

COLERIDGE AND SYNESTHESIA

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by

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To Gina Marie Botello

for listening to my endless rambling on STC
and for pushing me to finish when finishing seemed impossible.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BL</i>	<i>Biographia Literaria.</i>
<i>CL</i>	<i>Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i>
<i>CN</i>	<i>The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i>
<i>LL</i>	<i>The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary Online</i>

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a poet of rare talents and extraordinary genius. Partially responsible for the production of one the most significant poetic publications in the history of the English language, the *Lyrical Ballads*, he is an individual with an astoundingly complex variety of interests, a writer who exercises a sophisticated control over his often mystical subject matter, and a deeply spiritual and sensitive figure who has provided the world with a number of important insights into literary criticism, theology, philosophy, and poetry. Like many of his readers, I am drawn to the wonderful strangeness and complexity of his work. But it is not the strangeness of Coleridge's philosophical and poetic vision alone that fascinates me, but rather the intimate familiarity with the fantastic elements that characterize some of his most important work, and his ability to incorporate these elements as integral components of his intellectual powers. In short, I am struck by the profound harmony of emotional feeling and intellectual understanding that Coleridge's work exhibits.

My favorite of Coleridge's poems is "The Eolian Harp" because it exhibits this harmony of emotion and intellect in a brilliantly structured, concise, and provocative manner. The poet's communion with the natural world, his willingness to submit himself to the movements of nature, his acceptance of the possibility that we are but individual

expressions of one vast mind, and the troubled feelings of guilt his unorthodox musings bring him all demonstrate Coleridge's unique interests and sensitivity. But "The Eolian Harp" is also a perplexing poem that expresses many difficult concepts. For example, in one of the poem's most fascinating passages, Coleridge writes:

O the one life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where --
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (ll. 26-33)

Not only does Coleridge bring pleasure to the reader with the fluid rhythm and beautiful imagery of these lines, but he encourages the reader to speculate on subjects that transcend the concerns of mundane life. For example, what is the "one life"? What does Coleridge mean when he says that this "one life" becomes the "soul" of "motion"? Does "motion" have a "soul"? And most perplexing of all is Coleridge's problematic line: "A light in sound, a sound-like power in light." Is there "a light in sound"? Is there a "sound-like power in light"? I have never perceived "a light in sound," but there is, in fact, a co-presence of light and sound in some people's experiences. This phenomenon, the mixing of multiple senses into one sensual response, is called synesthesia.

The term synesthesia is derived from the combination of the Greek *syn* (together) and *aisthesis* (perceive) (Harrison 3), and refers to a multi-sense reaction to a single

cause. The Greeks have been interested in synesthesia since the classical period, where it was argued that color, like pitch and tone, is a quality of music (Gage 227). Although this concept is restricted to the co-presence of light and sound (which is, in fact, the most common synesthetic association), synesthesia refers to the co-presence of any sensory phenomena belonging to a common source. The early Greeks' hypothesis has been contemplated and tested throughout history with varying results and degrees of success. For example, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a sixteenth-century Milanese artist, organized a mathematical color scale that mirrored the musical octaves, and he eventually convinced one of Rudolph II of Prague's court musicians to "install painted strips of paper to his gravicembalo," a variety of harpsichord (van Campen 9). Isaac Newton, one of history's most important scientific thinkers, attempted to explain synesthesia in his important study of visual sensations, *Opticks*, where he theorized that music and color are related by the frequency of their vibrations through the atmosphere. The invention of the gas lamp furthered popular interest in the relationship between light and sound. Frederick Kastner manipulated this new technology by constructing the first gas-lamp organ – a musical instrument that, when played, produced colored light that supposedly corresponded to musical melodies and harmonies. Although most color organs do not emit sound (they are meant to be played simultaneously with a standard organ), they were occasionally used in symphonic experiments in the period following their invention.

Synesthesia has also been explored by visual artists. Late nineteenth-century symbolist painters such as Eugène Delacroix and Anton Raphael Mengs are said to have whistled to "create the right atmosphere for their paintings," and Vincent Van Gogh apparently "maddened his music teacher by stubbornly testing ideas on tone-color

correspondence during piano lessons” (van Campen 10). However, visual artists not only focused on the correlation between light and sound, but often concentrated on temporality as a sensation that unifies the arts. For example, the artist group *Der Blaue Reiter*, inspired by the synesthetic theories in Wassily Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*, organized multi-faceted experiments that sought to demonstrate the relation of painting to musical composition, dance, and theater production by examining the different types of “movements” inherent in these disciplines. After working with the composer Thomas von Hartmann and the dancer Alexander Sacharoff, Kandisky wrote:

I myself had the opportunity of carrying out some small experiments abroad with a young musician and a dancer. From among several of my watercolors the musician would choose one that appeared to him to have the clearest musical form. In the absence of the dancer, he would play this watercolor. Then the dancer would appear, and having played the musical composition, he would dance it and then find the watercolor he had danced. (474)

This interest in temporality has been an important concern in twentieth-century art, where visual artists involved in the futurist movement, as well as the members of *De Stijl* and *Der Blaue Reiter*, and especially Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, have tried to transcend the static condition of painting by creating not only the appearance of depth in their work, but also the “fourth dimension of time by means of visual suggestions of movement” (van Campen 11).

Finally, synesthesia has been an important technique in the literary arts. Literary synesthesia differs from that noted above in that it is largely used metaphorically.

Aristotle acknowledged “a sort of parallelism between what is acute or grave to hearing and what is sharp or blunt to touch,” but noted that the use of the words “acute” and “grave” in the description of music are, in fact, “metaphors transferred from their proper sphere, viz. that of touch” (420). The metaphorical use of sensory description is not an uncommon rhetorical device, e.g., it is not unusual to describe a brightly colored shirt as being “loud,” or a certain flavor of cheese to be “sharp,” and many writers have used language belonging to one sense in order to describe experiences evoked by another sense. Writers such as Percy Shelley, John Keats, William Blake, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Vladimir Nabokov have all been noted for their use of synesthetic language in their writing.¹ However, despite numerous instances like his important “one life” passage that rely on synesthetic metaphors or attribute multiple sensations to a single source, Coleridge is seldom mentioned among the poets who use synesthetic images and language as a rhetorical technique.

