ISSN 2277-3967 Vol. III Issue III, July 2014

THE ROMANTIC SELF AS TRANSMUTING AND PROGRESSING: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF S T COLERIDGE'S POETIC EXPRESSION

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Abstract

Romanticism has always prioritised the self as medium through which aesthetic and spiritual ideals can be fostered for both individual and communal fulfilment. This essay wrestles with the question of the transmuting and progressing creative self in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and 'Dejection: An Ode'. It re-evaluates certain strands of Romantic idealist criticism and Deconstruction, which are two major contesting and apparently irreconcilable critical positions in the reading and interpreting of Romantic philology. The poetics of self-progression and the creative process place the self in Coleridge's aesthetic and spiritual idealism in what I have called a constructive deferral, since none of his poetic texts demonstrates the totality of experience or the impossibility of conceptual and theoretical discourse. The aesthetic and spiritual advancement of the self delineates the self as conscious, anti-self-conscious, paradoxical, ironic and self-contradictory. These are the very phenomenological states that necessitate and enhance change and dynamism rather than portray imaginative impasse, failure and impossibility. The two poems, far from being self-enclosures or self-stasis, display an intertextual relation with regard to the self's mutation and progress towards the attainment of its pursued ideals.

Key Words: Romantic Self, Transmuting, Deconstruction, Aesthetic/Spiritual Idealism, Anti-self-consciousness

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the issue of the transmuting creative self as demonstrating a poetics of evolution in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and 'Dejection: An Ode', [1] against the background of his aesthetic and spiritual idealism and postmodern criticism, especially in the paradigmatic framework of Deconstruction. This presupposes an innovative intertextual treatment of the poems, intertextuality not conceived as involving the relation between author and precursor expounded by Harold Bloom, but as a subtle elliptical psycho-aesthetic and spiritual mixture between the poems.

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It will be important, first of all, to define certain key terms like mutating, progressing or the poetics of becoming and Deconstruction to situate the context in which the concept of Romantic self is discussed and analysed. Mutating connotes change and progressing presupposes continuity. Put together they delineate self-conscious striving towards an aesthetic or transcendental ideal. Taking self-presence and self-textualisation as distinctive markers in Romantic discourse, mutation and progress situate the self as engaged in a continuing process, which is characterised by irony, paradox, contradiction and anti-self-consciousness, regardless of the attainment of the ideal.

This definition therefore resists Anne Mellor's seminal discussion of the term becoming. [2] Mellor uses strands of Schlegelian philosophy of irony and becoming to formulate and substantiate her own notion of the term in the specific context of English Romanticism. Discussing Schlegel's notion that irony is characterised by permanent but non-progressive psychic tensions, and that understanding can be arrived at only through incomprehensibility, Mellor asserts that: "This chaos is abundantly fertile, always throwing up new forms, new creations. But insofar as these forms are static and finite, they are inevitably overwhelmed by and reabsorbed into the process of life." [3]

Following Schlegelian terms, she stresses that thesis and anti-thesis remain in constant contradiction. Becoming to her is conceived as a never-ending ontological reality, and only an aesthetic mode, she contends, can sustain universal chaos, incomprehensibility and unpredictability. For any aesthetic mode to be appropriate as Romantic irony it must be a form that simultaneously creates and decreates itself. [4] This form of creation and decreation, Mellor elaborates, makes works intrinsically antisystematic.

Mellor adopts an almost pro-deconstructnist attitude towards Coleridge. Her conviction is that, a guilt-ridden ambivalence deterred Coleridge's ironist enthusiasm; therefore she refuses his texts a treatment with regard to the philosophical and artistic implications of irony and becoming. [5]

Coleridge philosophically and artistically manifests Romantic irony, which is more than Schlegelian enthusiasm. His texts are taken largely to be expressive of a systematic construction, whereby irony and anti-self-consciousness justify a deferral of a permanent structure. His texts are partial representations of his longings and as such not enclosed and finite entities. His philosophy of self shows it as dynamic, and his psycho-aesthetic treatment of this subject provides evidence for progress rather than stasis or fixity.

The term Deconstruction is a postmodern or post-structural [6] coinage, which has broken new ground on the problems pertaining to theoretical and practical criticism in literature. It is quite a difficult and complex term to define, but there are a number of distinctive characteristics attributed to it. From the writings of its exponents like Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Hillis Miller, [7] Deconstruction is seen as a radicalised form of postmodernist or poststructuralist discourse on philosophy, linguistics and literature. Deconstruction is clearly at odds with Western idealism and logic; epistemologically, it is opposed to logocentric knowledge, and theologically, it is opposed to belief, faith, and spirituality. Yet, given that Deconstruction's basic premise is the subversion of or aversion to these, it is ironical that it is impossible to extricate itself completely from them.

