Comparative Culture 15: 39-62, 2010

The Coleridgean Imagination: its Role in Thought and its Relation to Reason

Peter Cheyne

This paper traces the development of the Coleridgean imagination to its position at the heart of a broadly neoplatonic system merging associationist roots with kantian inspiration. Rather than the place of the imagination being supplanted in Coleridge's later thinking (e.g., in Aids to Reflection (1825), and Church and State (1826)) by the role of platonic Ideas, I aim to show that the latter grew in prominence with the necessary groundwork having been laid by establishing the role of imagination in thought and its relation to Reason considered logically, and along platonic and neoplatonic lines, and not psychologically. Coleridge's theory of imagination was not just a brilliant theory of poetry; it was integral to a systematic philosophy that evinced as one example that from the very fact of poetry, the associationist philosophy of empiricism could not be a complete theory, but could only retain value as part of a larger system. Far from being a brilliant theory that was later eclipsed in Coleridge's writings by the theory of Ideas, I argue that the Coleridgean imagination can only be properly understood in terms of its necessity in bringing Reason explicitly to self-aware thought, and thus bringing Ideas to enlightened mind. For this to be possible, it must first be acknowledged how and why the concepts of the understanding can only be enlightened by negative reason, and that imagination is necessary in order for thinking to be aware of Reason in its positive aspect.

This paper is an exploration of the development of Coleridge's theory of the imagination as his philosophical ideas evolved from enthusiasm for the British empiricism of the day, transforming his take on transcendental idealism towards a broadly neoplatonic system. Coleridge's thoughts turned towards the imagination as he tried to understand what made a poet and what distinguished good poetry from bad. Since his school days at Christ's Hospital, he held a conviction, instilled in him by his Headmaster, James Boyer[1], "that poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes."[2] Much of Coleridge's life was spent in this difficult pursuit of poetry's logic.

Early in this pursuit, Coleridge was a follower of empiricist philosophy, believing association to be the important link between body and spirit. Associationism seemed to explain how the perceiving mind multiplies connections within experience, quite naturally producing similes and metaphors. While associationism was just one aspect of Locke's empiricism, David Hartley based his entire system on a theory of association by contiguity and repetition. Although Hartley's influence on Coleridge would not retain its central position, it was strong enough at the time for the poet to name his first son Hartley Coleridge.

Coleridge was especially interested in Hartley's theory because it progressed towards a kind of sublimation theory whereby the sense material became spiritualized. "Some degree of spirituality", wrote Hartley, "is the necessary consequence of passing through life. The sensible pleasures and pains must be transferred by association more and more every day, upon things that afford neither sensible pleasure nor sensible pain in themselves, and so beget the intellectual pleasures and pains." In 'Religious Musings', Coleridge hails Hartley as "of mortal

Peter Cheyne teaches at Miyazaki International College. Correspondence may be sent to: MIC, 1405 Kano, Kiyotake-cho, Miyazaki-shi, Miyazaki-ken, Japan 889-1605, Tel: 0985-85-5931, Fax: 0985-84-3396, E-mail: pcheyne@sky.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp

kind / Wisest", because he essayed to establish value on a materialistic and scientific footing and was the "first who marked the ideal tribes / Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain".[3]

Coleridge would grow to criticize the associationist philosophers in the strongest terms, but would never jettison the theory from his system. Associationism remained within the Coleridgean system, holding a place around the lower rungs of his ladder between nature and reason. The lower levels progressed from nature, through sensation and then fancy to the lower understanding, then to the higher levels, from higher understanding, through imagination to reason, the station after which is reached the ultimate truth: logos, or God. Conceiving this scheme as a ladder shows the order that Coleridge had in mind. Coleridge described his system as a polarity, as in a bar magnet, with reason and sense being the upper and lower counterparts. Imagination and fancy occupied the next upper and lower positions. A higher and a lower understanding were then lodged in the middle of the polarity, between fancy and imagination.

Analogies always break down, and we must be cautious not to assess Coleridge as a faculty psychologist. He was careful to emphasize that his was no faculty psychology, and that talking of sense, fancy, understanding, imagination, and reason was not to assume discrete faculties, but was rather a way of describing different kinds of basic mental processing, different kinds of creative mental activity. For Coleridge, each process involves the whole, in that an act of understanding, for example, involves and requires the contributions of associated fancy. Coleridge never considered such processes and activities in a way that was not holistic, or organicist, to prefer a term of his own coinage. We must bear with any appearances of faculty psychology in his system, and construe them as scaffolding, helping to form a modeled ensemble of the reality that Coleridge essayed to convey.

Association drove Hartley's entire psychology, whereas in Coleridge's system association operates only at the level of the fancy. Here, fancy processes for the lower understanding the materials provided by senses. The fancy provides the lower understanding with counters garnered from sense experience to be worked into concepts. Thus the understanding can then abstract from experience, gaining a concept of "outness", as Coleridge termed the sense of externality. Proceeding from this outness we conceive ourselves as detached individuals. This faculty of understanding (Coleridge's lower understanding) is concerned with concepts abstracted from experience and leads to an alienation that would be final if the associationist philosophy were the ultimate word in human psychology. The sense of individuality presented by the understanding is a personal unity consisting, negatively, in division from the main. It is the subjective residue after the objective entities in experience have been abstracted. This provides a sense of being an observer and an agent, a self who is able to observe and in turn act upon passive nature only in virtue of being cut off from it. The romantic gist is familiar. Within the realm of instinct and pre-reflective experience, the mind is at one with nature; with conceptual understanding comes the divorce.

Further in his theory, Coleridge saw a higher reunion with nature through the mediation of the imagination bringing the ideas of reason down to the higher understanding. This reunion, displacing the sense of detachment with a higher order of attachment, must have felt like the source of a great hope for Coleridge. This was both a personal hope and a hope to remedy many of the ills of the age, the age of enlightenment, which he was the first to describe as "the age of anxiety". For the mechanist and associationist philosophers, standing at the position that Coleridge calls the lower understanding would have represented the ascent to the

apex of human ability, standing proudly detached on a Himalayan peak, above and detached from a world it may now survey aloof with the clarity of distance. For Coleridge, on the other hand, the feeling would have been one of embarrassment and disappointment. "Is this it*?*", he might have asked himself. Coleridge warned that to position the understanding as the crowning glory of humanity to be revered as an end in itself would make of us, "a race of animals, in whom the presence of reason is manifested solely by the absence of instinct."

We may turn to a margin note that Coleridge wrote in his copy of Tennemann's *Gesichte der Philosophie* in order to clarify the outline of his system.[4] Here he wrote that, "The simplest yet practically sufficient order of the Mental Powers is, beginning from the

lowest	highest
Sense	Reason
Fancy	Imagination
Understanding	Understanding
------------	------------
Understanding	Understanding
Imagination	Fancy
Reason	Sense
lowest	highest

The polarities in the diagram can be clearly seen. From the lowest to the highest orders we move from sense to reason. Sense and reason are counterparts, as are fancy and imagination, with the lower and higher understandings being counterparts around the centre. Owen Barfield has noted, in *What Coleridge Thought*, that these complementarities are like octaves, and that there is more in common (in tune) between reason and sense than between reason and understanding, even though understanding is closer to it in the system as represented.[5] Coleridge complained that for the empiricists of his day, the lower understanding represented the apex of human thought and development. At this point Coleridge draws a bar, just before the higher understanding. Elsewhere, Coleridge remarked that the genius of Aristotle's understanding was a cloud that prevented his being able to see what Plato indicated in his theory of Ideas. This cloud is like the bar between Coleridge's lower and higher understanding. Beyond this bar is all that lies beyond the empirical theories, all that is not dreamt of in that philosophy.

In his theory of imagination and reason, Coleridge perceived rays of hope in a human reunion with nature and the source of the principles of the universe, which source and principles, cognate with the *logos* of tradition, he opposed to the abstracted rules culled by the understanding from the senses. For Coleridge this would have seemed a prospect worthy of life. The reunion with reason is indeed a higher reunion in this system because, for Coleridge, reason was present *in* nature but only present *to* the higher understanding. It is apparent here that the reason Coleridge had in mind was that of a *logos* implicit in nature, and not just a faculty of human discourse.