In this thesis, I will explore Coleridge’s use of synesthesia throughout some of his most important work, in particular “The Eolian Harp,” “The Nightingale,” “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and “Dejection: An Ode.” I will examine Coleridge’s interest in the scientific theories of his day that attempted to explain sensory association, his fascination with metaphysical thought that sought to explain spirituality in synesthetic terms, and his insatiable desire to view all of the world’s diverse elements as a single, organic whole. By acknowledging Coleridge’s interest in sense-association and the role

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See June Downey’s “Literary Synesthesia,” John Harrison’s *Synesthesia: The Strangest Thing*, and Lawrence Marks’ *Perceiving Similarity and Comprehending Metaphor* for further information.

of synesthesia in some of his major poems, we can establish valid insights into the nature of one of the English language's most perplexing, and influential minds.

I. "Know Thyself": Coleridge's Quest for Self-Knowledge

Shortly after Coleridge's death, Thomas De Quincey published an article highlighting the extent to which Coleridge borrowed language from Friedrich Schelling in the twelfth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*.¹ De Quincey's attention to these borrowings was the beginning of a long and sustained tradition of criticism aimed at exposing the appropriation of texts Coleridge had read in his composition of the *Biographia*, a tradition including René Wellek's *Immanuel Kant in England* (1931), G. N. G. Orsini's *Coleridge and German Idealism* (1969), Thomas McFarland's *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (1969), Norman Fruman's *Coleridge. The Damaged Archangel* (1971), and the Bollingen edition of the *Biographia Literaria* (1983), which contains extensive notes and commentary on Coleridge's plagiarism. Although Coleridge's plagiarism is well-documented and widely acknowledged by scholars of his work, the rigor with which this criticism is pursued, although legitimate and useful, threatens to distract students of his work from the originality of his thought. Despite the evidence of plagiarism in Coleridge's philosophical writing, the ideas that he pursues are his own, and he only uses the writings of Hartley, Kant, and Schelling to confirm concepts he had already developed through meditation on his personal experiences. In

¹ "Samuel Taylor Coleridge." *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, September 1834.

fact, Coleridge anticipates charges of plagiarism, and he attempts to protect himself by claiming that a “similarity of phrase will not be at all times a certain proof that the passage has been borrowed,” and that “many of the most striking resemblances [of the *Biographia* to the German transcendentalists], indeed all the main and fundamental ideas, were born and matured in my mind before I had ever seen a single page of the German Philosopher” (*BL*, I, 161). I do not intend to distract scholars from noticing Coleridge’s habit of plagiarizing. I do, however, intend to guard against his plagiarisms’ distracting scholars from recognizing the originality of his thought.

It would be a mistake to think that Coleridge’s philosophical works emerged as a result of his reading the English rationalists and the German transcendentalists. Although he borrows language and organization of thought from some of these thinkers, and does, in fact, rely quite heavily on his translation of the German transcendentalists, in his composition of the *Biographia*, he does not depend on them to provide him with the grounds of knowledge that he is exploring. On the contrary, Coleridge’s knowledge begins with his personal experiences. In her first Alexander Lecture, Kathleen Coburn observes, “Coleridge *experienced* what he thought and *thought* only what he experienced” (16). This is a significant observation when considering Coleridge’s interest in synesthesia, for synesthesia is a phenomenological occurrence that he may have been familiar with before he studied the writings of those thinkers who were attempting to explain the physical nature of cross-sensory stimulation. Coleridge’s personal experiences, both internal and external, his sensual interaction with his surroundings, and the curiosity that arose from his often complex psychological states led him to seek self-confirming evidence in the scientific, philosophical, and metaphysical studies that

ultimately became an integral part of his philosophical works. Coleridge sought validation of his personal experiences in writers such as Hartley, Schelling, and Boehme, and “when he met his own thought or a similar experience in a book, as in a friend, he jumped for joy” (Coburn 16-17). And indeed, Coleridge writes, “What is the right, the virtuous Feeling, and consequent action, when a man having long meditated & perceived a certain Truth finds another & a foreign Writer, who has handled the same with an approximation to the Truth, as he [had previously] conceived it? – Joy!” (CN, II, 2546). Therefore, it is my position that the ideas in Coleridge’s *Biographia* are his own, and have their origin in the peculiarities of his sensual interaction with the natural world.

Coleridge was remarkably adept at observing minute details in nature while recognizing their integral role in a larger, inseparable yet irreconcilable whole. From an early age, he was aware of the world as a vast, complex unity, and he spent much of his life attempting to reconcile the inner with the outer, the finite with the infinite, and the minute with the vast. He pursued this attempt at reconciliation tirelessly, finding nothing in the world “too minute or trivial; nothing too fundamental or vast” that did not warrant his energies and attention (Coburn 23).

Coleridge was aware from his childhood that he was in tune with the world in an unusual way:

I remember, that at eight years old I walked with [my father] one winter evening from a farmer’s house, a mile from Ottery – & he told me the names of the stars – and how Jupiter was a thousand times larger than our world – and that the other twinkling stars were Suns that had worlds rolling around them – & when I came home, he shewed me how they

rolled around – / . I heard him with a profound delight & admiration; but without the least mixture of wonder or incredulity. For from my earlier reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c – my mind had been habituated to the Vast. (CL, I, 354-5)

Although he was extraordinarily in touch with the minute physical world, Coleridge was able to see beyond what was immediately perceivable and approach levels of understanding that transcend man's natural perceptive abilities. Coleridge reiterates the claim that, at an early age, he had the ability to see beyond what was sensually available to him when he says, "I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my sight – even at that age" (CL, I, 53). He attributes this ability to his childhood studies of romantic tales of fantasy: "I read every book that came in my way without distinction" (CL, I, 354), and "Should children be permitted to read Romances, & Relations of Giants, & Magicians, & Genii? – I know all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative. I know no other way of giving the mind a love of 'the Great', & 'the Whole'" (CL, I, 53). Although Coleridge believed that his early readings were an important influence on the development of his mind, a development that any child could presumably experience if exposed to a similar reading regimen, he also recognized that the development of his childhood mind was peculiar:

So I became a *dreamer* – and acquired an indisposition to all bodily activity – and I was fretful, and inordinately passionate, and as I could not play at any thing, and was slothful, I was despised & hated by the boys; and because I could read & spell, & had, I may truly say, a memory & understanding forced into almost an unnatural ripeness, I was flattered and

wondered at by all the old women. (*CL*, I, 347-48)

He was a “dreamer,” a child not interested in childhood games, a boy with the intuitions of an adult. His impressions of the world’s vastness, its complexity, and its ability to act on both the outer and inner being preceded the maturation of his sensory experiences. It was this awareness of a reality beyond what is immediately perceived that led Coleridge to an early exploration of metaphysics. He writes, “At a very premature age, even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in metaphysics, and in theological controversy. Nothing else pleased me. History, and particular facts, lost all interest in my mind. Poetry . . . poetry itself, yea novels and romances, became insipid to me” (*BL*, I, 15-16). Mere history, facts, and literature could not hold young Coleridge’s interest. His passion was directed toward those elements of his experience that could not be explained by empirical evidence – those elements that can only be explained through an exploration of “‘the Great’ & ‘the Whole’.”

Coleridge was able to maintain this childhood sense of wonder throughout his adult life, and he was fully aware that retaining a childlike view of the world was a necessary condition of his intellectual powers. He professes a resolve to “carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child’s sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar” (*BL*, I, 80-81); and he recognized this childlike approach to the physical world, the refusal to allow the maturing process to dull the sensitivity of his perceptions, as “one of the marks which distinguish genius from talents” (*BL*, I, 81). Despite his romantic notions of childhood, Coleridge experienced a great deal of pain and loneliness in his youth (as he hinted in his admission that his male classmates “despised

& hated” him). He was well-accustomed to both physical and psychological pain as a boy. These pains, combined with moments of intense physical and psychological pleasure, exposed Coleridge to a wide range of experience – a bi-polar reality that became a vital part of his early development, and that lingered with him for the rest of his life.² Coburn notes that “On the one hand there was the sense of the outer human world, largely painful, and very lonely – to the point of depriving him of many of the sheer physical sunshine joys of childhood. On the other there were the traumas of inner states, both painful and pleasant, from fantasies and daydreams” (17). These pains and pleasures mixed in such a way in Coleridge’s experiences that they lost clearly defined barriers between inner and outer; the relationship between cause and effect became confused in his young mind. Pain and pleasure coalesced in a tangle of intense emotion. Inner and outer became one. Each perception, every minute physical element and emotion that he experienced, unified into one vast whole, and this unity became one of the defining principles of his life’s work. “I feel too intensely the omnipresence of all in each,” he says, “tho’ [my brain] perceives the *difference* of things, yet [it] is eternally pursuing the likenesses” (CN, II, 2372).

It was the tension between his mind’s natural impulse towards unity in nature, perception, and conception (the infinite), and his desire to understand how the world’s disparate elements work independently of each other (the finite), that dictated the direction of Coleridge’s studies. It is this tension that drives Coleridge’s pursuit of self-

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For a thorough examination of Coleridge’s childhood, see Richard Holmes’s *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804*.

knowledge, a pursuit that leads him to those sources on which he relies so heavily in the *Biographia*. Coleridge believes that “In all subjects of deep and lasting Interest you will detect a struggle between two opposites, two polar Forces, both of which are alike necessary to our human Well-being, & necessary each to the continued existence of the other” (*CL*, V, 35). This struggle is “the co-presence of Feeling & Life, limitless by their very essence, with Form, by its very essence limited – determined – definite” (*CN*, I, 1561). Coleridge recognizes the co-presence of the finite and the infinite in his personal experience, and, in an attempt to understand the relationship between form and formlessness in his perceptions, he delves into science, philosophy, theology, and metaphysics. “Coleridge’s thinking is rooted in personal experience, the minutiae as well as the wider arcs. His curiosity arises from a combination of mental concentration, observation, and an inexplicable personal drive” (Coburn 24-25), the drive to reveal his own nature. “Know thyself,” he says, “and so shalt thou know God, as far as is permitted to a creature, and in God all things” (*BL*, II, 240).

As students of Coleridge’s work, we should strive to understand the motives behind his actions, writings, and studies. Through this understanding, we can understand Coleridge himself. In fact, Coleridge states that readers cannot begin to understand him unless they have investigated the history of his studies (*CN*, II, 2375). If this is the case – that Coleridge’s experiences precede his studies and his studies confirm his experiences – then we can establish valid assumptions about the nature of his experiences by examining the works that he valued enough to include in the autobiography of his mind: the *Biographia Literaria*. Establishing a firm understanding of these experiences will, in turn, aid us in understanding Coleridge’s use of synesthesia in some of his most important

works of poetry.

As noted above, Coleridge was intrigued by the complex relationship that exists between the inner and outer man. His experiences with the physical world often led to intense emotional states. Although he recognized the difference between physical and psychological sensation, Coleridge was fixated on understanding the intimate relationship between what he experienced with his senses and what he experienced with his emotions. He believed that the stimulation of emotional states by physical sensation was an integral part of humanity, and that cultivating a respect for these emotions was equal to cultivating a respect for the supernatural force that moves through the natural world and serves as the very ground of human nature. He writes:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon
dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking,
as it were *asking*, a symbolic language for something within me that
already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that
latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new
phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of
my inner Nature. (CN, II, 2546)

That “forgotten or hidden Truth” of human nature is mankind’s connection with the divine, and Coleridge regarded the physical world as a means of exciting man’s capacity to recognize this supernatural relationship through heightened emotional states.

Coleridge viewed the interplay between physical and psychological sensation as a vital, organic relationship that produces the profound sense of self-awareness that ultimately separates man from nature. To understand this relationship was to understand the mind,

an exceedingly important task for a man who believed that “only the mind was involved in truly *human* life; all else flirted with the bestial” (Fruman 75).

