Who Am I? Coleridge, Imagination and the God of *Biographia Literaria*

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> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all?[1]

1. Imagination as image

BEST KNOWN TO US AS A POET, to his own generation, Coleridge was someone whose peculiar contribution was slippery and difficult to pin down. Journalist, critic, commentator on current affairs, popular preacher and lecturer on issues of the day (notably on political as well as literary and philosophical themes), Coleridge the poet, while recognised and applauded, was just part of a complex and constantly evolving persona available for public consumption. This was doubtless exactly as Coleridge himself would have had it, for in his mind there were no strong lines to be drawn between different compartments of human existence. Things should be seen as all of a piece in a life, and the patterns of resonance between the spheres of science, politics, religion, philosophy, art, friendship, love, domesticity and the rest traced and forged. The relationship between these two seemingly discrete activities, tracing and forging, acknowledging and shaping, discovering and creating, was one which concerned Coleridge throughout his career, and which, perhaps, he never entirely resolved to his satisfaction. But he certainly wrestled with it, and his wrestling led him back time and again to the intuition that the role of poet, far from being removed from the centre of life's practical concerns, was inextricably bound up with them, since the poet, as one imaginatively tuned in to the deep structures of reality, is one who works with the very same tools others must use in their day to day engagements with the world, but whose genius in deploying these 'creatively' affords a longer reach, a firmer grasp, a deeper insight into the truth of things. Thus 'poet' was no doubt what Coleridge was happy finally to be thought of as, since it was a vocation lying close by so many others that he held to be vitally important, while in some sense transcending their reach. If he aspired to any other designation then it was that of philosopher. He saw poetry and philosophy as organically linked, and was throughout his life, as he himself puts it, 'a Delver in the unwholesome quick-silver mines of abstruse Metaphysics',[2] unable to quieten a gnawing preoccupation with ultimate questions even when the circumstances of his life made the pursuit of intellectual interests difficult. His own proposed *magnum opus* (never realized) was a work of metaphysics rather than a definitive

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[1] Lines 44-8 of 'The Eolian Harp' in Richard Holmes (ed), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996), 37.

[2] 1178 [623, 22nd August 1806, to Daniel Stuart].

volume of poems, though, typically and in a revealing manner, it was to have fused issues of criticism with those of philosophy and theology precisely because Coleridge held the poetic task to be a finite analogue of an infinite and cosmic reality. Putting the matter in familiar Christian terms, for Coleridge God and God's creative relation to the world are most properly 'imaged' in the poetic imagination and its capacities. The terms in which Coleridge's most familiar statement on the subject are cast, though, indicate a complexity and density here which, if the traditional theological language of 'image' is indeed to be applied to it, demands further interpretation, not least in terms of its entailments for a more precise understanding of the relationship between God and the creature.

> The IMAGINATION… I consider either as primary, or secondary. The Primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former… .[3]

These words do not strike the reader as concerned merely to insist that a creative God has called into being creatures who are in their turn and by analogy 'creative', as a straightforward application of 'image of God' conceptuality to the poetic or artistic sphere might. The relationship between the categories of 'image' and 'repetition' invites further reflection. One thing may 'be the image' of another by virtue of some relationship of representation, a relationship which, however it is established, logically presupposes the distinctness of the two terms. The language of repetition, though, at first blush appears to go further and to encourage a stronger interpretation than this, an interpretation which probes uncomfortably beyond the limits which the Christian language of *imago Dei* has generally been willing to entertain, and sees x as related to y not as representative of y but because x repeats, reiterates, *is itself a form or manifestation of y*. We are, in other words, here hard up against the question of God's distinctness and otherness from or 'transcendence' with respect to the creaturely sphere, and the spectre of a conflation rather than a correlation of the dynamics of divine and human poesis—an *imago Dei* which is itself the presence of the very *imaginatio Dei* in human guise.

