

The Dangers of Imagination: Coleridgean Dreams and Nightmares

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I. *Imagining Ideology*

‘It is with nations as with individuals.’ This well-known dictum of Coleridge’s from the *Statesman’s Manual* is at the analogical basis of several attempts of the past decades to recover Coleridge’s famous definition of the poetic imagination for an academic discussion that increasingly revolves around questions of (cultural) politics. Probably the most thorough re-evaluation of what he calls the ‘discursive figure of imagination’ was presented by Forest Pyle in his 1995 study *The Ideology of Imagination*.¹ For Pyle, Romantic imagination is inextricably linked to ideology, and he sees the poetic performance and/or philosophical assertions connected to the concept as inseparable from political as well as social matters. Pyle describes what he sees as the *ideological* power of imagination in the Romantic period: its function in Romantic texts to (re)present and thus to *create* by means of aesthetics a unity that could empirically only be diagnosed as absent. Ideological discourse is for Pyle not a form of ‘false consciousness’ but rather ‘the fundamental necessity of a representation of the social,’ and as it seeks to construct and implement a particular vision of social coherence and unity, it necessarily relies on the ability to *imagine* such a unity in the face of existing social divisions. (Pyle 1995, 3.)

Coleridge himself makes this ideological dimension of aesthetic and philosophical positions quite explicit when he presents his ‘Opinions in Religion and Politics’ in Chapter Ten of the *Biographia Literaria*. For when Coleridge discusses the factional political strife in Europe and England in the wake of the French Revolution he offers a *philosophical* solution to this political problem. He praises the knowledge of *principles* as the only effective and truly patriotic source of a lasting unanimity and a social coherence that would be based on transcendental and hence immutable moral feelings rather than on the whim of political opportunism. Coleridge is thus quite aware of the ideological positioning he executes when he finally comes to define imagination in Chapter Thirteen of the *Biographia*, and what he performs, Pyle suggests, is not a mere description of the way imagination operates, but rather an idealistic ‘institution’ of the way the faculty *should* work in order to fulfill its ideological mission:

Politics must henceforth be instituted through the imagination. Only the cultivation and institution of philosophical principles—precisely those that Coleridge finds in Kant and Schelling and that cohere in the concept of the imagination—can effectively govern both nation and

¹ Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination. Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

individual. The imagination, ostensibly a principle of self or faculty of mind, thus assumes in Coleridge's work a public, institutional role in the securing of the nation.

(Pyle 1995, 31.)

Yet Pyle is well aware that the Coleridgean text is by no means as straightforward as it might seem on first sight. For when the definition of imagination finally appears in the *Biographia*, it arrives not once, but twice, not singular but double. The philosophical 'institution' of the faculty that is called upon to unify and to heal a disruption within the self and the nation is seen itself to contain and to produce a rift. Imagination, which sees the light of day in Coleridge's text in primary and secondary form, is thus, its distinction from 'fancy' notwithstanding, 'doubly articulated,' as Pyle puts it, and the purported textual moment of unity is riddled with doubles, echoes, and repetitions. As much as it endeavors to enact a unifying process of reconnection, Pyle is able to show, Coleridge's definition necessarily draws attention to a state of difference and displacement within the self and analogically the nation, a divisive state that cannot be truly recovered. The originality of Pyle's reading lies in the fact that he goes beyond a traditional deconstructive approach, which would ultimately accuse Coleridge of an ideological position in the narrow sense, of an 'idealist and mystified investment in a divine power of mind.' (Pyle 1995, 37.) Far from simply falling prey to a mystification, Pyle suggests, the power of Coleridge's theory of imagination lies precisely in the fact that it does *not* presuppose the unity of the subject and by extension the cohesiveness of the nation but rather in that it *projects* them as a future potential, an 'imaginary outcome':

Taking into account the 'pure fiction' of the nation, Coleridge finds in the imagination both the condition of perception and social being *and* the principle of an *eventual* cohesion that can make the nation. Thus, the 'idealism' of Coleridge's theory enables the ideological purchase of the imagination.

(Pyle 1995, 57.)