Coleridge, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the human mind could be explained through scientific inquiry, and he pursued such inquiry with a long-sustained vigor. In his essay, “Coleridge, Hartley, and the Mystics,” Richard Haven notes that Coleridge “shared the respect of his age for science and scientific theories, the confidence that human experience could be explained as physical nature could be explained, that there were laws of human nature as well as laws of motion” (480). As a young man, Coleridge was drawn to the writings of Newton, Locke, Priestley, Hartley, and other rationalists because he believed that their work could serve as scientific grounds to support his ideas concerning the mind. The rational grounds on which these men based their arguments appealed to Coleridge, especially since what he was attempting to understand did not seem, on the surface at least, to have an observable existence. However, if the various functions of the mind could be explained through scientific analysis, then objective conclusions could be drawn about the impact of man’s senses on his emotions. Hartley’s *Observations on Man* did just this, and Coleridge accepted Hartley’s theories as support for his personal experiences. Although Coleridge had some reservations when it came to the rationalists’ theories because of their mechanical nature, he was able to accept Hartley’s ideas (temporarily, at least) because they sought to explain the creation of thought (moral thought included) by pointing to man’s interaction with his surrounding environment. If thought is the result of physical sensation, and man’s ability to think is an integral part of his moral awareness, it follows that moral awareness is inseparably linked to physical sensation. By establishing that the mind’s

functions rely on its awareness of physical sensation, Hartley provided Coleridge with scientific evidence of a relationship with which he was long-acquainted: nature's provocation of deep spiritual feelings.

To Hartley, emotions have their root in the brain as opposed to the mind. The rationalists understood that the mind, being an immaterial phenomenon, cannot be empirically analyzed, but they thought that they could understand the brain and its functions. In Hartley's view, the brain and the mind were inseparably linked, but the mind was subject to the brain. For example, the brain, when exposed to certain stimuli, causes the mind to have a corresponding reaction. When man perceives a series of "motions" in the natural world with his sense organs (the eye perceives light's motion, the ear sound's motion, etc.), "vibrations" resulting from these "motions" travel through the nervous fibers of the brain. Color, Hartley believed, is produced because a specific frequency of light produces a specific "vibration" in the brain that corresponds to that color. Therefore, the color, which exists in the mind, is linked to the brain's physical reaction to natural "motions" (Hartley, I, 33).

Isaac Newton concurs with Hartley's theories on how visual and auditory sensation are produced, but he suggests that one's perception of different sensory phenomena (light as opposed to sound, for example) is determined by one's physiological makeup rather than by the natural phenomenon itself. In 1704, after completing an important cycle of experiments intended to explain the properties of light and the human eye's response to it under varying circumstances, Newton published the following query in his important scientific survey, *Opticks*:

Is not Vision perform'd chiefly by the Vibrations of this Medium, excited

in the bottom of the Eye by the Rays of Light, and propagated through the solid, pellucid and uniform Capillamenta of the optick Nerves into the place of Sensation? And is not Hearing perform'd by the Vibrations either of this or some other Medium, excited in the auditory Nerves by the Tremors of the Air, and propagated through the solid, pellucid and uniform Capillamenta of those Nerves into the place of Sensation? And so of the other Senses. (353)

This query comes near the end of *Opticks* – a work that is, to a great extent, composed of physical experiments that are used to support Newton's comparison of light and sound. On multiple occasions, in fact, Newton explains the results of his experiments on optical phenomena by paralleling the visual prism with musical octaves. The belief that the senses share origins, properties, functions, and results – synesthesia – was a popular subject of contemplation and debate in the century preceding the publication of Newton's *Opticks*; and the works of scientists, philosophers, and poets alike were greatly influenced by his theory's ramifications (Miller 82). One's ability to perceive the common origins of disparate sensations, however, depends on the physiological nature of that person's brain. Coleridge was excited by Newton's findings because, like Hartley's theories of association, they lent credence to his long-held belief that individual impressions and experiences cannot be isolated from the vast whole to which they belong.

It should be noted, however, that Newton and Hartley differ in one fundamental respect. Newton believes that the association of sensory phenomena (a person perceiving light or color when hearing sound, for example) occurs because a particular sense receptor in the brain is stimulated by the reaction of a separate sense receptor. When

sound waves, for example, travel through the brain's nervous fibers, the portion of the brain that reacts to light may, as a result of physical proximity, be inadvertently stimulated by the auditory vibrations. Therefore, sensory association is completely determined by physical vibrations through one's physiological brain matter. Hartley, however, takes his theories further by asserting that multiple sensations, when perceived in unison, create complex sense compounds that pass into memory, where they linger passively until the brain is exposed to some separate stimuli that, through association, recalls some element of the dormant memory back into an active state. Therefore, a simple perception can, through the involuntary act of association, enable one to form complex perceptions. This differs from Newton in that, for Hartley, it is one's prior exposure to natural phenomena, which has passed into memory, that makes sensory association possible. The physical vibrations in the brain that determine what tone a certain frequency of sound will have may also stimulate the vibrations that create a visual sensation, but the corresponding visual sensation is activated through memory. A certain sound may sub-consciously recall the memory of a certain color. Therefore, Hartley's theories of mechanical association contain vital psychological aspects that Newton's theories of optics do not. For Coleridge, who James Engell recognizes as having a "highly associative and amalgamating mind" (*BL*, intro., cxxx), a scientific and psychological theory such as Hartley's was a welcome corroboration of his personal experiences with sensation and emotion. However, Coleridge was not solely interested in the physical, but was in constant search of answers to spiritual questions. Can Hartley's ideas on association, for example, be used to explain Coleridge's sense of awareness of a higher, unifying power in nature, or do Hartley's theories replace that power?

For a time, Coleridge believed that Hartley's theory of association could be used to explain man's awareness of the supernatural, and he enthusiastically incorporated the theses in *Observations on Man* into his thinking. His enthusiasm was based on Hartley's belief that simple sensations not only produce complex sensations through association, but also produce complex emotional constructs, memory, imagination, and the will. Therefore, man's ability to feel emotion, his imaginative capacity, and the will that directs his life – all of the psychological aspects of the mind that collectively construct human consciousness and separate the “human” from the “bestial” – can be traced to an identifiable cause in the physical world. If one follows this line of thinking to its end, a line of thought that relies on causes to explain effects, it follows that there must be an original cause. Richard Haven explains:

In considering the problems of morality and religion, Hartley begins with what is essentially the old cosmological argument for the existence of God, but presented as a series of necessary “associations.” From our experience, he says, we necessarily acquire the notion of cause, and this leads inevitably to the idea of a first cause, or God. (482)

However, Hartley's association subjected all human sensibilities to natural laws, thus removing *free* will from human nature. As noted above, Hartley acknowledges that man has a will, but he proposes a will that is determined by the degree to which one has been exposed to the pleasures and pains of interaction with the natural world.

