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‘O yes! but I can!’ – Coleridge’s Chemical Others

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IN A NOTEBOOK entry dated Sunday, October 21, 1810, on the subject of Nightmair Coleridge writes,

Dreams, or Creatures of my Dream, you may make me feel you as if you were keeping behind me but you cannot speak to me—immediately I heard impressed on my outward ears, & with a perfect sense of *distance* answered—O yes! but I can—¹

Since Descartes, the central problem of philosophy has been the relationship between the individual self and the external world, between Subject and Object, and in these few lines, written on his 38th birthday, Coleridge proves that while he may be getting older he is by no means relenting in his ability to vex an old question. Always acutely aware of the pervasive, looming influence of an external objective world; a world which exists, as he calls it, at a “perfect sense of distance” from himself, Coleridge exclaims in a similar passage after another long night of tormenting visions, “wherefore fall on *me*?” as though demanding respite from some external act of injustice.² At other times, Coleridge not only appears to suffer at the hands of an ‘other’ but even to thrive from it and, at times even more opportunely, to harness it as the source of his most creative energy. Characterizing much of his poetry as though guided by some ‘other’ hand, Coleridge describes his contributions to *Joan of Arc* as “very fine Lines, tho’... hang me, if I know or ever did know the meaning of them, tho’ my own composition.”³ Alienating himself from his own words, and thereby undermining the notion of a unified authorial Subjectivity, Coleridge similarly complicates *Biographia Literaria*, supposedly his most autobiographical work, by prefacing it with the rather peculiar and self-effacing pronouncement that “the least of what I have written concerns myself personally,” and then proceeding to catalogue a collection of other voices that have haunted the work ever since they were written or, as some might more crudely put it, ever since they were ‘plagiarised.’⁴ This conceit of coming under the influence of an ‘other’ is also behind the inclusion of Coleridge’s “letter from a friend” in the *Biographia*; a letter which *he* himself writes in the *guise* of another person “without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, 4 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957-1990), III 3984. Hereafter referred to as CN.

2 ‘The Pains of Sleep’ in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, eds. N. Halmi, P. Magnuson, R. Modiano, (New York: Norton, 2004), 184-5.

3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays, 3 vols. (London: Princeton University Press, 2001), I 140n. Hereafter referred to as CPW.

4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London: Princeton University Press, 1983), I, 5. Hereafter referred to as BL.

inkstand", as he later tells us.⁵

Certainly then, as John Beer suggests, it often appears as though Coleridge suffers less from an "anxiety of influence", than from "an anxiety *to be* influenced."⁶ He appears in fact to relish the impression of an exchange with 'others.' "My nature requires another Nature for its support," he confides in his notebooks "& reposes only in another from the necessary Indigence of its being."⁷ Richard Holmes has interestingly psychologized Coleridge's plagiarisms as a kind of "silent conversation with [a] confrère or brother-spirit" during times of lost friendship, loneliness, and intellectual isolation,⁸ and certainly, this desire to escape from himself and to enter into communion with an 'other' also characterizes Coleridge's desperation towards Wordsworth to whom he writes, "O that... my *identity* might flow into *thee*, & live and act in thee, & be Thou."⁹

Coleridge frequently casts what appears to be his ability for self-surrender to an 'other' as the source of his most creative power. He writes: "It is an instinct of my Nature to pass out of myself, and to exist in the form of others." He also claims it as the primary instinct behind aesthetic experience in general, writing: "the Gothic architecture impresses the beholder with a sense of self-annihilation... he becomes, as it were, a part of the work contemplated."¹⁰ Of those poets who lack this sympathy or this ability to enter into the experience of an objective other, Coleridge writes: "There are men who can write most eloquently and passages [sic] of deepest and even sublimity on circumstances *personal* and deeply exciting their *own* passions, but [they are] not therefore poets."¹¹ Certainly, Coleridge muses that the poetic genius of Shakespeare also follows from this ability to becom[e] something 'other': "to send ourselves out of ourselves, [he writes] to *think* ourselves into the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly & strangely different from our own."¹² Shakespeare is exemplary he says of the ability to "*become* by power of Imagination *another Thing*."¹³

This rapt fascination then, and desperate identification with external 'others' appears to be a hallmark of the Coleridgean imagination, and it has been the source of much contention among his readers. Is Coleridge setting himself up against any possibility of absolute subjectivity? Is he an objectivist at the expense of his individuality, offering up a continual self-sacrifice in order

5 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), IV, 728. Hereafter referred to as CL.

