The Primary Imagination, Perception and the Divine Ideas

Graham Davidson

BECAUSE COLERIDGE DEFINED the primary imagination as 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception', almost all commentators have, with caveats and conditions, agreed with Shawcross that 'the primary imagination is the organ of common perception, the faculty by which we have experience of an actual world of phenomena.'[1]

The first premise of this paper is that this interpretation is a mistake. True, it is what Coleridge seems to say, but I am going to suggest that he means something quite different.

In describing this power as 'the organ of common perception' Shawcross does what Coleridge doesn't—who calls it the 'prime Agent of all human Perception'. It is not an organ, but an agent; it conveys not common or passive but human perception. Are these casual or deliberate distinctions? I suggest deliberate, because, for instance, perception in the passive sense we share with other beings who could not function in their worlds did they not perceive, and thus distinguish, the objects among which they live.[2] Common perception and human perception are not synonymous. Common perceptions may depend upon an organ, but human perceptions are something more and something else.[3]

We can find a small but vital distinction between the objects of common perception and the objects of human perception in Coleridge's early distinction between the material and revealed worlds:[4] he believed that the two were more or less at one for any person of faith or imagination (and faith and imagination, we will discover, are closely connected) but he tried to conceive what the world would look like if either is absent:

> The noblest gift of Imagination is the power of discerning the *Cause*

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[1] BL I 272, Shawcross. Further examples: 'The Primary Imagination is normal perception that produces the usual world of the senses, 'That inanimate cold world allowed/ To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd…'. I A Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 1934, p.58; 'Coleridge did indeed mean this "simple act of seeing" when he talked of the primary imagination…'. Kathleen Wheeler, disagreeing with *The Sacred River,* J V Baker, *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge's* Biographia Literaria, 1980; 'From a series of sense images not necessarily visual the primary imagination forms an intelligible view of the world.' (James Engell, BL I lxxxix, 1983); '… we have only to note that in deducing the emergence of physical perception, we have deduced the equivalent of Coleridge's Primary Imagination'. (Nick Reid "Coleridge and Schelling: The Missing Transcendental Deduction." Studies in Romanticism 33 (1994): 451-79, p.466); '… the idea that the aesthetic (secondary imagination) fashions a unity that consciousness and everyday perception (primary imagination) lack is extracted easily enough from a careful reading of the *Biographia*…'. Christopher Stokes, *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime*, (Palgrave 2011), 162

[2] Cf LHP 566: '… nothing can be more simple than what [Descartes] says… that there must be a difference in the perceptions of a mouse and a man, but this difference cannot be in the object perceived, but in the percipient; that, therefore, says Descartes, we have reason to suppose that there are two sorts of ideas or thoughts. If, says he, two really be… one is of those thoughts or images in which we are conscious of being passive, those which are impressed upon us whether we will or no…'.

[3] Coleridge is conscious of this distinction elsewhere: 'As soon as the human mind is intelligibly addressed by any outward medium… so soon does *Art* commence. But please to observe, that I have layed stress on the words, *human mind*—excluding thereby all results common to Man and all sentient creatures—and consequently, confining it to the effect produced by the congruity of the animal impression with the reflective Powers of the mind…' (CN III 4397 f.49). He does, however, use 'organ' non-somatically in other places—see fns. 8 & 9.

[4] Cf. his assertion of '*another world that now is*'; C&S 117, 174

> in the *Effect*, a power which when employed on the works of the Creator elevates and by the variety of its pleasures almost monopolizes the Soul. We see our God everywhere—the Universe in the most literal sense is his written Language. If we could suppose an Atheist educated in the total disbelief of an intelligent first Cause, all this magnificent work would be a blank. (LPR 338-9)