Coleridge could not completely accept Hartley's notion of the will because it violated his belief in mankind's God-given *free* will. According to Hartley,

The will appears to be nothing but a desire or aversion sufficiently strong

to produce an action that is not automatic primarily or secondarily . . .

Since therefore all love and hatred, all desire and aversion are factitious, and generated by association, i.e., mechanically; it follows that the will is mechanical also. (I, 371)

Hartley believes that, because desires and aversions are based on one's involuntary reaction to sensation, man will exhibit behaviors that reflect the desires and aversions that he develops through contact with his environment. When explaining Hartley's notion of the will, James Baker notes that "The trick, if one wishes to be morally guided aright, is to make the right associations of pleasure with virtue. This leads to an environmental approach to ethics; surround the child with the right environment, and he will make the right associations; his moral progress will be assured" (15-16). So, at any one moment in any particular place, man perceives a range of sensations (auditory, visual, tactile, etc.) that are stored in the memory where they await future activation through involuntary association with some separate set of sensations. This complex impression and the level of desire or aversion that this impression produces in the mind, in turn, determine the course of one's will. Coleridge explains Hartley's concept of the will in metaphorical terms:

Conceive, for instance, a broad stream, winding through a mountainous country with an indefinite number of currents, varying and running into each other according as the gusts chance to blow from the opening of the mountains. The temporary union of several currents in one, so as to form the main current of the moment, would present an accurate image of Hartley's theory of the will. (*BL*, I, 110)

The idea that the chance character of a moment can determine the outcome of one's will was an unacceptable hypothesis for Coleridge because it removed the active element from man's psychology, and rendered him a passive entity on which nature enacted *its* will.

The position that Coleridge sought to amend, therefore, was that an individual's will is a product of desires and aversions that have been developed through contemporaneous experiences. Hartley argued that the perceptions inherent in a specific moment (light, sound, pleasure, and pain) are deposited into one's memory where they dwell passively until, through the reaction of one's brain to a separate set of sensations that share some quality with the forgotten moment, they are involuntarily recalled, and that their recollection, in turn, affects the behavior of the percipient. This belief results in a notion of the will that is wholly determined by the combination of sensations perceived at a specific moment in time. Contemporaneity, therefore, becomes the master of the will. Coleridge believed that, if this were indeed the case, "the consequence would have been that our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory" (*BL*, I, 111). To Coleridge, a will that is subject to "outward impressions" and "senseless and passive memory" is no will at all. He continues:

If therefore we suppose the absence of all interference of the will, reason, and judgement, one or other of two consequences must result. Either the ideas (or relicts of such impressions) will exactly imitate the order of the impression itself, which would be absolute *delirium*: or any one part of that impression might recall any other part, and (as from the law of continuity, there must exist in every total impression some one or more

parts, which are components of some other following total impression, and so on ad infinitum) *any* part of *any* impression might recall *any* part of *any* other, without a cause present to determine *what* it should be. (*BL*, I, 111-112)

The determining cause that Coleridge so acutely identifies as missing from Hartley's theory is man's *free* will – that active portion of the mind that imposes order and importance on the body of sensations that impact the brain. He explains:

The true practical law of association is this; that whatever makes certain parts of a total impression more vivid or distinct than the rest, will determine the mind to recall these in preference to others equally linked together by the common condition of contemporaneity, or (what I deem a more appropriate and philosophical term) of *continuity*. But the will itself by confining and intensifying the attention may arbitrarily give vividness or distinctness to any object whatsoever. (*BL*, I, 126-127)

For Coleridge, therefore, the will must exist outside of contemporaneous experience, functioning as an ordering principle in an otherwise random series of perceptions. Although there may be a passive aspect of the mind that receives sensual information, stores it away, and recalls it in response to new sensual information that shares some associated quality, the will can actively create its own associations that have nothing to do with contemporaneous experience.

It is important to note that Coleridge does not completely reject Hartley's theory of association (in fact, he accepts it in large part), but rejects only the notion that the mind does not contain an active element. Coleridge's concept of the mind is one that

acknowledges both active and passive spheres. He asserts that, in the mind, “There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive” (*BL*, I, 124). This hypothesis argues that the mind is far more complex than Hartley believes, for it acknowledges Hartley’s passive qualities, but it also argues for an active quality and an “intermediate faculty,” at once active and passive, that synchronizes those passive aspects of the mind with the active. Coleridge does not believe that passive impressions recall other passive impressions, and that these recollections compose the mind’s sole conceptual capacity, but rather that there is an active principle at work in the formulation of ideas that surpasses the bounds of objective nature. He writes, “I almost think that ideas never recall ideas, as far as they are ideas, any more than leaves in a forest create each other’s motion – the breeze it is that runs through them – it is the soul, the state of feeling” (*CL*, II, 428). In this metaphorical comparison, Coleridge again asserts that there is an active principle that affects the ordering of sensory impressions in the mind, but in this case he defines it in spiritual terms – “the soul, the state of feeling.” However, because of this concept’s placement in the *Biographia* (a highly philosophical work), Coleridge must define this intermediate faculty in terms that adequately explain its philosophical components: “In philosophic language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION” (*BL*, I, 124-125). In order to satisfactorily account for his theory of the mind’s functions, Coleridge must expand on Hartley’s associationism by introducing a definition of the imagination that coordinates man’s active will with his passive perceptions.

Coleridge introduces his definition of the imagination in the last few paragraphs

of the *Biographia*'s first part (the metaphysical section), an arrangement that places the definition at the very center of this important work. When defining his concept of the imagination, Coleridge identifies two distinct functions that, together, compose man's total imaginative capacity: the primary and secondary imaginations. When explaining the primary imagination, he writes, "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). In this portion of the definition alone, we can discern Coleridge's focus on an active spiritual element that is at work in the imagination, for he clearly asserts that the primary imagination is repeating "the eternal *act* of creation" – a divine act that requires the presence of a self-conscious will: the I AM. Coleridge does not stop with this focus on the will, however, but continues in even more explicit terms:

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. (*BL*, I, 304)

Here again, Coleridge uses language that depicts the imagination as containing active components that are wholly subject to the will. Unlike Hartley's vision of a mind that is acted on by external forces, Coleridge describes the imagination, the mind's most important aspect, as an entity that acts by dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating one's

perceptions in order to “re-create” a dead world in vital terms.