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The roots of Deconstruction can be traced in the German idealist philosophy and Romanticism. It is rhetorically oriented and contemplates knowledge and meaning as representations that are unavoidably enmeshed in the heterodox and contradictory nature of language and interpretation. In other words, Deconstruction points to the ability to uncover systematic incoherence in literary texts, strongly resisting any logically concluded concept or argument. It underscores the inherent fragmentations, ironies, ambivalences and the irreconcilable contradictions of texts. Literary texts are seen to have an authority that overpowers and destabilises the construing of theoretical concepts and construction of meaning. In this vein, Deconstruction emphasises non-conceptualisation, insisting that textuality ultimately subverts the attempt to master knowledge through language, and meaning through interpretation.

It would be important to comment on the connection that Deconstruction has with Romantic idealism [8] on which most of the poetics of Romantic visionary criticism is based. Deconstruction is primarily a critique of philosophy. Its heavy presence in literary and linguistic studies has to do with strands of philosophical discourse that have been used to formulate and expound literary theory and criticism. It is in this light that Romanticism has been associated logically with Deconstruction, given that deconstructive critique implicates the complexities of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, which greatly contributes to the theoretical formulations of visionary criticism. Important constructivist Romantic concepts like self-presence, self-textualisation, intentionality, subjectivity and individuation, aesthetic and spiritual enthusiasm are all dismissed in deconstructionist discourse of Romantic texts, with the claim that Romantics were the precursors of Deconstruction.

With regard to the core of the argument, we want to assert the premise that Deconstruction's theoretical and textual discourse on Coleridge is an unfair dislocation of the philosophical, linguistic and literary context of his writings. Needless to emphasise Coleridge's involvement with German idealist philosophy. Yet Coleridge's work nonetheless shows his constructivist struggles, and these struggles should be best understood by seeing the self in his psychology as mutating and progressive amidst the complexities of irony and contradiction.

'Kubla Khan' as a Constructive Deferral

The discourse on deferral adopts a radically antithetical position to deconstructive deferral. Deconstruction addresses the issue of deferral in terms of continuous shifts in unclear meaning, stressing that all literature eludes theory and conceptualisation. Asserting that incomprehensibility, undecidability, and irreconcilable contradictions abound in texts, Deconstruction claims that no constructivist attempt on a text is plausible. With regard to constructive deferral, the question is not centred on semantic shifts, but the continual intention and process in the quest for an ideal. That is, the ideal is not deferred and texts, therefore, systematically construct the struggle towards the ideal.

Regina Hewitt has discussed 'Kubla Khan' on such deconstructive grounds, highlighting the conviction that both Kubla Khan and Coleridge exemplify poetic failure. She contends that:

> The tensions in 'Kubla Khan' may be seen as a tension between the extant themes of poetic creation, represented by the false poets, which Coleridge

> rejects and the new theory of imaginative creation that Coleridge embraces but cannot quite completely work out. [9]

Hewitt's interpretation of the incomplete nature of the poem as poetic failure signals the problem of reading it as an independent structure that must evince psycho-aesthetic totality. This problematises the poem as self-enclosure and end-product of the creative process rather than an integral part of the process, which presupposes further aesthetic production and idealistic speculation. Hewitt's statement nevertheless works in favour of the formulation of the poetics of becoming and constructive deferral since the poem unquestionably interconnects with other poems rather than remains an isolated or an enclosed entity.

Hewitt's relates with Jean-Pierre Mileur's critical assessment of Coleridge's hermeneutics of the imagination: "Coleridge's definition [of the imagination] does not appear to describe any poem that he succeeded in writing." [10] Mileur argues that Coleridge's description of the poetic imagination and ideal perfection implies something he does not necessarily claim for himself, and which is not available to any poet. Mileur falls short of understanding Romantic textuality. The fervent conviction in this essay is that no single poem of Coleridge can be interpreted phenomenologically as an independent self-contained enclosure, which should fully express his idealist philosophy of imagination. He was obviously conscious of the dangers of claiming totality of experience, which as his philosophy and aestheticism show was in continuity and always positioned in the future.

That 'Kubla Khan' is a quintessential Romantic poem, concerned with the process of creating poetry, the role of imagination and its affiliation with the mystical and spiritual, is tenable. Yet critics have strongly held opposing positions as to how this view ought to be judged. That Postmodernist discourse or more specifically Deconstruction discredits or even dismisses this ideal is very problematic, considering what the essential Romantic hermeneutics on irony and fragmentation were. From a technical perspective the poem is structurally incomplete, therefore, fragmentary, justified by the subtitle, 'A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment'. In fact, Coleridge's prefatory remarks situate the poem "rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits." This is not a statement to be taken (un)critically as an apologetic or self-subverting or self-undoing judgement of the poem. Contrary to Coleridge's stance, the poem is one of the greatest Romantic statements on the complexity of the creative process. The poem does not demonstrate a closure, but points to the inconclusive and dynamic nature of aesthetic productivity. The intriguing issue is that, the poetic merit of the text lies not only in its content, since the content points to future aesthetic creations. So the philological and philosophical implications of the poem are an apt demonstration of the Romantic poetics of becoming. As a constructive deferral, the poem is not concerned with linguistic or conceptual impasse from a deconstructionist point of view. It is not concerned with conflicting shifts in or dissolution of meaning as expounded by Jacques Derrida's notion of iterability and dissemination. [11]

Not being expressive of aesthetic totality, the poem partly textualises and defers this enthusiasm as it contains allowance for subsequent inspiration and creativity. One can see here an exemplification of Coleridge's consciousness of the Socratic irony on which Schlegel modelled the Romantic or Philosophical irony that permeates the poem. Coleridge's

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paratextual disclaimer of the poem's aesthetic intensity, negatively describing it as a fragment and psychological curiosity, can be considered as a subtle performative strategy to credit the poem's strength. Contrary to accusations of guilt and creative inability, this prefatory statement saves him from the narcissistic traits of self-praise and self-inflation.

