

**RETIREMENT AND THE ONENESS OF LIFE
IN COLERIDGE'S CONVERSATION POEMS**

DISSERTATION

Submitted by

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For

The Fulfilment of the Requirements

of

MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE

Supervised by

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1990

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to Prof. Dr. Marie Kamel for her valuable guidance and fruitful suggestions that were a great inspiration to that work.

I would also like to thank my mother who encouraged me in every way she could, and my sister, Susan, who gave me all kinds of support that a sister and a friend can give.

Thanks are also due to my seniors and colleagues who gave me words of encouragement when I needed them most.



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PREFACE

PREFACE

The group of poems chosen for this study is known by the title, "The Conversation Poems". Written by Coleridge in his youth, these poems represent a formative stage in his career as a poet. They throw light on the poet's life, relationships, politics, philosophical beliefs and ideals, and the development of his theory of poetry between the years 1795-1798. They bear the signs of the poet's development from youth to maturity. Written during this formative period, these poems bear the fruits of the poet's experimentation with the classical standards and the seeds of the new poetic standards that are known in the history of criticism by the name "romantic." It is beyond controversy that great attention has hitherto been given to Coleridge as a romantic poet, particularly to the best-known three poems: "Kubla Khan", "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel"; and that little is known about the conversation poems. It is George McLean Harper who wrote the first essay on "Coleridge's Conversation Poems" (Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), directing the readers' attention to the importance of this group of poems which he proved had the same characteristics and the same poetic structure. This occasioned other critical essays by prominent critics such as Professors M.H. Abrams, Max Schulz

and R.H. Fogle. With the help of these critical essays, the present research work throws light on these poems which, important as they are to the proper understanding of the poet's development, are still unknown to many of his readers.

The first chapter is an introduction to Coleridge's conversation poems. The main poems of the group are mentioned, together with the reasons that entitle them to the name "conversation poems". There is also mention of the origin and the development of this poetic genre. The main influences on Coleridge's conversation poems are also discussed. These poems are also compared to those of the poet's predecessors and contemporaries, mainly Cowper, Thomson and Wordsworth. They are seen against the background of the tradition of retirement poetry and the descriptive-meditative nature poetry of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. At the same time, they are seen as a new poetic genre that was initiated by Coleridge and adapted to his philosophical beliefs and to the new theory of the language of poetry.

Chapter two deals with the conversation poems as poems of retirement. Special attention is given to the study of the personal, social and political causes of the poet's retirement. Since Coleridge's

ideal of retirement included his family and friends, and since the conversation poems are addressed to friends or members of the family, Coleridge's family relations are discussed, with reference to passages from his earlier poems that throw light either on the poet's own life or on his concept of family life and friendship in general. The poet's ideal of familial retirement in nature as illustrated in the conversation poems is also seen in the light of his philosophical view of the benevolent influence of nature that ultimately leads to millennial harmony; that is the perfect harmony that marks the perfect rule of Christ on earth for a thousand years.

Closely related to this view of retirement is the concept of the unity of life which is best revealed in rural retreat. In the rural setting, the poet is able to see that God attunes nature together with the whole of the creation to form a universal harmony which is a revelation of order and unity. Man can partake in this harmony if he surrenders to the influence of nature, and consequently to the influence of God in nature. The third chapter of the thesis deals with this philosophy of oneness as revealed in the conversation poems and relates it to the poet's more mature thinking as illustrated in later poems.

As the circular structure of a poem gives the

impression of wholeness, it is suitable for poems that give expression to the philosophy of oneness. This rondo structure is one of the main characteristics of Coleridge's conversation poems. Chapter four is devoted to the study of the circular structure of these poems. The patterns of imagery, thought and emotion which help in forming this circular structure are also analysed. Reference is also made to what A. Gerard calls the heartbeat rhythm of systole and diastole as illustrated in the poems.

The text of the poems referred to in this study is that included in E.H. Coleridge's Collection of Coleridge's Poetical Works. The editor informs the readers that he has chosen the text of 1834 which was the latest edition of the Poetical Works published during the poet's lifetime and to which the poet has given great attention.¹ This version of the poems is adopted throughout this study, but reference to the earlier readings -which the editor had collected from manuscripts and contemporary transcriptions² and which he presents in the form of footnotes to the text- is made when necessary, as in chapter three where reference to the different versions of

¹ E.H. Coleridge, Preface, The Complete Poetical Works of S.T. Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. iii.

² Ibid.

"The Eolian Harp" helps in understanding the development of the poet's philosophical thought.

Among the critical works that were of great help to this study is M.H. Abrams's article, "Structure and Style of the Greater Romantic Lyric" found in the book From Sensibility to Romanticism. In this essay, Abrams points out the origins of the conversation poems, stressing their importance as a new lyric form. Kelvin Everest's book Coleridge's Secret Ministry is also among the most enlightening works referred to in this study as it helps in relating the conversation poems to the different stages in the poet's life as well as to the political atmosphere of the age.

Thus, this work is a study of the conversation poems as related to the poet's career and the development of his theory of poetry. It is also a study of these poems as autobiographical poems dealing with important events which helped in moulding the poet's character and thought; as political poems, marking the beginning and the end of his career in active politics; and as philosophical poems which deal with the concept of the oneness of life.