Although Coleridge charges his definition of the imagination with active language, his premise remains dependent on the mind’s passive functions. Without natural stimuli, the mind will have no material to dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate. It is for this reason that Coleridge specifies the imagination as being the intermediary faculty, both passive and active, that functions as an avenue between the mind’s wholly active aspect (the will) and its passive functions (perception and mechanical association). But his definition of the imagination serves another function as well: Coleridge notes an important distinction between the imagination and fancy, a distinction made necessary because of the popular confusion between the two terms. In his introduction to the Bollingen edition of the *Biographia Literaria*, James Engell notes that Coleridge’s distinction between the terms is

almost the reverse of that found in classical and medieval thought, and which, in fact, persisted into the eighteenth century. In this older distinction, the Greek *phantasia*, with its suggestion of a free play of mind, was the higher or more creative power. The Latin *imaginatio*, with its stress on the concrete and sensory (from the root-word “image”) was the inferior power. (xcvii)

However, by the time that Coleridge was dictating the *Biographia*, many English thinkers had begun to question the meaning of the two terms as they were being used in contemporary writing (especially among the rationalists and associative psychologists) (*BL*, intro., xcvii). Was the nature of eighteenth and nineteenth century psychological dialogue compatible with these ancient definitions? In part, it was in response to this

debate that Coleridge defined the difference between fancy and imagination. In order to clearly express his theories of the mind in sound philosophical language, Coleridge needed to authoritatively establish the terms of his conversation. As I have made clear in the preceding paragraph, Coleridge defined the imagination as a faculty that acts on sensory phenomena that has been passively received. It is fundamentally creative, and has the ability to conceive of things that are not physically perceptible. Fancy, on the other hand, is void of creativity. It relies wholly on what has been passively filtered into one's mind through sensory contact with nature.

Immediately after establishing his concept of the imagination, Coleridge offers an explicit definition of fancy. He explains:

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (*BL*, I, 305)

Here, Coleridge points to the role of Hartley's mechanical association in his theory of the mind. However, association does not hold the answer to understanding man's ability to conceive of "'the Great' & 'the Whole'" (*CL*, I, 53) in nature, but it does play an important role in the way that man treats the information he passively receives through contact with external phenomena. One may combine the information stored in the brain in any number of ways, thus producing strange, humorous, interesting, or even symbolic amalgamations, but these amalgamations will always bear a resemblance to the

information that provided the original material. Engell notes that the fancy can “aggregate and combine only what it has received. The choice of what it uses may be deliberate but it is limited, empirically, by what we can remember that we have perceived or experienced” (*BL*, intro., civ). Coleridge recognizes that the use of the “perceived or experienced” is an important aspect of the mind’s functions and abilities. In fact, he even acknowledges that one may use the fancy when composing poetry. However, he also considers this aspect of the mind to be inferior to the creative capacity of the imagination, especially when concerned with artistic, philosophical, and spiritual matters. Engell notes that, although the “fancy may produce unreal or impossible combinations, . . . their component parts will all be part of the experienced world” (*BL*, intro., civ). This fusion of preexisting impressions is the highest capacity of Hartley’s mechanical association. Although one may use the memory to produce interesting and provocative combinations, those combinations will always lack the complex insight of ideas ignited by the imagination. Engell makes clear that “the rules of fancy are ‘from the laws of association’; those of the imagination ‘are themselves the very powers of growth and production’” (*BL*, intro., civ). As I have noted, Coleridge does not discard Hartley’s mechanical association, “but he makes the passive part of the mind (associated with association and with the fancy) subordinate” (Baker 128) to that godlike intermediate faculty that marries the active with the passive: the imagination. Coleridge found the fancy and its dependence on associationism to be an inadequate way to conceive of the world’s vast complexities. To approach the divine in nature – “‘the Great’ & ‘the whole’” – one must ultimately depend on the imagination.

II. "Poetic Psyche": The Triumph of Imagination over Fancy

As I established in the previous chapter, Coleridge longed to unveil the nature of his mind by gathering scientific evidence that could explain its various functions. But Coleridge was not a scientist. In fact, although he was well-read in both the scientific and psychological theories of his day, he had no formal training in the sciences whatsoever, but had dedicated his studies at Christ's Hospital and Cambridge to the language arts. While his intellect may have been stimulated by the many important scientific and psychological advancements that emerged during his lifetime, Coleridge's soul was fundamentally bound to poetry. His unique mind, the nature of which he so desperately sought to understand, found its most engaging outlet in poetic verse, and much of the reasoning behind his efforts to redefine the fancy and imagination are inextricably linked to his desire to understand man's capacity to produce spontaneous, organic art that mimics God's original act of creation. This divine mimicry is a highly synesthetic function of the mind that strives to reconcile the world's many differences into a single physical/spiritual whole.

Coleridge's profound ability to perceive the many connected parts that exist in every whole extended to the connection between science and poetry as well as that between the body and mind. For example, when delivering his eighth lecture at the Surrey Institute in November of 1812, Coleridge cast the development of poetry in highly

scientific terms:

The Spirit of Poetry like all other living Powers, must of necessity circumscribe itself by Rules, were it only to unite Power with Beauty. It must embody in order to reveal itself; but a living body is of necessity an organized one – & what is organization, but the connection of Parts to a whole, so that each Part is at once an End & Means! This is no discovery of criticism – it is a necessity of the human mind – & all nations have felt and obeyed it, in the invention of metre, & measured Sounds, as the vehicle & Involucrum of Poetry itself, a fellow-growth from the same Life, even as the Bark is to a living Tree. (*LL*, I, 494)

In poetry, Coleridge perceived laws that were fundamentally similar to those found in science – organic, organizing laws that exist naturally in both matter and mind. But Coleridge recognized that, while poetry and science share some fundamental qualities, the subtle, philosophic nature of art projects the laws governing poetry beyond the bounds of science. When, in the *Biographia Literaria*, he recounts his early exposure to poetic method, Coleridge hypothesizes that “Poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, [has] a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes” (I, 9). The discovery of exactly what these “fugitive causes” are is one of Coleridge’s central concerns when pursuing the studies that he ultimately developed in the *Biographia*.