Coleridge, still only 22, understands the imagination as a power, under voluntary control ('when employed'), which looks to discern the law or idea ('the *Cause*') in the appearances of nature ('the *Effect*'), thus distinguishing the perceptions arising from the 'phenomena of the passive sense'[5] from those distinctly human perceptions achieved through the visitation of 'the friendly missionary',[6] the act of imagination which, infusing an energy into these images, 'reads' this informed vision of nature as God's revelation: 'The Omnipotent has unfolded to us the Volume of the World, that there we may read the Transcript of himself.'[7] Such is his youthful enthusiasm that he finds it hard to understand how the atheist will see nothing where he sees God everywhere; but thus he distinguishes two possible modes of perception.[8]

At the precinct of Ideas: CN IV4692

The second premise of this paper is that the two penultimate paragraphs of Ch. 13 are not Coleridge's final say on the primary imagination. Embedded in a long and anxious note of 1820 is a precise description of the imagination seemingly in its primary function. Written about the time he was beginning work on the *Opus*, CN IV 4692 begins by declaring that opposed to physics, which is the science of observation, all metaphysics is speculation, and 'is in its origin poetic: & in Poesy, that highest in which Phil[osophy] & Poetry interpenetrate, & mutually co-inhere it must end.' It is notable that he has brought Poetry in as the groundwork of this discussion, declaring that its union with philosophy creates Poesy—a term which takes in all the arts and defines the highest good: establishing the connection between philosophy and poetry underpins the first volume of the *Biographia*, which was to conclude with a deduction of the imagination. This 1820 note may be read as a revisiting of that argument.

Coleridge then admits that metaphysics begins where 'all the so called Analysts', who attack speculation, from Aristotle to Locke, Hartley and Condillac, leave off: that is 'at the precinct of IDEAS.' As he says in the *Opus*, 'The organs of philosophy are Ideas only…'[9], a statement of a kind with what he says of the mystics in the *Biographia*, who kept his heart alive in his head:

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[5] CN IV 5428
[6] F I 513, LHP II 541
[7] LPR 94
[8] Cf. CN III 4088 f.156^{v}: 'In short, all the organs of Sense 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: & we cannot but believe it. The Infidel proves only that the latter organs are not yet developed in him—.'
[9] OM 218

Reason lives on when 'all the products of the merely *reflective* faculty [partake] of DEATH.' But despite his assertion that metaphysics is poetic in origin, this looks more like becoming the prospectus for a particular philosophy than for the union of poetry and philosophy. And so the argument seems to develop: 'But only as Man is capable of Ideas, is he a Philosopher by birth-right'—no ideas, no philosophy, no philosopher—but he then adds a phrase which changes the whole tone of the discussion: '—and as far only as he is capable of an Ideal (practical product having its cause & impulse in *Ideas*, & its End, Aim, and Object in the approximative realization of the same) is Man a Religious Being.' Suddenly, from being an argument between philosophies and philosophers, it has become a proclamation of how we put on our humanity: for we should remember that Coleridge asserts that if not a religious being, man is hardly man at all, but a 'drone-hive strange of phantom purposes!/… Blank accident! nothing's anomaly!'[10] (Note how the word 'blank' comes up again when Man can't or won't realize his religious and human nature.) Or, as he said, borrowing from Young, 'an undevout poet is mad.'[11] Ideas are at the heart of the matter. But these are not abstract nouns, passive or innate, hard-wired into our being.[12] They are in some measure educed by a voluntary act: '… neither the one [the ideas of philosophy] nor the other [the ideals of religion] is possible except thro' the Imagination…'. This is unexpected, astonishing even: in a context closely comparable to the *Biographia*—what is true philosophy? how does poetry relate to philosophy? how do we construct our consciousness?—he puts the imagination at the heart of the matter, but seems to employ it in a completely different way: he is calling upon the imagination to make us philosophers or to disclose religious purposes—in fine, to empower our humanity. Then he immediately breaks off because, as in the *Biographia*, the imagination/fancy distinction has come to mind, and he inserts in parentheses, using different words but pursuing the same idea, '(*not* Fancy, which is but the aoristus primus… of Memory, in the service of *Choice*: & and which in the absence of Choice or conscious Volition becoming the slave of Association…)', finally resuming with:

> —neither, I say, are possible by means of the IMAG-ination, by force of which the Man
> 1. creates for himself, and for the use & furtherance of his *Thinking*, Representations, or rather *Presences*, where *Experience* can supply no

[10] PW 482, 'Human Life, On the Denial of Immortality'.
[11] LL I 326
[12] Cf Alan Gregory's companion paper: 'Coleridge answers Locke's rejection of "innate ideas" by reintroducing "ideas" but, in contrast to the Cartesian tradition Locke had attacked, he argues for ideas as active, formative, and seminal powers that inform the mind insofar as it participates in Divine Reason.' (p.102) See also *LHP* 489 Geometry, necessity and morality: 'It becomes evidently, too, an act of the imagination. Out of these simple acts, the mind, still proceeding, raises that wonderful superstructure of geometry, and then looking abroad into nature finds that in its own nature it has been fathoming nature, and that nature itself is but the greater mirror in which he beholds his own present and his own past being in the law, and learns to reverence, while he feels, the necessity of that one great Being whose eternal reason is the ground and absolute condition of the ideas in the mind…'

> more, but had already stopt payment;
> 2. feels Wants (ποθου, desideria) and proposes to himself Aims & Ends (*Zwecke*) that can be gratified and attained by nothing which Experience can offer or suggest, and to think of which is at the same time and by necessary involution to think and to form the notion of a higher purer Existence & a limitless Futurity.

The imagination only steps in when experience—the notices of sense organized by the Understanding—has no more to say, or in Coleridge's powerful metaphor, has 'stopt payment'. T S Eliot was thinking along the same lines in the appositely entitled 'Whispers of Immortality' when he described Donne as 'Expert beyond experience', knowing that 'No contact possible to flesh/ Allayed the fever of the bone.' The imagination has slightly different functions depending on whether one is a philosopher, in the first section, or a religious believer, in the second. But for neither can experience provide the intellectual representations or presences required for thinking, or the wants, aims and ends that govern spiritual development.[13] Coleridge emphasizes the IMAGe in imagination, but there is no indication in what he subsequently says that he is in any way thinking of the images of nature or of common perception. And though he insisted at the beginning of the note that it is ideas that make a philosopher or a believer, here, notably, he doesn't use the term, as if he is trying to be more precise as to what the imagination must conjure up. He first speaks of '*Presences*', and then of 'a higher purer Existence & a limitless Futurity.' At the edge of his consciousness, not yet on the stage, stands a person. He returns to the word 'idea' when he sums up his belief that 'faith then in these Ideas, as the condition, ground, and cause of a positive Religion, is necessary even to the continued existence of Man.' Ideas are living presences, and they blend with Ideals, living purposes.[14] In this note, Coleridge has presented a precise description of the primary imagination—and it is an idea-educing power. Can we be any more precise as to the nature of these ideas, these educts or percepts of the primary imagination?

The Opus Maximum

The first chapter of Fragment 3 of the *Opus Maximum* is subtitled ON THE DIVINE IDEAS. This seems to promise a description or naming of the ideas we might associate with the note of 1820, the ideas essential to a religious, poetic or philosophic life, divine ideas. And Coleridge begins with what he considers a materialized version of this hope, disclaiming any intention of a discussion of '"'Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers", Names, Fervours,

[13] James Vigus also makes an important distinction between two words in Coleridge's first paragraph, indicating why Coleridge preferred one to the other: 'His restless revisionism informs his suggestion that 'IMAGination' creates '*Presences*' rather than 'Representations' (the latter being the translation of the German term *Vorstellung*) – since 'representation' would imply the objective existence of something represented and hence lying within experience.' 'The Philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge', *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy* (forthcoming) in the section 'Imagination'.

[14] Cf. CM II 298, ideas as spiritual truths.