With the presence of reason reaching a level of awareness in the higher understanding, a new horizon beyond fixed and definite concepts could be glimpsed, however dimly this might first appear. This was the vision that Coleridge aspired to convey to his age, a vision that he believed his contemporaries, especially his compatriots, sorely needed. Coleridge diagnosed the intellectual malady of his day with his observation that, "The histories and political economy of the present

and preceding century partake in the general contagion of its mechanistic philosophy, and are the product of an unenlivened understanding."[6] Coleridge noted that, "the Present is the Epoch of the Understanding and the Senses" because the understanding, though it has access to ideas of reason through its power to abstract, is turned back, in its search for knowledge, to the impressions of sense once the reason in its positive aspect is denied.

From this position, we note that Coleridge did not disparage the fancy and the understanding; he simply cautioned that they should not be overestimated. Just as genius requires talent as its counterpart, so imagination depends upon fancy, with the higher faculties using the energy and materials of the lower. Fancy was for Coleridge the offspring of association, providing to the understanding "fixities and definites" from experience, which could use them as counters transformed into concepts. The important thing in Coleridge's caution was that we should not fail to see that the step from fancy to understanding has its higher counterpart in the step from imagination to reason.

In Coleridge's system, fancy has an important role in the generation of consciousness, converting perceptions into memories and streaming these together according to their spatio-temporal associations. Although fancy converts perceptions into memories, the primary imagination is responsible for the formation of perceptions themselves out of sensations and stimuli. Because the primary imagination organizes and shapes perceptions, by synthesizing in Kantian fashion the materials of sense experience with concepts from the understanding, our experience is intelligible. The fancy is able to use these percepts for the creation of its "fixities and definites". Debased, however, into passive fancy, it can lead to "the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude"[7], by which we enter "the lethargy of custom, having eyes, yet see not, ears yet hear not."[8] In passive fancy, the conceivable is reduced to the bounds of the merely picturable.

We have just noted that the fancy requires the organizing and shaping activity, which activity Coleridge called esemplastic, of the primary imagination in order to receive its materials.[9] This primary imagination is what Coleridge also called "the necessary imagination", necessary because it was a condition of perception. The primary imagination is spontaneous, fusing sensations and concepts into meaningful experience. As such it corresponds to Kant's empirical degree of the imagination, and its transcendental schematism of concepts and intuitions, producing intelligible experience.

The secondary imagination is not spontaneous, but voluntary. This creative power can remain dormant in individuals, or it can be stirred to activity, becoming the poetic or the philosophic imagination. This voluntary imagination is a superior degree of the same imagination responsible for the spontaneous shaping of perception. It exists in all people but is not equally developed in all, and it represents the fullest exertion of the self, controlled by "the free-will, our only absolute self."[10] Because the secondary imagination is voluntary, its acts of creation and recreation carry a personal, moral and social responsibility. The secondary imagination uses materials gathered and shaped by the primary imagination, able to idealize and unify these into harmony with the whole mind and not just with the understanding. Thus the secondary imagination may create and recreate according to the energies of reason. Although not everybody achieves the poetic imagination, everybody is more or less able to appreciate the fruits of poetic imagination. As Coleridge said, to hear a poem as a poem one must become, for at least that short time, a poet.[11] Once the artist has created the artwork, be it poem, painting, musical composition, and so on, the finished result can then be approached, via the senses,

by the imagination and understanding of the public. The same goes for work in philosophy.

The secondary imagination can work as poetic or philosophic imagination. This philosophic imagination is a transcendental power whose "sources must be far higher and far inward"[12] from the ordinary mode of consciousness. It is "the sacred power of self-intuition,"[13], able to work from that command descended from the heavens, as Coleridge was fond of quoting, the Delphic locution: "Know thyself!" In philosophic consciousness, the imagination intuitively contemplates its intuitive knowledge of the world, relating this consciousness to nature. Because the self is constitutive, the mind realizes that in self-contemplation it has also already been contemplating nature as *natura naturans* (nature naturing, the processes of nature) and not just the apparent phenomena of nature as *natura naturata* (nature natured, the outward forms of nature). Thus Coleridge takes further than Kant the insight, made in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, that we have access to at least one noumenon, or thing-in-itself, namely the self.

This self we simultaneously are and perceive, although the perceived self is distinguished by being a reflection, an empirical phenomenon, rather than the thing-in-itself in the immediate first person. Although Kant was very cautious about the ramifications of this insight (referring to the transcendental ego as beyond the laws of phenomena, with the empirical ego being a phenomenon subject to psychological laws), thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Fichte, and Schelling sought in the noumenal self who we are an entrance into the wider universe of transcendental reality and a return to metaphysics as such, rather than a kantian metaphysics of metaphysics. Coleridge thought that the self-intuition of the philosophic imagination had direct access to *natura naturans* in virtue of having this mode of reality itself. This does not, however, place him in quite the same post-kantian camp of metaphysics as Schopenhauer, because Coleridge understood nature to be "the term in which we comprehend all things that are representable in the forms of time and space, and subjected to the relations of cause and effect: and the cause of the existence of which, therefore, is to be sought for perpetually in something antecedent."[14]

Nevertheless, the philosophic imagination is, Coleridge thought, in a position to bring the ideas of intuitive reason, which are not phenomenal and not subject to cause and effect, down to the higher understanding. In this respect, the philosophic imagination is the counterpart of the primary imagination, which brings the materials of sensation up to the lower understanding. Fancy mobilizes the stream of association of fixities and definites taken from perception, offering them up to the understanding as ready-mades or *objets trouvés*. The understanding may then formulate a picture model of the world, wherein only the imageable is accepted as the conceivable. This was the thinking process, Coleridge noted, standardly theorized by the materialists. In one of many examples of this process of thinking, Coleridge spoke in his philosophical lectures of Locke's insistence that we need distinct images when defining words and concepts. We may further note that Locke's insistence is in line with Aristotle, contra Plato, who held, in *On the Soul* (Part VII), that the soul never thinks without an image.

Coleridge warned against mistaking distinct images for clear conceptions. For Coleridge, a very useful aspect of fancy was that it presented its fixed and definite images, and presenting also what we may call auditory compounds, tactile compounds, taste compounds, and olfactory compounds, in the flowing stream of association. It is over this stream that the thinker, in the act of composition or in the ordinary act of trying to recollect a name, a word, or a face, and so on, rests, like a pond-skater, to use Coleridge's emblem of the process, sometimes resisting the

stream's current,i.e. associationist fancy, sometimes allowing itself to be carried along by it, winning its way, until it makes the exertion, the moment of will and choice, to reach the sought for object.

At this point we are drawn to inquire into what the ideas of reason, to be conveyed to the higher understanding, are. The lower understanding conceives according to the perception of phenomena (*natura naturata*), "the sum total of the facts and phenomena of the senses". *Natura naturans*, on the other hand, denotes the essential power behind *natura*, or *physis* in the Greek. This essence is that phenomena are always in the process of becoming, and we can always seek the antecedent phenomenon or phenomena of any given phenomenon. The distinction between *natura naturata* and *naturans* is supported by the insight that the laws of phenomena are not themselves phenomena. When hearing that something being talked about is not a phenomenon, not an object to be perceived, most people will assume it to be an abstraction. But the referents of *natura naturans* are no more abstractions, and are no less real, than, for example, gravity.[15] This distinction, using Latinized terms from Aristotle, subsequently adopted and adapted by Spinoza, is related to Coleridge's insight that the act of thinking is not itself a thought. The act of thinking is often unconscious, while the products of the act, thoughts, are what achieve consciousness. On those occasions when we *do* think self-consciously, it is sometimes possible to snatch the thinking away from the product of the act. The result of thinking, the thought, is part of the "spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings."[16] The thinking itself, Coleridge observed, is not so spontaneously conscious on a natural level.