The words cited above are taken, of course, from the *Biographia Literaria*, an oddly structured concatenation of criticism, metaphysics and personal reminiscence in which Coleridge's most sustained articulation of views on our theme is to be found. While this book falls considerably short of Coleridge's ambitious conception for a *Logosophia*, it is as close as he ever came to writing one, and in its way suffices to communicate his distinctive integrative vision of

[3] *BL*.1, 304

intellectual, aesthetic, moral and spiritual concerns.[4] At the heart of this vision lie two key distinctions upon which he insists, and on which much else in his thought hangs. One is the distinction we have already met between the primary and the secondary imagination. The other is that between imagination and fancy. The fancy/imagination distinction is first introduced to the reader in Chapter 4 and revisited more fully (though even there briefly) in Chapter 13, but the primary/secondary distinction only occurs this once in all Coleridge's works. In the intervening chapters Coleridge provides an impressionistic genealogy of the major philosophical influences upon him to date, apparently aware that without it we shall, in all likelihood, be ill-equipped to fathom his own idiosyncratic account of things.[5] Frankly, the idiosyncrasy remains a significant challenge, and the proffered context proves necessary rather than sufficient, therefore, for those who would make some sense of what he has to say. It behoves us, nonetheless, to follow his lead and juxtapose his views briefly with those of some who he clearly considered to be his intellectual forebears.

2. Philosophical gleanings ~ following the Kantian turn

Coleridge's philosophical influences are clear enough, even though his literary style does not always afford them the precise amount of credit due.[6] A youthful high regard for the philosophical Empiricism of Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume and, more especially, the Associationism of David Hartley was disrupted when, in his late twenties Coleridge travelled eagerly to Germany to (as he puts it) 'finish my education'. Here, he tells us, he acquired a 'tolerable proficiency' in the language[7] and drank in thirstily the ideas of Kant (the 'illustrious sage of Königsberg' as Coleridge deferentially refers to him)[8] and of some of those who bobbed around in Kant's considerable wake. From the passage in which the 'sage' allusion arises it is clear that it was Kant's so-called 'Copernican Revolution' in philosophy (especially its new emphasis on freedom and

[4] Coleridge survived the publication of these views by some twenty years, of course, and there is evidence that he came in due course to see certain of them as immature. See, e.g., I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 3rd Edn. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962), 66. They are, though, his most clearly articulated statements on the subjects in hand, and those generally associated with his name and contribution in the field. For our purposes, therefore, they provide a fitting focus, though we shall also consider some of the trajectories of his thought prior to and beyond them.

[5] Holmes, following Engell and Bate, (*BL* 1 li-lviii) notes that the core philosophical sections of the *Biographia Literaria* were drafted after the rest of the text and in an intense burst of writing in August and early September 1815. Coleridge had at first considered the shorter text (which contained a mere handful of pages on this material) complete, but changed his mind at the last minute and decided to add some metaphysical underpinning to clarify the wider context for his views. The result was chapters 5 to 13 inclusive, an extra 45,000 words which doubled the book's length! See Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, 393.

[6] On the subject of Coleridge's 'plagiarism' see Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions,* 43 and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, 253f., 275f. See also Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 65, and *BL*.1, 158, n.2. For Coleridge's own response to the accusation levelled in November 1811 that he had, consciously or otherwise, borrowed material for some of his own public lectures delivered that month from those of Schlegel (delivered in 1808 and published in 1810) see Griggs, *Letters*, Volume III (1807-1814), 354-361 [845, c. 15-21 December 1811, to Unknown Correspondent].

[7] BL.1, 205. A proposed two-month trip eventually stretched to occupy ten, from September 1798 to July 1799. See Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 205-237.

[8] *BL*.1, 153. Cf also reference to 'the venerable sage of Königsberg', *BL*.1, 297.

responsibility in fashioning the 'objects' of knowledge) which so took Coleridge's imagination captive and came duly to shape his own understanding, though an entry in his notebooks for 16th March 1801 suggests that he may not have followed its course fully or whole-heartedly until then.[9] In any event, despite his continuing admiration for Kant, Coleridge rapidly came to the view that in actual fact it was not to Kant but 'to SCHELLING we owe the completion, and the most important victories, of this revolution in philosophy'.[10]

From Kant, Coleridge had learned the fundamental thing, that the contours of the world as we experience it humanly, in its physical as well as its moral, spiritual and aesthetic dimensions, is—whatever else may have to be said about it—in significant part a product of mind or thought, a constructive activity within which Kant himself ascribes leading roles to the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) functioning respectively in its 'transcendental' (or 'productive') and its 'empirical' ('reproductive') modes.[11] For his part, Kant had continued to posit the existence of the *Ding an Sich*, the 'thing in itself'—a reality, that is to say, existing independently of the ways in which, equipped with the particular apparatus we happen to be equipped with, human beings are bound to construct and to experience it. What such a thing might be we do not and cannot know, since by definition it falls beyond the range of any possible *human* experience. That it exists, has its own reality and integrity, though, Kant has little doubt. Thus, while refusing to concede the sheer givenness of the world to experience (as empiricism had tended to), and insisting instead on the mind's active participation in constructing it, Kant holds back from denying givenness altogether and as such, leaving room for the genuine existence of a reality (and its presumed source or origin) which is other than us, which confronts us, and which in doing so calls for a concomitant sense of responsibility and respect in the face of its own mystery.