Although much of Coleridge’s thinking hinges on his ability to recognize the many vast unities in the natural world, he is also adept at recognizing the many subtle

differences that collectively construct these unities. While he acknowledges the remarkable similarities between poetry and science, he is careful to note that there is a distinct difference between the two disciplines, despite their inherent link to one another. This separation has its origin in the difference between logic and emotion. Logic, from which science draws its principles, is grounded in the empirical natural world, while emotion is grounded in a distinctly human psychological reality that is fundamentally separate from nature (but Coleridge also believed that emotion can be triggered, in many cases, through exposure to nature). While science can only account for those phenomena that have their origin in the natural world (some of which are highly subjective, like human fancy), poetry accounts for *all* phenomena, both natural and supernatural, including those produced by the imagination. Richard Haven notices this connection between the natural and the supernatural in his essay “Coleridge, Hartley, and the Mystics,” where he writes that

Coleridge finds the highest religious and aesthetic value in a kind of experience which transcends the normal limits of human consciousness. But he does not present such experience as a turning *from* one world and language – that of physical reality – to another world and language – that of supernatural reality. Rather he presents the familiar world of sense as turning *into* the unfamiliar world of spirit. (486)

The natural world is inherent in the spiritual world, just as the spiritual world is inherent in the natural world, but these two worlds must be reconciled in the mind before they can be properly understood.

Coleridge attributes the power to reconcile the differences between the natural and

the supernatural to poetry rather than science. When explaining the development of the “poetic PSYCHE,” he claims that truly inspired poetry produces

the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops. “To find no contradiction in the union of old and new; to contemplate the ANCIENT of days and all his works with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat; characterizes the mind that feels the riddle of the world, and may help to unravel it.”¹ (*BL*, I, 80)

Here, Coleridge pays homage to the role of science in poetry by recognizing that “profound thought” and “truth in observing,” both of which are directly linked to scientific inquiry, are fundamental aspects of the “poetic PSYCHE.” However, the “poetic PSYCHE” is incomplete without the poet’s ability to 1) unify “deep feeling” with “profound thought”; 2) to imaginatively “modify the objects observed” empirically in nature; 3) to peer beyond one’s ordinary surroundings into the “ideal world”; and 4) to “feel” – as opposed to observe, as scientists do – “the riddle of the world.” Poets’ sensibilities parallel those of scientists’, but poets use the imagination to reach beyond the

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Coleridge is quoting himself in this passage. The sentence in quotation marks appears both in a notebook entry of October 1803 (*CN*, I, 1662) and the 1809-10 issue of *The Friend* (*The Friend*, II, 73).

bounds of science, extracting meaning from both physical and metaphysical realms.

It is imperative to note, however, that Coleridge's definition of the imagination as a phenomenon reaching beyond the bounds of science does not suggest that the imagination is separate from science. On the contrary, Coleridge accounts for science within his definition of the imagination, but does not attribute all of the imagination's qualities to science, as he does the qualities of the fancy. Coleridge's definition of the creative imagination relies on both science *and* metaphysics to take complete shape: science belonging to the passive aspects of the imagination, metaphysics belonging to the active aspects of the imagination (the imagination being an intermediary, both active and passive, between the wholly passive and wholly active aspects of the human mind).

Coleridge illustrates the imagination's duality with a clever example found in nature:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal *wins* its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. (In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION.) (*BL*, I, 124-5)

Coleridge's comparison of the imagination with a water-insect fighting against the current, alternately thrusting forward and allowing itself to drift back before again thrusting slightly further along, is itself a sharp departure from the traditional view of the imagination – a departure that, in some respects, favors science over metaphysics. In his highly illuminating account of Coleridge's later years, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804-1834*, Richard Holmes writes:

The psychology of this passage is remarkably modern. It seems to describe the actual process of creative inspiration, without resorting to the traditional idea of the Muse. Instead it proposes a model of the engagement between the conscious forward drive of intellectual effort (“propulsion”), and the drifting backwards into unconscious materials (“yielding to the current”), constantly repeated in a natural diastolic movement like breathing or heartbeat. This is how creativity actually works: a mental (ultimately spiritual) rhythm which arises from the primary physical conditions of the natural world. (397-98)

Coleridge's assertion that certain aspects of the imagination have the metaphysical ability to break free from the constraints of natural laws does not, therefore, exclude scientific principles from the functions of the imagination, but rather includes science in the discussion of creativity. However, the imagination according to Coleridge, in fact, goes beyond science and partakes of a supernatural energy that has its origin in the “eternal act of creation” – the very nature of God.

In his remarkably brief definition of the imagination, Coleridge explains that the primary imagination (as opposed to the secondary imagination) is “the living Power and

prime Agent of all human Perception, and . . . a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (*BL*, I, 304). Although this description briefly acknowledges man’s physiological makeup (“human Perception” and “the finite mind”), its true significance balances on the definition’s final phrase: “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” Not only does this phrase reject the materialists’ notion that the mind is simply a blank document on which one’s experiences compose one’s reality (Coleridge asserts that the imagination actively creates rather than being acted on by creation), but it makes an explicitly metaphysical reference to God: “the infinite I AM.” Coleridge’s reference to the “I AM” is taken from the biblical account of Moses’s first conversation with God. After encountering God’s presence in the form of a burning bush in the desert, Moses asks, “Behold, *when* I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, what *is* his name? what shall I say unto them?” The voice emitting from the bush responds with a cryptic answer: “I AM THAT I AM . . . Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (*King James Bible*, Exod. 3.13-14). Coleridge was fascinated with this response, and he contemplated its meaning at great length, combining ideas he had gained through extensive study of the Christian mystics and German transcendentalists to formulate one of his central philosophical positions: “Know thyself: and so shalt thou know God, as far as is permitted to a creature, and in God all things” (*BL*, II, 240); or – as may be more fitting, considering the language used in his definition of the primary imagination – “We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD” (*BL*, I, 283).