6 John Beer, "Coleridge and Wordsworth: Influence and Confluence", in Donald Sultana (ed.), *New Approaches to Coleridge: Biographical and Critical Essays* (1981), 192-211, 193.

7 CN I 1679

8 Richard Holmes, *Darker Reflections*, (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 253.

9 CN II 2712

10 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1987), II, 60. Hereafter referred to as LL.

11 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. by T. M. Raysor, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), I, 218.

12 CL II 809

13 LL I 69

to enter into 'others'? Is he therefore a proponent of the Sympathetic Imagination whereby poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality? Or is he simply, as Seamus Perry puts it, "a pluralist in spite of himself" ever succumbing to his need for the 'other,' despite his insistence upon a singular cohesive identity?¹⁴ More radically, as Stephen Potter once suggested, is this a case of split personality whereby Coleridge is in fact two people, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge the poet as we know him, and S. T. C. the self-recriminatory, broken, opium-eating man whose unfinished works, self-justifications, whinings and expostulations almost beg being posited as 'other'?¹⁵ More recently, Tim Fulford writes that it is out of Coleridge's insecurity that these externalized 'others' allow him to "gain an emotional recognition of aspects of [him] self not otherwise possible",¹⁶ and the spirit of this argument is in fact contemporaneous with Coleridge himself, when in the 1830s John Keble writes that the primary poet is he who speaks "his own thoughts through another's lips, modesty is observed, while the agitated, full heart is relieved."¹⁷

While confessing the relative merits of these interpretations, it occurs to me that perhaps one of the most interesting features of what Coleridge variously refers to as "man's dependence on something *out* of him"¹⁸ and as, elsewhere, "the dependency of our nature [to] ask for some confirmation from *without*",¹⁹ is that it satisfies, not what we might think of as Coleridge's fundamental conviction of the *divisibility* of the self from the external world, but rather his opposite insistence upon the *coalescence* or *harmony* of the mind with the world which surrounds it. Specifically, the 'dependence' upon, or 'anxiety to be influenced' by, an 'other' seems to demonstrate a fundamental unity for Coleridge between subject and object, self and other, mind and nature. As Coleridge states in *The Friend* of 1818: "EVERY POWER IN NATURE AND IN SPIRIT must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: AND ALL OPPOSITION IS A TENDENCY TO RE-UNION."¹⁵⁴ What appears to be Coleridge's characteristic doubleness then, while it announces continuously his disrupted "dividual Being",²⁰ in fact operates out of a fundamental prerequisite of the unity by which it defines itself. Coleridge's opposition to the Cartesian view that we are "separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life"²¹ finds its most fervent expression in his expostulations on Unity. Maintaining that a "high spiritual instinct of the human being impel[s] us to

14 Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104.

15 Stephen Potter, *Coleridge and S. T. C.: a study of Coleridge's dual nature* (Russell & Russell publications, 1965).

16 Tim Fulford, 'Dreams and the Egotistical Sublime: Coleridge and Wordsworth' in *Dreaming*, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams*. 7(2) 85-98, 1997. p. 91

17 John Keble, *Lectures on poetry 1832-41*, II, 92, 97.

18 CN II 2672, italics mine.

19 LL II 161, italics mine.

20 CL II 773

21 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) I, 520.

seek unity” and that “unity and system” are the “end and purpose of all reason”,²² Coleridge’s desire to identify with an ‘other’ may be read as guided by his faith in “that ultimate end of human Thought, and human Feeling, Unity.”²³ Interestingly however, while this idea of a cogent unifying embrace between self and other, subject and object, mind and nature, goes a long way towards elucidating Coleridge’s dependence upon an other, the synthesis is fraught with an inherent paradox which plagues this aspect of Coleridge’s epistemology and leads him to eventually abandon the idea altogether in favour of a more profound and insurmountable “*absolute* Unity”²⁴ in God and His design: “Life...begins in its detachment from Nature and is to end in its union with God”²⁵ Coleridge concludes in his later years.