The act of thinking (e.g., constructing, in imagination, a line without breadth) is more perfect, more adequate to the idea in a platonic sense, than the more easily reproduced and schematized representation of that act (e.g., the image of a line). An example given by Coleridge is when connecting two stars as extremities of a line. He felt the sensation, as it were, of a perfect length without breadth. This is an act of the imagination the representation of which might be a line drawn or scratched on a surface to represent the ideal. In the same way, he suggests, natural laws are neither things (phenomena) nor abstractions. We might arrive at knowledge, or at least working hypotheses, of natural laws through abstraction from experiment, but that is not what the laws actually *are*. Because the prevailing empirical philosophy in his day, at least in Britain, worked under the belief that every possible object of knowledge was either a phenomenon or an abstraction from such, and because it was no longer inspired by the inquiry into *physis* (the coming into being of beings) as such, Coleridge observed that "we have not yet attained to a science of nature."[17]

The understanding, working only with those functions proper to it, can deal only with phenomena and the causal relations between them. Delving deeply into phenomena, the understanding is led to other phenomena, until it becomes stuck. The understanding might then find itself faced with what Coleridge called proto-phenomena, or the *Ur-phänomene* of Goethe. Or it might reach the technical limits of experimental possibility. It is at such points that the understanding's spade must turn, failing to dig further. Unable to make progress, the understanding conveys the proto-phenomena, or the thus-far ultimate results of state-of-the-art experimentation, for the contemplation of the imagination. For the understanding to inquire behind proto-phenomena in search of yet more underlying phenomena would be for it to turn itself over to fancy and to invent picture-theories of material states of affairs: turtles all the way down, one might say. A representative sample of Coleridge's proto-phenomena would contain, among other examples, the phenomena of magnetism, of electricity, of crystal formation, of organic growth and

many observable processes of life and mind. From these proto-phenomena, Coleridge asserted, in keeping with his reading of Giordano Bruno and Jacob Böhme ("Behmen" in Coleridge's writings), we may deduce the most general law to be "polarity, or the essential dualism of Nature, arising out of its productive unity, and still tending to reaffirm it, either as equilibrium, indifference or identity".[18]

Coleridge places "the mystery and dignity of human nature" in the foundation that reason provides for individual personality. This reason is only reason insofar as it "is of universal validity and obligatory on all mankind." This is the same insight reached by Heraclitus: "Although the Logos is common to all, most men live as if each had a private intelligence of his own." Thinking is an act that individuates the thinker. The thinker judges the verity of propositions and ascertains states of affairs by engaging in the act of thinking. This act is a detachment insofar as it employs concepts that have been abstracted from reality in the polarization of experience into the thinking subject and its thoughts about world. This act is also a reattachment insofar as it commits itself to a true approach to the real state of affairs. The individual grasps and feels her individuality in the act of thinking, the product of which (viz. the thought) can be conveyed to other thinking beings who in their turn are able to test its verity, to compare its message to their own experience, and to hold the thought up to the light, as it were, of reason. It is "the queen bee in the hive of error," Coleridge cautioned, to believe that the same idea in two minds is two ideas and not one. As ever, Coleridge stated his platonism in unambiguous terms.

The ideas of reason are of higher origin than the notions of the understanding; it is by their irradiation that the understanding itself becomes a human understanding. If the understanding ignores the downshine, as it were, of reason, then it will remain a mere, rather than a fully human, understanding. This was precisely the danger facing his empirically reductionist contemporaries. The mere understanding would have no role other than to order sense data according to cause and effect, and to assign concepts to them. The name truth would denote nothing beyond personal sincerity, as each individual would conceive their concepts idiosyncratically unique, varying to greater or lesser degrees from what we might be able to call corresponding concepts in the understandings of other individuals.

Such is the expression of personality, or rather of idiosyncrasy, that appears when understanding is held to be the end and apex of the human mind. It would have no other faculty to assist when it reaches its limits, the limits of being able to find only phenomena behind phenomena until it reaches proto-phenomena. No other, that is, than the fancy, which then fabricates from its fixities and definites images of hypothesized phenomena that *might* appear if only we could somehow get closer to them. The alternative, that of informing the understanding with imagination and reason, illuminates personality "when this light shines downward into the understanding it is always more or less refracted, and differently in every individual." Reason distinguishes the understanding with individuality rather than detachment, and it was part of Coleridge's romantic ambition to so heal this detachment.

In keeping with his central philosophy of polarity, Coleridge divides reason into two modalities: negative and positive reason. Negative reason operates, however unselfconsciously, in the understanding, enabling the latter faculty to abstract in terms of universals. Negative reason is still reason, it is just not conscious and it operates only to the degree with which the understanding can cope. It is this ability that forces the understanding's detachment from nature. Now the understanding, as subjectivity, utilizes its ability to compare and contrast its objects

into the categories of sameness and difference. This negative reason consists in the "power of seeing, whether any two conceptions, which happen to be in mind, are, or are not, in contradiction with each other."[19]

Negative reason retains only the mechanical, separable elements of experience. It deals with *natura naturata* and is not equipped to approach *natura naturans*. Such an understanding, if left to stand alone, analyzes to the point of leaving a notion of nature bereft of life. The principle of contradiction, which operates as the negative reason in the understanding, can work only within the sphere of fixities and definites. With entities considered in detachment, the understanding cannot work with nature in its natural state of flux. *Natura naturans* cannot be caught in the net of this stop-start Eleatic reasoning. Negative reasoning, which is the understanding working only with negative reason, becomes a master of distinction and division. It is able to compartmentalize every element of nature by understanding what each thing is not in relation to other things, yet remains quite unable to state positively what anything essentially is. But even through this stage a glimmer of reason in its positive mode may shine, for the principle of contradiction has the quality of universality, which may impress the understanding such that the "unindividual and transcendent character of the Reason as a presence to the mind" awakens.[20]

When the principle of contradiction itself is considered, the understanding must turn its attentions away from the outward sense and reflect inwards and upwards, if we may employ a hasty visual metaphor for this mental process. The reflection would turn "inwards" because attention would be forced away from what common sense takes to be outward objects and "upwards" because for Coleridge, reason is above, as it were, nature. Reason is above nature in that while Coleridge considered sense, fancy and the understanding to be a part of nature, he held reason to be somehow above nature, although he did not consider it entirely apart from nature. This is because he held reason to be present in every level of being by, as the metaphor goes, shining down upon it.

An example of the Coleridgean downshine of Reason is in the notion of instinct as potential intelligence. When the understanding turns from outward objects to consider the principle of contradiction itself, it turns from *natura naturata* towards *natura naturans*. Such is the move from fancy's aggregating the "products of destruction, the *cadavera rerum*"[21] to imagination's finding itself, as *natura naturans*, in the unity of the polarities it perceives as the higher unity of contradictories. Contemplation of the principle of contradiction has this somewhat revolutionary effect in Coleridge's system because therein the understanding may be led to inquire into that which indicates contradictories as such. If reason in its passive mode can indicate contradictories, it must itself transcend contradictories in order to draw them together as presentations to the understanding, which may then hold them apart. The first glimpse of Coleridgean reason is in polarity: one power manifest as two forces.

Polarity, "a living and generative interpenetration,"[22] may not be grasped by the naked understanding, which conceives of everything in detachment, related indeed by cause and effect, but only mechanically related. It is the imagination that must lay hold of polarity. Where the understanding as negative reason grasps logical opposites (contradictories), the imagination holds polar opposites, which are mutually generative, inclusive and not exclusive, and therefore capable of distinction, but not of division. Coleridge found imagination between the understanding and reason (above understanding and below reason), rather than

below and between the understanding and intuition as Kant first placed it, or as a compartment within the conceptual understanding, as Kant later revised his scheme.

Between understanding and reason, Coleridge's imagination is a bridge between the two, which is seen clearly in the scale, reproduced above, that Coleridge sketched in the margin of his copy of Tennenann's *Geschichte der Philosophie*. This sketch schematizes the Coleridgean system of faculties in terms of the lowest and highest in the human scale. That Coleridge drew these scales twice, laying them side by side with the lowest to highest on the left and the highest to lowest on the right highlights how the faculties are complementaries on a pole. The polarity is emphasized by his inclusion of a bar, on both scales, between the higher and lower understanding. When the understanding is, as Coleridge described it, "impregnated" with the imagination, then the understanding "becomes intuitive, and a living power."[23]

The scale sketched in Tennemann describes the faculties in their order from the lowest level, from sense to reason, and from the highest level. The scales are drawn twice, in opposite orders, suggesting their mutual and corresponding generativity. In Coleridge's writings, reason is described as above both nature and the human scale, such that the human search for wisdom may approach reason, with that reason to be considered a "gift", rather than a faculty. On first appearances Coleridge presents us with what seems clearly to be a faculty psychology, yet he consistently denies that these powers are discrete faculties. When considered in terms of what we might loosely call the epistemological pole, the powers are seen in their proper light and then seen as incapable of division and separate operation, although for the purposes of inquiry they have been found to be distinguishable. A telling observation of Coleridge's is that, "it is a dull and obtuse mind, that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is a still worse, that distinguishes in order to divide." [24] Furthermore, Coleridge notes, "in every act of mind the man unites the properties of sense, understanding and reason. Nevertheless it is of great practical importance, that these distinctions should be made and understood."[25] Coleridge held that the primary and secondary imaginations were one power expressing different modes of operation. The secondary imagination, poetic or philosophic, unites the clarity of the understanding with the depth of reason, while the primary imagination, this time unconscious in its operation, unites "the plenitude of the sense with the comprehensibility of the understanding."[26] It is the imagination that generates symbols through which may be conveyed the ideas of reason, and it is this idea Coleridge expresses in the following definition of the imagination: "That reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors."[27] By virtue of the imagination's sensual 'incorporations' of reason, its symbols are 'consubstantial' with the conducted truths of reason. Such, for Coleridge, is imagination's role in the human connection with reason in its positive mode.

