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Coleridge and Wordsworth: Bromance and style

It's almost difficult to discuss romantic literature without mentioning either Coleridge or Wordsworth. What was intended as an "experimental poetry" by Wordsworth when publishing the "*Lyrical Ballad*" with Coleridge, became one of the earliest launch of Romantic Age in English Literature. If these poets were living in our present days, the word "bromance" would be quite the word to describe their relationship. They quickly became good friends and published a poetry collection together, but some relationship just can't last long as disagreement continuously building up more and more distance between them which eventually led to their "breakup". This essay will discuss the "bromance" and styles between Coleridge and Wordsworth.

It all began in 1797, where Coleridge was "bounding across the fields to Dorothy and William." (Thomson, 52), as Frances Wilson described in his review on the Telegraph, "Coleridge burst in upon the peaceful world of Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. Working in the garden outside of their Dorset home, the Wordsworths never forgot how they looked up to see a figure leaving the road, leaping the gate and hurtling through the corn towards them." It might appear as if everything happened way too fast as they've only met briefly in Bristol (Wilson) but in fact at that time, Coleridge was bitter from ended his relationship with poet Robert Southey in which he said "a large void in my heart, which there was no man big enough to fill". In her review on Adam Sisman's *The Friendship*, Thomson also wrote "the scene contrasts Coleridge's need to move in and out of others' lives, his fundamental homelessness, his preference for being a lodger as opposed to a resident, with the Wordsworths' ability to stand united on their chosen ground, selectively admitting others to their self-sufficient circle. That sense of stability which we associate with Wordsworth was hard won and Sisman evokes the excitement and turmoil both political and personal which underlie the young Wordsworth's turbulent life with bold, confident strokes." While the Wordsworths have managed their good domestic relations; Coleridge, who was married to Sara Fricker, later began an affair with another Sara, Sara Hutchinson. He rather prefer her being a 'concept' than a mistress, that she is his muse whom prevented him from falling into the mundane, a fantasy to his wretched

marriage with Sara Fricker. Thomson continued, "His friendship with Southey led to the major mistake of his personal life: his marriage to Sara Fricker which followed 'some kind of understanding on the basis of one week's acquaintance in the heady days of the pantisocracy plans (76). One can only wonder why Southey did not stop Coleridge from going ahead from this marriage considering how desperately Coleridge confided in him about his fears (95), for, while being friends with Coleridge was undoubtedly risky, being married to him was another story together." Sisman's narrative of Coleridge's life also traced the lamentable disintegration of his family life. (Thomson) The only awkward thing that happened eventually perhaps was Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson, the sister of Coleridge's "mistress". Nevertheless, with Dorothy being the central axle between the duo, her brother's marriage to Mary has brought an emotional distress in her life, as she has to 'share' her duties with her new sister-in-law, while having affection for Coleridge in the meantime. (Marowitz). She wore the couples' wedding ring all night until her brother came into her room the next morning. Dorothy did not attend the ceremony. (Wilson)

When Wordsworth and Coleridge were planning to write the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth omitted Coleridge's Christabel from the collection and replaced with his own poem, Michael, in which shifted the balance between them. Soon, Coleridge felt that he's dying as a poet, while watching Wordsworth rising to success. Besides his poorly managed marriage with Fricker and his addiction to opium that has gradually diminished his ability to write, to the extent that he was both physically and mentally deteriorated. (Marowitz) Their disagreements on creativity has drawn them further apart from each other, as their previous biographies describing their antagonistic relationship by praising one and condemn the other. In *The Friendship*, Sisman concluded that it was Coleridge's ambition for Wordsworth as a poet and Wordsworth's addiction to Coleridge as his reader that formed the ugly end of their bromance. (Wilson) In *Criticism*, it was described that "Coleridge is either the victim of Wordsworth's public and private criticism, which destroyed him as a poet, or morally hopeless, unable to fulfill his promise; Wordsworth is the quintessential poet of individual imagination, or a domineering egoist, whom Keats described as a bully, and who yet needed both Coleridge's encouragement and his philosophical speculation." After all, (Marowitz) Wordsworth wouldn't have gotten his success if it wasn't for Coleridge, his mentor, support, muse, canny editor with a ubiquitous critique and constant source of inspiration.