CHAPTER I

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The Conversation Poems:

Their Origin and General Characteristics

"New lyric forms are not as plenty as blackberries, and when one turns up, it is worth critical attention."¹

"No man works in a vacuum; the work of every artist is to some extent influenced, even determined by the work of his predecessors and contemporaries."²

In the lines quoted above, Professor M.H. Abrams considers the conversation poems a new lyric form, and he gives this new form the name of "the greater Romantic lyric".³ This new form, however, did not come out of vacuum. As Roomaaker explains, any artist is influenced by the work of others belonging to his age or to previous ages. This chapter is devoted to the study of Coleridge's conversation poems in their context in the history of poetry. This involves a study of the old and the new elements in this group of poems; that is, how they are similar to or different from the works of other poets.

¹ M.H. Abrams, "Structure and Style of the Greater Romantic Lyric," From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. F.W. Hilles and H. Bloom (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 530.

² H.R. Roomaaker, Towards a Romantic Conception of Nature: Coleridge's Poetry up to 1803 (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1984), p. 13.

³ Abrams, "Structure and Style", p. 528.

In April 1798, Coleridge wrote "The Nightingale", giving it the subtitle "A Conversation Poem".¹ In his article "Coleridge's Conversation Poems", G.M. Harper applies this term to eight poems written by Coleridge. These poems are: "The Eolian Harp" (1795), "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" (1795), "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (1797), "Frost at Midnight" (1798), "Fears in Solitude" (1798), "The Nightingale" (1798), "Dejection: An Ode" (1802) and "To William Wordsworth" (1806). These poems, Harper explains, were written to express "feelings which were occasioned by definite events." They throw light on the poet's life and on the "golden inner circle of his friends." The common elements in these poems, he adds, are elements of style as well as subject, as they are characterized by the "intimacy of address, and ease of expression" appropriate for conversation.² Later, however, many critics restricted the term "conversation poems" to the first six poems among those mentioned above.³ To the common elements in the conversation poems mentioned by Harper, Abrams adds other characteristics which apply only to

¹ The dates and places assigned to the poems are those given by E.H. Coleridge in his collection, The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), henceforward referred to as Poems.

² G.M. Harper, "Coleridge's Conversation Poems," English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), p. 147.

³ J.S. Hill, A Coleridge Companion (Macmillan, 1933), pp. 19, 242n.

these six poems. These blank-verse poems, he explains, begin with the description of the outdoor setting. There is a silent listener, present or absent. The description of the landscape evokes meditation which sometimes takes the poet to past memories or to future anticipations. At the end of the poem, the speaker achieves insight which adds meaning to the outward scene to which the poet returns at the end, where the poem "rounds upon itself."¹ "Dejection", as R.H. Fogle explains, cannot be considered as one of this group of poems because of its irregular Pindaric form.² Also "To William Wordsworth" does not fit the description as there is no particularized outdoor scene. Moreover, it does not describe a particular event in the poet's life; it is about the poet's reaction to a work of art, namely, Wordsworth's poem "The Prelude".³

Harper believes that Wordsworth was the one who initiated this new kind of poetry. He argues that before meeting Wordsworth in 1795, Coleridge used to write in the traditional manner that he later came to despise. After this meeting, he explains, Coleridge started to yield to Wordsworth's natural style.⁴

¹ Abrams, "Structure and Style", pp. 527, 528.

² R.H. Fogle, "Coleridge's Conversation Poems," Tulane Studies in English 5 (1955), p. 103. Max Schulz also excludes "Dejection" in his book The Poetic Voices of Coleridge (Detroit: Wayne Univ. Press, 1963), p. 73.

³ Poems, vol. 1, p. 403. For further differences see below ch. 3.

⁴ Harper, "Coleridge's Conversation Poems", p. 147.

Abrams disagrees with Harper on this matter. He admits that "Tintern Abbey" (1798) outdoes Coleridge's best conversation poem, "Frost at Midnight".¹ However, he believes that Coleridge was the one who "inaugurated" this genre, established its pattern, and wrote the greater number of poems that followed this pattern. "Tintern Abbey", he explains, was Wordsworth's first attempt in long descriptive-meditative verse. "An Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches" (1793) were written in heroic couplets, not in the blank verse and the conversational ease of the "greater Romantic lyric."² Coleridge, on the other hand, had already written "The Eolian Harp", "Reflections" and "This Lime-Tree Bower", establishing the pattern of the conversation poem. This entitles him to the name of the author of this genre.

Among the main characteristics of the six poems mentioned above is the description of the outdoor landscape. In "The Eolian Harp" and "Reflections", Coleridge describes his cottage at Clevedon, surrounded by Jasmin and Myrtle. In the first poem, he describes this scene in the evening (lines 3-11), and in the second, he describes the valley as it is seen at noon, in the evening and in the morning (lines 1-7). In "Reflections", the poet also describes the hills,

¹ Abrams, "Structure and Style", p. 533.

² Ibid, pp. 528-531.