While reason (in its negative mode) in the understanding gives rise to contradiction, reason in the imagination gives rise to the unity of experienced nature. The constantly changing and aspect-shifting appearances of phenomena[28] are related, by the imagination, to the permanent "energies of reason" (*A Lay Sermon*). This relation allows consciousness a temporality, an access to time, by virtue of being aware of mutable presences with their essences.

From Chapter V of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge begins his history and critique of association "traced from Aristotle to Hartley." Aristotle emerges from

this critique relatively unscathed. Coleridge judges that "the wise Stagyrite" delivered a "just theory without pretending to an hypothesis", which is to say that Aristotle delivered his survey of the observed facts of association without placing these within the framework of a guiding fiction or fancied state-of-affairs. The same cannot be said of the modern associationist theories that Coleridge targeted. Descartes, for example, assumed nervous spirits to drive association by etching and re-etching "engravings on the brain". Other associationists supposed this movement to be more mechanical than nerve-spiritual. Later proponents of associationism hypothesized ether oscillating along solid fibres and hollow tubes. Later still, in Coleridge's day, theories involved electric light or the elective affinity of chemical compositions as driving association. Coleridge's objection to these hypotheses was threefold: they were more unfounded flights of fancy than proper science; they were created in the thrall of "the despotism of the eye", as if these physical relations could be seen, requiring only a powerful enough microscope to be made; they were metaphysically materialistic, whereas Aristotle's original theory had the virtue of being ontologically neutral.

Coleridge did not wish to do away with the theory of association; indeed he retained it within his system as the "universal law of passive fancy" [29], supplying objects to other faculties.

> The image-forming or rather re-forming power, the imagination in its passive sense, which I would rather call Fancy=Phantasy, a *phainein*, this, the Fetisch & Talisman of all modern Philosophers (the Germans excepted) may not inaptly be compared to the Gorgon Head, which looked death into every thing and this not by accident, but from the nature of the faculty itself, the province of which is to give consciousness to the Subject by presenting to it its conceptions objectively but the Soul differences itself from any other Soul for the purposes of symbolical knowledge by form or body only, but all form as body, i.e. as shape, & not as *forma efformans*[30], is dead. Life may be inferred, even as intelligence is from black marks on white paper, but the black marks themselves are truly "the dead letter". Here then is the error, not in the faculty itself, without which there would be no fixation, consequently, no distinct perception or conception, but in the gross idolatry of those who abuse it, & make that the goal & end which should only be a means of arriving at it. It is any excuse to him who treats a living being as inanimate Body, that we cannot arrive at the knowledge of the living Being but thro' the Body which is its Symbol & outward & visible Sign?[31]

In this passage, empiricism is alluded to as a dead system, looking death into all it gazes on, and Locke's simile of a blank tablet for the human mind is referred to as truly dead. The chief error is to take the products of fancy as the highest end and purpose of the human mind, when it is rather a means, albeit a necessary one, in the process of forming concepts from experience. The Lockean theory and, a fortiori, the wholly associationist Hartleian system, envision picture-theories of mind that achieve their end in the formation of concepts and the flow of associated images and concepts. Coleridge shrewdly observed that these theories fully apply not to the human mind taken as a whole, but only, and even then not completely, to a state of giddiness or delirium: "There is in truth but one state to which this theory applies at all, namely, that of complete light-headedness; and even to this it applies but partially, because the will and reason are perhaps never wholly suspended."[32]

Coleridge held that the result of perception is neither a true subject nor true object but rather the most original union of both. This union is a chief effect of the primary imagination. Imagination blends thoughts and intuitions allowing for the very possibility of perception and, after that, allowing us to see beyond transitory phenomena into what Coleridge often referred to as the life of things: *natura*

naturans. Coleridge did not expect his ideas to be well received, or even understood by the empiricists of his day:

> "Every system, which is under the necessity of using terms not familiarized by the metaphysics in fashion, will be described as written in an unintelligible style, and the author must expect the charge of having substituted learned jargon for clear conception; while, according to the creed of our modern philosophers, nothing is deemed a clear conception, but what is representable by a distinct image. Thus the conceivable is reduced within the bounds of the picturable."[33]

Coleridge's position regarding the imagination in *Bigraphia Literaria* had been germinating for at least twenty years. In his lecture on the slave trade, Coleridge presented his earliest definition of the imagination. The imitation of creativeness by combination would, twenty years later, become the fancy and imagination would retain its key position in Coleridge's thinking. In this early statement we see that Coleridge places his hope for humanity not in the self-satisfied delight of creativeness through combination, but in the splendid possibilities and real excellence that imagination inspires. Without imagination, the optimistic motive for social improvement would be doomed to wither and fail. The dying motive to be revivified was the feeling of hope inspired by the early days of the French Revolution. Coleridge's theory of the imagination aspired to be more than merely a tool to understand the difference between good poetry and bad.

> To develope the powers of the Creator is our proper employment – and to imitate Creativeness by combination our most exalted and self-satisfying Delight. But we are progressive and must not rest content with present Blessings. Our Almighty Parent hath therefore given to us Imagination that stimulates to the attainment of real excellence by the contemplation of splendid Possibilities that still revivifies the dying motive within us, and fixing our eye on the glittering Summits that rise one above the other in the Alpine endlessness still urges us up the ascent of Being, amusing the ruggedness of the road with the beauty and grandeur of the ever-widening Prospect. Such and so noble are the ends for which this restless faculty was given us – but horrible has been its misapplication.
>
> 'Lecture on the Slave Trade', 16th June 1795.

Twenty years later Coleridge wrote his most famous paragraphs on fancy and imagination:

> The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. 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 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 re-create; 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.
>
> Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phaenomenon of the will which we express with the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.
>
> *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. 1, Chapter XIII.

Coleridge dictated these arresting sentences in the summer of 1815, as he did the majority of *Biographia Literaria*. Fancy is entirely distinguished from imagination,

enjoying its play with fixities and definites. The last sentence of Chapter XIV rates fancy as "drapery": "Finally, GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole." Coleridge deemed fanciful work as not only more casual and superficial than imagination but as of an altogether different order. One reason for this transcendental distinction was that fancy represented the only creativity possible under the various systems of British empiricism while his concept of the imagination developed quite differently, with his encounter with German transcendental philosophy. Various British authors before Coleridge had proffered distinctions between fancy and imagination; indeed coining variations on this very distinction was a fashionable parlour game among aesthetes of the 18th Century. Coleridge's originality in this matter lies on the weight and meaning he gives to the terms. Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination can clearly be read as part of a system that retained a place for British empiricism, a necessary one, but one within the lower orders of the system. Coleridge found the associationism of the empiricists as completely unable to account for artistic genius and creativity. It seems that Coleridge never wholly abandoned any position he held, preferring to award spoils from the succeeding system. In retaining elements of empiricism in his philosophy of "spiritual realism," Coleridge upheld Leibniz's injunction to "collect the fragments of truth scattered throughout systems apparently the most incongruous."[34]

Primary imagination is an unconscious act necessary for all human perception. Imagination becomes secondary, in either its poetic or philosophical form, when it becomes conscious, or at least moves closer to consciousness. In 'On Poesy or Art', Coleridge wrote that "there is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius." In the *Notes and Lectures on Shakespeare* he described a "genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper even than our consciousness."

