

THE FRAGMENT AS ROMANTIC FORM

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Treatments of the literary theory underlying romanticism and critical works dealing with romantic poets occasionally glance at the phenomenon of the fragment or allude obliquely to the fragmentary as a secondary romantic trait. It can be argued, however, that more direct attention should be paid to the fragment as a literary form of special importance. My thesis is that the fragment can be viewed as that form which more completely than any other embodies romantic ideals and aims. The intent of this paper is to lay some foundations for a theoretical treatment of this elusive form by developing a simple model for the fragment and by showing significant connections between the model and important romantic formulations concerning poetry. While emphasis will fall upon Coleridge, and in Coleridge upon "Kubla Khan," I hope that the value of the analysis will extend beyond the works of that poet; the intent at least is somewhat broader than Coleridgean criticism.

To clear the ground, I should point out that no attempt is being made here to contribute toward a definition of romanticism. In an article published in 1924, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,"¹ Arthur Lovejoy delighted in presenting sardonically the extreme confusions then existing in the use of the designator "romantic," and it does not appear that the situation has notably improved in the intervening years. Indeed, it seems extremely doubtful that any comprehensive or intellectually satisfying single definition or even set of Lovejoy-like discriminations will ever be found. Here, as in the case of

¹ *PMLA*, XXXIX (1924), 229-53; reprinted in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, 1948), pp. 228-53.

other important literary terms, we are forced to depend mainly upon intuitions and imprecise connotations.

Aiming, then, only at a simple and generally acceptable starting point, I take the common position that the two basic literary stances, the romantic and the classical, are manifestations of radically opposite evaluations of the nature of man, with romantic views centered upon an aspiration for the infinite, while the classical position stresses limitations and finiteness. While no one is so naïve as to suppose that such a broad and blanket dichotomy fits very well the complexity of the actual data we have to deal with in considering a specific poet or poem, it does probably serve as a kind of ground bass to all further discriminations and does have the kind of truth required for a simple theoretical model.

That this infinite-finite distinction, despite its crudity, is basic to most treatments of romanticism is supported by the fact that it frequently emerges even when the subject is approached from quite different directions. For example, C. M. Bowra gives as a "single characteristic" which distinguishes the English romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century "the importance which they attached to the imagination" and "the special view which they held of it." His supporting quotations from Blake ("This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal...") and from Coleridge ("The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM") show that this special view is intimately involved with the infinite.²

Even more pertinent is the example of E. E. Bostetter's *The Romantic Ventriloquists*, because here we find not only an indirect presentation of the infinity criterion, but also great emphasis upon the "unfinished poem." Without any direct interest in formal problems, Bostetter concentrates his intensive study on a close reading of the fragmentary poems of the great English romantics, seeing in them the quintessence of romantic practice. What I take to be his main thematic statement is:

Thus was engendered an immense egoism in which the poet assumed that the center of reality was within himself: the universe

² *The Romantic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), pp. 1-4.

existed as he imagined it. Where in the traditional syntax an objective universe focused upon man as the center of creation, in the new syntax the universe expanded outward from the human imagination. The poet became in reality the divine ventriloquist projecting his own voice as the voice of ultimate truth.³

Clearly, this new syntax forced upon the poet a kind of divinity and omnipotence; that is, it forced the human mind to bear the burden of the infinite. Consequently, the basic romantic dilemma and eventual breakdown can be generalized as the result of the strain between the infinite pretension and the human reality. This is an inversion of Bostetter's conclusion that "The history of Romantic poetry becomes in part the history of a syntax that proved inadequate to the demands placed upon it" (p. 5). Again, as in the case of Bowra, what I find most encouraging in this is a certain convergence with my views, despite the obvious differences in starting points and in emphasis.

In any event, when this assumption about the nature of romanticism is combined with a second assumption—that the form or shape of a poem should be, to some degree or another, a reflection not only of the explicit content of the work, but also of the fundamental ideals, directions, and tone of the poet—the major formal problem of the romantic poet emerges with great clarity.