In this paper, I would like to re-examine the relationship and the fundamental paradox between the Subject and the Object for Coleridge. And I would like to do so by invoking a rather unorthodox source for his reflections in order to see if we might elucidate some new insight by it. First however, it is worth noting that the paradox of the self-other union in Coleridge’s formulation of poetic identity is two-fold: On the one hand, Coleridge’s position requires a *unity* of self and world in order for the assimilation and recognition of the self in the other to occur; on the other hand, a firm *division* between self and world must also be sustained in order for a perceiving mind to come to know itself through its relationship with a differentiated other. Subject and object then, united in Coleridge’s scheme of the overall harmony of mind and world, must of necessity also be presupposed as separated for, as Schelling puts it, “only what is different can agree and what is not different is in itself one.”²⁶ As Coleridge himself recognises it in *The Friend*: “we at once identify our being with that of the world without us, and yet place ourselves in contradistinction to that world”,²⁷ and again: “every Thing or Phenomenon is the Exponent of a Synthesis *as long as the opposite energies are retained in that Synthesis*.”²⁸ Put another way, Coleridge’s faith in an overriding unity requires that the other through which the self seeks expression is simultaneously and yet paradoxically both indistinguishable *and* differentiated from the self. Turning once again to Coleridge’s frequently cited praise of Shakespeare, we read that it is this ability to sustain the epistemological paradox that is Shakespeare’s particular gift: he is able simultaneously to “become all things [and] *yet for ever remain himself*.” The implication of this, what Perry terms “saving paradox” or “honorary ‘and yet’”,²⁹ is that while Shakespeare is able to

22 BL II 72, I 285.

23 CN III 3247

24 CN II 2600

25 CM III 919, 417; LR IV 401

26 F. W. J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 14.

27 *The Friend*, I 497.

28 *The Friend* I 94n.

29 Perry, *Uses of Division*, 242.

enter into an external 'other', that is to transform and correspond to an object essentially separate from himself, he is also at once so entirely synthesised in the transmutation that he undergoes no removal from *himself* at all, being somehow already one and the same with his object. Pushed to its paradoxical conclusion, the imaginative union and interdependence of 'self' and 'other' renders the very terms of the equation invalid. This dilemma is perhaps best manifest in Coleridge's account in *The Friend* of Luther's dreaming visions, which he explains are also typical of the poetic imagination. Coleridge writes: "He was a Poet, indeed, as great a poet ever lived in any age or country; but his poetic images were so vivid, that they mastered the Poet's own mind!... what would have been mere *thoughts* before now... shape and condense themselves into *things*, into realities."³⁰ Luther's interfusion of self and other, of mind and world, ends up so confused and intimately coalesced that he can no longer differentiate mind from matter, thought from thing as his visions acquire an "apparent Outness" while at the same time being sourced from his own mind. Notably, Coleridge's chemical allusion to Luther's thoughts "shap[ing] and condens[ing] themselves into things" looks forward to another of his elucidations upon the dilemma of the internal-external, subject-object paradox. In his *Treatise on Method* of 1818, we read Coleridge comparing the situation of the poet to that of the "chemical philosopher" who is also engaged in the "pursuit after unity of principle through a diversity of forms."³¹ As Coleridge puts it, the quest of the chemical philosopher is that of uniting idea with law, and the result once more is a confused intermingling of paradoxically undifferentiated and yet unified objects:

Such, too, is the case with the substances of the LABORATORY, which are assumed to be incapable of decomposition. They are mere exponents of some one law, which the chemical philosopher, whatever may be his theory, is incessantly labouring to discover ... Thus as "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet," suggest each other to Shakespeare's Theseus, as soon as his thoughts present him the ONE FORM, of which they are but varieties; so water and flame, the diamond, the charcoal, and the mantling champagne, with it ebullient sparkles, are convoked and fraternized by the theory of the chemist.³²

Taking my clue from Coleridge's alignment of the equally paradoxical poetical and chemical dissolutions of various forms under the hope of a one overriding Unity of self and otherness, I would like in this paper to expound further upon Coleridge's lifelong interest in the history of chemistry – that which is in fact a widespread preoccupation in his work from the Neoplatonists through to

³⁰ *The Friend*, I 140.

³¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. by H. J. Jackson and J. R. De J. Jackson, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), I, 648. Hereafter referred to as SW&F.

³² SW&F I, 648.

Enlightenment science – in an attempt to suggest something more about what exactly informs this particular aesthetic vision, and his specific ‘formulation’, so to speak, of the subject-object dilemma throughout much of his life.

So turning then, to Coleridge's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, one reads the following rather deceptively simple statement. Coleridge writes,

For in this, in truth, did philosophy begin, in the distinction between the subject and the object... and he who first distinguished heat from the supposed power externally, which he called “caloric”, might have been truly said to have begun philosophy; and the whole progress from that time to this present moment is nothing more than an attempt to reconcile the same.”³³

Now, in the true spirit of the Coleridgean train of thought, we are forced here to explore one subject by virtue of an entry into what looks like a complete ‘other’; in this case, we are to explore the philosophical nature of Subject and Object by virtue of what appears to be a digression into Chemistry. Specifically, on the philosophical division of the Subjective and the Objective running parallel to the chemical division of heat and the caloric, Coleridge writes, “we all of us and in all languages call the sensation heat or cold and the outward cause of it by the same names.”³⁴ He is speaking here of our tendency to refer to the subjective experience of ‘heat’ or ‘cold’ with the same word we use to describe the objective cause of it, also termed ‘heat’ or ‘cold.’ This contiguity of the terms, Coleridge continues, “has produced a great confusion of thought” but “as common to all nations and arising out of the nature of the human mind, may well be believed to refer to some important truth.”³⁵ Rather enticingly then, Coleridge is suggesting that our use of the same word to refer to the subjective internal experience of ‘heat’ and the external objective cause of it, hearkens back to some primordial philosophical debate concerning the relationship between the Subject and the Object. What is important here is that the emergence of the caloric appears to open a divide between the a priori notion of heat and that which we experience, therefore between idea and experienced reality; or we might say, between the grounds of experience and philosophy.³⁶ In the editor's footnotes to this passage we learn that Coleridge attributes this honour of having, as it were, ‘begun’ philosophy, to Pythagoras. He develops the passage as follows:

We know that chemistry found itself soon compelled to frame a different word for the cause to distinguish it from the sensation it was produced to effect, and hence we have the word calori[c] or calorific... Now it appears that Pythagoras had proceeded upon this

33 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1818-1819 on the History of Philosophy*, ed. by J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), I 115. Hereafter referred to as LHP.

34 LHP I 111

35 LHP I 111

36 The ‘caloric’ in chemistry is defined as an indestructible, highly elastic, self-repellent, all-pervading fluid

opinion, that those unknown somethings, power or whatever you may call them, that manifest themselves in the intellect of man, or what in the language of the old philosophy would be called the intelligible world... these same manifest themselves to us and are the objects of our senses... ; in short, that the very powers which in men reflect and contemplate, are in their essence *the same* as those powers which in nature produce the objects contemplated.³⁷

Positioning Pythagoras as among the earliest formulators of this philosophical affinity between perceiver and perceived, between Subject and Object, Coleridge then deduces from him the following law of likeness:

... there is no action but from like on like, [he writes]..that no substances or beings essentially dissimilar could possibly be made sensible of each other's existence or in any way act thereon... This involves an essential... [homogeneity] a sameness of the conceiver [and the concept], of the idea and the law corresponding to the idea. In the language of philosophy, they would say that the eye could not possibly perceive light but by having in its own essence something luciferous, that the ear could not have been the organ of hearing but by having in its essence, and not by mechanism, something confirmed to the air.³⁸