The key move which Kant's various idealist disciples and detractors made was to wield Occam's razor and eliminate the *Ding an Sich*, thereby at a single stroke drawing *reality as a whole* into the sphere of the mind's jurisdiction. Consistent idealists, that is to say, went beyond Kant by denying the existence of any reality independent of mind itself, and regarding 'things …in their entirety as products of thought'.[12] They did not, of course, deny the *reality* of all sorts of things which, in our experience, appear to exist apart from any conscious or creative mental activity on our part. Nor did they suppose, in the manner of solipsism, that such things were produced by the individual mind. Instead, they thought of the finite human mind itself as part and parcel of a much greater, indeed infinite supra-personal reality of 'Mind' (or 'Spirit'), an Absolute Subject which (or who) is the ultimate productive source of all that is. Reality as a whole, that is to say, in both its physical and supra-physical

[9] See *BL*.1 153, n.1.
[10] *BL*.1, 163.
[11] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), A115-30.
[12] Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, VII.1, 18.

dimensions and their temporal extension in the respective 'processes' of nature and history, amounts to the objective self-expression or self-manifestation of this infinite creative reason.

In such early writings as the *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797) and the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) Schelling refers in this vein to Nature (the physical and biological cosmos) as in effect the by-product of a bid by infinite Mind to become conscious of itself, a vast dynamic and teleological process moving inexorably toward the emergence of consciousness as such (in the form of finite mind), and resulting—through such manifestations of human intelligence as philosophy and, for Schelling notably, art—in Mind/Nature becoming aware of and reflecting upon itself. [13] Here, as Frederick Coplestone puts it, 'the Universe knows itself in and through the mind of man'.[14] The realization is necessarily partial and incomplete, the truth of our ultimate union with Nature and its source being, as it were, from the standpoint of historical existence, necessarily apprehended 'through a glass darkly'. So there is still some scope for mystery, for the time being at least. But in the meanwhile, Schelling suggests, we can attain a fuller sense or glimpse of this truth through reckoning to the full with human artistry in particular, in which the highest levels of creative freedom and genius on our part are conjoined and concurrent with a productive dynamic infinitely greater than the conscious self as such, the artist being ever aware not just of the status of his "work" as an objective entity belonging to a world in terms of whose given qualities and potentialities he is obliged to work, but also of being taken up, Schelling says, by 'a power which separates him from all other men, and compels him to say or depict things which he does not fully understand himself, and whose meaning is infinite'.[15]

All this is, of course, metaphysics of a wholesale sort. Indeed, as Morgan notes, 'The whole story runs like one of the creation myths Schelling had looked into when he was in Tübingen' as a seminarian.[16] Coplestone reminds us that in actual fact *all* the major idealist philosophers (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) had once been seminarians,[17] and their interest in the relationship between finite and infinite reality was clearly motivated and informed by a continuing play with Christian ideas about God and the world. But the relationship was stretched rather thin at certain vital points. Specifically, the abandonment of Kant's postulate of the 'thing in itself' sucked all reality

[13] F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature as Introduction to the Study of that Science*, translated by E. E. Harris and Peter Heath; introduction by Robert Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); *System of Transcendental Idealism*, translated by Peter Heath with an introduction by Michael Vater (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978). On this see especially Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, ch. 3; Morgan, 'Schelling and the origins of his *Naturphilosophie'* and Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, VII.1, 121-2. Importantly, Coplestone notes that in Schelling's later works he embraces the idea that the spiritual reality lying behind the cosmos is *personal*, in which case 'it cannot .. be maintained that the ultimate spiritual reality becomes self-conscious in and through the cosmic process' (42).

[14] *A History of Philosophy*, VII.1, 25.

[15] Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 223.

[16] Morgan, 'Schelling and the origins of his *Naturphilosophie*', 31.

[17] See Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, VII.1, 26.

inexorably into the category 'Mind and its thoughts' and in doing so collapsed two vital distinctions. Now, not only was the distinction between the human mind and the world effectively surrendered without remainder, but, more importantly, the distinction between God and the world, Creator and creature, was deliberately swallowed up and dissolved by the claim that Mind and mind (and Nature) were ultimately and essentially all part of a single cosmic process. From here it was a small and natural step (if not strictly a necessary one) to the sort of 'unbridled romanticism' ascribed by Coplestone to Novalis and others, according to which all 'givens', whatever their source are, like rules, there to be transgressed, and the products of infinite Mind modifiable, in principle at least, by finite mind's resolute application of will.[18] Here, in other words, the relationship between artist and Creator is no longer one of analogy, but ultimately one of identity, a claim with some potentially disturbing entailments.