The romantics have this ideal of balance in their pursuits, even in this bromance we can see the balance of personalities and styles between Coleridge and Wordsworth, even if it was purely unintentional. They both were very fond of nature but having absolutely opposite aesthetic perspectives on nature and styles in writing. Coleridge sees nature as a superior dark force with massive destructive power, and shares a paradoxical relationship with humans. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* not only described Coleridge's views on nature but also explored the

subjects of supernatural and metaphysics. “In *The Ancient Mariner*, as in Coleridge’s other major poems, the material universe both masks and is the medium for apprehending the noumenal realms of spiritual and psychological reality. The supernatural is not separate from the natural, but the inner essence of it; and the Mariner’s experiences, at once physical and metaphysical, constitute an imaginative exploration of the links between the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural.” (Hill, 129) Coleridge had this idea of polarization on nature that he ‘painted’ nature into something that’s beautiful, amusing yet often powerful and dangerous, where “bloody” sun (112) hanging in a “hot and copper sky” (111), contrast of the “deep red” sky surrounded by the frozen tundra with a “green as emerald” (54) towering iceberg, in “witch-oils/Burnt green and blue, and white” waters (129-130), “the charmed water burnt red away/a still and awful red” (271-272). The Mariner’s ship was forced to sail southwards by a ‘tyrannous and strong’ wind (42), similar to Homer’s *Odyssey* in which Poseidon’s ship was changed in course by wind towards certain downfall, how the ice is personified like a beast, “It cracked and growled, and roared and howled, like noises in a swoon!”(62-64) and “The ice did split with a thunder-fit,” (69).

Coleridge used the albatross in several symbolizations: the bonding between man and nature, a good omen for sailing and his marriage with Sara Coleridge. Comparing their marital life with the poem from line 71-74, it was good at first “And a good south wind sprung up behind; The Albatross did follow, And every day, for food or play, Came to the mariner's hollo!” until the bird was shot (line 82), suggesting that Coleridge had begun his affair with Ms. Hutchinson and put his wife in neglect. Following the poem, it is as if the Mariner is a representation of Coleridge himself, the poem reads that the Mariner has a ‘strange power of speech’ (587) and described himself as an isolated, tortured figure, claiming that he was “Alone, alone, all, all, alone,/ Alone on a wide wide sea” (232-233), all that loneliness and pain from an unhappy marriage with a woman he did not love, his eccentric character and how it feels like living poet’s life. Another interpretation on the symbolism of the albatross is that nature and human are closely related in order to conserve the dynamic balance or else they’d face a catastrophic disaster, as the mariner shot the albatross, the tides changed as if the albatross was avenged,

“Water, water, everywhere,

And all the boards did shrink,

Water, water, everywhere.

Nor any drop to drink”

(119-122),

“The Nightmare Life-in-Death Woman was she

Who thickens man’s blood with cold”

and the death of his crew

“Four times fifty living men
 (and I heard nor sign nor groan)
 With heavy thump, a lifeless lump
 They dropped down one by one
 The souls did from their bodies fly
 They fled to bliss or woe!”

(216-221).

Later on Coleridge explored the idea of supernatural as the Mariner started praying for mercy yet he couldn't utter a word because his heart was “as dry as dust” and pulsating so fast that his eyeballs were pulsing the beats (247). He tried to take his own life yet “Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse/And yet I could not die” (261-262), in terms of biology and psychology, Coleridge is describing the mental (or emotional) state of post-traumatic stress disorder, along with the guilt-complex as one will feel a heavy weight around the neck, just as “Instead of the cross, the Albatross/About my neck was hung” (141-142).