The implication here (and to be kept in mind when we consider Coleridge's own relationships with 'others') is that what may be conceived of as Subject and Object are in fact united by a previous similarity of essence. Certainly, this is a Neo-Platonic notion and is found in the *Enneads* which Coleridge cites in *Biographia*, stating: "Never could the eye have beheld the sun, had not its own essence been soliform (*i.e. pre-configured to light by a similarity of essence with that of light*); neither can a soul not beautiful attain to an intuition of beauty."³⁹ However, this notion of a primordial affinity between all Subjects and Objects is traced back by Coleridge not only to chemistry and its earlier Pythagorean origins but, I would suggest, to an even more ancient tradition of hermetic and *alchemical* thought

Specifically, in both the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and in his notebooks, Coleridge traces the genealogy of Pythagoras and the Neoplatonists all the way back to the mystical "founders of alchemy."⁴⁰ Having declared that the works of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus were among his "darling studies", Coleridge would have been familiar with the large collection of Greek literature developed under his name as the *Corpus Hermetica*. One of the concerns of the Hermeticists was something called *sympathetic magic* by which they drew the power of the stars and spirits into magic talismans. The precise

37 LHP 112

38 LHP I 112-3

39 BL I 114-5

40 CN III 4414

method of sympathetic magic explained in the *Asclepius*⁴¹ presupposes the Hermetic belief in the continual effluvia of influences pouring down onto the earth from the stars. It was thought that every object in the material world is full of occult sympathies poured down upon it from the star on which it depends. As Ficino, the primary translator of Hermetic texts explains, all plants, animals, stones, and so on belong each to a planet and to a sign of the zodiac, and if one cuts across the bone of a solar animal or the root or stem of a solar plant, one will see the character of the sun stamped upon it. The talisman in other words, actually *contains* already within it the very properties which will later seem to act down upon it. This process seems to be a perfect analogy for the workings of the Coleridgean imagination by which external objects are made conducive to, or are made to have an influence upon, an observing subject. Once again, as in the law of likeness, the idea is that one cannot observe, imagine, or know something 'other' if it does not already have a place or an appropriate receptacle within the 'subject,' serving to catch an image of it. This may indeed be the essence behind Coleridge's assertion of the relationship between the subject and the object when he writes, rather like a modern existentialist, that we must already "*be* it in order to *know* it."⁴²

Pressing Coleridge's own apparent digression a little further then, one which relies upon the importance of this chemistry or ancient 'chymistry' to expound upon the nature of the subject-object dilemma, I'd like to turn to another source of his, namely the work of the celebrated physician of the eighteenth century, Herman Boerhaave. Boerhaave, with whose work we know Coleridge to have been familiar from his extensive marginalia in the 1727 publication of *A New Method of Chemistry*, made clear a rational system of chemical philosophy and drew acclaim as one of the foremost pre-Lavoisier chemists. What is interesting about him is that although he is usually considered to have been the first great rational chemist, imbued with Newtonian philosophy and a thorough-going experimentalism, he still maintained convictions in alchemy, and his methodology is remarkably similar to the principles expressed in the *Hermetica*. Boerhaave writes:

Now 'tis certain there is gold in every mass of lead: had we then a body which would so agitate all the parts of lead, as to burn every thing out but mercury and gold; and had we some fixing sulphur to coagulate the matter remaining: would not it be gold?... The philosopher's stone is held a fix'd subtle, concentrated fire [which does these things].⁴³

Reading Boerhaave, Coleridge immediately recognizes that "the Alchemists

41 Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 143.