Coleridge's notion of genius was bold, for he did not talk only of one artist's genius for representation, another thinker's genius for synthesis, and so on with particular exceptional abilities. Rather, he directed his words to genius in general as that which reflects nature exemplified by events and phenomena; the artist polishes such forms in consciousness to make nature thought:

> In the objects of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements, steps, and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness, and therefore to the full development of the intelligential act; and man's mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature. Now, so to place these images, totalized and fitted to the limits of the human mind, as to elicit from, and to superinduce upon, the forms themselves the moral reflections to which they approximate, to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature–this is the mystery of genius in the fine arts. Dare I add that the genius must act on the feeling, that body is but a striving to become mind–that it is mind in its essence?
>
> In every work of art there is a reconcilement of the external with the internal; the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it. Yes, not to acquire cold notions–lifeless technical rules–but living and life-producing ideas, which shall contain their own evidence, the certainty that they are essentially one with the germinal causes in nature–his consciousness being the focus and mirror of both–for this does the artist for a time abandon the external realm in order to return to it with a complete sympathy with its internal and actual. For of all we see, hear, feel, and touch the substance is and must be in ourselves.
>
> 'On Poesy or Art', 1818 lecture.

Coleridge coined the term "desynonymization" in his *Biographia Literaria* to help explain his distinction between fancy and imagination. Indeed his use of these terms required careful explanation because Coleridge inverted the traditional meanings of "fancy" and "imagination". "Fancy", whose root is the Greek "*phantasia*", originally meant a free play of the mind not tied to specific or definite images. "Imagination", insofar as it sometimes expressed a different meaning from fancy, traditionally referred to the capacity to generate images in the mind. In Coleridge's inversion, imagination became the higher, more creative, faculty and fancy became that by which we create fixed and definite images. Coleridge explains, "It is not, I own, easy to conceive a more opposite translation of the Greek *Phantasia* than the Latin *Imaginatio*; but it is equally true that in all societies there exists an instinct of growth, a certain collective, unconscious good sense working progressively to desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning." On desynonymization, Coleridge believed, as he remarked in the fifth of his philosophical lectures, that, "The whole process of human intellect is gradually to desynonymize terms."

Coleridge provided many examples, taken mainly from English poetry, of fancy and imagination to illustrate his distinction. Here is one example of fancy:

> And like a lobster boyl'd the Morn
> From black to red began to turn.

No imaginative power could sanely fuse together the various images and meanings in this burlesque example of fancy at play, and fancy is defined as entirely different in kind from imagination. Butler's lines are as deliberately burlesque as Otway's, "Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and ships of amber"- another product of fancy, coincidently mentioning lobsters, given by Coleridge. Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis' is the source of the following example of fancy adduced by Coleridge:

> Full gently now she takes him by the hand,
> A lily prison'd in a gaol of snow,
> Or ivory in an alabaster band;
> So white a friend engirts so white a foe.

Here fancy aggregates various images as similes to represent the goddess's hand taking that of her mortal lover. In each image – the lily, the gaol, snow, ivory and alabaster – a likeness is shown, but the images, as "fixities and definites", do not cohere; there is "no connexion natural or moral, but [they] are yoked together by the poet by means of some accidental coincidence."[35]

Choice, "an empirical phenomenon of the will", rather than the will as principle of the mind's being, has selected by association these images. The properties of the various images are merely "aggregated" and not "co-adunated" (fittingly assembled), so they cannot interfuse to mutual enrichment. Coleridge speculates here that Shakespeare employed fancy in order to distance his poetry from a cloying subject matter: "Shakespeare writes in this poem, as if he were of another planet, charming you to gaze on the movements of Venus and Adonis, as you would on the dances of two vernal butterflies." Because the products of fancy produce "fixities and definites" that neither intermingle with each other, nor interfuse with the mind (of the poet or reader), they can be used to effect various moods all typified by a certain distance from the subject being considered or presented. In his earliest traced desynonymization of fancy and imagination, Coleridge noted that "Definites, be they Sounds or Images, must be thought of either as being or as capable of being, out of us", that is to say, external to us in a way that cannot be said of imagination's products. He continues, "Nay, is this not faulty?–– for an Imagination quoad Imagination cannot be thought of as capable of being out

of us. Answer. No. For while we imagine, we never do think thus. We always think of it as an it, & intimately mix the Thing & the Symbol."

Staying with "Venus and Adonis", Coleridge quotes an example of poetic imagination:

> Look! how bright a star shooteth from the sky
> So glides he in the night from Venus' eye.

"How many images and feelings", comments Coleridge, "are here brought together without effort and without discord, in the beauty of Adonis, the rapidity of his flight, the yearning, yet hopelessness, of the enamored gazer, while a shadowy ideal character is thrown over the whole!" Here imagination co-adunates separable meanings into one whole. Importantly, the reader's activity is also brought into play in this process. "You feel him to be a poet," notes Coleridge, "inasmuch as for a time he has made you one––an active creative being." (*Lectures on Shakespeare*, I: 251)

"You may conceive the difference in kind between the Fancy and the Imagination in this way, that if the check of the senses and the reason were withdrawn, the first would become delirium and the last mania."[36] It is an interesting observation that an excess of fancy tends towards delirium, whereas an excess of imagination may lead to mania. Fancy is moved by association, with one impression recalling others in more or less rapid succession, like the free association of the psychoanalysts. This delirium is a state of excitement and mental confusion, sometimes accompanied by hallucinations. Working mainly with images, fancy brings together elements that are only accidentally related into a sometimes delightful, sometimes nightmarish, nonsense. Imagination, on the other hand, works to fuse, unite and create meaningful wholes. When the influence of the senses and the reason are reduced, the mind may move towards mania, formulating ever-greater units and systems of meaning around one central idea. The central idea at the hub cannot bear to carry such a burgeoning weight of significance.

The secondary imagination may be enjoined to the task of, "awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."[37]

Fancy is, "always the ape, and too often the adulterator and counterfeit of our memory."[38] Passive fancy can become habituated and contribute to that "film of familiarity" that the poetic or philosophical imagination is tasked to replace with "the loveliness of the treasures of the world."[39] The lethargy of custom holds sway when the mind remains among passive fancy's ready-made fixities and definites rather than rise to its active and creative potential. When the active fancy is set to choose its images, there is the reduction of "the conceivable within the bounds of the picturable." In Chapter VI of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge shows the active fancy being involved in the creation of Hartley's theory of "vibratiuncles" and as factitiously picturing something that cannot be seen, satisfying "the despotism of the eye" by promising that if we had better eyesight, then these unobservables could in fact be observed.

For Coleridge, the principle of life is individuation. This unifying principle in life both creates the unified life-world of an organism and also holds it somewhat apart as an individual in the world. Primary imagination perceives a unified landscape, "a oneness, even as nature, the greatest of poets, acts upon us, when we open our eyes upon an extended prospect."[40] Secondary imagination creates meaningful relations; fancy, however, simply brings together fixities & definites that

do not meaningfully belong together. Empiricism divides the world into smaller components, but it can't very well put it back together again. In *Theory of Life*, Coleridge writes of "the power which discloses itself from within as the principle of unity in many." Here he also describes "totality dawning into individuation" with the development of life. The unity in multeity becomes "more intense in proportion as it constitutes each particular thing a whole of itself; and yet more, again, in proportion to the number and interdependence of the parts which it unites as a whole."[41] As primary imagination allows for perception itself, secondary imagination expresses and intensifies (this verb is a Coleridgeism) perception's unity in multeity of organically related parts in a whole. It is the imagination's symbolic activity that works with this unity in multeity.

Fixities and definites are opaque, and analogies are opaque, which is to say that they do not, on their own, allow us to see through them into what they are intended to represent. The imagination, however, allows the symbol to emerge as translucence. Not only do they allow the intended object to be seen in and through them, they allow the logical object to be conceived in the first place, just as light is not clearly seen until it is "held" diffused in a diamond or crystal. Here is an example from Coleridge. The beautiful image of the pond-skater and its motion reflected on the sunny bottom of the stream appears in Coleridge's ongoing discussion of association in Chapter Seven of *Biographia Literaria* as follows:

> Now let a man watch his mind while he is composing, or [...] while he is trying to recollect a name; and he will find the process completely analogous. Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little the animal wins its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary fulcrum for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. (In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the imagination. But in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary controul over it.)