II. *Dissolution and Dissipation*

What might seem troubling is thus reconstructed as a virtue by Pyle in his attempt to recover the 'purchase of the imagination' for academic critical discourse. I would argue, however, that it is necessary to take an even closer look at the problem of imagination and the ideological and metaphorical path of connection between the make-up of the self and the nation. For Coleridge's definition not only points to a rift that it is simultaneously called upon to heal, it also contains a principle of disruption and dissolution within itself. The secondary imagination after all is openly called upon to effect a disruption, a

poetic lifting of the ‘veil of familiarity’ created in the mind by the dead and mechanical relations of both understanding and fancy. The imaginative act of dissolution of the epistemologically necessary but dead ‘fixations’ of the fancy *should* be followed by a moment of poetic closure and an aesthetic recreation of the vital powers of reason and the primary imagination, which will allow the self to recognize and to embrace the divine Law. There can, however, be no guarantee that this moment of closure will actually take place, for is it not possible that the secondary imagination, as an act of poetic freedom might ‘dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate,’ yet *not* in order to recreate, or at least not to recreate in a way that is compatible with the principles of divine Law? What if more than the philosopher had wished for escaped from the Pandora’s box that opens up between the disruption of ‘the lethargy of custom’ and the closure enacted by the law of reason? The mental power able to reconceive the customary relations between thoughts and things and to recombine them entirely anew might after all fulfil its function *against* the subject’s will, in an imaginary process that takes place, to use one of Coleridge’s own expressions, while the subject ‘lies in a stupor,’ only semi-conscious and a hapless, helpless prey to a mental process beyond its rational influence.²

In this disturbing scenario, imagination would not appear as the desired ‘synthetic and magical power’, by virtue of which the poet ‘diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each’.³ It would rather emerge as the dangerous ‘mistress of the passions,’ a material trouble-maker connected to the unruly desires of the body, a guise in which it can equally be found in the history of Western philosophy, and which would not have been unfamiliar to Coleridge. A mere look at the dictionary can show us that the verb ‘to dissipate’ and the act of dissipation for example, which Coleridge attributes to the secondary imagination encapsulates almost comprehensively the main suspicions that one of Coleridge’s philosophical heroes, Immanuel Kant, to choose a prominent example, had held about the image-creating faculty: a wasteful squandering of energy without thought about the usefulness of the work, an intemperate indulgence in extravagant pleasure, excessive amusement, and a general state of physical and moral dissolution.⁴ The guilty conscience of the opium addict echoes subterraneously in the definitions of the philosopher, and contrary to what Coleridge asserts at the beginning of Chapter Fourteen, ‘the name of imagination’ has not been

² This loss of rational control in itself is not necessarily a problem for Coleridge. He is well aware that the divine aspects of the subject cannot be within its rational grasp, and that the subject thus depends for its “moral progress” on a submission and opening up to forces beyond its rational understanding. For this reason, the unconscious workings of imagination in dreams can have a moral effect for Coleridge, as David P. Haney has demonstrated in his reading of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*. (cf. David P. Haney, *The Challenge of Coleridge* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).) What *does* represent a very unsettling threat to Coleridge, however, is the fact that imagination might not be exclusively the instrument of the divine, and that the subject, precisely because of its necessary openness to the irrational, might thus fall prey to forces that are ultimately destructive to its moral integrity.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria I*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 16 vols. Vol. 7:1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 16.

⁴ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974).

‘exclusively appropriated’ in his definition for the ‘spirit of unity.’ Its distinction from fancy notwithstanding, imagination in its secondary and poetic form retains a spirit of dissemination, a power to exuberantly scatter, disperse, and disintegrate. Like the maenads who tear apart a Theseus too secure in his belief in the dominance of reason and the intellect, the secondary imagination thus retains the seed of danger for the self and the nation, both of which the faculty should simultaneously help to secure.