42 CL IV 768

43 Herman Boerhaave, *New Method of Chemistry*, (London: J. Osborn & T. Longman, 1727), 217.

may perhaps be decipherable into intelligible notions.”⁴⁴ Moreover, the idea that gold already exists *within* each mass of lead and only requires an extrapolation for it to come into its own as an independent separate entity appears again to be the very groundwork upon which Coleridge bases his aesthetics, at least as far as it relies upon an examination of the relationship between Subject and Object. Regarded from the purview of the history of chemistry then, subject and object are primordially one, united in the mind, and it is within the context of imaginative expression (what I think Coleridge refers to in the secondary imagination's ability to dissolve diffuse and dissipate in order to re-create) it is only within the context of this imaginative expression, or alchemical extrapolation by which gold is extracted from the lead in which it has always existed, that the union or identity in fact becomes apparent. What I'm suggesting then is that Coleridge's investigations into chemistry provide a useful analogy for understanding his conception of the workings of the imagination, for it is the imagination then that becomes (rather like the philosopher's stone) a mechanism which allows us to become conscious of a pre-existent unity. The chemical rhetoric certainly inhabits Coleridge's vocabulary, for he defines the results as of the imagination as “living educts” and the reference here is vital. The term “educt” is defined in *Watt's Dictionary of Chemistry* as “a body separated by the decomposition of another in which it *previously existed as such*,”⁴⁵ suggesting that in effect the imagination is the mechanism by which a subject makes *of itself* an other, and comes to *know* itself as such. Certainly, this might help us to understand what Coleridge means when he says, “a Subject knows itself by the act of making itself an object for itself—: for this is the necessity of limitation, and imperfect Being.”⁴⁶ And he goes on in the *Opus Maximum* to extend this to the thought process more generally, where he says that thought can only be communicated “by words or language” but “all language is utterance i.e. outer-ance” of something which is already within (namely, “ideas”, or “meanings”) into an external form.

What all this suggests, is that for Coleridge, subject and object exist in a state of self-identity or unity, but this is one of which we not readily aware since in order for us to become conscious of a unity of subject with object we must first project our subjectivity as ‘other’ and locate it, as he says, at “a perfect distance from ourselves.” Perhaps more usefully, or at least more succinctly, in *Biographia*, Coleridge writes:

During the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs. There is here no first, and no second; both are

44 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. by George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984-2001), I, 547. Hereafter referred to as CM.

45 Trevor Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and early nineteenth-century science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 193.

46 CM I 618

coinstantaneous and one. While I am attempting to explain this intimate coalition, I must suppose it dissolved.⁴⁷

And in so saying he suggests that the very grounds of being rely upon the identity of subject with object. But the grounds of knowledge, or awareness of this or being consciousness of it, relies on their dissolution. As he writes a little later in a note to himself:

The ground of Consciousness is the identity or Indifference of object and subject, but the indispensable Condition of *becoming conscious* is the Division or Differencing of the *Subject* and *Object*.⁴⁸

It is interesting to note here that “con-scious” whose Latin source means “to know with” (to share knowledge with an ‘other’) applies in its original form most closely to Coleridge’s use of the term, and only later comes to mean “to know in oneself, alone.” So examined in this light, by virtue of Coleridge’s chemical digression, his apparent need for an ‘other,’ or his reliance upon external sources, and what Beer calls his “anxiety *to be* influenced,” is in fact not at all to be understood as an escape from the Coleridgean ‘self’ in order to enter into a relationship or exchange with some external ‘other,’ nor is it an act of self-annihilation, but rather it captures a unique imaginative moment of entry into a suspension between two states of possible (and allegorically chemical) crystallization; a unique moment where the poet projects himself as ‘other’ and becomes at once the Subject and the Object, at once the poet and the poem.

What I’ve been suggesting in this paper then is that there is something centrally important about Coleridge’s use of a chemical vocabulary that helps him to think through a problem in his epistemology, and I think that more than being merely an act of rhetorical subvention it is in these very chemical processes that Coleridge’s conception of the imagination’s place in overcoming the subject-object division in modern dualist epistemology is in fact formulated. Imagination then, examined through Coleridge’s hermetic understanding of Subject and Object, may be seen as a moment of suspension or “hovering” which arises out of the attempt to establish a moment of consciousness; a moment of self-recognition in the ‘Ab-solute’—the Ab-solute being that moment of pure Identity prior to the chemical dis-solutions of later philosophy.

47 BL I 255

48 CN IV 5276