Coleridge and Fichte on the Power of Imagination

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GIVEN HIS DESIRE TO CREATE A 'NEW SENSE' OF THE IMAGINATION (BL I 169) it is perplexing to observe that across the vast breadth of his literary writings Coleridge failed to develop a sustained account of the primary imagination, choosing instead to create a sense of the term through a fragmentary array of literary, psychological and philosophical ruminations. One such rumination is, of course, Coleridge's one and only definition of the term given in the final page of the First Volume of the *Biographia Literaria*—'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' (BL I 304).

Many attempts to elaborate on this brief definition have been made.[1] One of most cited and often supported is that of Shawcross who proposed 'the primary imagination is the organ of common perception, the faculty by which we have experience of an actual world of phenomena.'[2] Elaborating on and giving credence to the idea of the primary imagination as simply the 'Power and prime Agent of all human Perception' may resonate with Sara Coleridge's declaration that Coleridge 'stroked out' the final clause of the definition as 'a repetition in the finite mind…' (BL I 304 fn.3). However, given Coleridge defined perception as 'human' and given his desire to create a 'new sense' of the term imagination, Shawcross's elaboration falls surprisingly short.[3]

The primary imagination is more than an 'organ of common perception' for Coleridge describes the imagination as an 'esemplastic power'—a 'power to shape into one' (BL I 168). By defining the imagination as a 'faculty that forms the many into one' (CN III 4176), Coleridge endows the primary and secondary imagination with the power to create something much more than the unified form of the perception. As Coleridge explains, the human mind embodies a unique and particular power—'I have layed stress on the words, *human mind*—excluding thereby all results common to Man and all sentient creatures….' (CN III 4397). That which is 'common to Man and all sentient creatures' is the power to produce or to create the form of the perception. Humankind, along with all sentient beings, need to see, hear, feel, smell and taste in order to interact with the world, in order to survive. Perceptions are

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[1] Some examples include G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 222. Thomas McFarland, 'Excursus Note Xiii. Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination,' in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 310. Nigel Leask, 'Coleridge's Theory of Primary and Secondary Imagination,' in *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988). Alexander M. Schlutz, *Mind's World: Imagination and Subjectivity from Descartes to Romanticism*, ed. Richard T. Gray, Literary Conjugations (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 227–30.

[2] See Shawcross' definition in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Volume I, ed. with his Aesthetical Essays by J. Shawcross, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1907), 272. Davidson provides a detailed account of the prevailing scholastic interpretation of Coleridge's primary imagination which associates the primary imagination primarily with the act of perception. See Footnote 2 in Graham Davidson, 'Coleridge's Primary and Religious Imagination. A Prescript,' *The Coleridge Bulletin,* 51, (2018), 105.

[3] Coleridge's inclusion of the word 'human' also noted by Davidson in op.cit.105.

fundamental to the possibility of all forms of experience allowing the sentient being to understand, for example, what is of value, what is of danger, what is necessary for survival.

Given this explanation, the primary imagination must be, in principle, fundamental to the essential form of the human mind allowing perceptions to be thought about. As Coleridge explains, the 'congruity of the animal impression with the reflective powers of the mind' allows 'not the thing presented but that which is re–presented by the thing' to become unified in 'one thought' or in 'one idea' (CN III 4397).[4] The creation of 'one thought' or the creation of 'one idea' is an innately human activity—it is an activity that gives form to being—to the being of human which is, for Coleridge, a re-enactment in the finite mind of the 'eternal act of creation.'[5]

Conceived in this way, the primary imagination is an ontological power of creation. It gives form to being by allowing an interminable interplay between the finitude of being and the infinitude of the 'infinite I am,' rendering the human mind continually active. As Coleridge explains, 'If the mind be not *passive*, if it be indeed made in God's Image, & that too in the sublimest sense—the Image of the *Creator*—there is ground for suspicion, that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false, as a system' (CL II 709).