The main question wrestles with why we posit this contention. The answer is fundamentally important, because it maps the context in which the persuasion on the poetics of becoming is endorsed and examined. It is irony that necessitates self-consciousness, anti-self-consciousness and progress, lending credence to the unacceptability of a fixed and unchanging self. 'Kubla Khan' aptly justifies this conceptualisation in terms of the self-constructive process that characterises its inspiration and contents. It, therefore, is a positive aesthetic and spiritual impasse.

From a hermeneutic and phenomenological viewpoint this fragmentary and open-ended nature of the poem, strongly connected with irony and paradox, presupposes a complexity and subtlety of argument that goes beyond the rhetorical figures or literary devices in a deconstructionist perspective. An enormous energy infuses the poem, leading to what can be described as an ecstatic quality, not necessarily as an aroused experience by the critical reader, but detected from the poem and, therefore, a justification of Coleridge's self-textualisation. This means that natural and sublime imagery permeates the poem, and its overall contents relate to some of the pre- and post-conceptualisations Coleridge expounded on with regard to the creative and redemptive power of imagination.

For a better analysis of this poem as concerns the poetics of change and progress, we propose radical antithetical critical readings from Romantic visionary criticism and Deconstruction. These will then provide an antithetical or contrastive context for the new line of argument proposed. Two insightful partitioning models come in handy when discussing the surface and deep structures of the poem. Rolf Breuer, [12] an idealist critic, has noted in "Coleridge's Concept of Imagination - With an Interpretation of 'Kubla Khan'" (1980), that both the first and second stanzas of the poem (L. 1 - 11 and 12 - 36) can form a substratum for the poem's structural analysis since they thematically belong together. The third stanza constitutes the second part. According to Breuer's scheme, part one describes the landscape, the first stanza containing the more static description of the garden and the second stanza being the more dynamic description of the river, while part two consists of the accompanying visions and reflections of the lyrical I. Breuer calls these two parts level and metalevel, stressing that they show the poem as having an extremely incomplete structural design, necessitating a kind of synthesis in a Hegelian sense. [13]

The second structuring model is proposed by the Deconstructionist David Hogsette. [14] In "Eclipsed by the Pleasure Dome: Poetic Failure in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'" (1997), he sees the poem as presenting scholars with chronic critical problems, pointing out that 'Kubla Khan's textual history remains unclear, [15] its prefatory explanation suspicious, and the poem itself generally cloudy in meaning. In analysing the subtitle and preface as metalinguistic keys to the poem's interpretative and performative context, Hogsette poses the thesis that the poem will be discovered to have nothing to do with imaginative redemption or Romantic irony. On the contrary, he underscores, 'Kubla Khan' offers a series of false poetic

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figures, ultimately demonstrating that the ideal (pro)creative redemptive imagination lies beyond the grasp of the mortal poet, remaining an external and unobtainable Other. [16]

Hogsette's concern with the creative realm, places emphasis on the figure of Khan, the sacred river Alph, and the fountain which to him prefigure and/or illustrate Coleridge's phenomenological model of fancy, the primary imagination and the secondary imagination. Hogsette argues that Khan produces an enchanting paradise, a pleasure dome which is clearly an Edenic realm infused with (masculine) virility ('walls and towers') and seething with sensuality (blossoming incense-bearing trees and soft hills enfolding spots of greenery) and sexual potency ('fertile ground' through which runs 'sinuous rills'). This, he stresses from his deconstructionist poetics, has mislead readers into thinking that the core content of the poem deals with the creative imagination and aesthetic enthusiasm. The primary and secondary imagination remains sterile and eternally illusive. This is a typical critical situation which M. H. Abrams' strong anti-Deconstruction stance has referred to as construing and deconstructing. [17] Hogsette can deconstruct Coleridge's Romantic idealism only through constructing and affirming it.

In what turns out to be a criticism of scepticism Hogsette asserts the poem's failure, refusing it the concept of Romantic irony and arguing that the imaginative and visionary potential that Coleridge seeks is an unobtainable Other from the poet's self. [18] Thus the text is seen from the second reading strategy proposed in Derridean Deconstruction as non-communicative of any move towards an ideal, since it is self-deconstructive in its metaphysics of presence.

