Imaginative Perception in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*

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I Introduction

COLERIDGE'S AIMS in the *Biographia Literaria* were complex and extremely varied. One of his major aims is expressed on the final page of volume one, Chapter XIII. These two paragraphs constitute some of the most written about, quoted, and debated ideas in the entire corpus of his voluminous works. And possibly they are the most misunderstood of almost anything he wrote. Below are the lines of interest:

> 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 Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.
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> 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; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.[1]

The main purpose in this paper is to demonstrate that Coleridge really *did* mean what he said in these paragraphs, which may seem surprising, since one might think that would not have been doubted. But it has been doubted, so that—more surprising still—hardly anyone writing about Coleridge up to the present day (2011)—with the notable exception of I.A. Richards in his book *Coleridge on Imagination* (1934), and, to a lesser degree, R.H. Fogle in *The Idea of Coleridge's Criticism* (1962)—seems to have taken to heart Coleridge's remarks. Most Coleridgeans believe it a mistake to describe perception as essentially imaginative; hence, Coleridge must have meant something else.

Let's first note three central and distinct—though intimately interrelated—ideas in the above quotation. Simplest is 1) the distinction

[1] *Biographia Literaria by S.T. Coleridge. Edited, with his Aesthetical Essays*, by J. Shawcross (Oxford University Press, first edition 1907), I 202; hereafter abbreviated *BL*.

between the imagination and the fancy. Second is 2) the distinction between primary and secondary imagination (whose actual sense and meaning is still argued about today). The third major point is 3) the relating of primary imagination to perception; the second clearly depending upon the third. It is this third claim which throws readers and critics a curve: it seems so counter-intuitive. Isn't imagination, unlike perception, that vital power of ideas, of other creative activity, that "sacred power of self-intuition", that "shaping and modifying power", "the soul…[of poetic genius] that forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole".[2]

> 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 the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*.[3]

Yes, these are all descriptions of the imagination, familiar to readers of Coleridge. But haven't we have been schooled to treat perception as a mere passive receptivity of already constituted things, ideas or images? "We seem to ourselves merely passive to an external power, whether as a mirror reflecting the landscape, or as a blank canvas on which some unknown hand paints it".[4] And Coleridge said that because of the 'despotism of the eye'—our need for visual objects as basic causes—"we bewilder ourselves, whenever we would pierce into the adyta of causation"?[5]

All three of the genuinely innovative ideas of those final paragraphs of the *Biographia* quoted above have caused controversy, but none is so misunderstood as that primary imagination is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception". Even the fancy/ imagination distinction has not by any means always been accepted. Wordsworth had been the first to be uncertain about it:

> 'to aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the imagination as to the fancy'. [Coleridge's reply was that] if by the power of evoking and combining, Mr. Wordsworth means the same as, and no more than, I meant by the aggregative and associative, [then] I continue to deny, that it belongs at all to the imagination; and am disposed to conjecture, that he has mistaken the co-presence of fancy with imagination for the operation of the latter singly.[6]

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[2] *BL* I 167, 193, II 12, I 86 .
[3] *Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White (Princeton University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Princeton and London, 1972), 29, and see page 30 for the relevant definition of 'symbol'. Hereafter abbreviated *LS*.
[4] *BL* I 66 and see 70-3.
[5] *BL* I 74.
[6] *BL* I 194.

Later objections came in Pater's *Appreciations* (1889)[7] and from T.S. Eliot,[8] but the distinction was at least understood.[9]

Shelley was an articulate follower of Coleridge's ideas, in insisting on a very similar distinction in the mind's powers on the first page of his "Defence of Poetry". His emphasis, however, was made in terms of a distinction between the powers of analysis and synthesis, which he called reason (*dianoia*) and imagination (*nous*). These remarks (and the "Defence" as a whole, along with numerous essays, such as "On Life" or "Speculations on Metaphysics") are instructive for understanding Coleridge's ideas, if we keep in mind that Shelley used 'reason' where Coleridge used 'understanding'. Shelley explained that reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things, but, most important, that imagination is the TO POIEIN (the power of making), while reason is the TO LOGIZEIN (the power of analysing what has already been made). That is, unlike the other powers of the human mind, the imagination is a *constructive* power: it makes new and previously unknown things and ideas. It does not just analyse or reorganise—however strikingly—already known elements. Later, Coleridge was to emphasise precisely this distinction of *nous* versus *dianoia* which was Shelley's concern. One further definition of Coleridge's we can usefully compare with Shelley:

> The imagination [is the] shaping and modifying power; the fancy, [is the] aggregative and associative power; the understanding [is the]regulative, substantiating and realizing power; the speculative reason, vis theoretica et scientifica [is] the power by which we produce or aim to produce unity, necessity, and universality… by means of principles a priori.[10]

Coleridge's imagination and reason are the powers of *nous*, of ideas, and of intuition, while his fancy and understanding correspond closely to Shelley's *dianoia*—what Keats called consecutive reasoning, from which, he said, we can gain no new knowledge.