It is within this context that Coleridge's definition of the imagination given in the Lay Sermons resides. As he states, 'the Imagination' is a 'reconciling and mediatory power.' It incorporates 'the Reason in Images of the Sense' and organizes 'the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self–circling energies of the Reason' (LS 29). In principle, this description of the power of imagination resonates with *both* clauses of Coleridge's definition. By reconciling 'Reason in Images of the Sense' with the 'self–circling energies of the Reason', the primary imagination allows the possibility of the 'figured language of thought'—of the Ideas of Reason. Consequently, by reconciling the finitude of being with the infinitude of the Divine, the primary imagination renders the human mind an active and 'living' system (CN III 4397).

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In principle, Coleridge's brief definition of the primary imagination and its associated series of psychological and philosophical ruminations serves to define this power of the soul as an active, incessant and constitutive power that never 'struggles to idealize and to unify' (BL I 304). But it also, and more importantly, serves to define this primary power as ontologically creative. It gives form to being by uniting as 'one' the finitude of experience and the infinitude of the '*eternal* act of creation' of the Divine.

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[4] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'On Poesy or Art' in *Biographia Literaria*, Volume II, ed. J. Shawcross, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1907), 492.

[5] Jonathan Wordsworth, 'The Infinite I Am: Coleridge and the Ascent of Being,' *The Wordsworth Circle* 16, no. 2 (1985): 76.

On a philosophical level, this elaboration of the power of the primary imagination shares inherent similarities with the philosophical reflections of Johann Fichte. As Coleridge explains in the *Biographia Literaria*, he was initially drawn to Fichte's writings for he provided the 'key-stone' (BL I 158) to resolving the contradictory nature of the Kantian system. Although the '*clearness* and *evidence*' of Kant's writings took possession of Coleridge 'as with a giant's hand' (BL I 153), the originality, novelty and logical essence of Kant's critical approach was imbued with an unresolvable contradiction. By premising the concept of the original apperception upon the inaccessible form of the noumenon, Kant limited the objective validity and divinity of *all* sensual forms. As Coleridge declares, the 'THING IN ITSELF' is not 'matter without form' because all sensual forms, including the human form, embody the infinite form of the Divine (BL I 155).

Faced with the inaccessibility to the realm of the Divine, Coleridge turned to Fichte's philosophical system. As Fichte began with an '*act*' of the self rather than with the notion of a '*thing* or a *substance*' he envisioned the mind as containing both the 'spring' and the 'principle' within itself (BL I 158). Fichte portrayed being as subject *and* object—being as phenomena *and* noumena. For Coleridge, this novel proposition was critical—it provided the 'key-stone' to resolving the contradictory nature of the Kantian 'THING IN ITSELF' laying the ground for the form of a 'Dynamic Philosophy' (CL IV 792).

Although revelatory, Fichte's philosophical system also proved to be problematic. As Fichte focused primarily on the ego, Coleridge accused Fichte of conveying a 'boastful and hyperstoic hostility to NATURE.' Furthermore, by portraying 'NATURE' as 'lifeless, godless, and unholy' (BL I 159), Fichte denied the finite human mind access to the creative essence of the Divine. Consequently, Fichte's philosophical system of the human mind became, for Coleridge, a representation of a '*thinking* disease, in which feelings instead of embodying themselves in *acts* ascend & become materials of general reasoning & intellectual pride…' (CN III 4012). It was a system in which 'God is no *living* God' (CN IV 4728).

Notwithstanding these hesitations, Coleridge later acknowledged that Fichte provided 'one or two fundamental ideas' that contributed to a 'revolution in philosophy' and, consequently, to the development of his own thinking (BL I 163).[6] Although Coleridge failed to embellish on the specific content of these ideas, a consideration of Fichte's remarkable philosophical system is particularly useful for it enables a deeper comprehension and elaboration of the concept of the primary imagination.

Such is the case with Fichte's exploration of the role the imagination plays in the spirit, or the 'Geist' of the human soul. As he proclaims, 'all human beings possess spirit'—all human beings possess a 'productive power' to create

[6] Emphasizing Fichte's influence also provides an important balance to the commentary that associates the primary and secondary imagination with Schelling's definition of poetry. See for example: Schlutz, *Mind's World*, 228 and Leask, 'Coleridge's Theory of Primary and Secondary Imagination,' 135-6.

