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A Study of the Concept of Love in Coleridge’s Poetry

The association between love and hope is much stressed in the Romantic period. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 lit up the minds of the Romantic poets and philosophers with its fervent appeals for freedom and love that annihilates all inequalities. The French Revolution was regarded as the rebirth of humankind. In Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, the glory and hopes in relation to the revolution are vividly depicted: “France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again” (qtd. in Abrams, *Correspondent* 248). The French Revolution influenced the literati of the time tremendously. In 1794, Coleridge was inspired to participate in a project that he named as “Pantisocracy,” which aimed at establishing an ideal community in America. A group of young people were involved in Pantisocracy, including Robert Southey, the friend whose “firmness” in the character won his admiration (Bate 15-16). Coleridge, who was twenty-one years old then, was enthusiastic about devoting his revolutionary passion to the carrying out of Pantisocracy. W. Jackson Bate points out, the young Coleridge believed that the plan of Pantisocracy could gain him “a completely new life” (16) and realize “some of his highest moral ideals” (16). Due to the reasons above, Coleridge became a fervent advocate of Pantisocracy, “speaking about it to everyone he met” (Bate 16).[[1]](#endnote-1)

To Romantic poets, France was the pioneer of the world. Romantic poets embraced the ideals of freedom and fraternity of the revolution and hence took a sympathetic attitude towards the wars that France waged against the royal regimes in Europe. In the eyes of many poets of the era, the wars were once regarded as the “necessary evil,” namely, the means of protecting the newly born republic from the hindrance of the old European regimes. While reiterating his stand on the peace of Europe, Coleridge “understood the unwillingness of the French to opt for a weak ruler” (Beer, *Coleridge and the Play of Mind* 103). He urged the public to accept Napoleon’s treaty of peace so that the usurper would “confirm his power, and that by this and his subsequent moderation it may continue, till the revival of commerce and manufactures in France calls into active power the spirit of property, and consequently brings with it a Government modified accordingly” (qtd. in Beer, *Coleridge and the Play of Mind* 103).

Sympathy constitutes a part of the complex psychology that Romantic poets harbored for the French Revolution. To Romantic poets, the French Revolution was the crux of ambiguities that they faced in forming the opinions of the revolution. In the poets’ minds, the success of the French Revolution in the early phase made a sharp contrast to the impotence of Britain in failing to catch up the revolutionary trends; yet, the decay of the revolution could not relieve the poets of their uneasiness. As the French Revolution turned out to be the cause of the military conflicts, it challenged the poets’ love for freedom, equality and fraternity, for it was impossible for them to forsake the love for their motherland, yet Britain was hostile towards France. The contradictions mark the tensions between the fraternal love and the love for the motherland. On the one hand, the poets’ sympathy with the French Revolution sustains the values they appreciated the most such as fraternal love and freedom. On the other hand, to Romantic poets, it was the love for their motherland, rather than fraternal love, that offered them a sense of belonging. The interplay of different kinds of love explains why the poets’ feelings towards the French Revolution were complicated.

With the fall of the French Revolution, the hopes and dilemmas came to an end. The wars went out of control and the promises of the French Revolution in establishing a new order of freedom and fraternity were left unfulfilled. The fall of the French Revolution had a tremendous impact upon the poets of the Romantic era. It was not merely about the end of the Romantic poets’ love-hate relationship with France but also about a broken dream and shattered hopes. As Wordsworth revealed in *The Prelude*, the fall of the revolution made him feel the “utter loss of hope itself / And things to hope for” (qtd. in Abrams, Correspondent 63). Coleridge lamented the unrealized dream in the French Revolution. In his “France: An Ode,” freedom is like a dream; its voice is heard but it becomes beyond reach: “Forgive me, Freedom! O forgive those dreams! / I hear thy voice, I hear thy loud lament, / From bleak Helvetia’s icy caverns sent—” (64-66).

