



THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION IN COLERIDGE'S "DEJECTION: AN ODE"

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Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" is initially a poem about the depressed state in which the author finds himself. The work is not simply a poem, but rather a reflection of the poet, who was as famous for his rise as for his fall. "Dejection" is thought to be the product of Coleridge's depression born of his unhappy marriage and his futile love for Sara Hutchinson; the poem was, after all, first written as a letter to his beloved Sara (Broughton 241). On the surface, the work can simply be read as the remnant of an unattainable love. On the other hand, "Dejection" is also read as the record of a creative crisis in Coleridge's career. In this view, the poem is ultimately a testament to the importance of the imagination in Romantic thought and ideology. Imagination gives life to external situations and objects; perception is everything. Throughout "Dejection," Coleridge, while in the depths of despair, tries to stimulate his imagination and creative powers through outside experiences of nature, but he fails. He realizes that only in his own mind is meaning attributed to otherwise neutral stimulus; outer perceptions are nothing without internal attribution of meaning. We see this Romantic theme occurring throughout the work. Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" attests to the importance of the imagination in the nature of the author's depression, its

pivotal role in attributing meaning to outside perceptions, the interplay between external and internal experiences, and the evidence of empathy in the final strophe of the poem.

To begin a discussion of the imagination, or lack thereof, in Coleridge's "Dejection Ode," the milieu in which the poem was written must be examined. The Romantic era was defined by an emphasis on the individual and emotionality, internal realities, and the imagination. Coleridge's literary treatise, *Biographia Literaria*, illustrates the importance of the imagination in the lives of the Romantics. In this work, Coleridge defines "imagination" as the "prime Agent of human perception" and a means by which the mind participates in "the eternal act of creation in the I AM" (Coleridge 202). This belief, prevalent throughout Coleridge's body of work, shows the importance of imagination and internal life in creation of external realities. Without a doubt, the author, and the Romantics as a whole, regarded the imagination as the most important aspect in creating our own realities; outer perceptions are nothing without internal attribution of meaning.

An understanding of the romantic imagination allows the reader to conceptualize the nature of Coleridge's state of mind, represented in "Dejection," which is a poem clearly about the effect of depression on the poet's creative life. As the late social psychologist and professor at the University of Missouri, J.L. Simmons once explained, the author's mental condition is one that "stifles his perceptions and in turn calls forth a treatment of poetic terms of his aesthetic philosophy" (212). Coleridge is lacking in inspiration and motivation to create his own reality; the agony of losing the power of creativity and his driving passion disturbs the poet more so than the depression he experiences. Throughout the work, the author conveys the imagery of grief and sadness, and how this dejection, as it were, affects the experiences of the speaker. The struggle that ensues is a bitter battle with the numbness that pervades Coleridge's life during his period of depression. He repeatedly wishes to be moved by the sights and sounds that are around him, but is unable to be so. All of the perceptions of life and

nature do nothing to motivate the speaker. When the fruitlessness of looking outward to find the inspiration to break the sadness, or at least to make it productive, fail, Coleridge asserts that the inspiration must come from within. This is the conception, the ideal, which gives rise to the Romantic poets' emphasis on the imagination and internal realities.

For the Romantics, reality is created first in the mind; feelings and personal attributions are internal creations that give meaning to external experiences in a phenomena known as the egotistical sublime. These are the ideas that occur to Coleridge as the poem continues. Although his constant depression and lack of joy, is of concern to him, the poet is more disconcerted by the *nature* of his depression: It is utterly lifeless. "Dejection" is not a poem about the miseries that cause and accompany depression, nor even about depression itself, but rather the agony that results from the inability to feel. Whereas past bouts with depression and unhappiness have been productive to Coleridge, as he describes in strophe 6 as

A time when, thought 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,

the present depression has a numbing effect on his affections. The frustration arises from the lack of internal life. Misery arises not from depression, but from unproductive depression, the lack of feeling inside the person. There is a certain level of depression, of sadness, that fosters the creative powers, pushing writers to their best abilities; there is a certain level of stress, of anxiety that facilitates work and aids in the creative process. Beyond this level, depression becomes debilitating, nonsensical, and numb. It is this unproductive depression that Coleridge experiences in "Dejection."

Coleridge recognized the difference between a depression that caudles creativity and one that destroys it. The thing that determines whether depression takes on one form rather than the other is none other than the presence of imagination,

the person's ability to create an internal reality that takes the lifelessness of depression and makes it live. Psychological studies have examined the effect of cognition on depression treatment. Psychologists Beevers and Wells from the University of Texas, and Miller of Brown University, in a 2007 study, found that negative cognition reduces a person's response to treatment (Beevers, et al. 429). Treatment of, and recovery from, depression are related to the attitude of the patient. This result supports the Romantic notion that internal attribution does, indeed, influence perception of external experiences. Depression is more severe if negative cognition is associated. Therefore, Coleridge does not lament his depression, but rather his inability to make it productive with the use of imagination, which the Romantics regard as a paramount part of being.