Edmund Burke's own definition of imagination, in 1757, shows how inadequate it itself is, partly because it conflates fancy's limited functions with a truly creative power, only touching upon Coleridge and Shelley's idea of imagination as fusion and synthesis:

> The mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own: either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order

[7] Walter Pater, 'Essay on Wordsworth', *Appreciations. With an Essay on Style* (London and New York, 1889), 37.

[8] T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London, 1933). For an interesting contemporary response, note Terry Otten's 'Macaulay's Critical Theory of Imagination and Reason', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **28** (Autumn 1969), 33-44.

[9] But see Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London, 1927), 103, on his insistence that imagination is only a more intense form of fancy, not different in kind.

[10] *BL* I 193.

> and manner in which they were received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order. This power is called imagination; and to this belongs whatever is called wit, fancy, invention and the like.[11]

For Burke, imagination only combines *already existing* things, thoughts, ideas, or images, albeit sometimes in a new manner or order. (This poor account came from the man who wrote so inspiringly about the sublime and the beautiful!)[12] This was entirely typical of Eighteenth Century theorists,[13] while for Coleridge and Shelley the imagination MAKES new things by acts of fusion and synthesis, acts completely different from combination. Moreover, its primary vehicle is METAPHOR and/or symbol, not *images of things*. Coleridge's famous definition of the symbol as distinct from allegory demonstrates how different Burke's 'combination' is from true, imaginative synthesis:

> Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses… A symbol … is characterised by a translucence of the Special through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.[14]

Shelley's view of the centrality of metaphor—his word also for symbol—in 'ordinary' language, not just poetic language ("language is *essentially* metaphoric")—along with the insistence that metaphor is both the *vehicle* for imaginative activity and the *record* of its activity—demonstrate the distinctive character of imagination, while his image of the 'DEAD metaphor' helps understand why Coleridge's idea is difficult to grasp.[15]

These errors of confusing true imaginative power with reason (Shelley) or fancy/understanding (Coleridge)—those merely associative, or combinatory, or analytical powers—are analogous to the misunderstanding about the nature of basic perception, which Coleridge saw as itself imaginative in its most fundamental activities. Perception is usually understood to be rather like the fancy and reason (or 'understanding'), and even like memory, since it allegedly does not construct or create; it is not essentially vital and active. Instead, it is said to be receptive, basically passive, toying with already known, existing

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[11] 'A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York, 1971), 306.

[12] One of the best accounts of Eighteenth Century attitudes is in John W. Wright's remarkably innovative study, *Shelley's Myth of Metaphor* (Athens, Ga., 1970), introduction.

[13] For eighteenth-century uses, see W.J. Bate and John Bullitt, 'The Distinction between Fancy and Imagination in Eighteenth Century English Criticism', *Modern Language Notes* **60** (1945), 8-15. And see David Fairer's 'Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Creative Fancy', *Coleridge Bulletin* **37 (NS)** (Summer 2011), 1-20, as well as Fairer's recent book, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009), 15-32.

[14] *LS* 30.

[15] See *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957—1990), III 4183 and 4498 for relevant thoughts on the symbol. Hereafter abbreviated *CN*.

things, albeit sometimes in new ways. Seventeenth and eighteenth century writers like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume gave such passive accounts, but not Berkeley or Kant. And it continues today, in spite of experimental discoveries by neuropsychologists and brain researchers like R. L. Gregory, in his *Concepts and Mechanisms of Perception* (1974), or *The Intelligent Eye* (1970), or Colin Blakemore. Still earlier, Ernst Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion* (1960, from his 1956 lectures), built up an overwhelming case against the passive/receptive attitude to perception in the context of painting and visual experience generally. But it was Coleridge's great predecessor, William Blake, who first broke with 18th Century views and articulated the creativity of perception itself, and the part it plays in art. Anticipating both Coleridge and Shelley's advances, Blake made the extraordinary claim that "to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself" (letter to Dr. Trusler, 23 Aug 1799),[16] to which we will return.