Wordsworth, on the other hand, share a rather opposite perception on nature. He often regard nature with more positivity than Coleridge, in which his poetry often “touches all living things and inspires and delights them” (Rider) with forms and images of nature. *The Prelude*, for instance has at least eight passages containing Wordsworth's experience with the forms and images of nature, (Weaver, 434) where visible forms that excites him with an immediate, extrinsic and organic joy. It is the kind of joy that first appear as a pleasure sheer and instant, which later subtilized and sublimated to “intercourse with the eternal Beauty” (Weaver, 434), which Wordsworth wrote in a abrupt way to describe such consummation:

By influence habitual to the mind
 The mountain's outline and its steady form
 Gives a pure grandeur; and its presence shapes
 The measure and the prospect of the soul
 To majesty; such virtue have the forms
 Perennial of the ancient hills; nor less
 The changeful language of their countenances
 Gives movement to the thoughts, and multitude,

With order and relation.

(The Prelude, Book VII, 721-740)

In the earlier passages in the first book of the *Prelude*,

Yes, I remember, when the changeful earth,
And twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd
The faces of the moving year, even then,
A Child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the eternal Beauty, drinking in
A pure organic pleasure from the lines
Of curling mists, or from the level plain
Of waters colour'd by the steady clouds.

(586-593)

there are similar thoughts of nature where Bennet thought similar to those of in *Tintern Abbey* (435), for instance, the “five seasons” in both *Tintern* “five summers, with the length of five winters” (1-2) and *Prelude* “And twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd” (587), and the “changeful earth” in the *Prelude* compare to the change of scenes in *Tintern*. Wordsworth’s idea of pleasure that “pure and organic” manifested in him in his early life. In *Tintern*, he emphasized on the intensity, the immediacy of his reaction to the colors and forms of Nature, a reaction he described as “an appetite”. (Weaver, 434)

Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
The wild green landscape. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,

(10-19)

Unlike the dark, massive Nature in Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, Wordsworth’s Nature in *Tintern Abbey* has a rather

calmer, tranquil side, with its rustic sceneries of the woods and cottages that provided him the “tranquil restoration” in his mind (24-34), and also enlightened his burdened state of mind and soul.

Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life

As Weaver quoted “For him and for us alike, there is no word capable of expressing perfectly the ‘delicate, snailhorn perception’ of that instant when within the eye form is purely form, and when within the heart of man his joy in pure form is pure. Wordsworth suggests these things almost as well as one may, at least with a clarity sufficient to make it known that he is aware of them.” (p434) Wordsworth passed through the ordeal of maturity in *Prelude*, regarding the transition from “pure organic pleasures” of lines and colors of objects, to the spiritual happiness in “wisdom of the universe” (Weaver), where the extrinsic form transform into intrinsic quality. For instance the “steadiness and grandeur” of the “mountain outline” being transmuted into that of the soul, The beauty in form becomes that of the mind which then spiritualized. (434).

Once the mind has been given "a pure grandeur" by the "mountain's outline," and once the "prospect of the soul "has been shaped" to majesty," then the soul is in a measure prepared for intercourse with the "eternal Beauty." Deep speaks unto deep and power is changed with power. "Think," cries the poet, " the Wisdom and Spirit of the universe, the Presence whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, gives everlasting motion to forms and images! With these forms and images the Presence intertwines the passions of my mind, purifying, sanctifying, disciplining

me until I am aware of the grandeur in the beating of my heart"

(Prelude, I. 428-441).

Wordsworth also has another concept when it comes to the relationship between man, animals and nature, in the *Prelude*, the separating line placing beasts and birds outside of Nature, with intense language such as “light of beauty”, “grandeur”, “circumfuse”, “tenderness”, “obeisance” to represent his intention to exclude animals from being part of the great influence in life, but treated with inverse proportion to any real power of overcoming, (Jones, 75) which can be seen in:

a passion, she [Nature],
A rapture often, and immediate joy
Ever at hand; he [Man] distant, but a grace
Occasional, and accidental thought,
His hour being not yet come. Far less had then
The inferior creatures, beast or bird, attuned
My spirit to that gentleness of love,
Won from me those minute obeisances
Of tenderness which I may number now,
With my first blessing. Nevertheless, on these
The light of beauty did not fall in vain,
Or grandeur circumfuse them to no end.

