Coleridge and Imagination (essay 1)

Like Blake and Wordsworth, Coleridge stressed the role of imagination, and his critical essays did much to assert the idea of this faculty as the sovereign creative power. He considered two levels of imagination, which he called PRIMARY and SECONDARY IMAGINATION. In his essay titled Biographia Literaria, he expresses himself in the following terms: The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Engell has demonstrated that Coleridge's division of the imagination into the "primary" and "secondary" draws a distinction between creative acts that are unconscious and those that are intentional and deliberate. "The Primary Imagination" was for Coleridge, the "necessary imagination" as it "automatically balances and fuses the innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the mind receives through the senses." It represents man's ability to learn from nature. The over arching property of the primary imagination was that it was common to all people. The Secondary imagination, on the other hand, represents a superior faculty which could only be associated with artistic genius. It was this aspect of the imagination, one which could break down what was perceived in order to recreate by an autonomous willful act of the mind that has no analog in the natural world—which Coleridge associated with art and poetry. A key and defining attribute of the secondary imagination was a free and deliberate will; "superior voluntary control. . .co-existing with the conscious will." The secondary imagination, once activated by the will, "dissolves, dissipates in order to recreate."

The act of poetic creation is a conscious act, during which the poet 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate'; in other words, the poet's imagination dissolves and unifies the experiences stored in the poet's mind as a result of his perceptions and creates a new world, which has apparently no connections with the poet's experiences, but is, in fact, closely linked to them.

There are similarities and differences with Wordsworth. The similarity is that, to both poets, the process of poetic creation starts from personal emotional experiences which are stored in the poet's mind; this stage, which is common to all individuals, may be associated to what Coleridge defines as PRIMARY IMAGINATION. (every one can recollect these experiences, but probably will not feel the same emotional involvement and will not feel them as inspirational material for poetic composition). When these emotional experiences return to the conscious sphere, only the poet can possess the that special faculty which can turn them into poetic creation; that is IMAGINATION. However, the way imagination operates differs sensibly in the two poets: to Wordsworth, imagination transforms, modifies the recollected experience, which is therefore still visible and easy traceable in the poem he composes; to Coleridge, imagination, which he calls SECONDARY IMAGINATION, operates a sort of dissolution of various emotional experiences into a 'new whole', a new world which the poet expresses in his poem.

Coleridge and Imagination (essay 2)

Like Blake and Wordsworth, Coleridge stressed the role of imagination in poetic creation. He makes a distinction between PRIMARY IMAGINATION and SECONDARY IMAGINATION. The characteristics of PRIMARY IMAGINATION are the following:
- It can be experienced by every individual
- It is linked to perceptions
- It is an unconscious process
- It manifests itself through images which recall past relevant experiences.

The characteristics of SECONDARY IMAGINATION are the following:
- It is an echo of the primary imagination
- It is a conscious act
- It can only be experienced by art genius
- It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates the images linked to past experiences
- It creates a new whole

The Primary imagination is what every individual can experience when somewhat unconsciously previous experiences of some emotional relevance are recalled. These experiences manifest themselves to the mind in the form of images. This is only a first step in the idea of Coleridge about Imagination. At this stage, poets or art genius can rely on a supreme creative power, that is what Coleridge calls Secondary imagination. At this stage, the poet consciously operates a dissolution, a diffusion, a dissipation of the images, linked to the experiences which flash in his mind; in other words, by the conscious act of his secondary imagination, he re-adjusts, unites, re-arranges these images; the
result of this process is a ‘new world’, which the poet expresses in the form of the poem he creates. As a matter of fact, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is not about a personal experience lived by Coleridge. However, it is a tale which only apparently is detached from the personal experiences of the poet; in fact, the poetic product which Coleridge creates is the result of the work carried out by his secondary imagination, which has diffused, dissipated, dissolved images linked to real experiences in order to create a new world.

In the light of the afore mentioned reasoning, the creative process proposed by Coleridge shares quite a few similarities with what Wordsworth has suggested. Wordsworth, in his Preface, says that ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and that ‘it takes place from emotion recollected in tranquility’. As a matter of fact, this process can be well understood if we start, as a first reference, from the poem *Daffodils*, which is unanimously considered as a poem in which the poet shows in concrete terms the way poetry is generated. In the final part of this poem, Wordsworth states that the experience he has lived in touch with the daffodils returns to his mind and he experiences an emotion similar to what he had previously felt; however, when this experience is transferred into poetry, Wordsworth says in the Preface that it is transformed by the work of imagination in order to make the ordinary event he reports more attractive to the reader. Therefore, the final moment of poetic creation is a conscious act of the poet who ‘colours’ the ordinary event by the work of his imagination. The parallel between Coleridge and Wordsworth appears quite clear: They both starts from personal experience, which, at some point in their life, return to their conscious sphere in the form of images; the moment Wordsworth recollects the daffodils can be compared to the PRIMARY IMAGINATION theorized by Coleridge. At this point, both poets operates a transformation of these images linked to personal experiences; this transformation is the work of Imagination, which Coleridge calls SECONDARY IMAGINATION. In Wordsworth, Imagination at this stage slightly transform the experience, which remains quite visible in the poem, as it is clearly shown in the poem *Daffodils*; in Coleridge, the work of imagination (which he calls SECONDARY IMAGINATION) makes a much wider transformation, by unifying, dissolving, rearranging the previous experience he has recollected; the result, in this case, is a totally new product, as it is clearly visible in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. 