3. Making all things ~ reality as imaginative product

Coleridge was certainly not an unbridled romantic in this sense. And while his appropriation of Schelling was enthusiastic, it was never total, so that the form of idealism which Coleridge espouses is spoiled by the occasional eruption of deep-rooted realist instincts related directly, perhaps, to a faith in God which, despite some profound shifts and crises, endured from childhood and became more rather than less intense throughout his adult life. The result is an epistemology which, although it places a huge emphasis upon the mind's creative and constructive activity—and thereby renders the status of the 'reality' of which we are conscious ambiguous relative to the reality of the self—nonetheless does so in the interests of a profoundly felt sense of responsibility in the face of something or someone Other to which 'response' of an appropriate sort is properly due.

Let us turn, then, to Coleridge's distinctive account of imagination, an account which begins life in Chapter 4 of the *Biographia* in the service of literary criticism[19] but duly becomes, by way of the philosophical detour we have followed, an account of how it is that human beings engage more widely (and more deeply) with the world. For Coleridge is convinced that the *nature* (if not the degree), of the engagement is the same across the board, with a vital imaginative and creative component demanding recognition. What the poet does in the most exalted moments of visionary genius is of the same sort, and draws on the very same capacities and tools, as what we all do daily when we participate actively in and make sense of the larger reality of which we find ourselves to be a part. This holds true from the most basic of sensory engagements to our engagements with what Coleridge calls the 'world of spirit'

[18] Coplestone, A History of Philosophy VII.1, 31.

[19] 'The conception was devised as a means of describing the wider and deeper powers of some poetry'. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 96. It should be borne in mind in what follows that the primary concern of *Biographia Literaria* is a literary rather than a philosophical one, and Coleridge's suggestive excurses into the territory of metaphysics therefore remain largely undeveloped.

which, if distinct, is nonetheless inseparable from the physical, and with which we also have to do daily in our intuition of and responses to mental, spiritual, emotional, moral, aesthetic and other 'things' which transcend and complement the level of our embodied physicality.

'(A)ll the organs of sense' Coleridge writes, 'are framed for a corresponding world of sense; and we have it. All the organs of spirit are framed for a correspondent world of spirit: though the latter organs are not developed in all alike. But they exist in all, and their first appearance discloses itself in the moral being'.[20] We notice here at once the striking 'realist' note implicit in the claim. There is a reality, a world to be engaged with, it has physical and spiritual dimensions, and there is a plenitude to be fathomed and brought to our awareness. And it is precisely this task of the intuition, appropriation and opening up of realities with which Coleridge is concerned, a task in which we are each necessarily involved at more or less mundane levels, but which the poet presses deliberately to ever greater heights and depths, showing us things that we should not otherwise notice, helping us to see, feel, taste them afresh and anew. For Coleridge the link between the two circumstances lies securely in the fact that reality as a whole is by definition susceptible to the mind's activities, even the world seemingly 'given' to our senses being one which we must lay hold of and process or 'construct' in order to know it. Thus the 'real world' whose depths and heights the poet plumbs for us, is precisely also the 'ideal world'[21] since reality is always rendered for us by the creative imagination, as Coleridge's account of the matter in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia* makes plain.

In this key chapter Coleridge draws two particularly important distinctions and offers relevant definitions of his terms. Although we have already cited part of what he says, it will be worth here citing his words again, and this time in full:

> 'The IMAGINATION I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead'.[22]

Here, then, is the first important distinction, that between the primary and the

[20] BL.1, 242.
[21] *BL*.1, 80. Cf also: 'the man of genius lives most in the ideal world'. *BL*.1, 43.
[22] *BL*.1, 304.