'representations' because to be without 'spirit' would suggest one is 'unconscious or dead.' For Fichte, this 'productive power' that contributes to the formation of consciousness is the 'productive imagination.' As he states, the 'productive imagination' is 'completely creative'—it 'creates something from nothing.' It 'creates the material for representation: it alone shapes everything that is found within empirical consciousness and is the creator of this consciousness itself.'[7]

Fichte's reference to the 'productive imagination' as the creator of the material of representation *and* as the creator of consciousness certainly resonates with both clauses of the definition of the primary imagination. However, Coleridge develops Fichte's reflections concerning the act of creation through his own attempt to explore the ground of human consciousness, a topic he approaches by raising the question of—'What is the definition, not verbal but real, of PERSONALITY? What constitutes a PERSON?' (CN IV 4728).

What makes a person 'real,' Coleridge decides in the same note, is 'the union of a Self–subsistence with a Basis independent of it, so that both, mutually interpenetrated, are but one Being.' Although not explicitly stated, this union is conditional upon the power of the primary imagination which unites into 'one' the form of 'Being.' As 'Being' is, for Coleridge, 'in the Being of God' then 'Being' embodies the 'eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.' As he states, 'Our Almighty Parent hath therefore given to us Imagination…'[8]

However, and as Coleridge also declares—'God created our Being out of *Nothing*…' Coleridge's reference to the term '*Nothing*' may in fact draw on Fichte's use of the term for it highlights there is no finite form, nor any determinate thing that could give definitive form to 'Being.' As he explains, conscience cannot be 'derived from experience.' But once created out of '*Nothing*,' 'Being' must embody a form of finitude for 'Being' involves the experience, or the perception of the world. Coleridge elaborates on this remarkable proposal in the following passage:

> There can be no *I* without a *Thou*, & that a Thou is only possible by an equation in which I is taken as (equal to) Thou, & yet not the same…but the equation of *Thou* with *I* by means of a free Act, negativing the sameness in order to establish the equality is the true definition of *Conscience*—but as without a Thou no You, without a You no *They*, These, or Those, & as all these conjointly form the materials and the subjects of Consciousness, and the conditions of Experience—it is

[7] Fichte outlines his early reflections on the imagination in the first lecture of the series titled, 'Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy.' These lectures were given at Jena, in the year 1794. See' Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'Concerning the Spirit and the Body as Such,' in *Fichte, Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 193–4.

[8] See 'Lecture on the Slave–Trade,' in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* Volume 1, *Lectures, 1795: On Politics and Religion*, eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 235.

> evident, that the Conscience is the root of all Consciousness, and—a fortiori the pre–condition of all Experience; & that the Conscience in its first revelation cannot have been deduced from Experience.[9]

'Being' is, therefore for Coleridge, both equal to and yet other than God as 'Being' embodies both the infinitude of Thou and the finitude of You, They or Those. Although Coleridge does not explicitly state so, this definition of 'Being' proposes that 'Being' is given ontological form through the primary imagination which unites as 'one' these opposing realms of activity.

By grounding the definition of conscience upon a 'free Act' of 'Being,' Coleridge also draws on another one of Fichte's fundamental ideas. Specifically, the idea upon which Fichte premised the entire foundation of his seminal text, the *Science of Knowledge*. As Fichte explains, the object of the *Science of Knowledge* is the system of all human knowledge, or the system of the human mind. In the context of this claim, the object of the *Science of Knowledge* can only ever be given by engaging with the form of the system, which presents in and through the content of the text. That is, Fichte demands the reader necessarily engage with the form and content of the text in order to create and experience for themselves, the object of the text.