To the dismay of the Romantics, the failure of the French Revolution indicates that it is unfeasible to gain their hopes via political actions. M. H. Abrams notes, “The great Romantic poems were written not in the mood of revolutionary exaltation but in the later mood of revolutionary disillusionment or despair” (*Correspondent* 62). Nevertheless, it is misleading to think that it is dejection that comprises the tenor of the Romantic poetry. The essence of the poetry in the Romantic era does not lie in the self-confession of hopelessness or dejection, but in how the poets regain hope via reconstructing their relationships with nature as well as other people. On realizing that it was unfeasible to obtain everlasting hopes from the French Revolution, the Romantics contemplated on hope in more reflective moods. The veering was inextricably bound up with the humanistic concern of the age. In the Romantic period, the wellbeing of human beings was a cardinal issue. It was believed that human beings lost the wellbeing that they used to have and the alienation from varied aspects such as self-alienation, alienation from nature and others accounts for their suffering (Abrams, *Natural* 145). To restore their wellbeing, it requires reintegration, or more precisely, the restoration of the unity in different aspects (Abrams, *Natural* 145). The unity is represented by the harmonious relationships between the self[[2]](#endnote-2) and others and can be seen in the Romantic poetry of love. Abrams claims that “all the major Romantics are primarily poets of love” (*Natural* 294-95). This is basically true. In the Romantic poetry, various kinds of love are depicted, and they are often illustrated by the idea of union. For example, the love for nature implies the union of the self and nature. In Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence,” such union is suggested by synchronizing the ebb and flow of the moods with the phenomena in nature. The union creates hopes by helping the self overcome dejection. Regaining hopes after the moments of dejection was one of the recurrent themes in the Romantic poetry. The speaker in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” trusts the benign power of the union of the self and nature and wishes to compose the notes of hope with the west wind.

In Wordsworth’s and Shelley’s poetry, hopes are regained when the self trust and establish sympathetic relationships with the outer world. The relationships are associated with the Romantic love. To the poets of the Romantic period, love represents a unifying power. It connects the self with others and is counter to the idea of alienation for the latter bespeaks evil, which does harm to the wellbeing of human beings (Abrams, *Natural* 294). Shelley defines love as “the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man but with everything which exists” (qtd. in Abrams, *Natural* 294). How Shelley views of love responds to Neoplatonic philosophy of love as “the integrative force” whereas self-love is “the separative force” (Abrams, *Natural* 295).

For the Romantic conception of love is influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, self-love, the idea that contrasts to love in the Neoplatonic tradition, must not be ignored in discussing the Romantic poetry. As what is demonstrated in the foregoing paragraph, self-love is connected to separation, in other words, alienation. It prevents the self from being united with nature as well as other people. As William Blake propagates that “Man liveth not by Self alone,” but “by Brotherhood & Universal Love” (qtd. in Abrams, *Natural* 295). Self-love, or the selfish love, is not welcomed. Coleridge’s famous allegorical narrative, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is about how self-love leads to the horrifying encounter and bitter regrets. It is when the love as the concern of others is developed that the mariner, the protagonist of the story, is given the chance for redemption.

The Romantics’ rejection of self-love, or the so-called selfish love marks the tension between love, as the concern of others and self-love, which implies selfishness. Nonetheless, the tension between the two kinds of love does not mean that the Romantics undervalue the significance of the self. Take Coleridge for instance. To Coleridge, the self plays an essential part in his love for nature, his family and hometown as well as for humankind. His idea on the mutual reflection between the self and the other confirms this point. According to a letter that Coleridge wrote in 1825, the metaphor of two facing mirrors is described. In the letter, Coleridge talks about two imaginary mirrors, standing in front of each other, “each seeing the other in itself, and itself in the other” (*Collected Letters*, 414). In Coleridge’s opinions, the way that the two mirrors reflect each other is mutual reflection. The mutual reflection illustrates the ideal relations between the self and others. What is more, it represents love. In another letter, Coleridge tries to endow the metaphor of the two facing mirrors with more meanings. Beth Lau notices that Coleridge compares the two mirrors as “true human love” or two hearts that correspond to each other in his letter (qtd. in Lau 538). According to Coleridge’s description, each mirror “reflects and magnifies the other, and in the other itself, is an endless reduplication, by sweet Thoughts & Sympathies” (qtd. in Lau 538). The emphasis on “sweet thoughts” and sympathy manifests Coleridge’s view of love as the affectionate connection between the self and others. With the idea of mutual reflection in his mind, Coleridge refines his idea of love by foregrounding not only the role of the self but the interrelationship among the self and the loved others. Lau observes how the relationships between the self and others are constructed in Coleridge’s thinking. She comments:

Instead of regarding individuals as mere passive instruments that give forth only what has been impressed upon them by an outside force, Coleridge preferred to think of man’s relationship with God, nature, and his fellow human beings as a communion of energies, each serving to evoke a response in each other. (538)

The “communion of energies” can be understood as one form of the mutual reflection. In Coleridge’s depictions of love, the interplay between the self and others is a highlight. The self is not like an Eolian harp that cannot voice itself without the outer force. It has its autonomy and is vital in making love fulfilled for it is only when the self is in the sympathetic mood that the union with others such as nature, people as well as God is possible.