(Prelude, VIII, 486-497)

Wordsworth applies the term “animal” as a way to describe the non-spiritual part of human consciousness, such as the “glad animal movements of childhood” in line 74 of *Tintern Abbey*; while as an adjective he regards it as silent and inarticulate despite having consciousness and free will, the animals occupy the margin between “the mute” and “the brute”. Jones believe that the significance of animals to Wordsworth in a combination of two of the most powerful preoccupation of his work: interaction between humanity and nature, and the development of his ability to articulate the meaning to the world as a poet. Wordsworth sees them as a challenge because they remind him of the fragility of his own ability to speak and how they bring that ‘natural’ language into his conviction. (76) Through his writing it seemed that Wordsworth wanted his animals to “speak” but the expression tends to progress the same way, that the “speaking” is not directly recounted, instead, being interpreted. (Jones,77) An example from the *Prelude, Book II*:

And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams? For this didst thou
O Derwent! winding among grassy holms
Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,
Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts

(275-282)

His love for the forms and images of nature, not only giving him the substantial power to be seized from the unpredictables, but also empower him with aspiring creations. They have a peculiar functional importance to him and his imagination that "reason in her most exalted mood"; the "grand Reason" is an "awful Power" rising "from the mind's abyss," it is that, in short, which comes from the "blind cavern," or source of being, a synthesizing power, drawing all things into harmonious relationship with each other and with itself. Imagination, to Wordsworth, can be destroyed by analytic reasoning, by comparing the forms and images superficially, or randomly combine them which numb the "inner faculties". (Weaver, 439)

Just as how they both love nature but having different views on it, Coleridge and Wordsworth have different styles and opinions on poetry, the origins and role of poetry to the world. In page 149 of the preface of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth states his idea of poetry that it is the language for everyone, "To this knowledge which all men carry about with them, and to these sympathies in which without any other discipline than that of our daily life we are fitted to take delight, the poet principally directs his attention" (Rider). Just as how he sees nature, poetry should be available for everyone to understand, and be touched, inspired and delighted by it, regardless of their social status. Rider quoted from page 151 (of *Lyrical Ballads*) that Wordsworth also makes the point that "poetry is the spontaneous over flow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility". Such emotion that evokes the occurrence of sublime, making one unable to enunciate the nature and beauty of the event, only after the 'recollection' then the poet can arrange the words to share that particular experience with everyone, in condition that the poet has a certain personal distance from what was being described in the poems. For Wordsworth to able to achieve that objective, he felt that he has to use a more common language and subjects, alongside some of his personal wisdom on Nature and other aspects of life. For instance in *Tintern Abbey* "Nature never did betray/the heart that loved her" (139), Wordsworth showed how his emotion was influenced by his interaction with Nature, that his experiences brought contemplations and considerations which are to be expressed.

Coleridge was the opposite. He disagrees Wordsworth's idea of generalizing poetry and the usage of simpler vocabularies in writing. Instead he focused on concept of imagination; primary and secondary. He explained in his

Biographia Literaria:

“The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and the prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. (387)”

From the concept of Imagination, Coleridge also introduces the concept of fancy, as there're “fixities and definites” (387), where creation is not involved, therefore just a reformation of existing ideas, the more recreation/fancy there is, the more appealing the poetry will be. He demonstrates his primary imagination in “*Kubla Kahn*”'s introduction

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree;
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. (347)”

an imagination induced by his opium consumption and Coleridge reciprocated that sublime moment into this poem, including his ideal of polarity where “A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!” (348), in which “sunny” and “ice” represent the feel of hot and cold, the “pleasure dome” would be his darker version of euphoria. His theory of the human mind construct its own reality and interpret the meaning of its experience, “the primary imagination involves the subject becoming an object to itself, the unconscious ‘I AM’. The secondary imagination differing only in degree and in the mode of its operation... dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all event it struggles to idealize and unify” (Berlin, 66) Thus, to Coleridge, whatever the sense, understanding, and fancy provide from the external world must be interpreted with reason and imagination so that its real essence can be understood. (Berlin, 64) He concluded:

My own conclusion on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination. What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself,

which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. (Biographia, II, 12)

Despite their differences in opinions and style; Coleridge being the refined, artistic one while Wordsworth considered common life and language simultaneously with Nature, the collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge brought a dynamic variety to romantic literature with the *Lyrical Ballads* , making them the pioneers of the Romantic literature.

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