With regard to the question of the Hegelian dialectic that Breuer proposes above, he is of the conviction that it is the result of what he calls the paradoxical approach that best suits the interpretative context of the poem. His remarks as to whether the poem attains a deep structural unity are worth critically examining, because they throw light on the thrust of our argument. It must have occurred to Coleridge, Breuer holds, that the fragmentary nature of his abandoned 'Kubla Khan' would be the ideal symbol of its perfection. He further argues that the poem has two distinctive features:

On the surface a fragment, in its deep structure complete. In this contradiction, the poem is a symbol of the split of life into thinking and being. Its dialogic construction, its fragmentary nature, the lack of a keystone, all suggest the spirit from which it arose - the dialectical spirit of the interaction between part and whole. [19]

It is obvious that Breuer adopts the Hegelian position he contends and advances, seeing the poem, therefore, as a unified totality. In this context, the text is interpreted as a permanent closure without any further possibility of opening. This cannot be convincing, because the poem's intertextual relations show that it strongly resist Hegel's idealist dialectics. Reuven Tsur's critical conclusion in *The Road to 'Kubla Khan:' A Cognitive Approach* (1987) also values the poem on similar lines to Breuer. He advances the view that the poem "deals with the irruption of the irrational and of chaos into our rational and ordered world, with a force that is unprecedented in lyric poetry". [20] This kind of interpretation is very characteristic of visionary critics who see most poems as finished entities of self-portrayal or complete aesthetic fulfilment. [21] Breuer's and Tsur's interpretative stance is too idealistic, leaving the impression of complete transcendence. Such idealist readings, which see texts as

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delineating a totality of self, greatly problematise visionary criticism and necessitate re-evaluation. The question of synthesis from a Hegelian perspective that Breuer proposes is rather puzzling and even enigmatic if we assert that Coleridge subsequently wrote several other poems and prose works, demonstrating his usual paradoxical and antithetical thinking or anti-self-consciousness. No text can demonstrate the totality of experience or knowledge as expounded by Hegel's transcendental dialectics.

The radical or extremist position advanced on deconstructive grounds only complicates a comprehensive reading and interpretation of Romantic aesthetics and spirituality. Even if 'Kubla Khan' demonstrates the complexity of critical insight in reading and interpretative processes, enacting deconstructive gestures, it sounds misapprehending to argue that it intentionally explicates Deconstruction or that Coleridge is a proto-Deconstructionist or a precursor of Deconstruction as Kathleen Wheeler and Joseph Swann assert respectively. [22]

To summarise the argument, while Romantic visionary criticism has often uncritically treated the poem as a quintessential Romantic poem, Deconstruction's extremist position accepts this view only to demonstrate that it is an exemplary piece that delineates the poetics of Deconstruction and is therefore radically subversive to its premised idealism. We therefore, though still adopting a visionary stance, pursue a plausible middle path in the debate, the poetics of becoming.

'Kubla Khan' exemplifies the antithetical or polarised thinking that characterises Coleridge's notion of the imagination, and, therefore, throws light on the question of becoming - the constant self-transforming process, characteristic of irony, paradox and logical and constructive self-contradiction, that possibly leads to the attainment of aesthetic and/spiritual ideals. Breuer's paradoxical approach could be justifiable as long as the poem is not seen as structurally unified but open-ended. The poem's open-ending justifies the concept of process, therefore, becoming. It is not a demonstration of the limitations of the imagination; it is an expression of the fullness of imaginative experience however momentary or brief. 'Kubla Khan' is an instance of Coleridge's anti-self-consciousness. That is, he is aware not only of imaginative bliss but also of the immense challenges posed to it.

The first two stanzas show Coleridge's exploration of his creative and artistic potential. The sacred river (depicting a continuing and transforming life process), the bright gardens with sinuous rills (delineating fertility), the measureless caverns, the sunless sea, the lifeless sea (suggesting conscious and unconscious processes), the fertile ground, the ceaseless turmoil seething, the pleasure dome, the fountain and caves (depicting a paradisal realm), and the prophesying of war by ancestral voices, all associate with and capture Coleridge's all-embracing conception of life. They mark both the signs of chaos, incomprehensibility, but at the same time, order, possibility in transformation and transcendence to spirituality.

Stanza One places emphasis on Kubla Khan and gives the impression that the poet is merely recounting what he seems not to be part of. But, as we will realise, the subject matter of the poem is not the historical figure of Kubla Khan, but the poetic personae himself, engaged in a self-reflexive and self-investigative activity, the result being the written poem and the possibility of subsequently composing others.

The last stanza as famous as it is needs citing for convenience sake:

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> A damsel with a dulcimer In a vision once I saw: It was an Abyssinian maid, And on her dulcimer she played, Singing of Mount Abora. Could I revive within me Her symphony and song, To such a deep delight t'would win me, That with music loud and long, I would build that dome in air, That sunny dome! those caves of ice! And all who heard should see them there, And all should cry, Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair! Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread, For he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise (L. 37 – 54)

This last stanza points to the question of self-referentiality, which necessitates our understanding of change-progress as an intrinsic quality in Coleridge's poetics. Coleridge's sudden change of emphasis from Kubla Khan to the personal pronouns "I" and "me" shows the intensity of his self-involvement in the creative process. This shift of emphasis validates his self-consciousness of imaginative energy that is deferred, but not at all pointed towards a lost ideal. Systematically, we have, "In a vision once I saw: .../Could I revive within me .../ I would build that dome in the air." "Vision" and Mount Abora represent the ideal that is sought for, and "revive within me" suggests a potential that he already possesses. The reawakening or reactivation of his aesthetic and spiritual potentials will place him in a like manner as Kubla Khan not only to create more poems but also to affirm these potentials for subsequent use. So we can conveniently talk of a deferral of creative inspiration and aesthetic enthusiasm and not of imaginative paucity. The seeming loss of imaginative strength is ironically a resolve to continue in the direction of aesthetic and spiritual achievement. 'Kubla Khan' is certainly not the last and greatest poem that Coleridge composed. It is better to describe it as a transitory poem.