secondary imagination. The tacit value judgment which we tend typically to associate with 'primary' is here subverted, and it is to the 'secondary' form in which imagination exists and acts that Coleridge ascribes what is perhaps the more significant role in terms of our human engagement with the world. The *primary* imagination, he suggests (i.e. *logically* primary), is that pre-conscious, constructive (and therefore 'creative') activity of the mind which renders for us the day to day world of physical experience. Coleridge's elaborate way of referring to it rests solidly on Schelling's complex scheme (with a rendering of which the ten theses contained in Chapter 12 are chiefly concerned), and we have already noted the slightly ambiguous implication of his chosen image of 'repetition'. However this should be read, though, it is clear that Coleridge sees this pre-conscious imaginative agency as tied directly to God's activity in fashioning a coherent and meaningful world for our indwelling. (Coleridge could take for granted the familiarity of readers in his own day with core biblical narratives, and his explicit allusion to God's identification of himself before Moses in Exod. 3:14 as 'I AM' would thus scarcely have merited further comment.) The *secondary* imagination, on the other hand, is defined as such by the wedding of imagination to the exercise of will, and thus to deliberate activities of meaning making, 'dissolving, diffusing, dissipating', in order subsequently to reconfigure and thereby (hopefully) to grasp more fully, see further, probe deeper into the plenitude of what is possible. Imagination orders and re-orders, creates and recreates the human world which we all indwell, and at each stage of imaginative advance the self grows and develops, becomes more capable of reality, more attuned to that 'eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' of which it discovers in itself the repetition and the echo.

4. Making all things new ~ imagination and fancy

Coleridge's chosen terms of description might lead one to enquire just what the difference is (if indeed there is a difference) between those privileged products of imagination labelled 'reality' and others afforded the lesser status of fiction, illusion, or falsehood—in short, things merely 'imaginary'. On this point Coleridge is apparently quite clear. 'When a man mistakes his thoughts for persons and things', he insists, 'he is mad. A madman is properly so defined'.[23] This is abrupt to say the least! But then Coleridge was only too familiar with the pathological possibilities of a diseased or disordered imagination, and madness was something too close to home for comfort. He had suffered from terrible nightmares ever since childhood, was addicted to opium and suffered its hallucinogenic effects throughout his adult life, and had close relatives and friends who were the unfortunate victims of severe mental illness. So he knew all about the damage imagination was capable of doing in and to a life. But he had learned, too, through the same proximity to 'strong imagination', just how powerful it was not just in obscuring reality with

[23] Table Talk, July 25th 1832, Cited in Richards, 172. Get full ref to CCW.

dreams, terrors and fantasies, but in breaking it open, affording epiphanies of deep-hidden connections between things, of possibilities, disordering the familiar patterns and offering them back under new configurations, transfigured, and to be experienced in a fresh and life-changing ways. And, while the secondary imagination as Coleridge defines it operates in all manner of more or less mundane everyday contexts, it is in the genius of the poet that he understands its capacities as most fully present and most deliberately realized. The poet's eye apprehends and probes, as it were, a complex and dynamic surplus of meaning, and through his careful use of words leads us ever deeper into a reality pregnant with meaning waiting to be born, one image or connexion leading naturally on to another, and granting not just a knowledge of new and surprising things, but new ways of understanding and experiencing some old and familiar ones. The secondary imagination, we might say, "makes all things new".

While the line may not always be a straightforward one to draw on Coleridge's terms, therefore, it is clear that he insists on *drawing* a line between those imaginative products which may count for us as 'reality' and those which, for whatever reason, may not. This brings us to the second key distinction he draws in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, that between 'imagination' and 'fancy'. Again, we cite him in full. 'Fancy', he tells us is 'the aggregating and associative power' of the mind, compared to imagination's role as the 'shaping and modifying' power.[24] As such,

> 'FANCY… has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association'.[25]

Fancy, in other words, draws things from the available stock of what the self has already known and been ('memory') and, through the application of will, 'liberates' them from their given place in the order of things.[26] Thus I may choose to imagine myself, somewhat younger and fitter obviously, and having 'bulked out' a little, scoring the match-winning try for Scotland against the All Blacks in the imminent Rugby World Cup final; I can remove the wings from a bird and attach them (appropriately resized) to a horse; or turn the sky red or the sun green (simply by the playful redistribution of nouns and adjectives), and so on. On some definitions, this sort of 'playing with' the counters given

[24] *BL*.1, 293.
[25] *BL*.1, 305.
[26] Again, therefore, we note that, once all the relevant idealist checks and balances are in place, there is indeed a 'givenness' to be acknowledged in the world, albeit one for which, in some sense, the mind itself is responsible. The 'law of association' to which Coleridge refers here is not, therefore, that understood by Hartley et al as something external and given to the mind, but a law which itself falls under the mind's own creative jurisdiction, part of what the primary imagination fashions. See *BL*.1, 116-7.

to us by past experience and language might indeed, of course, be ascribed perfectly naturally to imagination itself, as Coleridge's fleeting spat with Wordsworth on the subject demonstrates.[27] In appropriating the category of 'fancy' in the peculiar way that he does, though, Coleridge intends to disentangle two discrete strands of mental activity from their undoubted entanglement with one another in practice, and to put some clear blue water between them as types. Typically, the chapter which Coleridge promised to write *justifying* his use of the relevant distinction never appeared, and we are compelled to organise and develop his sketchy comments more fully than he himself did. But something like the following seems to fit the case.