It becomes immediately apparent that the romantic artist must deal with formal problems much more difficult than those of the classical artist. The development of forms that conform to ideals centered on the finite, forms that enhance effects such as balance, harmony, perfection, and so on, presents no great theoretical problems, difficult though the actual practice of the art may be. But the romantic poet is faced by the prospect of devising forms that will reflect the infinite and the indeterminate, and this is a task of an entirely different order. Certainly the direct approach, the infinite or unending poem, is not attractive, though in bleak moments one is tempted to think that this was what Wordsworth had in mind in writing *The Prelude*.⁴

The great formal problem of the romantic poet can be stated briefly as the devising of means to embody the infinite in a finite, discrete, and

³ Seattle, 1963, p. 4.

⁴ The bizarre notion of the infinite poem is, naturally enough, rare in criticism, but it does occur. See John Shearman, *Mannerism*, Pelican Book (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1967), p. 151, who quotes from Sperone Speroni's *Discorsi sopra Virgilio* (ca. 1562): "since poetry consists in superfluous and redundant ornament, if the poet treats multiple actions poetically the poem, if it is to be perfect, will grow to infinity."

sequential medium. I will not attempt to list the ways in which this general problem was approached; rather, I will limit myself to the thesis that the fragment constitutes a perfect formal solution to the problem, and that it can therefore be called the ultimate romantic form—ultimate in the sense that it matches romantic ideals and tone as fully and completely as the closed couplet matches the ideals of eighteenth-century neoclassicism.

A simple model for the basic effect and shape which the romantic poet is trying to achieve is furnished by an unending, ascending, and widening spiral. This figure draws attention to the fact that what is required is not the infinite merely in the sense of the continuous and unending, as could be represented by a straight line or the natural number series, but that there must also be a rising (an increase in intensity) and a broadening (the embracing of ever greater diversity). That is to say, there must be a strong sense of upward sweep, a sweep which carries everything before it and which grows continually more powerful and full.

The difficulty is, of course, that there is one fatal limitation which the romantic poet cannot avoid: somewhere the towering spiral must stop, and the stop is apt to be abrupt, and the abrupt stop is apt to turn into a sudden fall, and the sudden fall destroys the whole effect. An excellent example is a famous speech in Part I of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, a speech which also illustrates admirably the romantic attitudes here being considered:

Nature that fram'd us of four elements,
 Warring within our breasts for regiment,
 Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
 Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
 The wondrous architecture of the world
 And measure every wand'ring planet's course,
 Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
 And always moving as the restless spheres,
 Will us to wear ourselves and never rest
 Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
 That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
 The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.

(II.vii.18-29)⁵

⁵ For works available in a variety of editions, I provide only in-the-text documentation.

This passage, taken in and by itself, demonstrates perfectly the sudden descent and ludicrous anticlimax to which a soaring pattern is, by nature, subject.⁶

But it is easy to see how the fragment avoids this danger entirely. (At this point it is convenient to think of "Kubla Khan," which is the best example in our literature of the kind of fragment I am interested in.) Like most successful solutions, this also is quite simple, consisting in the transformation of an unpleasant necessity into a triumphant virtue. Again we have the ascending curve, gathering strength and velocity as it mounts; again the abrupt ending, but—and here is the beauty of the thing—it is now a cutting off rather than a stop. To put it another way, the abrupt ending is experienced by us as being purely accidental, and it is this variation which makes all the difference. It is as though we were listening to the poet from another room and unexpectedly a door were closed; we hear no longer, but we feel that the poet's voice continues. That is, because the stop is accidental, the poet can count upon something analogous to the physical principle of inertia; the mind of the reader, caught up in the velocity of the movement, continues along the accidentally interrupted curve, and in an important sense the poem never really ends.

Without doubt the greatest master of the fragment in English poetry is Coleridge. Few would quarrel with Bowra when he says that the three poems "Kubla Khan," "Christabel," and "The Ancient Mariner" are "of all English Romantic masterpieces . . . the most unusual and the most romantic" (p. 53). But surely it is not without significance that two of these poems are fragments, while what has caused most critical controversy in "The Ancient Mariner" is precisely that it is not a fragment; I refer to the mixed feelings which most critics have about the so-called moral ending.