Energies, with the long et cetera of the Cabbalists and the degenerated Platonists… '—the first phrase a deliberate echo of Satan's denomination of the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*—a discussion which is nothing but 'the application of the understanding through the medium of the fancy to truths of which the reason, exclusively, is both the substance beheld and the eye beholding' (OM 215). Whatever the eye of reason is beholding, it is not images of the external world, not perceptions but percepts. 'I have but one end in view,' he goes on, 'that of presenting an intelligible… Idea of ~~an existance~~ that which in some sense or other is, yet is not God nor One with God.' There is an echo here of his definition of the primary imagination, which is 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM', for in both passages Coleridge is seeking a way of expressing the truths of eternity, an 'Idea of an existence', in the forms of time, of the infinite in modes of the finite. There is much more caution here, a much greater sense of the difficulty of moving from the finite to the infinite, because, as far as possible, he is refusing the assistance of the Understanding. In his *Biographia* definition, as well as 'human', there is one other repeated word too little considered—'in': a repetition *in* the finite mind of the act of creation *in* the infinite I AM. It is unclear what is being created: we tend to assume that it is the visible and material world, but I suggest that this is mistaken, because the created world is finite, external to the infinite, and so cannot be 'in' it; if not, then it is either a form of pantheism or Berkeley's idealism, both of which Coleridge rejected. Implicit in this phrase is the construction of the percepts that precede and enable our perceptions—the friendly missionary constructing our finite humanity in imitation of the self-constructing godhead.[15]

Therefore the question is, in what particular form can the infinite or absolute be represented by the finite? And of course Coleridge's answer, presented in the chapter title, is the form of ideas. We now seem to be entirely removed from the world of beefsteaks and buses.[16] But, what, specifically, is a divine idea? Any, and perhaps every, constituent of the Logos is his answer, for '… to suppose God without Ideas, or the realizing knowledge of all the particular forms potentially involved in the absolute causativeness, would destroy the very conception of God.' The logos is causative, or creative. Therefore these ideas are powers: 'An idea is not simply knowledge or perception as distinguished from the thing perceived; it is a realizing knowledge, a knowledge causative of its own reality; in it is life, and the life is the light of men.' So we might summarize simply enough: the primary imagination is the power that can educe ideas; a divine idea is a discrete, creative, constitutive form of and within the Logos, the creator and the evolver; and the Logos is the first step from the infinite to the finite. Here

[15] 'The central point of Coleridge's most famous definition of Imagination may be that what is distinctively human is only so because rooted in God's "I Am."' See Daniel McVeigh's review of Douglas Hedley's *Living Forms of the Imagination* in Bulletin 37, p.66

[16] I A Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 58

again the shadowy figure of a person waits in the wings of Coleridge's mind.[17]

Coleridge was very aware that these ideas were powers, but that they were not wholly available through the conscious will, rather as the Mariner's willingness to pray did not result in prayer, but had he not tried to pray, the prayer he didn't succeed in uttering could not have been answered. In a note in which he questions the value of attempting to discover 'the precise character, purpose and source' of the synoptic gospels, Coleridge declares that

> 'When the Ideas rise up within me, as independent Growths of my Spirit, and I then turn to the Epistles of Paul & John and to the Gospel of the latter, these seem a Looking-glass to me in which I recognize the same truths, as the reflected Images of my Ideas…
>
> (CN V 5624)

In those two opening phrases I think we see the primary imagination at work—appearing to rise up as if from within a hidden well, partly voluntary, partly to be attended upon; and he finds the objective to his subjective in the words of his favourite gospel, the opening verses of which spoke so deeply to him.[18]

If we can now say with a degree of confidence that Coleridge saw the primary imagination as an idea-educing power, it might seem that we are a world away from the primary imagination as the power of common perception. But perhaps not quite as far as it appears. If we examine the link between passive or common perception and the human percepts of the primary imagination, we will see a distinction arise within an earlier conflation, and then a creative re-union between the two.[19]