When in the act of composition, or trying to recollect a name, the mind allows the stream of associations to flow until it feels confident to make the leap and land on the sought word it was seeking. Coleridge's introspection of the involuntary stream and the active thinker waiting to make a move at the appropriate time is a masterpiece of subtle psychological observation. Coleridge evokes a natural phenomenon to grasp the process of thinking and understanding in metaphorical language. The movement of the pond-skater, gliding now by the current, now against it, visually stands for two opposite powers at work while thinking, for example while writing poetry. The active phase is an exertion of the will, the passive phase surrendering to the power of the current. Active and passive only in relation to each other, Coleridge adds, because the moment when the pond-skater ceases to resist the current and yields to it for a short duration is still a moment of, as it were, choice, which moment of choice is more literal in the human psychological example that the pond-skater charmingly emblemizes. The dialectic of the motions propels the process. Concerning the creative process, in the active, self-conscious phase the mind is in control, and makes, for instance, compositional decisions. Whereas in the passive phase it is controlled through a reliance on the inspiration from the

materials it works upon. Coleridge's passage emphasizes the necessity of their balance.

Katherine Wheeler, who tirelessly edited many of Coleridge's previously unpublished manuscripts, claims that the metaphorical passages in *Biographia* most often thematize the act of understanding, and should be read self-reflexively. I think the water-insect passage in particular refers the reader to their own self-experience, to observe their own processes of thinking.[42]

Engell and Bate, Coleridge's editors for the Bollingen editions of the *Collected Coleridge* volumes, interpret the water-insect metaphor as anticipating the definition of imagination in *Biographia Literaria's* Chapter Thirteen. For them, the phrase "in all its degrees and determinations" differentiates the degrees there named as primary and secondary imagination. That state which is passive in relation to the other can thus be interpreted as the primary imagination of perception, which is an instinctive reflex of the mind. The water-insect yields to the power of the mightier current as the mind yields to a myriad of stimuli and composes a living picture of the surrounding world. Engell and Bate, conversely, interpret the active state as being the secondary, poetic imagination, which co-exists "with the conscious will." The act of will instigates and controls the poetic imagination: "This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities." It seems to me that Engell and Bate might be mistaken here, because in that passage Coleridge writes that between the active and the passive powers lies the intermediate faculty of imagination. Imagination as a faculty (comprising primary and secondary imagination) cannot be the intermediate between primary and secondary imagination, as Engell and Bate's interpretation would read.

The intermediate aspect of imagination is explicitly described in *Biographia*. Coleridge's grasp of imagination as a mediating term is perhaps best understood in light of his discussion of the strength of thinking in:

> leaving a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other, when it is, as it were, hovering between images. As soon as it is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination– a strong working of the mind.[43]

A will exists, insists Coleridge, "whose function it is to control, determine, and modify the phantasmal chaos of association."[44] It is clear that Coleridge is not merely talking about Hartley's theory here, but about the chaos of free consciousness itself. Even as Coleridge enacts a form of stream-of-consciousness, and enacts a considerable feat of memory, he warns against that enactment. For what is stream-of-consciousness, really, besides a stream of association? It is interspersed with acts of will, for one thing. For Coleridge the "Act of Will" accordingly becomes not only the basis of the "PRINCIPLE, in which BEING AND THOUGHT COINCIDE," but also "the original and perpetual Epiphany" (Notebooks 3: note 4265). It also supports a prospective view of humanity in which "the will, and with the will all acts of thought and attention, are ... distinct powers, whose function it is to controul, determine, and modify the phantasmal chaos of association" (*Biographia* 1:116). In Coleridge's system, association provides a chaotic stream of material to be shaped and directed according to the uses decided by the will, sometimes inspired by reason and imagination, usually determined by understanding, and often directed back to the play of fancy and whim.

More needs to be said to clarify the mysterious place and all-important role of reason in Coleridge's system. In the foregoing, we noted the role of reason in its

negative mode as the principle of contradiction. This is placed squarely in the lower understanding. When this principle itself is reflected upon, the thinking mind is apt to be impressed by the principle's universality of applicability, and a glimmer of positive reason is perceived. Positive reason in the human mind is more clearly observed in the use of symbolism, whereby imagination works to schematize the invisible Form or Idea into a "living educt", a symbol to be imaginatively approached and contemplated, "consubstantial" with the idea itself. This idea is, of course, platonic, and we could do worse than consider Coleridge's Platonism as we approach what he meant by the ideas of reason. Coleridge considered himself a congenital Platonist, believing that all people fall naturally into one of two general kinds regarding the use of reason.

> 'Every man is born an Aristotelian, or a Platonist. I do not think it possible that any one born an Aristotelian can become a Platonist; and I am sure no born Platonist can ever change into an Aristotelian. They are the two classes of men, beside which it is next to impossible to conceive a third. The one considers reason a quality, or attribute; the other considers it a power. I believe that Aristotle never could get to understand what Plato meant by an idea. ... Aristotle was, and still is, the sovereign lord of the understanding: the faculty judging by the senses. He was a conceptualist, and never could raise himself into that higher state, which was natural to Plato, and has been so to others, in which the understanding is distinctly contemplated, and, as it were, looked down upon, from the throne of actual ideas, or living, inborn, essential truths.'

Table Talk, 2nd Edition, p. 95.

Aristotle was a conceptualist, according to Coleridge, who never thought beyond the concepts of the understanding. He considered reason to be a quality, or attribute of the mind, of a discourse, or a proposition, and so on. Plato, on the other hand, considered reason to be a power. Coleridge does not elaborate his meaning here, but perhaps we can imagine this power as similar to the Heraclitean *logos*, to Lao Tze's *Tao*, and, as Coleridge related several times, to Baconian laws of nature.

Plato's allegory, itself imagistic, of the prisoners in the cave, in Book VII of *The Republic*, addresses the problem of appearance, the image and their relation to reality. These prisoners compete for honours by creating systems to explain the reality and meaning of the shadows projected before them by a fire behind, unseen due to their severe neck shackles. One prisoner escapes from the cave into the dazzling world outside, but he can at first only look at shadows, then colours, then three-dimensional objects, eventually to face the sun itself. When he tries to free the remaining prisoners from their bondage to a world of inconstant shadows, he finds that they would rather kill him than allow him to rend them from the only world and reality they know.

By his own account, Coleridge was a Platonist. Although Plato illustrated philosophy with some of the subject's most beautiful and memorable images, the official role of imagination in his system is rather a lowly one. Indeed Plato's esteem for poetry was notably low. In *The Ion* he denounced *rhapsode* as magnetism rather than mastery – a divinely inspired magnetic *dynamis* rather than more rational *techne*. Of course, this divine inspiration does provide assurance of poetry's exalted origin, but on the other hand, it is to be seen as a gift from the gods, and not as the product of mastery and expertise. It was the imaginative bias of the poets that led Plato to expel them from his ideal Republic. This contrasts starkly with the importance of imagination in Coleridge's system. For Coleridge imagination is the faculty relating the human mind most closely to God (although one could argue that this might be true in Plato too).

Certainly Coleridge accepted Plato's metaphysics. Here we see, neatly set in the image of the divided line from *The Republic* (509d-511e), reality divided into the realm of the Forms, or Ideas, and the sensible world. The realm of the Forms, the intelligible world of universals, consists of the higher Forms reflected by the lower region of concepts and mathematical Forms. The sensible world then reflects the realm of the Forms, with particular sensible objects that are in turn reflected in the mere images or shadows of things. The metaphysical division between the realm of the Forms and the sensible world is reflected in the epistemological division between knowledge, which relates to Forms, and opinion or conjecture, relating to the sensible world. In knowledge, pure reason relates to the higher Forms, while concepts and mathematical Forms make up the province of the understanding, subsuming the particular under the general. In opinion, sensible things are accessible through sense perception and belief, with the lowly imagination being left with the mere images of things. Hereby imagination is placed three distinct removes from the truest reality of the higher Forms. Indeed it is four distinct removes from ultimate reality, which originates in the Form of the Good, from which originate the harmony and beauty we may contemplate in all of the other Forms. Elsewhere Plato describes imagination as an "inner artist painting pictures in the soul" (*Philebus*, 39c). This "inner artist" provides a mnemonic service, as "memory is like a block of wax into which our perceptions and thoughts stamp impressions" (*Theatetus*, 191c, d).[45]

For Plato, thinking with created images involved a lower consciousness of reality than even sense perception and belief. Our memory's retentive capacity is essentially imagistic in its storing of impressions, and this capacity is less attuned to reality than direct contemplation of the Forms. Between the imagistic impression and the contemplation of the Forms, is the written word. With the written word, impressions are made on paper, a tablet, a screen and so on, and these impressions record relations between concepts, although these relations and concepts cannot always be faithfully retrieved with the same meaning with which they were originally inscribed. This is part of the problem that Plato describes in *The Phaedrus,* when Socrates calls writing a *pharmakon.* The *pharmakon,* the drug, is both remedy and poison.