I. A. Richards, in his ground-breaking study, *Coleridge on Imagination*, clarified the meaning of the primary/secondary imagination distinction and showed its centrality for Coleridge's insistence on perception itself as imaginative, constructive, and active. Richards explained that Coleridge's concept of primary imagination is designed to emphasize that the most basic, so-called 'materials' of perception are products/processes of a creative, constructive primary faculty. He wrote further, "Primary Imagination is *normal* perception that produces the *usual* world of the senses".[17] Primary imagination is actually involved in the production of our everyday perceptions, those things which constitute ordinary experience and the world as external. For Richards, imagination is indeed the faculty which constitutes this world, as we know it. But then, error creeps in when we unconsciously hypostasize an external world of objects, wholly independent of our perceptions of it, which Coleridge, after Berkeley, famously called the "prejudice of outness". This 'outness' feeling is an overwhelming sense of an absolute division between the inner realm of thoughts, ideas, and experience, and the outer realm of things and world. Shelley warned us about this prejudice when he wrote, in his 'On Life' essay:

> the difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects. [Even further, Shelley insisted that] the words I, and you, and they, are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them.[18]

These admonitions were anticipated in Coleridge's exhortations that while we must distinguish in order to think at all, we must not divide (but more on this

[16] *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford Standard Authors Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969), 793, and see his remarks on 'spiritual sensation'.
[17] I.A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (London, 1934), 58-9.
[18] *Selected Poetry and Prose of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Carlos Baker (Random House, New York, 1951), 'On Life', 460.

later).

One further caution: Coleridge's primary imagination is often interpreted to mean the creative powers of artists, while secondary imagination is said to be the aesthetic appreciation of artefacts, or aesthetic response. This distinction is interesting, but it is not what Coleridge wrote. Indeed, both Shelley's and Coleridge's speculations decreased the distinction between aesthetic creation and aesthetic appreciation, demonstrating a shared conviction that all human beings are imaginative, albeit in varying ways and degrees. As Shelley wrote in 'Speculations on Metaphysics', "the human being…is not [only] a moral, and an intellectual—but also, and pre-eminently, an imaginative being. His own mind is his law; his own mind is all things to him".[19] This democracy of the spirit, shared by Shelley, Keats, Blake, and Coleridge, is well expressed in the perhaps slightly exaggerated but still meaningful folk saying that "We are all Shakespeares in our dreams"—and it has its foundation in the idea that perception is imaginative, an idea which, then, has not only philosophical and aesthetic implications, but also social and political values at stake, discussed later.

II Philosophical Groundings

Introduction: Perception as active, creative;

1) Nature and objects as all alive, growth, creativity, like Imagination;

2) Mind's powers and Nature's powers are congruent, alike;

3a, b) Experience is of a unified world of objects and subjects, homogeneous, not heterogeneous;

4) Rejection of barren dualism by means of 1)—4).

Coleridge's innovative insistence that, contrary to traditional philosophies, imagination is intrinsically involved in the first flutterings of perception is a rejection of the accepted account of perception as a *vis receptiva*. Passive accounts portray perception as a repeating and copying of an already constituted, objective, external world, independent of perception. But for Coleridge (as for Shelley) the human mind is not (*pace* Locke) a blank tablet, nor is it a mirror of nature, something Coleridge had learned from Berkeley, Plato, and Kant, but mainly from his own experiences. Hence, if by 'perception' is meant a passive receptivity of an objective world, then for Coleridge such perception does not exist. Rather, perception, empowered by primary imagination, is itself originative and constitutive, not a copying, repeating, or mirroring process. Blake also had captured this idea of perception as imaginative in writing of the necessity for "double vision", even four-fold vision, and when he entreated, "May God us keep/ From Single vision & Newton's sleep!" (Letter to Thomas Butts 22 Nov 1802).[20]

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[19] Ibid., 818.

[20] *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford Standard Authors Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969), 818.

