Coleridge's aesthetic fundamentals so far as they can be gathered from his writings. As for the distinctive functions of the various mental faculties, it would be good if the reviewer can look into his own mind, adding the glow of the "Inner consciousness" to each one of them, wherever required, if he does not possess it himself.

There are a few other points. The reviewer is not much bothered whether Coleridge is called an idealist, transcendentalist or integralist. There is evidence in Coleridge's writings on which any one of these claims can be based. It is in this context that I have emphasised the need to regard him as an integralist. I do not regard this as a major contribution. It clears the ground for what follows. The reviewer makes himself incomprehensible on the question of the friend's letter in Ch XIII. Coleridge thinned away substances into shadows and deepened shadows into substances. It was Coleridge's own idea of what readers might feel about the chapter and this was certainly one of the factors that prevented Coleridge from including the chapter in B. L. As for the unsympathetic climate that the Romantic poets had to face (Shelley's poetry was hardly read by a few and Keats' death was supposed, for a long time, to have been hastened by harsh reviews) in their own time, every student of romantic poetry knows about it, Coleridge was the hardest hit for he was involved in transcendental philosophy.

The reviewer has mixed up the changes in Coleridge's critical views with certain psychological changes that he had to go through because of misfortunes that befell him. The recantation with regard to the Heaven-descended 'know thyself' is a psychological change. I have said with reference to such changes: "Be this as it may, the later pessimistic attitude of Coleridge towards his own visionary powers and early speculations need not prejudice us "against their permanent significance for any theory of art." Having said this, I have remarked that *one of the reasons* why he wavered is to be "found in the fact that he had to write about the things he loved, in an unfavourable intellectual climate". And I stand by this statement. The reviewer writes whole paragraph to prove what I have implied in my phrases "later pessimistic attitude" and "one of the reasons" I do not know why.

Coleridge's borrowings from Schelling and other German philosophers have been referred to by the reviewer. Even supposing that it is going to be established that the borrowings have been extensive, Coleridge had undoubtedly absorbed them and made them his own. The German philosophers themselves borrowed freely from ancient Indian philosophy. It is not a sin to light our own lamp at another provided our own lamp is truly lighted and burning.

The reviewer objects to my system of abbreviations and to the lack of an index of topics in a book which runs only to 71 pages though there is a book-and author index. It is surprising that he does not comment on the omission of a bibliography.

To crown all this, he attacks my style 'uniformly stilted'. I looked up the dictionary to ascertain the exact flavour of that word. It means "pompous, bombastic." That is the usual fling at academics. Let the reader judge for himself. In any case, I am glad that my style does not bristle with spines like a porcupine. The reviewer quotes my sentence: "the substance of the moment of vision...has the increase of consciousness as its goal" and asks the question: "How can a moment, which is a point of time, or its substance have a goal?" Now, this substance of the moment of vision is an amalgam of knowing, feeling and doing. Such a moment is as long as eternity. Blake speaks of holding eternity in an hour. There is an increase of consciousness during such a moment and that is the goal, the desired result. Let Coleridge explain further: "whatever part of the *terra incognita* of our nature the increased consciousness discovers, our will may conquer and bring into subjection under the sovereignty of reason."

Picking up another sentence, the reviewer says that a work of art or poem, about to be born, does not itself have a shaping and modifying

power. We should therefore say: "the power of shaping or modifying the work of art or poem that is about to be born" and not "the shaping and modifying power of the work of art," etc. My statement in its context runs as follows "As an independent faculty along with the others, Imagination has already achieved two specific fusions. As the shaping and modifying power of the work or poem that is about to be born, it uses its synthetic and magical power mainly in two ways." The distinction in these sentences is between imagination as a faculty which makes its own contribution to the subtle substance of a work of art or poem and the secondary imagination. I have written about the latter; "it is made to preside over the birth of a work of art and is endowed with an additional shaping and modifying or synthetic and magical power." The point, I suppose, is clear. The Secondary Imagination is not just "the power of shaping and modifying the work or poem that is about to be born?" but the power *that is put in charge of shaping and modifying*" etc. It may be that both the reviewer and myself are imprecise in phrasing this idea. If the necessary *legal precision* were to be given to it and similar ideas, I am afraid the book may be unreadable. As it is, my imprecision, if that is what it is, is nearer the mark than the reviewer's.

This is about examples selected from my 71 pages. Let me now select from the reviewer's 27 pages. Here is a sentence on the side of substance. "Coleridge was the first, and so far has been the last, to try to place creative activity of the mind on a foundation of philosophy and establish thereby a casual (causal? V. K. G.) link between the two which, ordinarily, one would not suppose to exist." I should like to know which writer on aesthetics, from Bharata and Plato down to Croce and Tagore, has been able to eschew philosophy from his writings on aesthetics. The writer's philosophy is inevitably present there, by the back or the front door, implicitly or explicitly. I have already commented on this basic error in the reviewer's approach to the subject.

The second example I choose refers to his language: "One does not find it possible to accept the author's own estimate of the worth of his book and that of his publishers." I have offered no estimate of the worth of my publishers either in the preface or in the book. I hope the reviewer does not think that there is a legal dispute about it between my publishers and myself. What, I suppose, he wants to say is that he does not find it possible to accept either my estimate of the worth of my book or the estimate of its worth given by my publishers. Let him please himself.