Imagination is a way in which the mind or self acts which is 'higher' than fancy, because it involves a creative, forming and shaping relationship to the world in which reality (or our consciousness of it) is modified, broken open, deepened, and so on. The primary imagination furnishes us with that consciousness of the world (its physical and spiritual 'order') which, tacitly, shapes the way in which we experience it. Thus it is the provider of the 'fixities and definites' which memory reinstates in conscious experience and upon which fancy subsequently works its playful magic, dismantling the order and putting it back together in colourful and striking new configurations for our entertainment and delectation. Let's notice first, then, that while imagination may be 'higher' and fancy correspondingly 'lower' in this scheme, the two are nonetheless compatible with one another and, indeed, mutually dependent. Fancy can only function on the basis of images with which the primary imagination provides it. In its turn, though, imagination (now in its guise as the 'secondary' imagination) needs fancy, for its own activity of reforming, making anew, shaping of things depends initially on just the sort of deliberate, playful 'meddling with the Primary World'[28] that is fancy's forte.[29] And when Coleridge cites poets such as Milton, Burns and Wordsworth as instances of the secondary imagination in its most exalted manifestations, we should note that he also cites poets (Cowley, Otway) to exemplify fancy at its best.[30] Clearly, then, the distinction between the two does not lie in the *form* either of their activities or their respective products, but elsewhere. Where, then, should we seek it?

It centres finally, I would suggest, on the relation of each form of mental activity to reality as it is known, and the capacity which the one possesses (and the other lacks) to open reality up further for our shared indwelling and participation. Whereas '(t)he Fancy brings together images which have no connection natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by means of

[27] See on this *BL*.1, 293-4. In the preface to an edition of his own poems in 1815, Wordsworth had insisted precisely that the sort of role Coleridge was ascribing to 'fancy' was also the prerogative of imagination, and demanded from him a more precise way of differentiating the two.

[28] The phrase is Tolkien's. See *Tree and Leaf*, 48.

[29] Hence 'Imagination must have fancy, in fact the higher intellectual powers can only act through a corresponding energy of the lower'. Table Talk, April 20th 1833. (Cited Richards, 75.)

[30] See *BL*.1, 84-5.

some accidental coincidence', imagination 'modifies images, and gives unity to variety; it sees all things in one'[31] and in its creative integrations and co-adunations one image 'is made to modify many others, & *by a sort of fusion to force many into one*'.[32] Whereas the products of fancy may be interesting, but quickly run out of steam in terms of any poetic penetration of reality, those of imagination mine rich and deep veins of truth, drawing us ever further in, as one creative or suggestive correspondence or link between things leads us willingly and naturally to another, and still another, in a seemingly open-ended chain or pattern of 'natural' connections. The imagination engages creatively with the world in ways which do not merely reorganise a given set of pieces (like a child with a modelling kit capable of construction into endless different patterns—now a racing car, now a steam-roller, now an aeroplane, and so on), but actually extend or enlarge the reality with which the poet began, leaving us all with a richer, more extensive vision of and grasp upon the world and its possibilities than that possessed at the outset, and thus, too, of course, a different starting point for all subsequent activities of fancy and imagination alike (a larger selection of pieces to play with).[33] Thus, Coleridge notes, imagination is 'that sublime faculty, by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on',[34] the self or subject growing, developing and being 'realized' as the contents of consciousness ('reality') are imaginatively reshaped, modified, created and discovered. The well-chosen metaphor, George Steiner suggests, provides us with a new mapping of the world, reorganizing our habitation in reality.[35] In a real sense it changes reality for us (in Coleridge's term it 'modifies' it), opening it up, unfolding it before our eyes, endlessly regenerating it through the midwifery of what Ricoeur dubs "heuristic fictions".[36]

From all this it is clear that for Coleridge the mind's creative relationship to reality is certainly not one in which anything goes. If the formulations of imagination are pregnant with meaning or transparent with respect to truth in a way that those of fancy are deemed not to be, then there must be identifiable criteria for differentiating between the two. The genuine value added to the world by imagination must be recognizable as such, otherwise the capricious dissolution and reassembling of reality by fancy and the 'esemplastic' offerings of poetic genius amount to much the same thing, there being no merely structural difference between them. By nature of the case, though, since imagination is itself the source both of the materials with which fancy works

[31] Table Talk, 23rd June 1834.