Coleridge can hardly be said to be lamenting imaginative failure in the above lines. On the contrary, he is grappling with desire for further inspiration and imaginative exuberance. Denying him the ideal of becoming and the possibility of transcendence and eventual paradisal communion may sound misjudging and unfair. Seeing the poem as an expression of a psychically distorted personality obviously signals the wrong inspiration and intention behind the poem's composition. Refusing the poem any theoretical and conceptual bases only wrongly helps in distancing it from its aesthetic, linguistic and philosophical context. Using Breuer's partitioning model, the two parts of the poem undoubtedly suggest a missing/absent synthesising passage, justifying the open-endedness and, therefore, providing grounds for self-questioning, self-seeking for a final principle, a self-quest for certitude in the ongoing processes in experience. The poem is paradoxical because it succeeds when it seems to fail, because it is simultaneously itself and its mirror image. It marks a harvest and at the same time, provides fertility for further growth and fruition.

'Dejection: An Ode': Constructive Anti-self-consciousness

This poem, composed several years after 'Kubla Khan', furthers and advances the preceding discussion on 'Kubla Khan', highlighting once more the question of aesthetic intertextuality and the dynamics of constructive deferral. It underscores the issue of the creative self amidst

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antithetical psycho-aesthetic processes. The assertion that this poem is one of, if not the last great poem Coleridge composed, is a misconstrued apprehension of the poet's creative career. Anne Mellor's discussion of this poem stresses her conviction that the polarity of self does not move to reconciliation, but to an intensified awareness of the distance between contradictory human conditions. Therefore, Coleridge can only create images of separation, alienation, self-destruction and pain. [23] The critical position that Brian Wilkie, in a like manner, asserts with regard to disunity in Coleridge's poetics, is highly illogical and not convincing. He attributes no visionary potentials to Coleridge. Wilkie's contention that there is no such thing as reconciliation between childhood and adulthood but contradictory intricate overlays or super-impositions, is a curious dismissal of the question of Romantic self-questing, which Coleridge's poem evinces. [24]

'Dejection: An Ode' is a revised edition of the epistolary poem 'Dejection: A Letter.' Coleridge wrote this letter in connection with his overwhelming passion for Sara Hutchinson and did not intend to publish it, but he revised it later into a polished poem with the intention of publication. In this version Coleridge demonstrates a significant change of emphasis. He is more personal and self-referential.

'Dejection: An Ode' has been paralleled with 'Frost at Midnight' as poetic expressions of Coleridge's recuperative attempts to restore unity in his split self. It should be stressed that the centrality of the poem in the present argument does not lie on the psychological reliance on an Other but on the impacting context of the poet's self-investigation and self-mirroring. This implies that the allusion to an Other is not part of the psycho-dynamics of transference or projection, since it does not deter the poet's self-centred imaginative attitude.

Coleridge's speaker laments the loss of imaginative potential, encapsulated in his expression of aesthetic and spiritual deprivation. This connects with his childhood yearnings and visionary gleam in nature rather than with the loss of or the impossibility of imaginative regeneration. Coleridge's paradoxical presentation of this state of despair and agony clearly represents his antithetical thinking, which connects with the phases of his psychological development since childhood:

> 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 – O Lady! In this wan and heartless mood, To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo'd, All this long eve, so balmy and serene, Have I been gazing on the western sky, And its peculiar tint of yellow green: And still I gaze – and with how blank an eye! And these thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars; Those stars, that glide behind them or between, Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen: Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue; I see them all so excellently fair, I see, not feel, how beautiful they are! (L. 21 – 38)

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This excerpt expresses a strong grain of Coleridgean paradox and anti-self-consciousness. Coleridge characteristically uses aesthetic potential to talk about its very failure. In fact, this is where the strength of the poem interestingly lies; the psycho-aesthetic ability to express the inability to express the same potential, and as we shall see, the deferring of this ability to subsequent aesthetic exploration.

In the third stanza, Coleridge highlights this plight:

> My genial spirits fail; And what can these avail To lift the smothering weight from far off my breast? It were a vain endeavour, Though should I 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. (L. 39 – 46)

Coleridge's expression of failure does not signal an incurable degenerate self, for his speaker is conscious of the fact that remedial measures lie not elsewhere but within his self. This means that the regenerative force is not dead even if it appears degenerate. It can still be revived, as was expressed in 'Kubla Khan'. The interesting question is why there exists this consciousness of the force from within? The dynamics of psychological retrospection and introspection best answers the question. The developing self is one, and the storehouse of memory can be activated through imaginative potential. So self-struggle cannot be cut off from the history of the self's past. The self relies on its past for its (re) construction. So even if Coleridge portrays a psychologically embattled life, it also positively depicts psycho-aesthetic therapy through self-mirroring and self-textualising.