Probably it was Coleridge's own experiences of his powerful imagination that helped him challenge theorists who thought perception passive and who underestimated the fundamental creativity of the generic human mind. Mind, Coleridge believed, is a pure active and proper *Perceptivity*. These opposing thinkers tended primarily to be empiricists, but idealists fell into related errors, in spite of their respect for the mind's powers of creativity—errors which Coleridge always avoided, for he was no mere idealist. Like Shelley, he sought a philosophy which—by synthesising and truly fusing chosen aspects of both Platonism and Empiricism—could avoid the crippling errors of 'psilosophers', those who wittingly or unwittingly fell into a barren dualism.[21]

[1] The first step involved Coleridge's realisation that the basic character of Nature is *like* the character of the human mind: full of powers of growth, creativity, and production. Nature consists not so much of fixities, products, and substances. What we experience all around us in Nature are events, happenings, relations, interactions, activities, processes. On the other hand, those products, substances, subjects, objects, and fixities are results of such active processes. These results are merely the way the mind has of distinguishing its complex experiences into portions which it can more easily control and organise for its knowledge and practical use. Nature's objects, then, are best understood as processes, not final, fixed, material products: "all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead"[22]; hence:

> Even so as thoughts, from Images even up to ideas, are distinct but not divided Existences of the Mind, [quasi proles semper in utero] so are the Products of Nature, which we call things or Fixes (res fixae, intellectiones coagulatae) are never really producta jam et vere fixa; but themselves portions of the act of producing. [23]

Objects become dead metaphors (*vide* Shelley) when we forget that they are essentially processes, not fixities. Put another way, we must distinguish the products of "the mechanic Understanding… from the *poesis* of the imaginative Reason… Products in antithesis to Produce—or Growths…".[24]

Coleridge believed Descartes to be the first philosopher to make nature "utterly lifeless and godless… who introduced the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence, and the body as matter." [25] Moreover, he then insisted that, "To think (*Ding*, *denken*; *res*, *reor*) is to thingify".[26] This analogy between mind and nature is also found throughout the notebooks and

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[21] See Coleridge's *Philosophical Lectures*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London, 1949), for his account of the Platonic *versus* Aristotelian philosophy. Hereafter abbreviated *PLects*.

[22] *BL* I 202.

[23] *CN* III 4351.

[24] *LS* 29, n1.

[25] *PLects*, lecture 13, 377. And note a further relevant remark: "But observe! that in my system the Object is not, as in the Fichtean Idealism the dead, the substanceless, the mere Idol, but the absolutely free Productivity in the always perfected Product."

[26] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956—1971), IV, 885.

letters, where nature, life, *and* experience are all characterised by what is vital, growing, active— not fixed, static and unchanging.[27] Coleridge's 'One Life' theme unites objects and subjects, when their nature is properly understood, as homogeneous with each other. And it treats not only the object as process; the subject/mind/ or self is also not some fixed and final essence. Rather, "Reason is a self-development, not a quality supervening",[28] and, moreover, "the higher life of Reason is naturally symbolized in the process of growth in nature". [29] But this homogeneity of object and subject is only true if we cast away the notion of 'object' as dead, inert matter. For Coleridge, matter and objects must be understood as "the *coagulum spiritus*, the pause, by interpenetration of opposite energies".[30] And in a letter, he argued with astonishing insight that "no matter [is] *real* otherwise than as the copula of these energies".[31]

Products, substance, and objects *qua* objects are, then, merely 'dead metaphors', to quote Shelley's lucid figure of speech; objects are products of reflection which, when taken literally, lead to the outness prejudice, the collapse into insoluble dualisms, and into unimaginative, literal-minded experience. But we need not drift into idealism by thinking that this reconceptualisation of human experience and nature as acts and processes means that the world is mind-made:

> If it be said, that this is Idealism, let it be remembered that it is only so far idealism, as it is at the same time, and on that very account, the truest and most binding realism… This believes and requires neither more nor less, than that the object which it beholds or presents to itself, is the real and very object.[32]

Nature—whether human nature or physical nature—when viewed as events, acts, and processes, makes possible the restoration of continuity between the two. This does away with old problems based on worn-out dualisms which are mistaken to be facts of reality instead of products of reflection. It is no accident, then, that we speak of nature and of human nature, and that we use the word 'experience' to encompass processes that include both objects and subjects, thoughts or images and ideas, sensations and intuitions.

[2] Following Coleridge's own 'adamantine' chain of reasoning, we can now realise that the mind's powers of construction and creation are exactly analogous to nature's powers of growth and production. Coleridge called this the Pythagorean view: "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".[33] Then he insisted that "the spirit in all the objects

[27] As, for example, in *CN* II 2330, 3223, III 4319, 4333, *CL* II 864-5, and *Lay Sermons* 31.
[28] *BL* I 94.
[29] *LS* 72, and 29.
[30] *CN* III 3632, 4412, and *LS* 81n.
[31] *CL* IV 774.
[32] *BL* I 178 and see 179.
[33] *PLects*, 114.