All turns on Coleridge's long, slow but fundamental re-visioning of nature. In 1828 he wrote that 'Nature is Hades rendered intelligible by the energy, which combining therewith makes it no longer Hades…' (CN V 5931) What energy is that? The energy of ideas, which 'exert an informant Power…'. And what is the origin or source of these ideas? Distinguished from, they are nonetheless '*contained* in the Fullness' of the Logos. Divine ideas, then. This process, by which Nature as Chaos is rendered intelligible, is the obverse of, but analogous to, Coleridge's earliest views: instead of nature revealing the

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[17] Cf. CN II 2546; this note, written in Malta in April 1805, represents a half-way house in Coleridge's journey from believing that the appearances of nature may educe in us the truths of the spirit ('Great universal Teacher') to his assertion that these appearances are comparable to Chaos or Hades prior to the arrival of the Logos.

[18] There is a very interesting association of ideas and music in CN V 6742, which clarifies Coleridge's insight into what happens when ideas 'rise up'. He begins by saying he has no technical knowledge of music, and wishes he had: 'I receive deep sensations, yea, intellectual activities by it… Music seems to have an immediate communication with my Life… It converses with the *life* of my mind, as if it were itself the Mind of my Life…—Yet I sometimes think, that a great Composer, a Mozart, a Beethoven must have been in a state of Spirit much more akin, more analogous, to mine own when I am at once waiting for, watching, and organically constructing and inwardly constructed by, the *Ideas* (living truths—the living Truths,) that may be re-excited but cannot be expressed by Words, the Transcendents that give the Objectivity to all objects, the Form to all Images, yet are themselves untranslatable into any Image, unrepresentable by any particular Object, that I can imagine myself to be to a Titian or a Sir C. Wren—.'

[19] 'Coleridge asserts that finite self-consciousness involves, firstly, the giving of unity to the perceptual object. Coleridge refers to this as 'the unity of *primary* perception', or as the '*primary* mental act'. (Reid, *ibid* fn.1, 475, quoting *Logic* 70, 76; Reid's emphases)

being of God, that being, in the form of ideas or living presences, informs the dust or indistinction, which is our passive perception of nature, thus creating the living world. In us, those ideas, presences, 'intelligencies' or beings, are educed not by observation, but by an act of imagination, an exertion of will. We can see the consistency of this with the assertion that the imagination is the living power and prime agent of all human perception. The imagination, educing the creative ideas of the logos, brings order, and thus perception, to the chaos of passive sensation.[20]

But the truth is, or Coleridge's truth is, that unless you are willing to think like a philosopher or a religious being, you will, as your senses soak up the landscape about you, see nothing in the terms of your humanity: you will have no ache, no yearning, no longing for another person to be present, as Coleridge longed for first Sara then Asra as he climbed Brockley Combe;[21] you will receive no hint of an idea of order, or of beauty awaiting its avatar, and the blank world will present itself only as a thing of utility. However, if among all the grey noise of our commercial instincts, the getting and spending by which we lay waste not only our own lives, but that of the earth itself, something in you whispers of a disturbing presence which elevates your thoughts, if some 'tremulous feeling of the heart, as if it heard or began to *glimpse* something which had once belonged to it, its Lord or its Beloved' wells up within you,[22] then your primary imagination has yet to be fully extinguished, your humanity is safe for another day—and if you are lucky enough to be a poet, your secondary imagination might spring into life, as it did for Coleridge in 1795, ascending that now noisy, road-ridden coomb.

[20] In the late notebooks he was willing to describe Nature, in the form of Chaos or Hades, as evil: '… in Nature the natural ground or origin is *evil*… Nature is but a term for Hades, the chaos, or the fallen non-absolute Distinctities as blended in undistinguishable multeity, or one by negation of *all* number, below or above.—' (CN V 6272, f8v-9)

[21] PW 108 – see headnote

[22] CN III 3935; see note 16