The other central stanzas of the poem with relation to our discussion are the sixth and eighth stanzas. In the sixth stanza Coleridge's speaker takes the reader down memory lane:

> There was a time when, though 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:
> For hope grew round me, like the twining vine, And fruit and foliage, not my own, seemed mine. But now afflictions bow me down to earth: Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;But oh!
> Each visitationSuspends what nature gave me at birth, My shaping spirit of Imagination. (L. 76 – 86)

These lines echo the failure of 'genial spirits' inscribed in the third stanza. Two important words capture our attention: failure and suspension. These words do not expressly state but imply that there is still possibility of regeneration rather than definite aesthetic, psychological and spiritual stasis. The 'shaping of Imagination' that nature gave the speaker at birth connects the present phase of his life to that of his childhood and youth, and points to the fact that he is not resigned to despair and frustration. Even if he expresses uncertainty, he is not destitute or entirely robbed of his visionary potentials.

William Wordsworth's philosophy in 'Ode: Intimation of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood' is important here, given that it was influential on Coleridge:

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> And when Our trance had left us, oft have we, by aid Of the impression which it left behind, Looked inward on ourselves, and learned, perhaps, Something of what we are. Nor in those hours Did we destroy
> The original impression of delight, But by such high retrospect it was recalled
> To yet a second and a second life. While in this excitation of the mind
> A vivid pulse of sentiment and thought Beat palpably within us, all shades
> Of consciousness were ours. [25]

Wordsworth clearly sees the self as progressively transforming and not self-deconstructing, or progressively regressing and deteriorating.

Through retrospection and introspection the history of the self does not designate two selves, but the same self that must undergo changes, and not without overwhelming difficulty and complexity. Arguing that Coleridge's speaker seeks to be a child again or be reborn, will sound too simplistic and naïve. The question of a second life, which Wordsworth mentions, is to be understood as a major phase in the self's developmental history. This necessitates a more philosophical re-adaptation of past visionary gleam into the complex realities of the present for continuity. The past provides a psychological context, which generates and assures self-continuity. In 'Dejection: An Ode' this hope for regenerative growth is captured in the last stanza, "May this storm be but a mountain-birth." This has a resonance with the poetics of becoming, discussed in the previous section with reference to 'Kubla Khan', which explains the paradox of the limitations of creative and visionary enthusiasm and the possibility of renewed and more complex imaginative and aesthetic and spiritual strength. Associating this poem with paradoxical or antithetical thinking is justifiable, given that Coleridge laments a lost ideal but which in the very act of the creative process is averted, resulting to a poem of great and canonical significance.

The poem, we reiterate, is a great instance of aesthetic and spiritual possibility and continuity. One can say that it is through the act of envisioning that one understands the greatness of human consciousness. Regeneration here connects with the thread of childhood and points to the imaginative reworking of memory for the enhancement and engendering of self - understanding, harmony and redemption. So the poem is far from what the romantic visionary critic M. H Abrams styles as Coleridge's despairing farewell to health, happiness, and poetic creativity. It continues to resist the arguments of Anne Mellor and Brian Wilkie.

The poet's sense of remorse and his supposed awareness of poetic and imaginative inability are only a firm statement of the possibility of resolution and restoration, a reaffirmation of self-reflective and corrective will. The poems, therefore, become great utterances of the paradox and irony in the Romantic mind. The placing of the poems, especially 'Dejection: An Ode', as part of canonical creative achievement cannot evade the fact that they are great poems whose subject matter curiously is about the inability to write good poetry because of reasons already stated.

Far from being instances of self-disillusion, self-disability, self-deconstruction, they are hermeneutically rooted expressions of self-confrontation, self-assurance and continuity towards a desired goal. To put it alternatively, the self-textualising aspect of poetry, therefore,

far from being an ideal or a finite portrayal of the self, is a partial but constant self-seeking and questing for a certain ideal, in this case the life-long search for fusion with the One.

The irony, fragmentation and apparent contradiction inherent in Coleridge's works and life, place them as unfinished instances of self-portrayal and self-textualising processes, therefore justifying the hermeneutic and phenomenological interpretation that the paradoxical and antithetical understanding of the self does not delineate it as a fixed entity, but unfolding in the process of becoming which is not the ultimate reality in itself, but the necessary medium through which the greater reality of the One, I AM or Logos is attained.

We do not need to emphasise that Coleridge lived for thirty-two more years after the composition of 'Dejection: An Ode'. And during this period, he showed proof that the storm could always give room for further aesthetic creativity and spiritual reassurance. Judging Coleridge's greatness only from his poetic productivity is an incomplete view of his entire aesthetic and philosophical career. The writing of *Biographia Literaria* (1817) was obviously not an escape from poetic failure to philosophical speculation. He was still concerned with poetic composition. Besides, later poems like 'Youth and Age' (1823), 'The Pang More Sharp than All. An Allegory' (1825), and 'Phantom or Fact' (1830) share similar concerns with 'Dejection: An Ode'. These poems strongly delineate aesthetic and thematic intertextuality with 'Kubla Khan', and evince the argument that the dynamics of transmuting and progressing best explains Coleridge's transforming creative self.