There is, of course, considerable ambiguity in my claim that Coleridge is the master of the fragment, because it raises immediately the question of his awareness. Was Coleridge master of the fragment or did the fragment master him? This is a difficult question with respect

⁶I make the qualification that the passage is not being considered in context or with reference to Marlowe's intention because I think that the descent is conscious and planned. That is, here, as in *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe is criticizing as well as exploring the romantic absorption in the infinite. That he knows exactly what he is doing is suggested by the reaction of Theridamas to the speech. He picks up the gravitational image and gives the passage an "earthly" political interpretation: "And that made me to join with Tamburlaine; / For he is gross and like the massy earth / That moves not upwards, nor by princely deeds / Doth mean to soar above the highest sort" (II.vii.30-33).

both to Coleridge and the romantics in general, for by and large the theory of the romantic poets was not particularly sensitive to matters of form. At least none of the romantic theorists, to my knowledge, deal directly with the problems I have outlined, though they frequently seem to me to be approaching them. Indeed, it is hard to find the fragment viewed as form, and desirable form, before the well-known passage at the end of Chapter 32 of *Moby Dick*:

But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught.

And even this is ambiguous because of its strong element of progressivism; that is, the idea of the fragment as temporary, something to be completed in time.

On the other hand, many of the key statements of romantic theory suggest, if they do not state, the necessity for a fragmentary poetry. In Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, for example, we find:

the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness. . . . Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the Poet.⁷

It is true that the primary image here, "feeble shadow," suggests a complete though weakened reproduction of a conceptual unity, but shadows, from the Myth of the Cave onward, also operate as strong images for the fragmentary. Furthermore, in his "inconstant wind" and "transitory brightness," Shelley introduces the feeling of the fragmentary with respect to the poetic process.

More direct in its statement of the fragmentary is the position taken by Poe in the essay "The Poetic Principle":

⁷ *Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, VII (New York, 1930), 135.

Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry . . . we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep . . . through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem . . . we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.⁸

The central passage in the *Biographia* dealing with the imagination seems to me to be much closer to Poe's view than to Shelley's. Coleridge writes:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Chapter XIII)

In all three of these statements we have the familiar Platonic or Neoplatonic conception of progressively more shadowy images or reflections of the full reality, with strong suggestions of the fragmentary located either in the conceptions in the poet's mind or the product of the poet's art or in both. It is especially striking that if, in the formulation of Coleridge, we question the degree to which the secondary imagination can re-create "the eternal act of creation," it would seem that the re-creation would necessarily be incomplete and fragmentary. Because his interest is in establishing the creative and vital nature of the activity itself, Coleridge does not emphasize this aspect, though he seems to be aware of it in the phrase "yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify."

We know, however, that rather than exulting—as Melville was later

⁸ *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Robert L. Hough (Lincoln, 1965), pp. 39-40.

to do—in the fragmentary nature of his work, Coleridge constantly bemoaned it and viewed it as a weakness. Of “Christabel” he said:

The reason of my not finishing “Christabel” is not, that I don’t know how to do it—for I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the idea, an extremely subtle and difficult one.⁹

And, as everyone knows, in the introduction to “Kubla Khan,” he insists that on awakening from the dream he “appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole. . . .”

These statements, combined with the different directions he chose to take in his theoretical work, make it clear that Coleridge did not cultivate the fragment as form. The fact seems to be that until recently the fragment has been an accidental form in the sense that it has just happened rather than being consciously planned. This means that on one level the creation of this superb romantic vehicle was accidental. But it should also be recognized that in this context it becomes unclear what meaning we should assign to the word *accidental*. It is at least possible that Coleridge was a man so profoundly true to his deepest instincts, a man with such a complete intuitive understanding of the romantic position and its poetic problems, that he could unconsciously and against the grain, as it were, solve problems which he had not directly formulated and could create a great form against the pressure of his somewhat conventional and external views of poetic success. But this leads us into deep waters and cannot here be pursued.¹⁰

I would like instead to look more closely at Coleridge’s insistence that he had in his mind a comprehensive grasp of the whole of both “Kubla Khan” and “Christabel,” for this reveals another interesting aspect of the mechanism of the romantic fragment. By definition a fragment is a part of some whole which is not present. It may be a part of some readily apprehensible whole, as the arm of a Greek statue is

⁹From *Table Talk*, recorded by H. N. Coleridge in *Coleridge: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Stephen Potter (London, 1950), p. 514.