[32] From Coleridge's 1808 lecture notes cited in *BL*.1, 85, n2.

[33] It is important to note that Coleridge's fancy is not directly equivalent to literary or psychological uses of the similar term 'fantasy'. Since his definition has to do with the capacity of particular reconfigurations of reality to penetrate deeper into reality itself, it should be clear that some instances of the literary genre of fantasy and of the activity of fantasizing or day-dreaming are likely to be classified as fancy, while others will count in Coleridge's terms as activities of the secondary imagination. Precisely because no purely formal criteria for classification exist, judgments will have to be made on a case by case basis.

[34] 1808 lecture notes, cited in *BL*.1, 85, n2.

[35] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23.

[36] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 239.

and of our most exalted redescriptions and renewings of reality, no *external* rule of judgment can by supplied to enable us finally to distinguish between the two. 'The rules of imagination', Coleridge insists, 'are *themselves* the very powers of growth and production'.[37] If we are to draw such distinctions, then it can only be on the basis of what amounts to an intuition of poetic authenticity, an epiphany which occurs only as sympathetically we indwell the unique symbolic standpoint which the poet's striking reconfigurations afford us.

5. The infinite I AM, and beyond … ~ towards a Trinitarian poetics

It follows from this that, notwithstanding the role Coleridge ascribes to imagination itself as the vital source both of the given world and an as yet uncreated 'new world', there must in some clear sense be a depth or plenitude of 'reality' waiting, as it were, to be discovered or, if we prefer, called into existence by the imagination. Again, in the terms proper to Coleridge's chosen idealism, the two metaphors are equally appropriate, intuition and invention, discovery and creation, insight and projection being but different ways of describing the same psychological phenomenon—the responses of sentient beings to a complex physical and spiritual world (past, present and potential/future) which is itself shaped by and falls under the jurisdiction of mind—not the poet's own mind, of course, but Mind with a capital 'M' or 'the infinite I AM'. Like Schelling, Coleridge sees the poet or artist as the one best equipped for this task of 'inventing' in both senses of the word[38]—feeling his or her way out beyond the current limits of knowledge and given experience towards a reality which will only be known fully in an eschatological consummation, but of which genuine anticipations and approximations are already possible here and now.[39] Art, therefore, for Coleridge, is never merely mimetic, but always creative, always pressing ahead and seeking (by its genuinely 'creative' rather than merely playful modifications of our perception and consciousness) to bring something into existence which, as yet, has no existence in the human world—which is precisely to say, in the world as human beings experience it.

All this brings us back at last to the theme of responsibility and accountability—that of the poet, but equally that laid upon each of us as we are called upon to exercise those epistemic skills and faculties with which nature has endowed us, and so participate actively and creatively in the task of constructing a world fit for human habitation. For all that Schelling's finite mind is in a genuine sense confronted by what is given to it by the infinite I AM, the self-differentiation, we should recall, is only temporary, and in the bigger picture it remains true that responsibility is effectively owed by mind

[37] BL.2, 84.
[38] C.f. Ricoeur, *loc cit.*
[39] NB this reality lying as yet beyond the bounds of our experience is not equivalent to Kant's *Noumenon*. It is a reality which is in principle knowable by human beings, part of the human world which, as yet is not in fact known, but has the potential to be known.

only to Mind itself, a conviction that lends itself naturally, perhaps, to a certain sort of hubris or presumption to dominion over reality (of a sort presaged clearly in strands of Renaissance Neo-Platonism and bearing strange fruit in some intemperate versions of Neo-Romanticism). Ironically, therefore, while it was precisely a deeply felt sense of the need for our knowing to be responsible rather than merely 'mechanical' which attracted him to the emphases of idealist philosophy, Coleridge's Christian faith in God, while it certainly ebbed and flowed and developed through his life, granted him a more ultimate and intimate sense of responsibility yet, and a sense of the otherness or transcendence of God which was never going to sit very comfortably with a description couched in idealist terms.