III. *A Self without a Center*

‘Whirled about without a center—as in a nightmare—no gravity—a vortex without a center’.⁵

If it takes some archaeological work to unearth such fears connected to imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge’s notebooks provide a much more explicit account in this regard. In particular Coleridge’s reflections on the nature of dreams and nightmares provide ample material for a view of imagination that has only a veiled presence in Coleridge’s ‘life in letters.’ The notebook entry from 1810 presented above, depicting a conscious self that witnesses its complete loss of control, its being ‘whirled about’ in a maelstrom of forces not of its own making, probably comes closest to the state, only indirectly present in the *Biographia*, which undercuts all the hopes and projections Coleridge sought to develop in his philosophico-literary autobiography. Coleridge’s recollection—not quite in tranquillity—of a nightmare at sea on his way to Malta in May 1804 gives us a vivid illustration of such a powerless self that finds itself—in its own interiority—at the mercy of external powers:

& of these Sleeps, these Horrors, these frightful Dreams of Despair when the sense of individual Existence is full & lively only <for one> to feel oneself powerless, crushed *in* by every power—a stifled boding, one abject miserable Wretch/ yet hopeless, yet struggling, removed from all touch of Life, deprived of all notion of Death/ strange mixture of Fear and Despair—& that *passio purissima*, that mere Passiveness with Pain (the essence of which is perhaps Passivity—& which our word—mere Suffering—well comprizes—) in which the Devils are the Antithesis of Deity, who is Actus Purissimus, and eternal Life, as they are an ever-living Death./—and all this vanishes on the casting off of ill-tasted Gas from the Stomach/ But O mercy! what a Dream to *expect* Death with what a pillow-mate for a Death-bed!
(CN II 2078)

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 2 of 4, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 3999. Subsequent references to the notebooks, abbreviated to volume number and entry are placed in the text.

The self here has lost precisely what is at the heart of Coleridge's endeavor in the *Biographia* and in his definition of imagination in particular: its connection to the divine will, the eternal act of creation, *actus purissimus*, in the infinite I AM, of which it can experience itself as a repetition. Quite to the contrary, the self depicted here is unable, by an act of will, to ward off the powers which threaten to crush it. All it can do is to observe in complete passivity—philosophical anathema for Coleridge—its (self)destruction in its own oneiric thought processes.⁶ In a chilling metaphorical conflation, the self becomes its own death-bed, where it is forced to accept a dark twin for a pillow-mate. How could a self so desperate, so frail, so miserable a prey to outside influences *in his/her own mind* be at the origin of the unified nation? How, in other words, can we expect the work of imagination to secure the self and hence the nation, if it also creates—it least in its work in dreams—the 'life-in-death' which Coleridge not only depicted in his 'nightmare poetry' but which he himself experienced in his own nightmares?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to perform a little desynonymization of one's own, for one has to recognize that there are two kinds of imagination at work in Coleridge's texts: the well-known idealist and transcendental mental faculty presented first and foremost in the *Biographia* on the one hand, and a second 'version' of the faculty, directly connected to the material processes of the body on the other.⁷ Coleridge makes the bodily rather than transcendental origins of this second 'incarnation' of the faculty quite explicit when he remarks in his notebook entry that all the aforementioned fears, despairs, and anxieties, as well as the quite vivid images that accompany them, are no more and no less than the product of a problem of indigestion, produced by 'ill-tasted Gas' in the stomach, and which will vanish upon its 'casting off'.⁸ Particularly in light of the hopes expressed in the *Biographia*, this power of imagination to disrupt the unity, peace, and rational control of the self must indeed seem 'strange' for Coleridge:

Strange Self-power in the Imagination, when painful sensations have made it their Interpreter, ... strange power to represent the events & circumstances even to the Anguish or the Triumph of the *quasi*-credent Soul, while the necessary conditions, the only possible causes of such contingencies are known to be impossible or hopeless, yea, when the pure mind would recoil from the very <eye-lengthened>

⁶ David S. Miall was one of the first to analyze Coleridge's writings on dreams and to draw attention to the fact that Coleridge's reflections on his nightmares threaten the very idea of the fundamental unity of the self so central to Coleridge's philosophical thought. It is my aim here to make Miall's insights fruitful for the political discussion advanced by Pyle and others about Coleridge's concept of imagination. Cf. David S. Miall, 'The Meaning of Dreams: Coleridge's Ambivalence,' *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (Spring 1982): 57--71.