Notes

1. Coleridge, S. T. *Complete Poetical Works: Poems*. Vol. I. ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), 'Kubla Khan' (295 - 298) and 'Dejection: An Ode' (362 - 368).

2. Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). See particularly "The Paradigm of Romantic Irony" 1 - 30. Subsequent references will be *English Romantic Irony*.

3. *English Romantic Irony*, 4.

4. *English Romantic Irony*, 5.

5. "Guilt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge", *English Romantic Irony*, 137 - 164. This section will be closely referred to in the discussion of both poems.

6. There are a number of definitions or more appropriately, characteristics of Poststructuralist and Postmodernism, which clearly demonstrate the dichotomy, especially in the form of Deconstruction that exists between Deconstruction and Romanticism. For further reading see, *Approaching Postmodernism*. (Ed.) Dome Okemah and Hans Bretons, (1986), particularly Helmut Lethe's "Postmodernism and Some Paradoxes of Serialization". 239 - 254. and Marci Calmness's "Naming and Difference: Reflections on "Modernism versus Postmodernism" in Literature', 255 - 270. Others include. Brian Michael, *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992). Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism* (2002), particularly Chapter One, "Creatures of Difference" 1 - 22, Chapter Two, "Difference and Culture" 23 - 47, and Chapter Four "Difference or Truth?" 69 - 88, Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism* (2002),

particularly Chapter One "The Rise of Postmodernism", 1 - 12, and Chapter Two. "New Ways of Seeing the World", 13 - 43, Peter Zima. *Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (2002), particularly "Epilogue: Deconstruction Between Modernity and PostModernity", 200 - 206, and finally *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments Literature, Theory, and Culture*. (Ed.) Klaus Stierstorfer (2003). In it we find important essays like Philip Tew's "A New Sense of Reality? A New Sense of the Text? Exploring Meta-Realism and the Literary-Critical Field", 29 - 49, Bernd Klähn's "The threefold Way: About the Heuristics and Paradigmatics of (Post) Modernist Culture and Literature", 77 - 89, and Ihab Hassan's "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust", 199 - 212.

7. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1974), *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge. 1978), and *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). For Paul de Man see *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and for Joseph Hillis Miller "On the Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism", *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*. (Ed.) Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 96 - 126. Other readings on the poetics of Deconstruction can be consulted in the following sources: Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982). Christopher Norris. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1982), Gerald I. Bruns, "Structuralism. Deconstruction and Hermeneutics" (1984). Danny J. Anderson, "Deconstruction: Critical Strategy/Strategie Criticism" (1989). Kenneth Kierans, "Beyond Deconstruction" (1997), and Peter Zima. *Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (2002). These are all works that encompass the writings and views of the main contributors to deconstructionist thought and therefore offer a comprehensive reading on the subject.

8. Romantic idealism here is subject to critical evaluation, and will largely be seen as an expression and desire to sustain an aesthetic and/or spiritual ideal. In fact, the poetic of becoming places idealism not as a Romantic claim to the fullness of imaginative experience, but as the enthusiasm, which is embedded in the will and capacity to reach fulfilment.

9. Regina Hewitt, "False Poets in 'Kubla Khan'" *English Language Notes*. 26. 2. (1988), 54.

10. Jean Pierre Mileur. "Deconstruction as Imagination and Method", *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today*, (Ed.) Christine Gallant (New York: AMS Press. 1989), 74

11. See John R. Searle "Reiterating the Difference: A Reply to Derrida" *GLYPH*, I (1977), 202. Reacting against Derrida's claims that iterability (continuous repetitions in speech or written acts) demonstrates the ambivalence of linguistic repetition, dissolving the identity of the sign - dissolving the semantic coherence of discourse - dissolving the metaphysical presence of meaning, Searle posits the exact opposite view, reasserting his conviction that iterability is vitally important in syntactic and semantic discourse, especially where the identity of the sign depends on the context of its use. This brings in the complexity of intentionality in language, with Searle underscoring the point that the diverse characteristics of intentionality that we observe in speech acts presuppose an iterability that not only concerns the one type that we have analysed, namely the repetition of one and the same word in different contexts, but also the iterability of application of syntactic rules. For further

reading see Searle's seminal work. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

12. Rolf Breuer, "Coleridge's Concept of Imagination With an interpretation of 'Kubla Klan'", *Romanticism, Modernism. Postmodernism*, (Ed.) Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980). Later references will be to "Coleridge's Concept of Imagination".

13. "Coleridge's Concept of Imagination", 61 - 62.

14. David Hogsette. "Eclipsed by the Pleasure Dome: Poetic in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan", *Romanticism on the Net*. 5 (1997).