However, the inherent difficulties imposed by the form of this system and the impenetrability of this system when read on its own led Fichte to demand that his students necessarily 'think the wall.' By thinking the wall through a free act of the mind, his students could begin to comprehend and experience the nature of his philosophical system—a system which was premised upon the experience of the inseparability of the subject–object, of the inseparability of the I as the known subject and the wall as the known object. These determinations, as thinker–thought, were, for Fichte, necessarily one and the same.[10]

In a similar fashion to Fichte, Coleridge also draws on the metaphor of the wall in the attempt to define what constitutes a 'thinking Being.'[11] As he explains:

> 'By deep feeling we make our *Ideas dim*—& this is what we mean by our Life—ourselves. I think of the wall—it is before me, a distinct Image—here. I necessarily think of the *Idea* and the Thinking I as distinct & opposite Things. Now (let me) think of *myself*—of the thinking Being—the Ideas becomes dim whatever it be—so dim that I know not what it

[9] See 'Essay on Faith,' in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Volume 11, *Shorter Works and Fragments II,* eds. H.J. Jackson and J.R. de Jackson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 837–8.

[10] I, 18–9, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Das System Der Sittenlehre Nach Den Principien Der Wissenschaftslehre* (Jena and Leipzig: Christian Ernst Gabler, 1798).

[11] As discussed in detail by Stempel and Orsini, Coleridge was reading Fichte at the time this note was made confirming the connection between Coleridge's and Fichte's reference to the wall. See: Daniel Stempel, 'Revelation on Mount Snowdon: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Fichtean Imagination', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 29, no. 3 (1971), 375–6 and Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism*, 178–83.

> is—but the Feeling is deep & steady—and this I call *I*—the identifying the Percipient and the Perceived—' (CN I 921).

By referring to the feeling of the 'I' in the form of 'the identifying Percipient and the Perceived,' Coleridge evokes the Fichtean notion of 'the thinker and the thought' as 'one.' The 'one' in this instance is premised on the form of a 'free Act,' which in theory embodies the two clauses of the primary imagination. However, by locating this 'feeling' in the 'Percipient and the Perceived' Coleridge repositions the 'I,' moving it from Fichte's metaphysical realm into the realm of the natural world of the Divine. As God was a '*living* God' then, for Coleridge, the experience of the finitude of being—of being in the Divine natural world—was crucial to the ontology of being.

Coleridge's elaboration of the feeling of 'Life' as a 'deep & steady' feeling arising from opposing forms shares similarities with Fichte's remarkable description of the power of imagination. Fichte introduces this description in his exploration of the original and unknowable '*Act*' of the self 'lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.' As he explains, prior to any form of empirical activity or empirical consciousness, the self must posit itself through its own pure activity. The self is at once the agent and the product of action; action and deed are one and the same.[12]

Conceived in this way, the first moment of consciousness is, for Fichte, necessarily composed of both the conjoining *and* the opposition of distinct realms of activity. The infinite and bounding activity of the 'I' must co-exist with the finite products of its own activity within the contradictory yet unified form of the human mind (*The Science of Knowledge* 93–110). As Fichte explains in the following paragraph, the power that enables this form of reciprocity is the 'power of *imagination*:'

> The interplay of the self, in and with itself, whereby it posits itself at once as finite and infinite—an interplay that consists, as it were, in self-conflict, and is self-reproducing, in that the self–endeavors to unite the irreconcilable, now attempting to receive the infinite in the form of the finite, now baffled, positing it again outside the latter, and in that very moment seeking once more to entertain it under the form of infinitude—this is the power of *imagination* (*The Science of Knowledge* 193).

As the 'power of *imagination*' wavers or oscillates between the infinite and the finite—between opposing posited forms—the imagination confers the possibility for something determinate but does not reduce this possibility to determination (*The Science of Knowledge* 193–4). Like Coleridge's conception, the imagination remains, for Fichte, a continually active and necessarily unknowable power that oscillates incessantly between the finite and the infinite

[12] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 97.

realms of being (*The Science of Knowledge* 217).

Fichte's description of the power of imagination as an ontological power of creation provides a useful means in which to comprehend Coleridge's reference to the imagination as a power to 'shape into one.' However, Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination also resonates, in principle, with Fichte's concept of the 'creative imagination'—a concept that underlies the central thesis of *The Science of Knowledge*. As Fichte explains, the activity of the 'creative imagination' plays a central role because all presentations in the mind are given determinate form through this power of the soul (*The Science of Knowledge* 250).

