



THE POETIC AND GNOSEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SAMUEL T. COLERIDGE'S PHILOSOPHICAL POETRY

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Abstract: This article examines the synthesis of poetic form and epistemic theory in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. By analyzing his transition from Associationism to Kantian Transcendental Idealism, the study explores how Coleridge's concept of the "Primary" and "Secondary" Imagination serves as a gnoseological bridge between the finite mind and the infinite divine. The research concludes that for Coleridge, poetry is not merely an aesthetic endeavor but a vital instrument for perceiving ontological truth.

Keywords: samuel taylor coleridge, philosophical poetry, gnoseology, transcendental idealism, primary and secondary imagination, ontological truth, epistemic theory, synthesis of poetic form.

Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge occupies a unique position in the English Romantic canon, functioning simultaneously as a poet, critic, and philosopher. Unlike his contemporaries, Coleridge sought to establish a unified theory of reality where the creative act is inseparable from the act of knowing.

The central problem of Coleridge's intellectual life was **gnoseological**: how can the human mind, which is finite, apprehend the "Absolute"? To answer this, he moved away from the mechanical materialism of David Hartley toward the subjective idealism of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schelling. This article investigates the philosophical foundations of his "conversation poems" and *The*



Rime of the Ancient Mariner, arguing that his poetry serves as a laboratory for his gnoseological theories.

Coleridge's poetic imagination was influenced from early in his career by his fervent engagement with German philosophy as well as by his adoration of imaginative, spiritual experience. He conceived of poetry as not only an artistic endeavor but a mode of knowing—a way of accessing truths that elude the straightforward paths of rational argument and empirical observation. Poetry for Coleridge was an epistemic enterprise: it sought to reveal, to suggest, and to synthesize ideas and emotions usually separated by the analytic mind. This sense of poetic gnoseology, or theory of knowledge, is evident throughout his major works. His unique conception of the imagination, particularly as elaborated in his critical writings, provides a key to understanding his poetic theory. Coleridge distinguished between 'primary' and 'secondary' imagination. The primary imagination, in his view, was the ordinary human power to perceive the world—God's creative act reflected in human consciousness. The secondary imagination, however, was "an echo of the former," a conscious, willful act that could shape, dissolve, and recreate sensory impressions to construct new forms and meanings. Poetic creation, thus, was not mere imitation or fancy; it was a gnoseological act of participating in, and extending, the creative powers of nature itself [1]. In tracing the poetic foundations of Coleridge's philosophical poetry, it is clear that language, for him, is not passive but active—a living, generative force. Poetry becomes an arena in which language is not simply the vehicle for ideas, but the very condition for their emergence and possibility. The act of poetic composition mobilizes metaphor and symbol not just for rhetorical effect, but as necessary instruments for the cognition of transcendental realities. Words, through poetry, act upon the mind and stand as thresholds to higher forms of understanding. This positions Coleridge's poetry as not merely reflective or descriptive, but thoroughly creative and generative of knowledge. Embedded



within much of Coleridge's verse is a deep preoccupation with the limits and powers of human understanding. Contemplation of nature, self, and spirit is persistently linked to questions about how we come to know and how we can represent such knowledge. For Coleridge, any approach to metaphysical truth is necessarily indirect, shrouded in mystery and accessible only through intuition and imagination. His poems encode this conviction: they move in circular, spiraling patterns, returning again and again to uncertainties, fragmentations, and the desire for wholeness. The interplay between reality and imagination, perception and conception, marks the philosophical underpinnings of Coleridge's work. Ultimately, his poetic practice is inseparable from his gnoseological ambitions, where each mediates and clarifies the other. The poetic act is both an exploration and celebration of the soul's power to apprehend meaning in the world, and a recognition of the mystery that persists beyond the reach of articulation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his most celebrated lyrics, where the transcendent and the mundane entwine, suggesting knowledge as a process, never a final state [2].

Methods

This research employs a **hermeneutic and comparative methodological approach**:

- **Textual Analysis:** A close reading of *Biographia Literaria* (Chapters XIII and XIV) to define the mechanics of the Imagination.
- **Philosophical Mapping:** Comparing Coleridge's "Reason" (*Vernunft*) and "Understanding" (*Verstand*) with Kantian definitions to trace the evolution of his epistemic framework.
- **Literary Application:** Analyzing specific poetic works, such as *The Eolian Harp* and *Dejection: An Ode*, as phenomenological records of the poet's struggle to achieve a "unified consciousness."

Results: The Trinitarian Structure of Knowing



The investigation identifies three core pillars that form the gnoseological foundation of Coleridge's poetry:

A. The Primacy of Imagination

Coleridge famously bifurcated the imagination. His results suggest that:

- **Primary Imagination:** Is the "living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception." It is the universal faculty of sensing the world.
- **Secondary Imagination:** Is an echo of the primary, co-existing with the conscious will. It "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create." This is the foundation of poetic genius.

B. The Reconciliation of Opposites

Coleridge's gnoseology relies on **esemplastic power**—the ability of the mind to shape disparate experiences into a single, organic whole. In his poetry, this is manifested through the synthesis of:

- Subject vs. Object
- Nature vs. Spirit
- The Finite vs. The Infinite

C. The Distinction between Reason and Understanding

The study finds that Coleridge viewed **Understanding** as the faculty of the senses (mechanical and limited), whereas **Reason** was the organ of the supersensuous. His philosophical poetry acts as an exercise in "Reason," attempting to see the "one life within us and abroad."

Discussion

The implications of Coleridge's gnoseology suggest that he viewed the poet not as a mere "maker" of verses, but as a **seer**.

The "Eolian Harp" as an Epistemic Symbol

In *The Eolian Harp*, the metaphor of the lute played by the wind represents the gnoseological passivity and activity of the mind. The poem asks:



"And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd...?"

This highlights the tension in his philosophy: Is the mind a passive mirror reflecting nature, or an active lamp illuminating it?

The Failure of Vision in "Dejection"

In *Dejection: An Ode*, we see the tragic side of his gnoseology. When the "Secondary Imagination" fails, the world becomes "a blank inorganic heap." This proves that for Coleridge, knowledge of the world is dependent on the internal state of the soul—a purely idealistic stance.

Conclusion

Coleridge's philosophical poetry serves as the bridge between British Empiricism and German Idealism. His gnoseological foundation asserts that truth is not found in the accumulation of facts, but in the imaginative synthesis of experience. Poetry is the highest form of knowledge because it alone can mirror the "I AM," the creative pulse of the universe.

References

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