⁷ Jennifer Ford has presented a detailed argument in her study *Coleridge on Dreaming* to bring to light this non-transcendental version of imagination in Coleridge's thought. Cf. Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming, Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998).

⁸ An in-depth discussion of the philosophical tradition that informs Coleridge's materialist and 'bodily' account of his nightmares is presented by Nicholas Halmi in 'Why Coleridge was not a Freudian,' *Coleridge and Dreams*, special issue of *Dreaming, Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* 7.1 (1997): 13-28.

shadow of an approaching hope, as from a crime—yet the effect shall have *place & Substance & living energy*

(CN III 3547)

It is this ‘self-power’ of imagination, which most disturbs Coleridge, for it creates a dream-world all of its own, a stream of images uncontrollable by the self, whose reason, the ‘*quasi-credent Soul*,’ can only look on, unable to stop the production of this nightmarish alternative reality:

Night-mair is, I think, always... a state not of Sleep but of Stupor of the outward organs of Sense,...while the volitions of *Reason*, i.e. comparing &c are awake, tho’ disturbed... to which the Imagination therefore, the true inward Creatrix, instantly out of the chaos of the elements <or shattered fragments> of Memory puts together some form to fit it—which derives an over-powering sense of Reality from the circumstance, that the power of Reason being in good measure awake, most generally presents to us all the accompanying images/very nearly as they existed the moment before, when we fell out of anxious wakefulness into the *Reverie* ... (CN III 4046)

In the nightmare, this ‘stupor’ or ‘reverie’ in which the self is suspended between wakefulness and true sleep, imagination, the ‘true inward Creatrix’ thus does exactly the work of secondary imagination described in the *Biographia*. It reassembles the ‘shattered fragments’ it has at hand and recreates a new whole out of the chaos of elements now floating in the void before it. Yet this creation does not effect a soothing organic reconnection to the divine, but rather produces a cluster of images, known by the rational self to be an illusion, but nevertheless so *real* in its effects on the psyche that the self cannot but descend into the black night of fear precisely because it knows that it has lost all power over the distinctions between the real and the imaginary. An abyss of its own making opens up at the heart of the mind and thus of the world:

Good heaven! (reasoned I) were this real, I never should or could be, in such an agony of Terror—

(CN III 4046)

With real, bodily causes as its basis, imagination creates a reality the self knows to be imagined, but which nevertheless has real and complete power over it. The self thus experiences a loss of control over the very reality it produces and which determines its sense of identity, unity, and moral integrity. This experience holds the greatest possible terror for the Coleridgean self, as the ‘motions of the blood’ force it to contemplate unwanted yet undismisssible images that do not lend themselves as mediators of the self’s divine origin. In the nightmare, the self loses its innocence, for it finds itself forced to contemplate threatening images of its own making, images it cannot stop or

‘poise’ and which it would find abhorrent in its waking life.⁹

Reason and Reality can stop and stand still, new Influxes from without counteracting the Impulses from within, and *poising* the Thought. But Fancy and Sleep *stream on*; and... they connect with them motions of the blood and nerves, and images forced into the mind by the feelings that arise out of the position & state of the Body and its different members... Thank Heaven! However/ Sleep has never yet desecrated the images, or supposed Presences, of those whom I love and revere.

(CN III 4046)

There could not be a greater challenge to the view of the self Coleridge seeks to institute in the *Biographia* than the fact that the body, the nerves, the blood, the stomach, with imagination as their ‘interpreter’ are able to ‘force’ images into the mind in a process beyond the self’s control, for the material body here acquires a power that threatens the primacy of mind and ultimately the divine reason. The physical body and its uncontrollable effects, made ‘real’ by imagination, undercut the very unquestionable principles which *should* be at the basis of the unified self. Imagination is thus responsible for both the self’s salvation and its destruction or damnation. Coleridge can only apprehensively thank heaven that what is dearest to the self has not yet been desecrated by its material and imaginative constitution, leaving these ‘highest goods’ their essential integrity. There can, however, be no guarantee that this desecration will never take place, for there is no knowing what the body and imagination in its wake might produce in a nightmare, ultimately depriving the self, clearly *not* in control of its innermost thoughts, of even the last vestiges of an ideal of unity and divine autonomy to which it desperately clings.