While Plato reserved a very humble place for imagination and the image in his system, there was indeed a place for them there. Plato found their inclusion necessary, not least to allow the actual transmission and illustration of his teaching into other minds. But with Plato's ideal being the contemplation of the Forms beyond image and concept, he would certainly not have agreed with Aristotle's view that, "the soul never thinks without a mental image (*phantasma*)."[46] On this point Coleridge seems close to Aristotle's position, but not exactly. Coleridge noted that, "A whole Essay might be written on the danger of thinking without images."[47] Coleridge's note here, although in a similar spirit to Aristotle's, contradicts Aristotle. If Coleridge believed that the soul *never* thought without images, then he would not have been able to speak of the dangers of doing so. What Coleridge feared here, reminiscent of Kant, was the danger of thinking with concepts only, unaided by images. This would not be to contradict Plato, because for the thoroughgoing Platonist, there is no possibility of thinking in terms of Forms or Ideas. The Ideas can be contemplated but not conceived, or turned into concepts and used as fixed and definite counters. Here is the fuller quote from Coleridge's letter to Josiah Wedgewood: "She interested me a good deal;" Coleridge wrote of Wedgewood's late governess, "she appears to me to have been injured by going out of the common way without any of that Imagination, which if it be a Jack o'Lanthorn

to lead us out of that way is however at the same time a Torch to light us whither we are going. A whole Essay, […etc.].” The injury came from thinking in concepts only, traversing unknown terrain dialectically without the guiding lights, though they have their own Jack O’Lanthorn-like dangers, afforded by imagination. Coleridge held that we ought to think also with imaginative symbols, which he thought of as educts of ideas, and not aim to think by concepts alone.

In a platonic vein, Coleridge discoursed on “Ideas of Reason.” He distinguished them, parallel to Plato’s distinguishing them from *mathemata* and the theorems of *dianoia*, from“conceptions of the Understanding.” With this very distinction, came the problem of defining the Ideas of Reason. If Ideas of Reason transcended concepts, then their definition would appear to be impossible. A conception of an Idea would only be the shadow of an Idea and would, of course, remain a concept. Coleridge was very much alive to this problem, “Ideas and Conceptions are utterly disparate, and Ideas and Images are the negatives of each other.”[48] This problem much exercised the neo-platonists, one of whose discourses was entitled ‘A Discourse on Truth, Which Cannot be Discussed.’ Coleridge could find no convenient *gradus ad philosophiam* from concepts to Ideas. In Ideas he saw the union of universal with particular, much as Hegel saw the Notion as unifying particularity, universality and individuality as the concrete universal (without their predicated universals, subjects would not be individuals at all, so universals are not just those predicates which group different individuals together). Particulars share a pervading identity or universal, which is the soul of the particulars. Coleridge describes the identity or universal of a particular as its “Law”, a Law “constitutive” of phenomena and “In the order of thought necessarily antecedent” to them revealing fragments of the Ideal world distinguished, “*not from the real, but from the phenomenal.*”[49]

Coleridge presents us with objects perceived in experience and asks us to consider their predicates as universals. In the light of Ideas, particulars are seen and understood as individualizations of universals. The Law is that in phenomena which is antecedent to and constitutive of the objects in our experience. Coleridge understood Plato’s Ideas as “Living Laws” imbued with particularity.[50] The aim of these Living Laws in human life is “to present that which is necessary as a whole consistently with the moral freedom of each particular act.”[51] Coleridge sees evidence of a “directing idea” which shapes our ends, as “a chain of necessity, the particular links of which are free acts.”[52] “You may see an Idea working in a man by watching his tastes and enjoyments, though he may hitherto have no consciousness of any other reasoning than that of conception and facts.”[53] Indeed, “All men live in the power of Ideas which work in them, though few live in their light.”[54] We detect here that for Coleridge, human Reason and its relation to Ideas was not entirely conscious. While Coleridge held Aristotle to be the undisputed master of the Understanding, Plato surveyed the Understanding from a higher vantage and, “as it were, looked down upon, from the throne of actual ideas, or living, inborn, essential truths.”[55]

In his seminal criticism, Coleridge holds up Shakespeare as literature’s master of the Ideal. “In every one of his characters we find ourselves communing with the same human nature. Everywhere we find the same human nature. Everywhere we find individuality, nowhere mere portraiture. The excellence of his productions is the union of the universal with the particular. But the universal is the Idea. Shakespeare therefore studied mankind in the Idea of the human race, and he followed out that Idea in all its varieties by a method that never failed to guide his steps aright.” (*Preliminary Treatise on Method*, p. 41). How may we hope to access,

like Shakespeare, the Ideas and live in their light? According to Coleridge's metaphysics, we all live in the power of Ideas, but it is another thing to befriend wisdom and live in, and choose to be guided by, their light. Could we not be mistaken in identifying the light of an Idea? After all, Coleridge held Aristotle, the genius of the Understanding known for centuries simply as 'The Philosopher', to be a conceptualist unable to raise himself to that higher state natural to Plato. How could we tell if we had ever been, or have failed to be, illuminated by an Idea? Surely it could not come directly from sensory experience. Nor would it come from what we could generalize from such experience, as that would rather be a conceptual booty, rightfully the acquisition of the understanding.

Although many thinkers since and including Plato have appealed to different manners of Ideas being innate, Coleridge did not accept that as a feasible option. Echoing the Cambridge Platonists, whom he admired from a distance, he repudiated the doctrine of innate ideas. Far from Coleridge's position was Descartes' conception of clear and distinct innate ideas. Although Descartes' model gave ideas independence from perception and will, it was an absurdity that Coleridge could not entertain because of Descartes' "fanciful hypothesis" of "configurations of the brain which were as so many moulds to the influxes of the external world".[56] Indeed Kant's apparent support of Cartesian innate ideas was a distinct point where Coleridge parted company from Kant, as Coleridge's spiritual realism opposed Kant's idealism. Coleridge did, however, agree that the configuration of the mind was endowed with "instincts and offices of Reason". With Kant, he saw these as necessary for experience, bringing "a unity into all our conceptions and several knowledges. On this all system depends; and without this we could reflect connectedly neither in nature nor on our own minds."[57] Coleridge's originality here was in insisting that the unifying idea must be found as arising out of experience and not as superimposed on it. Abstractions of thought, as much as perceptions and images, may well obstruct the unifying principle and must be surmounted if we would ascend to the Idea. Coleridge called for that experience in which outer and inner is united – wherein the whole experiencing mind is surveyed. From this survey Ideas such as life, freedom and our deeper purposes arise in our mind neither as objects given nor as impositions from our nature but "as deep calling to deep in the self-evolution of truth."[58] This unity would come from a ground common to mind and world: Coleridge's *ens realissimum*.

This most real being would be the ground for all other realities and Ideas seen in their unity and truth. As such it was, after a Platonic fashion, the *Idea Idearum*, the Idea of Ideas. "The grand problem, the solution of which forms the final object and distinctive character of philosophy, is this: for all that exists conditionally (that is, the existence of which is inconceivable except under the conditions of its dependency on some other as its antecedent) to find a ground that is unconditioned and absolute, and thereby to reduce the aggregate of human knowledge to a system."[59] Coleridge argued the indisputability of this ground from two facts. Firstly, scientific inquiry seeks the relations, or laws, as the ground of phenomena. Secondly, we conceive of a "ground common to the world and man", which forms "the link or mordant by which philosophy becomes scientific and the sciences philosophical."[60] This ground would account for the general unity of experience, the general concord of reason and experience. This was the ground that Hume declared did not exist – that our expectation of the sun rising tomorrow, or of a purse full of gold left on the pavement at Charing-Cross flying away like a feather are merely inferences brought about by the habits of witnessing constant

conjunctions of similarly associated events, the mind merely being "determined by custom to infer the one appearance from the other”.[61]

This same ground Kant essayed to defend with the transcendental unity of apperception: if the real causes of events could not be shown for things themselves, then at least phenomena might be shown to be necessarily unified in experience. But Coleridge did not set about to show the unity of experience alone. As Hume had shown, this ground is not reachable by induction. “If we use only the discursive reason we must be driven from ground to ground, each of which would cease to be a ground the moment we pressed in it. We either must be whirled down the gulf of an infinite series, thus making our reason baffle the end and purpose of all reason, namely unity and system, or we must break off the series arbitrarily and affirm an absolute something which is *causa sui.*”[62] The option of affirming a *causa sui* provides a break from the logic of the understanding, but this arbitrary break, was not seriously considered by Coleridge.