To illustrate the importance of the imagination in the depths of depression, Coleridge's recognition of a productive and nonproductive depression must be examined. Coleridge recognizes that there is a sadness that informs creation and pleasure, and one that destroys it. Noted Romantic poet, Percy Shelley, in his *Defense of Poetry*, conceives poetry as the product of imagination, and he points to the paradox of pleasure created by poetry. It is not always happiness that yields the best poetry, that exercises fully the imagination, but rather it is that "sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good" (Shelley 35). This commentary suggests that Coleridge, Shelley, and the Romantics believed in a productive depression. In "Dejection," the author writes in strophe 6 of his past unhappy experiences that had been relieved by "this joy within me," which "dallied with distress/And all misfortunes were but as the stuff/Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness" (ll. 76-79). The joy he speaks of is the imagination, which creates something out of despair. It is this "beauty-making power" that had previously pulled him through his deepest depressions. The realization of a productive form of depression embodies the importance of internal attribution in Romantic ideas.

In contrast to the productive depression that had existed

in Coleridge's past, his current state does not allow for the imagination to illuminate the darkness of despair; this lack of imagination is the bane of existence, for it does not grant the perceiver the ability to respond emotionally to his surroundings. Coleridge refers to this state of dejection as

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.

In other words, his current state of depression is unmoving; it does not allow for creativity to take place, and it does not inspire any sort of emotion in him. This is the type of depression that removes affect and motivation from life. Perhaps Coleridge's state is best described by Simmons when he says that "he [Coleridge] is, for all purposes of life, dead" (Simmons 214). Rather than elevating him to the new levels of creativity and pleasure, described by Shelley, Coleridge's "afflictions bow me down to earth/Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth" (ll. 82-83). Clearly, the author's current state of internal affairs would cause distress for any Romantic poet: no imagination and no feeling, which often go hand in hand. That Coleridge recognizes the difference between productive and nonproductive depressive states points to the important role of the imagination in creation of one or the other.

Further, the importance of the imagination is exemplified in the inability of external experiences to revive Coleridge from his despair. Although the Romantics place a great emphasis on nature and its relation to man, it is apparent in "Dejection" that nature, for all its beauty and wonder, is nothing without internal attribution of meaning. This is to say that no matter what the external experiences are, it is the understanding of those experiences, our interpretation of them, that matters. Coleridge describes the experience of seeing the beauty of nature and feeling nothing in himself. He illustrates for the reader the tints of the sky and the scenery of the moon and stars, yet, instead of being moved by these images, he says,

“And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye” (ll. 30). Without imagination, nature offers no inspiration. Ilhwan Yoon remarks that it is unusual and disturbing to find a Romantic utterly unaffected by nature, to find that “the beautiful objects in nature do not necessarily evoke the feeling of joy” (169). Coleridge is not blind to what is around him, but rather he cannot find any comfort in them; his lack of imagination does not allow for the attainment of the pleasure dome for which he aspires in a work such as “Kubla Khan.” Without the effective use of imaginative powers, nature does not affect the perceiver in any deep and meaningful way.

Likewise, in several lines of “Dejection,” Coleridge suggests that imagination is totally independent of external experiences. The idea that the world itself offers no meaning without imagination is most strongly asserted in Coleridge’s last lines of strophe 3:

Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

Not only is Coleridge unmoved by nature’s beauty, he realizes that internal perceptions of reality create the reality, itself. Regardless of the beauty that is around him, “joy excites the interest of the soul itself, independent of the ‘presence’ of an external object” (Yoon 168). According to this statement by Ilhwan Yoon, the internal perceptions are not related to external stimulus, supporting the Romantic belief in the importance of personal attribution of meaning. Coleridge goes as far as to imply that nature is useless without man’s imagination. He finds that “in our life alone does Nature live” (ll. 48). Without the life of the mind, nature does not live; it is purely existent, but, ultimately, inanimate. Depression has robbed Coleridge of the ability to imagine, and, thus, to give life to nature. The meaning that the Romantics attribute to nature must be derived from the soul. The imagination can work independently of nature, and can give meaning to nature, but

not the other way around, illustrating its paramount importance.