15. Robert L. Fleissner's recent work *Sources, Meaning and Influences of Kubla Khan: Xanadu Re-routed. A study in the Ways of Romantic Variety* (2000), takes a further step from John Livingston Lowe's classic *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927), to solve the mysteries surrounding the possible sources of the textual history of the poem. Elizabeth Schneider's *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (1970), provides an interesting psycho-medical approach to the poem's sources. See particularly Part III, "The Echoes" 110 - 152.

16. Other studies that relate to Hogsette's theoretical and practical views on this poem include Kathleen Wheeler "Coleridge and Modern Critical Theory", *Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination Today*, (Ed.) Christine Gallant, (New York: AMS Press, 1989). John Beer. "Frangmentations and Ironies", *Questioning Romanticism*, (Ed.) John Beer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1995), and Joseph Swann, "Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge: The Romantics as Deconstructionists", *Romantic Visions and Revisions of a New World*, (Ed.) Michael Gessenmeier et al. (Essen: Blaue Eule, 1995). They all discuss Derridean or de Manian deconstructionist poetics with regard to the poem's preface, subtitle and core content.

17. M. H. Abrams' "Construing and Deconstructing", *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, (Eds.) Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Abrams reiterates his anti-deconstructive position in "The Deconstructive Angel", *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, (Ed.) David Lodge. (London: Longman, 1988).

18. Hogsette's arguments bring to mind Anne Mellor and the renowned Romantic critic Thomas McFarland, who in previous criticism have shared related concerns with the question of imaginative achievement. In her discussion of 'Kubla Khan' in *English Romantic Irony* (1980), 155 - 157, Mellor holds that the poem offers hermeneutic readings that show the imagination as unifying principle, but the very unity is undermined by the disruptive forces of self-doubt, mortality, and rationality seen most clearly in the melancholy and poetic longing in the final stanza. Coleridge de-creates whatever he wants to create. This use of the subjunctive mode signals a contradiction and certainly poetical uncertainly - his calling the poem a fragment and psychological curiosity is a measure of guiltily protecting himself against charges of blasphemy. To Mellor, Coleridge leaves the antithetical positions unreconciled, the result being an ironic and unresolved duality characteristic of Romantic irony. We need not overemphasise our critique on Mellor's position, which does not provide any further clues to understanding the philosophical implications of her stance that becoming

is the ultimate reality. McFarland, in his assessment, recognises the issue of fragmentation. *In Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge and Modalities of Fragmentation* (1981) he terms fragmentation "diasparaction" (4), arguing that fragmentation is not an accidental component in Romanticism, but a constitutive part of its core contents. Chapter Five of his work, "A Complex Dialogue: Coleridge's Doctrine of Polarity and its European Contexts", grapples with McFarland's intimation that Coleridge always placed his system in the future, given the ironic and fragmentary nature of his letters, notebooks, poems, lectures, talks and prose works. But he warns that oppositional thinking does not imply a transcendent resolution (339). With specific regard to 'Kubla Khan', he inclines to a psychological reading, positing the premise that Coleridge was an emotionally unstable poet who undermined and disclaimed his poem by writing the preface so as to avoid the psychological pain of negative criticism (104 - 36, 225). So if the poem makes any statement or has any interpretative value about Coleridge, it is that it is a veiled expression of his disturbed, guilt-ridden and neurotic life.

19. "Coleridge's Concept of Imagination", 64.

20. Reuven Tsur, *The Road to 'Kubla Khan': A Cognitive Approach* (Jerusalem: Israel Science Publishers. (1987). 95.

21. See David Perkins, "The Imaginative Vision of 'Kubla Klan': On Coleridge's Introductory Note, *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adam's Dream*, (Eds.) J. Robert Barth and John L. Mahoney (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 97 - 108. Perkins discusses the diversity of theoretical and practical views on the poem. Other readings of the poem which examine it concerning Romantic articulations of creativity and spirituality without critically assessing such concepts include Fred Milne, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': A metaphor for the Creative Process", *South Atlantic Review*, 51. 4 (1986), Peter Huhn, "Outwitting Self-consciousness: Self-Reference and Paradox in Three Romantic Poems", *English Studies*, 72. 3 (1991) and M. W. Rowe. "'Kubla Khan' and the Structure of the Psyche", *English*, 40. 167 (1991, and Milne's concept of the creative process sees the poem as a unified aesthetic production. These readings do not account for the poem's intertextuality with other Coleridge poems wrote. Huhn, on his part, talks of a structural unity born of a reconciliation of tension between creative genius and imaginative failure.

22. Kathleen Wheeler, "Coleridge and Modern Critical Theory", 83 - 85, and Joseph Swann, "Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge: the Romantics as Deconstructionists", 81.

23. *English Romantic Irony*, pp. 162 - 163. Coleridge is interpreted as a self-decreating poet. Kathleen Wheeler also refers to this poem as providing grounds for deconstructive reading. Charles Rzepka's *The self as Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). 5, 20, centres on "visionary solipsism". Rzepka asserts that while poets like Keats and Wordsworth succeeded in achieving a mature sense of self-certainly. Coleridge failed to do so.

24. "The Romantic Ideal of Unity", 33.

25. *The Norton anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition. Vol II, ed. M. H. Abrams et al (New York & London: Norton. 2000) 287 - 292.

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