We do, however know of one causative thing, and we know it from the inside, namely the will. Coleridge gave priority to the will in human and universal consciousness. Coleridge approached the Idea via an act of will. “It is at once the distinctive and constitutive basis of my philosophy that I place the ground and genesis of my system, not, as others, in a fact impressed, much less in a generalization from facts collectively, least of all in an abstraction embodied in an hypothesis, in which the pretended solution is most often but a repetition of the problem in disguise. In contradiction to this, I place my principle in an *act* – in the language of the grammarians I begin with the verb – but the act involves its reality” (*Opus Maximum*). This affirmation of action is not the same as the Faust of Goethe who declared, “*Im Anfang war die Tat*!” (In the beginning was the deed!), for this act of Coleridge’s is his human access to the Idea, it says nothing of God or of the Word – also the Idea is held as anteceding the deed.

Coleridge’s major divergences from Kant can be seen to stem from his Platonism.

For Coleridge's “ideas of Reason” were not an innate conduit to extra-phenomenal reality. Rather he appreciated them as mental products and correspondents, and as the culminating stage of conscious development, mental counterparts of the laws of nature themselves. These counterparts stand as “correlatives that suppose each other.” Here Coleridge harmonizes with Schelling, who wrote in his *Natürphilosophie* that “Mind is invisible Nature; Nature visible Mind.” The Ideas are, in other words, “living and life producing ideas, which . . . are essentially one with the germinal causes in nature,” and so are “constitutive” of the generative principles which they represent in the realm of awareness. Reason in Coleridge’s system, it must be stressed, is not a faculty, even as imagination and understanding can be thought of as faculties.

Coleridge remained loyal to the neoplatonists he studied and said that Plotinus provided “the statement in his most beautiful language of the only possible form of philosophic Realism,” as well as furnished “the demonstration of it by one of the most masterly pieces of exhaustive logic found in ancient or modern writings.” “Let the attempt of Plotinus have ended in failure, yet who could see the courage and skill, with which he seizes the reins and vaults into the chariot of the sun, without sharing his enthusiasm and taking honour to the human mind even to have fallen from such magnificent daring?”[63] Coleridge was defending Plotinus’s principle, which Tennemann “so cavalierly kicked out of the ring,” that, namely, whatever is necessary to reality is necessarily real itself. Plotinus demonstrated, rallied Coleridge, that “a knowledge of Ideas is a constant process of involution and

evolution, different from the concepts of the understanding in this respect only, that no reason can be brought for the affirmation, because it *is* reason. The soul (for example) contemplates its principle (which is) the universal in itself, as a particular, i.e. knows that this truth is *involved* and *vice versa evolves itself from its principle*." Here we find the beauty of the poet-philosopher's quarry, the identity of act and object in the neoplatonic act of contemplation, an act involving the reality of the Idea.

---

[1] Bowyer, but in Coleridge's mis-remembered spelling.

[2] *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. I

[3] 'Religious Musings', *Coleridge's Works*, vol. VII, ed. Shedd, p. 81, New York, Harper & Bros., 1864.

[4] Coleridge was the first person to use the term "marginalia" (he used it in a letter to describe his notes in margins), although Edgar Allen Poe was first to have the word published. This note has been dated by Jackson (1969) as written between July, 1818, and March, 1819. Coleridge referred to Tennemann's *History of Philosophy* while preparing his series of philosophical lectures, which ended on 29 March 1819. Coleridge also coined the words 'intensify', 'mammonolatry', 'desynonymization', 'psycho-analytic', 'darwinize', 'interpenetration', and 'esemplastic', to name but a few of the concepts he contributed to the English language.

[5] *What Coleridge Thought*, pp. 101-102, The Barfield Press, San Rafael, CA, 2006.

[6] *The Statesman's Manual* (1816). At the end of his life, Coleridge resided in Highgate with Gillman, his friend and doctor. In Gillman's copy of *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge amended the word "product" to "artefacts". This is noted in W.J. Bate, *Coleridge*, London, Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 1968.

[7] *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XIV.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Coined by Coleridge in *Biog. Lit.* to denote a power to unite disparate elements into a whole. This word is perhaps an attempt to translate Schelling's *ineinsbildung*.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Lectures on Shakespeare*, I: 251.

[12] *Ibid.*, Ch. CXII.

[13] *Ibid.*, Ch. CXII

[14] *Aids to Reflection.*

[15] *What Coleridge Thought*, Barfield, Owen, p. 24.

[16] *Biographia Literaria*, I: 164.

[17] *The Statesman's Manual,* Shedd, I: 450 (penultimate page).

[18] Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life, Coleridge, S. T., p. 578, ed. Seth B. Watson, 1848.

[19] *The Friend*, 'The Landing Place', Essay V, ed. Shedd, vol II, p.148.

[20] *Logic*, Pt I: ChII, p.69, ed. Jackson, J.R., 1981.

[21] *Aids to Reflection,* Appendix B, Shedd, vol. 1, p. 464.

[22] *The Statesman's Manual*, Shedd, vol. 1.

[23] Appendix B, *The Statesman's Manual*, Shedd, vol. 1.

[24] *Aids to Reflection*, Aphorism XXVI.

---

[25] *The Friend*, The Landing Place, Essay III, p. 164, ed. Shedd.

[26] *Aids to Reflection,* p.375.

[27] *The Statesman's Manual*, p.35, London, 1816.

[28] This problem proved a thorny one in A. J. Ayer's radically empirical phenomenalism, a theory which essayed to show that the appearance of the phenomenon (pardon the apparent pleonasm) was logically equivalent to its being. *Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936.

[29] *Biographia Literaria*, 1:104.

[30] Coleridge's term for the form-forming form as opposed to the formed form- active form rather than passive shape. This term is clarified in a footnote in *The Friend*, "The word Nature has been used in two senses, viz. Actively and passively; energetic (= *forma formans*), and material (= *forma formata*)."

[31] *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. V.

[32] *Biographia Literaria*, 1: Ch. 6.

[33] Biographia Literaria, 1: Thesis X.

[34] Quoted in *Biog. Lit.*, Ch. XII, Everyman, pp. 140-141.

[35] *Table Talk*, 23 June, 1834.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XIV.

[38] *Ibid.*, Ch. XXIV.

[39] *Ibid.*, Ch. XIV.

[40] Lectures 1818, quoted *Biographia Literaria*, vol. II.

[41] *Hints Towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life*, ed. Watson, Seth B., London: John Churchill, 1848, p. 44.

[42] *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge's* Biographia Literaria, Katherine M. Wheeler, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

[43] The Seventh Lecture (1811-12), *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism,* 1930, Harvard University Press.

[44] *Biog. Lit.,* Ch VII.

[45] The limitations of this image-making faculty were memorably described by Descartes, who in his *Meditations* argued in favour of pure reason when he tried to imagine the essence of wax balls, the properties of which he claimed could be clearly and distinctly grasped neither by imagination nor by sense, but only by what he called the mind alone.

[46] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 431a, 15-20.

[47] Letter to Josiah Wedgewood, All Saints' Day, 1800.

[48] *Semina Rerum, Audita, Cogitata, Cogitanda,* quoted in Alice D. Snyder, *Coleridge on Logic and Learning*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1929, pp.135-7.

[49] Cited in J. H. Muirhead, 1930 p. 98 from *Semina Rerum, Audita, Cogitata, Cogitanda,* p. 33.

[50] *The Friend*, 1: 492.

[51] Cited in Muirhead, p. 99.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] Muirhead, John H., ‘Cambridge Platonists’, *Mind,* vol. Xxxvi, p.172 n.

[57] *Aids to Reflection*, Aphorism XCVIIIc, 5.

[58] *Coleridge as Philosopher,* Muirhead, London: George Allen & Unwin, [1930] 1954, p. 102.

[59] *The Friend*, ed. Shedd, circa p. 420.

[60] *Ibid.*, Shedd, vol. ii, p.420.

[61] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume, Ch. VIII.

[62] *Biographia Literaria,* p. xii.

[63] Marginalia, in Tennemann’s *Geschichte der Philosophie.*