Fichte premises the concept of the 'creative imagination' upon the proposal that although the 'power of *imagination*' forms the ground for the possibility of life and of consciousness this ground does not give rise to genuine life, or to empirical existence in time. In order for genuine life to be possible, the self must create its own form of determinate reality through an engagement with something outside of itself—with the world. In a similar fashion to Coleridge's exposition, this powerful thesis proposes that empirical consciousness is wholly dependent on the presumption of the existence of something other than the self itself. Fichte acknowledges, however, this interaction with something other is at the same time an interaction of the self with itself. That is, by moving out of itself and by engaging with something other, the self necessarily experiences both the infinitude and the finitude of its own activity (*The Science of Knowledge* 246–8).

The ontological necessity for a form of reciprocity between self and other opens onto Fichte's concept of the 'creative imagination.' As Fichte proposes, the power of the 'creative imagination allows the self to exist in a form of reciprocity with something outside of itself and with something inside of itself. It allows an interminable form of wavering between the finite and infinite realms of being, such that the self creates for itself its own determinant reality by establishing an incessant and indeterminable form of relation to something other.

As the 'creative imagination' forms the ground for the possibility of all forms of determinate experience then, and as Fichte explains, the main suppositions of *The Science of Knowledge* can only be given form through the conscious use of this power of the soul. As he states:

> The Science of Knowledge is of a kind that cannot be communicated by the letter merely, but only through the spirit; for its basic ideas must be elicited, in anyone who studies it, by the creative imagination itself; as could not, indeed, be otherwise, in a Science that penetrates back to the ultimate grounds of human knowledge, in that the whole enterprise of the human spirit issues from the imagination, and the latter cannot be grasped save through the imagination itself (*The Science of Knowledge* 250).

Interestingly, across the vast breadth of his own literary and philosophical

reflections Coleridge fails to acknowledge the concept of the 'creative imagination' as indebted to Fichte. However, it is certainly possible Coleridge was influenced by this remarkable concept, as exemplified by the placement of the one and only definition of the primary imagination. Essentially positioned between the two volumes of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge's definition of the 'IMAGINATION' unites his literary and philosophical perspectives into the form of a 'one.' [13] The 'one' in this instance takes on the form of Coleridge's literary autobiography—an autobiography which attempts to portray through the use of form the entirety of Coleridge's thoughts or ideas as 'one.' Conceived in this way, the primary imagination provides ontological form not simply to the form of Coleridge's autobiography, but also to Coleridge's own lived experiences.

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Although Coleridge may have realized his ideas concerning the ultimate form and system of the human mind prior to his reading of Kant, Fichte and Schelling (CN II 2375), it can be proposed that Fichte's depiction of the 'power of imagination' and the concept of the 'creative imagination' played an influential role in the development of Coleridge's thinking. While this proposal certainly supports the view that Coleridge's conception of the imagination does not 'grow out of his Schellingian paraphrases', more importantly it reinforces the idea that the primary imagination is something much more than simply a 'common organ of perception.' [14]

As 'Being' is, for Coleridge, 'in the Being of God' and as 'Being' is other than Thou then the primary imagination descends from the heavens allowing 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.' Oscillating between the finite and the infinite, between the finitude of 'Being' and the infinitude of the 'Being of God,' the power of the primary imagination to 'shape into one' is, for Coleridge, fundamental to the creation of 'Being.' Ultimately, this elaboration of the primary imagination is indebted to the fundamental tenets of the Fichtean system, a claim that is perhaps confirmed by Coleridge's statement that 'Fichte was far nearer the truth than Schelling—he had hold of the Horns of the Altar, but with nerve–palsied hand—and blind' (CL IV 874–5).

[13] Coleridge's use of the imagination to secure the form of the *Biographia Literaria* has also been discussed by Schlutz, *Mind's World*, 218 and Wordsworth, 'The Infinite I Am: Coleridge and the Ascent of Being,' 74.

[14] Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 157.
For commentary regarding Fichte's influence on Coleridge's writings see: Jonathan Wordsworth, 'The Infinite I Am: Coleridge and the Ascent of Being,' Daniel Stempel, 'Revelation on Mount Snowdon: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Fichtean Imagination,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 29, no. 3 (1971), G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism.*