which it views, views only itself… It must therefore be an ACT; for every object is, as an object, dead, fixed…".[34] Coleridge's organicism emphasises this interrelation between mind and nature in a unity of experience. Yet he also argued for an organic system of reason, whose essence is, like that of Nature, organically-interrelated processes, acts, and growth. Moreover, knowledge is activity: to know, he said, is essentially a verb active. He concluded that, in philosophising, one must commence with an act instead of thing or substance; only then can we have a truly systematic metaphysics, one which has its spring and principle within itself. Moreover, "Intelligence…is [self-]development, not a quality supervening" while all knowledge

> that enlightens and liberalizes, is a form and a means of self-knowledge … the whole of Euclid's Elements is but a History and graphic Exposition of the powers and processes of the Intuitive Faculty…

And, to emphasise, he continued, "We learn to construe our own perceptive power, while we educe into distinct consciousness its inexhaustible constructive energies".[35]

For Coleridge, then, the more we dwell in reason, the more it dwells in us. The human mind, its intelligence, ideas, and its reason/imagination—these are in a constant state of self-development. They evolve, grow, and change, and in this way are also like Nature. A major power enabling reason to evolve is language: "… the knowledge of words … What an immense effect it must have on our reasoning faculties?"[36]

[3a] The next step Coleridge took in freeing himself from the dualisms of both empiricisms and idealisms was a logical progression from his realisation that mind is essentially creative, and that 1) Nature is full of processes, growth, productivity, and 2) mind's powers are congruent and homogeneous with Nature's. Namely, he showed that 3) human experience is, consequently, of a unified world, a world inclusive of opposites—like mental and physical—which are aspects and qualities of experience, not contraries or absolutely heterogeneous substances:

> He alone deserves the name of philosopher, who has attained to see and learnt to supply the difference between Contraries that preclude, and opposites that reciprocally suppose and require each other.[37]

In brief, both types of philosophers—whether empiricists and idealists—had

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[34] *BL* I 184-5; thesis VII.

[35] *BL* I 101, *CN* III 4265, sec iii, and *CL* VI 630.

[36] *CN* I 866; and see R.L. Gregory, *Concepts and Mechanisms of Perception* (1974), on the crucial dependence of verbal language on visual language.

[37] *CN* III 4326. And see *On the Constitution of the Church and State* for similar remarks, such as that opposite powers are always of the same kind, and tend to union, either by equipoise or by common product.

made the fundamental error of dualistic thinking (that 'barren dualism'), in contrast to Coleridge's 'essential' dualism—the law of polarity. In barren dualism, a subject (the knower) set up against an object (matter, the world) is taken to be the nature of reality, instead of being a result and product of reflection. Reality thus breaks up divisively into heterogeneous subjects (mentality) and objects (physicality) only as a consequence of our reflecting about human experience. But this useful subject-object distinction—indeed, this vitally important distinction for all progress in science, as well as in our practical life activities—is mistaken to be an absolute division, a characteristic of existence or reality itself. Blake had anticipated Coleridge's 'essential dualism', with his same distinction between dynamic opposites *versus* inert contraries (as in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*).

Moreover, these subjects and objects (like thoughts and things) are characterised as so different that the major problem of philosophies for 2,500 years has been how they could ever interact. How can the physical (or material, or bodily) and the mental (or non-material or mind) ever come together into any kind of relationship?[38] And yet, our own, everyday experience constantly proves that they do; they are inextricably intertwined, interacting, relating, affecting, and transforming each other. Next, let us note Coleridge on Spinoza:

> The *proton pseudos*… in which all his Antagonists were as deeply immersed as himself… consists in the assumed idea of a pure independent Object—in assuming a Substance beyond the I; of which therefore the I *could* only be a modification.[39]

Put another way, "The Subjectivity of Reason is the great error of the Kantian system";[40] this creates the need for an object—Kant's *noumenon*, or *Ding an sich*. Coleridge, by contrast, said that the unifying principle of experience

> can be neither Subject nor Object…but the identity of both… and yet to be known, this Identity must be dissolved—and yet It cannot be dissolved. For its Essence consists in this Identity. This Contradiction can be solved no otherwise, than by an Act… the Principle makes itself its own Object, [and] thus becomes a Subject. [41]

[3b] To recapitulate, Coleridge rejected these two major errors (which are integrally related), first, that the mind is not constructive and synthetic in perception, but only analytic and receptive—a kind of mirror capable only of analysis, association, and recombination of already given elements coming from outside itself and different from it. Second, the world and reality are

[38] See *BL* I 88-90 for more on the 'law of heterogeneity'.
[39] *CL* IV 849.
[40] See my "Coleridge's Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?" In *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. David Jasper (Macmillan, London, 1984), 22, for discussion of this Kantian error.
[41] *CN* III 4265.