J. Robert Barth argues that Coleridge, like Wordsworth, pursued “the pure principle of love,” that is, “the divine source from which all joy and goodness flow” (88). In Coleridge’s poetry, the connection between the self and divine love is experienced through the love for nature, home, and humankind, which will be surveyed in Chapters Two, Three, and Four in this thesis respectively.

In Chapter Two, the relationship between the self and nature in Coleridge’s poetry will be explored. The love for nature in the poetry of Coleridge is often depicted as a personal experience which is associated with the faith in God. Barth alleges that to Coleridge, “Nature can prompt and support, but it is only the human person—and human relationships—that can heal and bless” (87). It is partly true. In Coleridge’s writing, human relationships mean significantly, but all blessings are derived from the love of God. Coleridge’s standpoint on divine love is well justified in John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity,” in which Winthrop enunciates that God’s love leads to the love among human beings. He claims that human beings love each other because they recognize the traces of God’s love in each other (173). The ground of love, according to Winthrop’s essay, is “an apprehension of some resemblance in things loved to that which affects it” (173). His argument echoes Coleridge’s idea of the two facing mirrors which is mentioned earlier. According to Coleridge’s idea, each mirror reflects the image of the other, and it is this mutual reflection that the two mirrors bear the resemblance to each other. With the metaphor, it can be inferred that to Coleridge, to love is to discover the shared qualities or ties in each other, and the discovery cannot be obtained without open attitudes. It corresponds to what Emerson expresses in relation to the love for nature in “Nature” that the natural objects are not really accessible unless “the mind is open to their influence” (Emerson 7).

Based on the principle above, it is not surprising to see what Coleridge manifests in his poetry of nature are the awareness and belief in the benign power of nature. The mutual influence in Coleridge’s love for nature exemplifies his idea of the mutual reflection. By paralleling the self as one of the facing mirrors and nature as the other, it is explicit that it is not just nature that leaves impressions upon the self. The self also endows nature with meanings. The mutual reflection between the self and nature is strengthened by the self’s union with nature. In Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp: Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire,” the union of the two is exhibited as nature becomes the “Rhythm in all thought” (29), and the distinction between the self and nature gets blurred. From Coleridge’s point of view, love is the origin of hopes, and it is no exception in the love for nature in his poetry. In “France: An Ode,” the poet is pleased to find that the love for nature allows him to breathe in the air of freedom and hence enables him to regain a life of hopes.

While the love for nature in Coleridge’s poetry connects the self to God, the familial love in Coleridge’s poetry confirms “love of nature leading to love of mankind” (Wordsworth, *Prelude* *XIII*). In Chapter Three, the love for home in Coleridge’s poetry will be surveyed. The love for home in the poetry of Coleridge includes the love for his family and his hometown. In his conversation poems, Coleridge shows the love for his family by pinning his hopes on them instead of on himself. He was hopeful that his beloved wife or child had greater potential of leading a life that is happier than his. Hence, his “conversations” in the poems do not aim at conveying any messages to his beloved family. They are Coleridge’s prayers for the wellbeing of his family. To experience hopes through wishing the wellbeing of others is done with “the surrogacy device” in Peter Barry’s term (Barry 609). Barry holds that in Coleridge’s conversation poems, there is “a transaction between the speaking persona and a surrogate self, that is, another person onto whom are projected or transposed key elements of the speaker’s own personality, dilemmas, or thought processes” (602). The surrogate self in Coleridge’s poems is usually performed by one of the beloved family or friends of Coleridge. Their roles as silent addressees allow Coleridge to project his hopes on them. However, the adoption of the surrogate self should not be attributed to the poet’s “perennial dissatisfaction with himself, and his desire to possess the qualities he sees in others” (Barry 616). It is because of the love, rather than the jealousy of others, that the device of the surrogate self is at work.