¹⁰Without question psychological factors were of enormous importance in the case of Coleridge. Bostetter’s analysis of Coleridge in terms of “power without strength,” as a man with a grievously flawed will, is persuasive. But over and beyond these factors looms the impossibility of the realization of the romantic vision, no matter what the quality of the will. This failure is seen in the large number of the “unfinished poems.” The fragment is a special case of the unfinished poem, that in which the impossible is made possible largely through accident.

sensed immediately as part of an Aphrodite or at least of a beautiful woman. But the fragment can also be a part of a whole which cannot be apprehended, and this is clearly the type which expresses the infinite. In a fragment of this second type it is necessary, if the maximum effect is to be gained, that the reader be absolutely convinced of the reality of the unapprehended whole. But, by the nature of the situation, this conviction is hard to establish completely in the poem itself. Consequently, such a fragment really needs a preface in which the required conviction can be secured. Coleridge has given us the perfect example in his introduction to "Kubla Khan." It seems to me that this introduction is a part, and a necessary part, of the poem, and this claim seems to be confirmed by our usual treatment of the poem. "Kubla Khan" is usually printed with the introduction; everyone is familiar with the wonderful story of the circumstances of the poem's creation; questions raised by that story have received elaborate critical treatment—in short, the material of the introduction has become almost completely merged with the poem in our experience and in our imagination.

What is most interesting from my point of view is that this introduction very skillfully established the required conviction of the reality of the unrealized whole. This is accomplished mainly in the passage:

On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

By the circumstantiality of the account we are completely convinced of the reality of the "distinct recollection of the whole," and then there is the intrusion of the prosaic and mysterious person from Porlock. It used to be the fashion, at least among the more emotional lovers of Coleridge, to curse this poor creature. On the contrary, I suggest that if he did not exist he would have to be invented, for he is in flesh and

blood the accidental factor, like the suddenly shut door, which is necessary to create the illusion of the cut short rather than the stopped. In what follows, the "vague and dim recollection of the general purport" in the mind of the poet figures and foretells our state at the end of the poem as our own imaginations sweep beyond the given.

In short, this whole passage operates powerfully to condition our minds for the poem itself. We have the claim for a wholeness, vast beyond our comprehension, which existed, if only momentarily, in the imagination of the poet. This both reassures us and, more important, encourages us to continue beyond the poem; it converts the bounded into the boundless. The sense of outward movement is also supported indirectly by the image of ever-expanding circles in water, and finally the mysterious infinity of the vision itself is further intensified by the touch at the end that it can never again, either by poet or by reader, be fully recovered; this gives a distinctly asymptotic flavor to the whole process.

The obvious care that Coleridge takes to involve the reader in the imaginative process reminds us of yet another congruence between the fragment and the romantic position. We have already touched indirectly upon the supreme importance placed by the romantic mind on the creative imagination, as it applies to reader as well as to poet. But the fragment is a peculiarly potent means of eliciting an active imaginative response. This is apparent even in the case of the statue fragment. It is extremely difficult, given even such a simple type of fragment, to resist the impulse to reconstruct the whole. That is, this more or less gestalt aspect of the fragment is another major source of its fitness for romantic ends. The most impressive example of this power is probably not to be found in poetry but in Pascal's *Pensées*, another accidental masterpiece in which a content centered around considerations of the infinite is in perfect accord with the form. No one can read the *Pensées* without attempting to build up from the brilliant and glittering fragments the structure Pascal was aiming at.

Finally, there is one other consideration to be presented, one which not only draws these somewhat scattered observations into a conceptual unity, but also suggests extremely interesting paths for future exploration. I refer to the rather surprising fact that the frag