⁹ For this reason, nightmares, other than dreams, do not lend themselves as metaphors for matters of aesthetics in Coleridge’s thought. Coleridge can call poetry “a rationalized dream” and Shakespeare’s *Lear* and *Othello* “a divine Dream” in a notebook entry from May 1804 (CN II 2086), but there is no space for “rationalized nightmares” in his writings about poetry and aesthetics, even though a poem like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* might reasonably be called just that. When Coleridge uses dreams in his first lecture on Shakespeare in December 1818 to illustrate what happens to our sense of reality when we watch a play, the comparison between the two modes of consciousness depends on Coleridge’s conviction that we “pass no judgment” on the ontological status of dreams. “[W]e do not judge them to be <un>real” because our rational powers of comparison and judgment are inactive while we sleep. When we watch a play, on the other hand, “[w]e *chuse* to be deceived,” we succumb, in Coleridge’s famous dictum, to a “willing suspension of disbelief.” Deception is thus a choice in the aesthetic process, a choice that, according to Coleridge, simply does not offer itself while we sleep and dream. (cf. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, ed. R.A. Foakes, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 16 vols. Vol. 5:2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) 266.) The state of nightmare, however, is different, for in this state of consciousness, as Coleridge maintains, we do not truly sleep, and “the volitions of *Reason*” are still to some degree awake. During the nightmare, as Coleridge experiences it, we *know* that we are being deceived, but we nevertheless cannot choose to end the deception, no matter how abhorrent it might be to us. The potential for a choice is there, but it can, agonizingly, nevertheless not be executed or acted upon. Like the Ancient Mariner, the subject in a nightmare is aware of being under a spell but does not have the power to overcome it. Forcing the audience to experience such a state of consciousness is not something Coleridge could or would openly contemplate as an aesthetic goal, even though his work as a poet might lead him to precisely those places he would not seek out as philosopher or critic.

IV. Political Nightmares

In his essay 'Dreams and the Egotistical Sublime' Tim Fulford has already suggested that this threatening form of imagination might also be present in the *Biographia* by way of its very absence. 'The famous 'letter from a friend,' which curtails the transcendental deduction of imagination, Fulford argues, might have been inserted by Coleridge, not because he was unable to perform this deduction in a convincing fashion, but rather because

if pursued too far, the quest to discover the origins of the imagination will discover its source in an incestuous union of hellish mental forces over which reason and will have no power, forces within the self creative of a drama by which the self is enthralled: 'The Horror of their Crimes to view,/ To know and loathe, yet wish and do.'¹⁰

I could not agree more with Fulford, and would argue that this unsettling conception of imagination, which can be found not only, as Fulford has shown, in 'The Pains of Sleep' but also, as I have demonstrated here, in Coleridge's notebooks, needs to be integrated into the political discussion of Coleridge's concept of imagination in current academic discourse. If it is indeed true that 'it is with nations as with individuals,' even the imaginary and projected prospects of principled unanimity and union for the British nation, instituted by Coleridge in the text of his literary life look much less promising than one might wish for. Once we decide to utilize the metaphor of the 'body politic' to highlight the ideological positions entailed in Coleridge's philosophical and aesthetic speculations about the role of imagination in the constitution of the autonomous subject, we cannot ignore the possibility that this 'body' might already be riddled by an endemic 'disease'. If the same faculty that is called upon to secure the unity of the self also holds the threat of its potential dissolution and moral corruption, then the ideological 'purchase' connected to imagination by way of analogy must also include the political possibility of violent revolutions and the anarchic, 'unprincipled' chaos, the 'democratic phrensy' so dreaded by Coleridge the political analyst in 1817.

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¹⁰ Tim Fulford, 'Dreams and the Egotistical Sublime: Coleridge and Wordsworth,' *Coleridge and Dreams*, special issue of *Dreaming, Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* 7.2 (1997): 85-98, 90.