Idealism's core dogma, we recall, was that nothing is ever absolutely given to the mind, the self being no mere puppet whose strings are jerked by causes, events, habits and other mechanisms with respect to which it is passive, but a responsible maker of its own world. Ironically, it was during the very months and years in which Coleridge immersed himself in idealist writings and appropriated this dogma that the world itself (both inner and outer) suddenly bit back, assuming for him an altogether darker and more threatening aspect. Infatuation, addiction, depression, writer's block and various other spanners were all thrown into the works, leaving him looking for all the world like the victim of circumstance and impulse rather than the confident author of his own personal growth and development. Far from lodging a plea of diminished responsibility, though, Coleridge's idealism appears to have prevented him from placing the blame elsewhere, confirming in his own mind that the resultant mess was indeed one of his own 'making' in various relevant senses, but knowing himself, too, to be incapable of lifting himself out of the mire by any voluntary tugging at his own bootstraps. The result, borne witness to in correspondence from the period, especially with his son Hartley, was a rediscovery not just of the transcendence of God, but of God's *holiness*—that incomparable moral purity which, according to the Christian characterization of God, manifests itself in gracious judgment and redemption in the face of human folly and sin.[40] The question of the relationship between idealism's Absolute and the God of Sinai, Golgotha and Pentecost, of the true identity of the 'infinite I AM' in whose image the poet was created, was now growing urgent, but remained as yet largely unresolved.

Coleridge, then, was now well on his way back to the religious orthodoxy of his baptism and early upbringing, but it was bound to complicate his relationship to that other gospel, issuing from the apostles of Konigsberg and Jena, with which he had allied himself with all the zeal of a convert. By 1815 (the year in which the Biographia was written) it is clear from other sources

[40] So, for example, 'think of God & what *worms* we all are, & how likely to be wrong in any case, how sure to be wrong in *many*'. Griggs, *Letters*, Volume 3 (1807-14), 54 [672, early 1808, to Hartley Coleridge]. And again, 'It is a Whim of modern Date to consider Christianity as a mere Code of Ethics. This seems to me a degradation of the New Testament. It is an offer of Redemption from Moral Evil and its Consequences, with a declaration of the conditions of acceptance'. Griggs, *Letters*, Volume 3 (1807-14), 153 [734, 30th December 1808, to Sir George Beaumont].

that *religiously* Coleridge had already put behind him the idealist synthesis of God/Nature/Humanity which had earlier so attracted him, but the metaphysics and aesthetics reflected on its pages remains relatively unscathed by the shift. What he wanted—what he had always wanted and still wanted—was an account of the world as shot through with divine significance, pregnant, indeed with the very presence and energy of God himself, and an account of every human engagement with the world as being of a potentially creative and responsible sort, not crushed by a deleterious divine heteronomy which demands of it only that it 'shut up, sit up and listen up!' in the face of a world absolutely given. Idealism had provided him with the terms in which to articulate such a vision. Now, in the dawning light of his gradual return to Christian orthodoxy, he was still seeking a framework which would permit him to reckon to the full with the radical immanence of God within the world and its processes, and indeed within the depths of the human spirit, yet one which would simultaneously enable him to distinguish God from both, insisting upon God's absolute otherness with respect both to the world and the human spirit as the ultimate personal source and arbiter of reality, goodness and truth, and the one with whom responsibility for their moment to moment existence, unfolding and destiny finally lay.

As yet, it seems, no way of squaring this circle had suggested itself to Coleridge. A way lay within his reach, though, if not as yet his grasp; a distinctly religious rather than a philosophical framework, a vision of God's engagement with the world which at once secured the dialectic of divine transcendence and immanence, otherness from and radical involvement in the world, that Coleridge now so craved, and embraced to boot the full participation of the creature in the dynamics of the pattern of divine life and activity. A letter to Joseph Cottle in April 1814 reveals that Coleridge had already crossed the relevant theological Rubicon: 'You ask me my views of the Trinity', Coleridge writes, 'I accept the doctrine …as the clear revelation of Scripture'[41] (a far cry, this, from the Socinian Unitarianism he had for so long and so passionately espoused). But if the distinctive Christian naming of God as Father, incarnate Son and Holy Spirit had already transformed his way of reading the New Testament, it had apparently not yet occurred to Coleridge that it might transform his poetics too; though this, it must be admitted, is an oversight for which, given the wider pattern of Christian theological engagement with the subject both before his day and since, he might still be forgiven. Indeed, although in his later writings Coleridge would take identifiable steps in this direction, a properly Trinitarian poetics—accounting for acts of human poesis as an active sharing in the artistry of God himself both as Creator and as creature—remains, as yet, to be written.

[41] Griggs, *Letters*, Vol. 3 (1807-14), 480ff.