consequently split into absolutely heterogeneous subjects and objects, mental and material, mind and body. Next, he rejected the belief—characteristic of idealists (though shared by some empiricists)—that because of the supposed dualistic nature of reality itself, we can have no genuine knowledge of that external, material world, but only knowledge of the human mind. That is, while idealists so correctly saw the synthetic and creative powers of the mind, they fell into a similar kind of 'barren dualism' that plagued many empiricists. Coleridge described the idealist error this way:

> Our Senses in no way acquaint us with Things, as they are in and of themselves… the properties, which we attribute to Things without us, yea,… this very Outness, are not strictly properties of the things themselves, but either constituents or modifications of our own minds. [42]

From a thorough rereading and study of, especially, Plato and Kant, he was able to formulate his 'constructive or dynamic philosophy', which Shelley would later elaborate in more poetical and practical terms into a 'composition theory of experience': experience is truly constructive, while perception is fundamentally imaginative.

[4] During his middle years, Coleridge clarified his solution to the barren dualism of most traditional philosophies. First, he insisted upon the absolute necessity of always reunifying after the process of distinction in thinking:

> The office of philosophical *disquisition* consists in just *distinction*; [but] distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical *process* of philosophy. But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the *result* of philosophy.[43]

Earlier, he had remarked: "it is a dull and obtuse mind, that must divide in order to distinguish: but it is a still worse mind, that distinguishes in order to divide".[44] His concept of 'essential dualism' expressed the necessity to synthesise and reunify after analysing and distinguishing. Later, his use of the closely-related Blake-like 'law of polarity' would take him another step further in this effort to overcome the dualism inherent in empiricism and idealism. The great Coleridge critic Owen Barfield had explained that for Coleridge "the essence of polarity is a dynamic conflict between coinciding opposites".[45] As Coleridge explained in *The Friend*:

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[42] CN III 3605 f.121, and see the above article, 21-2 for Coleridge on "Was ist Erfahrung?"
[43] *BL* II 8.
[44] *BL* I 88.
[45] Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (London, 1971), 186 *pp.*

> 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 reunion*. This is the universal Law of Polarity or essential dualism, first promulgated by Heraclitus.[46]

"Extremes meet" was a much earlier, favourite formulation Coleridge devised for expressing the necessity to reunify after distinguishing and the related necessity to distinguish but not to divide. This early metaphor for the idea of the 'law of polarity' and of the Heraclitean 'reconciliation of opposites' had fascinated him since his youngest days. By 1809, in *The Friend*, he remarked: "Extremes meet—a proverb, by the bye, to collect and explain all the instances and exemplifications of which, would constitute and exhaust all philosophy".[47] Earlier, he had joyed in the idea, writing in a notebook, "O the depth of the Proverb, Extremes meet!".[48] This insistence upon a philosophically crucial difference between opposites that interrelate and contraries that exclude each other (barren dualism) helped him early in his life to see that experience is not of irreconcilable, heterogeneous subjects and objects or minds and bodies. Human experience is first and foremost of a continuous world, a world of experience where subjects and objects, thoughts and things, external and internal are only relative oppositions—or distinctions for specific purposes.

In order, like Coleridge, to follow Plato's insistence that "Experience seems to be the surest touchstone for everything" (*Eighth Letter*), we must establish our thinking as truest to experience when we recognise what is obvious in all our experience—*until we think it away*—. Namely, subjective and objective events and happenings are intrinsically involved in each other for their meaning and existence—hence, they are homogeneous. Experience is then re-unified into a natural, integral whole, encompassing both subjective and objective in a single realm, not one within the mind and the other outside it. The qualities of physical and mental, mind and body, thought and thing are only distinguished qualities of experience within a unified whole. Clearly, these qualities are homogeneous, for we have only distinguished them, and not divided absolutely things that are essentially related. The following remarks about philosophy and truth apply equally to nature and experience:

> 'Eclectic Philosophy', 'Syncretism'… is the Death of all Philosophy. Truth is one and entire because it is vital. Whatever lives is contradistinguished from all juxtaposition—and mechanism… by its oneness, its impartibility;—and mechanism itself could not have had existence, except as a counterfeit of a

[46] *The Friend*….etc., ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols (Princeton University Press and Routledge and Kegan Paul, Princeton and London, 1969), I 94.
[47] *Friend* I 110, and see 205, 529, and *CN* I 1725, *LS* 133, *CN* III 3400, 3405, 3726, and 4007.
[48] *CN* II 3156.