The conception of home endorses Coleridge’s pursuit of love in his poetry. “Home” prevents Coleridge from feeling disoriented, and it is the anchorage of his love and affection. Coleridge’s attachment to home can be discovered in various ways, such as in the love for his family, the places that he dwelled as well as his yearning for a spiritual home. In “Sonnet: To the River Otter” and “Frost at Midnight,” the love for the hometown is tied up with the poet’s nostalgia for his childhood, the time when his sense of home is related to his birthplace and the family into which he was born. In addition to love for his birthplace, Coleridge’s love for hometown is illustrated by Coleridge’s love for home that he forms with his wife as well as a spiritual home. In “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” the poet expresses his reluctance to quit his “sweet Abode” (68), the place that he lives with his wife. Coleridge’s love for his hometown is also represented by his obsession about a spiritual home. The spiritual home is not just an imaginary retreat in the poet’s mind. It is integrated with a spot in the town he dwelled, where the homey atmosphere offers comfort and joy for the poet’s inner self. Coleridge’s longing for a spiritual home reflects the peaceful state of the inner self as one of his most cherished values. Inspired by the Romantic ideal of love as the concern of others, Coleridge was engaged in the public matters that he termed as the “honourable toil” (“Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” 63). Albeit meaningful, the dedication to the public affairs contradicted to the poet’s natural disposition and sometimes resulted in his mental weariness and turbulence. A spot of seclusion, for instance, “the valley of seclusion” in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” (9), offered Coleridge the spiritual peacefulness that was indispensable for getting along with his inner self and musing with “wiser feelings” again (“Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” 14). Coleridge’s love for a spiritual home or a spot of seclusion in his hometown does not suggest that he wanted to be alienated from others. In his poetry, the idea of the self is valued in the circumference of love for human beings.

In Chapter Four, the love for humankind will be the target of investigation. In the previous chapter, it is demonstrated that the love for the family and hometown reflect Coleridge’s attachment to home. This attachment to home is interwoven with the faith in God in Coleridge’s representations of love. Coleridge considered the love of God the home of all types of love. The awareness of divine love makes individuals realize that they are “proportions of one wond’rous whole” (Coleridge, “Religious Musings” 128). Consequently, divine love is the foundation of the love for humankind as well as other forms of love.

Love is supposed to be the fountain of joy, but on occasion it brings woes. Out of the love for humankind, Coleridge began to notice the evil which caused the suffering of people, and the “fleshly passions” of evil tortured him (“Ode on the Departing Year” 169). Returning to the pure faith in God, as it is suggested in “Religious Musings,” restores joy to love so that the love that God gives individuals in loving other people and nature would work out again as salvation.

Abrams speaks of the Romantic idea of love as “the confraternity of the one life shared not only with other men but also with a milieu in which man can feel fully at home” (*Natural* 431). His definition testifies the link between love and “the one life,” a unifying power. Via love, individuals share a kind of organic unity with others and nature that can be comprehended as “one life” (Abrams, *Natural* 431). The idea of “one life” secures the Romantic poets against their despair at the failure of the French Revolution. Coleridge’s poetry exemplifies this point. The various sorts of love in his poetry show his endeavors to restore the ties with others and the outer world, and the ties are the messengers of hopes. However, what makes his writing about love distinct from other Romantic poets’ is his stance on religion. The faith in God plays a crucial role in Coleridge’s personal life as well as his poetry. To Coleridge, the awareness of God’s love, the common ground for the love between the self and others, is an experience that cannot be separated from the love for nature, his family as well as humankind. Seeing the blessings of God on all individuals helps them think of each other in mutual love which makes individuals feel at home in any situations. Coleridge’s metaphor of the two facing mirrors speaks of the poet’s yearning for home under the love for the self and others. The mutual reflection between the mirrors allows each one to reflect the other in itself, and to be reflected and finds itself in the other (Coleridge, *Collected Letters* 414). In conceiving the relationship between the self and the other in this way, the self is the home for the other, as in the other, the self finds its home. This is the significance in the Coleridgean love and union, as a response to the idea of love in his age.

1. Coleridge’s dream of starting a new life by Pantisocracy, however, was unrealized. Again and again, the plan to settle in America was postponed. Finally, to Coleridge’s much disappointment, it was decided that the project was abolished. During the preparation of Pantisocracy, Southey persuaded Coleridge into being engaged with Sarah Fricker, the oldest daughter of the family that played the central role in the project of Pantisocracy. The abandonment of Pantisocracy did not restore Coleridge to the life he used to live. His promise to marry Sarah Fricker was demanded to be fulfilled. For more detail on how Coleridge’s life was changed by his dream of Pantisocracy, see W. Jackson Bate’s *Colerdige*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The self here is contrast what Ralph Waldo Emerson means by “not me” in his “Nature.” In “Nature,” Emerson suggests that “the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul” (5). He defines Nature as “NOT ME,” which does not only denote the outer world as well as a person’s own body(5). Hence, the opposite of “not me,” or “me” so to say, can be thought of as an individual by emphasizing his soul or the spiritual faculty. Since “me” will not be manifest without “not me,” it can be inferred that “me” or “the self” in this thesis must be contemplated in conjunction with the idea of “the other,” which indicates anything other than the self.

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