On the other hand, the significance of the imagination is shown in "Dejection" through the interplay of external and internal experiences. Perhaps the imagination can work independently of the world around us, but the world around us can enhance the imagination. In contrast, nature and the outside world, cannot be meaningful independent of the imagination. Simmons examines this interplay of external and internal experiences in the example of the lute in Coleridge's "Dejection" (216). The Aeolian lute is a common symbol in Romantic poetry of man and his interaction with nature. Keeping this association of man and nature in mind, it is easy to see why Coleridge would look, in line 14, to break his depression in the beginning of the poem by looking to the moon and "squally blast" for inspiration, and, finding none, he realizes that the "poet himself is dull, and the external stimulus of the moon elicits mechanical, fanciful notions" (Simmons 216). The lute imagery makes the wind an actor upon the poet. As J.O. Hayden asserts, "the image of the Aeolian lute . . . can only point up the passivity of the poet and thus works against everything Coleridge says in the poem about perception" (134). Here, we see the necessity of outside influences on the perceptions of man. Just as the lute needs more powerful breezes to produce music, the poet needs sufficient inspiration to enlighten the imagination, which is not afforded by the moon and stars, in Coleridge's case.

After failed attempts to find inspiration outside of himself, Coleridge learns that external forces are not enough to produce music from a lute, and inspiration, in a poet. The wind can continue to blow, yet, it cannot produce music without the lute. Hayden notes that in strophe 7 of "Dejection," the wind suddenly becomes the poet, rather than external inspiration (135). This change in characterization of the wind implies that Coleridge has realized that man must be the actor in his own imagination. Panthea Reid Broughton agrees when she writes that the mind "does not respond, but rather, creates"

(243). An automatic response can be produced by external experiences, but “joy, passion, and life denominate the musician of Genius, who plays upon the strings, differentiating mind from the mechanical instrument” (Simmons 216). In other words, Simmons is suggesting that regardless of the intensity of outward experiences, the music that is produced, the reality that we perceive, is created by internal genius, or imagination. There must be an interaction between external and internal experiences, which is an idea best conceived in Coleridge’s own words: “we receive but what we give” (ll. 47).

Finally, the influence of the imagination is apparent in Coleridge’s “Dejection” in that it survives even without acknowledgement from the poet of its existence. Although Coleridge spends much time lamenting the loss of his imagination, it is active. In strophe 8 of “Dejection,” Coleridge clearly addresses and makes wishes for the “Dear Lady,” suggesting imaginative power. Panthea Reid Broughton makes this observation in her article when she says that because “he ends the poem with a prayer for the lady surely does evidence that his soul has traveled outward beyond the confines of self to challenge the separateness of an alien world” (245). To transcend the self requires imagination. The Romantics viewed poetry and imagination very highly, in part, because it increases empathy. This idea is most evident in Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry*, in which he regards that “a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pain and pleasures of his species must become his own” (14). In this aspect of imagination Coleridge does not seem to be lacking, even in the midst of his unproductive depression. Perhaps he does not even realize his capacity to empathize for the Lady, which he most assuredly does, because it takes imagination and empathy to wish that she “ever, evermore rejoice” (ll. 139). Because he can still wish for the happiness of another being, the presence of empathy is suggested, which, in turn, indicates the presence of a functioning imagination. The very fact that Coleridge is able to empathize with the lady and use his imagination illus-

trates the relevance of the internal experiences in consideration of the outside world.

Consequently, the expression of imagination and desire for imagination depicted in “Dejection: An Ode” lend themselves to the idea that the “beauty-making power” is of utmost importance in the creative lives of Romantic poets. Whereas Coleridge is not at a loss for beauty and inspiration in nature, he *is* lacking in imagination. Nothing moves him to act, nothing moves him to feel. This dejection is overwhelming to the author, and is the cause of great disconcert and pain. As the reader moves through “Dejection,” he or she experiences the torment of trying, but in vain, to enliven a dead mind. We read in Coleridge’s words the attempts to be inspired by something of the outside that would “startle this dull pain, and make it move and live” (ll. 20). In the same work, we find Coleridge’s realization that inspiration and meaning come from “passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (ll. 46). The significance of the imagination in Romantic thought and experience is constantly depicted in Coleridge’s struggle to shake off his unproductive and numb dejection. The internal experiences are, in the end, even while interacting with external experiences, what give life to the Romantic’s world. Reality is a product of imagination; “the structure of reality lies in human perception and that order is inherent in the mind of the perceiver” (Broughton 247). The importance of perception is very much in line with the Romantic ideology, yet experience must be accounted for, especially since Coleridge places so much emphasis on the lute. In this case, “nature begins to interact with the poet as co-creator . . . so that subject and object can no longer be distinguished” (Broughton 247). Nature and man are fused into one, yet it is the imagination that gives nature its vivacity. In the end, imagination cannot be constrained, even in the midst of a depressive episode, when the author shows empathy for the Lady. Through the examination of the factors contributing to the work at hand, it is found that the lack of imagination is debilitating, yet, it survives in empathy. Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” attests to the momentousness

of the imagination in the creation of our internal and external realities.

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