> living whole. [And compare:] It is the object of the mechanical atomistic Philosophy to confound Synthesis with Synartesis, or *rather*, with mere juxtaposition of corpuscles separated by invisible interspaces.[49]

This distinction between synthesis and Synartesis is fundamental—a metaphor for the *nous/dianoia*, imagination/fancy, symbol/allegory, and idea/image distinctions. Similarly, experience for Coleridge being one and entire, is vital, inclusive of both subjects and objects—distinguished not mechanistically but dynamically.

III Experience is aesthetic and Perception is Imaginative

The above errors arose, Coleridge showed, because each involves taking distinctions in thought and language literally: they become absolute divisions. We must always reunite and synthesise to avoid hypostasising distinctions into realities. Put another way: do not take the metaphorical literally, or it loses all its life. The metaphorical and literal are only verbal distinctions, not essentially different. The literal is comprised of dead metaphors littering language: their truth has been lost through familiarity and custom. Ordinary, everyday perception can *seem* passive, because what we too often experience is a low-level inactivity of mere recognition, memory, and stereotyped response, which is not worthy of the name 'perception'; it is a negative only.

Genuine perception—that energized kind, different from 'passive' perception which relies so much on the memory and reflex action—is, upon examination, intensely active, vital, vigorous, contrasted with mere memory and lazy recognition, which are much like dead metaphors in language. Coleridge wrote of using words mechanically and habitually, as mere counters: we use language as a slide rule, instead of using language imaginatively. This problem with language is an exact analogue of perception: language, too, can be used in a rote way—*via* memory—mechanically. Or it can be used in vital, imaginative ways, ways which really engage the mind in an active, creative process. Thus, the world of Words and Language is an analogue to the world of Nature; we can use perception in a stereotyped, habitual way, or we can infuse it with vitality. It can degenerate into mere recognition, just as language degenerates into literal, clichéd, commonplace habit. But we do not define the nature and character of something by its lowest form, the form it takes when something is at rest. It is easier to see this with Language, probably, than with Perception and Nature, because there is no Outness prejudice. Things and words and ideas, like

[49] *CN* III 4251and *The Friend* I 94

> Truths of all others the most awful and mysterious, yet being at the same time of universal interest, are too often considered as so true, that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth, and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with the most despised and exploded errors.[50]

Compare Shelley, whose remarks on poetry are equally applicable to perception:

> Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar … it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being … It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impression blunted by reiteration.[51]

Our profound mistake about perception arises from confusing genuine perception with the hum drum, that state in which we merely drift along, labelling situations and objects as such-and-such, in a mere succession of half-waking states. Stereotypes, clichés, and a modicum of attention allow us to drift in a world of 'dead metaphors', as Shelley argued, taking them as literal realities, instead of the mere remains or memories of former acts of imaginative perception. To perceive—really to see—is more than merely to recognise, more than to nod acquiescently at familiarity and custom—and then move on, believing oneself to be fully awake. These states are dead spots in experience filled in by past acts and efforts no longer fully felt, but only remembered, and now taken to be fixed and inert realities. We see without feeling, we hear at second hand, we yield to conditions of living that force sense to remain at the surface and our conduct to become mechanical, our responses compartmentalised. A narrow, dull life experience is the result of such submission to convention. Life as it is ordinarily lived is often so stunted, aborted, and slack that we cease to know what our own everyday, ordinary experience could be. Stasis and fixation are the result, and automatic reflexes replace active response. We then define *all* experience to be that hum-drum, half-awake portion, familiar to us when tired, ill, or disheartened. And we assume that true perception is this low level, passive receptivity, this stereotyping and categorising, this labelling and unquestioned receptivity of the surface of the things around us. But this is to confer a meaning on perception that excludes most of its real being, where we are not properly alive, where life is postponed to a distant future because of an inner lethargy.

In contrast to this minimalist account, in which it is assumed that the perceiver passively takes in what is already out there in finished form, an examination of our experience shows us that even this 'taking in' involves

[50] Coleridge was quoting himself from *The Friend* I in *BL* I 60.
[51] Carlos Baker, op. cit., 501-2, 519. And see Coleridge, *CN* IV 4692, on a new heaven and a new earth.

activity, as long as it is not a mere reflex action. Unless some active response occurs, we see only bare recognition, not perception, and recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop. Recognition is just the beginning of an act of perception arrested by a falling back into stereotypes, dead metaphors, or memory—by attaching a tag or label or category. But in a genuine act of 'taking something in', there is some reconstructive activity, some consciousness becomes fresh and alive, and some vivid consciousness is aroused. An energetic going out of ourselves to meet something occurs, instead of a withholding of energy and a withdrawing of the self. When we are only passive to a scene around us, it overwhelms us; we make no answering activity; we don't really perceive it. We have to summon energies and pitch them at responsive keys in order to take something in, to drink it in, really to perceive, and so, appreciate it.[52]

In order to perceive in any meaningful sense of the word, one has to create one's own experience; one must actively construct a response that involves relating elements and finding unities, a whole. This is no less true of our response to the world than it is for the appreciation of works of art. The only difference is the intensity of the activity of response, and even this lesser degree ceases in the presence of sublime and beautiful scenes in nature, or in the presence of human events that move deeply and inspire moral sublimity and beauty. So-called ordinary perception and ordinary experience are full of imaginativeness and aesthetic qualities—if we rouse ourselves from lethargy and custom really to see, really to take in the world around us. Imaginativeness and aesthetic qualities are inherent in our most basic, simple acts of genuine perception. The most ordinary tree can be seen as beautiful, if only we rouse ourselves to meaningful response, and see the wonder of our being.

For Coleridge (and Shelley), there is no difference in kind, but only in degree or intensity, between 'perception' and imagination, between ordinary experience and aesthetic/creative experience, in which imagination creates works of art or ground-breaking, new Ideas. For them, art and imagination should not be delegated to some superior, ideal realm alienated from everyday life. Art is inherent in experience and perception; it arises out of the everyday into a more distilled, condensed, and unified form, no doubt, but a form that is still recognisable as natural and continuous with experience. This we can immediately understand if we think of any ordinary activity well-performed, with heart or perhaps even a little passion in it. A well-prepared meal can be a work of art, while a gesture of generosity discretely offered is a beautiful thing. And the appreciative *receipt* of such gifts can be equally fine. A stimulating conversation can leave one with a sense of fulfilment not different in kind from reading or writing a fine poem. All around us in our ordinary lives at any moment of the day we can participate in imaginative perception, whether it be

[52] See John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, first published in 1934, for a full and lucid elaboration of these ideas about how best to characterise genuine perception; see especially chapters 2-6.

to delight in a sunset or mountain scene, or whether it be to take aesthetic delight in the play of light and shade in the back garden. This is what we mean by genuine perception, by seeing, by taking in the life around us—not that proxy, that lethargic, going-through-the-motions which we fall back on when unable to focus our minds and rise to genuine perception.

IV Concluding Remarks

Consequently, Coleridge wrote of the essential similarity between the appreciation of works of art and the making of them. In emphasising this similarity, he showed that the reader must be a fellow labourer who goes through the same processes as the author. Both activities involved in works of art he defined as secondary imagination, because they are similar in essence—though the results are different. In the one, works of art result; in the other, aesthetic appreciation is the end. But Coleridge never acknowledged any distinction in kind between acts of secondary imagination and the realm of (so-called) ordinary perception: that world of trees and flowers, meals and drinks, sunsets and seashores, acts of kindness and generosity. That world and those processes of perception are in essence imaginative too, and how could Coleridge have been more forceful in insisting upon this than by calling perception, itself, the Primary Imaginative power?

Turning our customary ideas upside down, the Romantic poets refused to prioritise and set in a superior realm of museums and ideals the results of secondary imagination. Instead of allowing us to continue in our mistaken notions that works of art require a higher and different kind of power, they insisted that the most vital and primary mental activity in the *human* mind is that of 'originary' perception, which enables the world of minds and nature, of thoughts and things, of self and others to rise up around us and become rich with meaning. For Coleridge, as for Shelley and Blake, artistic power and activity are not some special kind of mental activities reserved for geniuses. They are the paradigmatic form of *all* human mental activity, from basic perceptual acts to the highest endeavours. In this dynamic conception of perception, it is metaphor, symbol, and other kinds of figuration which play, at all levels, the central role in relating elements to other elements, creating thereby new elements. Metaphor itself is the very character of basic human perception in building up a meaningful world of Nature or of Mind, as well as being the primary constituent of knowledge experiences. But when imaginative, perceptual energy degenerates—through lethargy and custom—then the mind, its knowledge, and the worlds of both nature and language become littered with dead objects, dead metaphors and mere allegories—littered throughout with the remains of what were once symbols, but which have now lost all their original power of stimulating response, and so 'lie side by side with despised and exploded errors'.