To fully grasp Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination, it is necessary to acknowledge his sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the human mind and "the infinite I AM." In the chapter preceding his definition of the imagination, Coleridge writes:

This principle [that truth is self-grounded], . . . manifests itself in the SUM or I AM; which I shall hereafter indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self, and self-consciousness. In this, and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject. It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presupposes each other, and can exist only as antithesis. (*BL*, I, 273)

This is a fundamental definition of human self-consciousness. We are aware of ourselves as intelligent beings because we conceive of our consciousness objectively, although our consciousness does not exist objectively in the material world. But that is not to say that consciousness does not exist at all, for it does, in fact, exist in a very powerful way once we perform the act of recognizing its existence. The existence of self-consciousness depends on the subjective mind viewing itself objectively, which in a godlike performance creates an objective, self-conscious intellect where no objective intellect originally existed. It is through this act of recognition, of "self-duplication," that the "self," as Coleridge defines it, is created. But this principle of human psychology is only

part of Coleridge's meaning, for he does not speak only of human self-consciousness, but parallels human self-consciousness with "the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" – God himself.

Coleridge believes that understanding human self-consciousness, which is the ultimate goal of philosophy ("Know thyself"), enables man to understand both God and nature because animated creation *is* the act of God affirming himself in the natural world. In fact, Coleridge would go so far as to say that nature, in its entirety, is the objective existence of God. For example, in "The Destiny of Nations," Coleridge writes:

But properties are God: the naked mass
 (If mass there be, fantastic guess or ghost)
 Acts only by its inactivity.
 Here we pause humbly. Others boldlier think
 That as one body seems the aggregate
 Of atoms numberless, each organized;
 So by a strange and dim similitude
 Infinite myriads of self-conscious minds
 Are one all-conscious spirit, which informs
 With absolute ubiquity of thought
 (His one eternal self-affirming act!)
 All his involved Monads, that yet seem
 With various province and apt agency
 Each to pursue his own self-centring end. (ll. 36-49)

Just as man affirms himself by self-duplicating his consciousness into subject and object,

thus creating a conscious self, so God affirms himself in nature. By animating the natural world and integrating the “Infinite myriads of self-conscious minds” into “one all-conscious spirit,” God performs the “eternal act of creation” – a “self-affirming act!” that occurs through the process of God’s self-naming: “I AM THAT I AM.” Through the act of recognizing himself, God synthesizes the natural world with his spirit, rendering objective what originally only existed subjectively. Therefore, created nature is to God what self-consciousness is to man: the self duplicated into both object and subject, the beholder and the beheld. In Coleridge’s system of thought, “The inter-penetration of subject and object, mind and the external world, can logically take place only in the self-assertion of God. Here alone are the conditions under which the ground of existence, and the ground of the knowledge of existence, are the same” (J. Wordsworth 48). So, when speaking of “a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject” (*BL*, I, 273), Coleridge is referring to the idea that God exists because he duplicates himself, objectively and subjectively, in nature and spirit. Therefore, the myriad components of the natural world, when unified into one complete “SUM,” equal the “I AM,” or God.

Coleridge refines this idea into his “one life” theory: the belief that all things are one in God. This is a metaphysical, Pantheistic notion that Coleridge explored throughout his poetry and prose for much of his life. Although he often struggled with the compatibility of this theory with Christian Orthodoxy, he never completely managed to purge his religious beliefs of Pantheistic tendencies. His natural inclination toward Pantheism inspired his devotion to the Christian mystics (most notably Jacob Boehme) and German transcendentalists (most notably, as concerns the material leading up to his

definition of the imagination, Friedrich Schelling, from whose work Coleridge widely plagiarized in the *Biographia*); and many of his most important poems, including virtually all of his influential Conversation Poems, rely on the “one life” as a central theme.

But to “feel” this “one life,” to annihilate oneself in God, one must abandon his faculties to the powers of the imagination. The fancy, with its reliance on passive, mechanical reception of sensory data without the ability to dissolve and reform that data into new wholes, does not have the capacity to diffuse the self into the “one life.” Only through the use of the imagination is man able to recast his perceptions into new wholes, thus joining the “one life” in the “eternal act of creation.” James Baker eloquently explains that the imagination

intuitively organizes the whole, the confused corrugation of mountains, into ideal concepts (like Platonic ideas) of mass, majesty, eternity, beauty, infinity and the like. The mind, in other words, intuitively grasps the real forms of the ideas behind the sensuous forms and establishes, in this way, direct contact with the divine. Thus the mind of the poet is creative in perception and, in its lesser degree, participates in the creative power which formed the mountains in the first place, as cloudy symbols or concrete objectifications of itself. (119)

The Platonic notion that there are ideal forms underlying all that we perceive is central to Coleridge’s definition of the imagination and the “one life” theory. In fact, it is Coleridge’s deeply held belief that the physical world is a complex conglomeration of symbols representing the *ideal* that fueled his passion for the Christian mystics and

German transcendentalists – both of whom rely extensively on Platonic principles.

Coleridge writes in the *Biographia* that “the Mystics . . . define beauty as the subjection of matter to spirit so as to be transformed into a symbol, in and through which the spirit reveals itself” (II, 239). This statement recalls Coleridge’s beautiful lines:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon
dim-glimmering thro’ the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking,
as it were *asking*, a symbolic language for something within me that
already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that
latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new
phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of
my inner Nature. (CN, II, 2546)

It seems natural, therefore, that the human imagination finds its most productive outlet in poetry, one of man’s most symbolic modes of expression (poems, after all, are literally composed of symbols, i.e., individual letters that form words that *represent* ideas). By composing poetry born of the imagination, the poet joins the “one life” in establishing “beauty [artistic expression] as the subjection of matter [the perception of the material world] to spirit [the imaginative perception of the ideal world] so as to be transformed into a symbol [a poem reflecting the ideal]” (BL, II, 239). So, there is a unique relationship between imaginative poetry and the “one life.” As Jonathan Wordsworth writes in his provocative essay, “The infinite I AM,”

The proper interest of Nature lies in its being permeated by the One Life –
“‘tis God / Diffused through all, that doth make all one whole” (*Religious Musings*, ll. 139-40) – and in its being, in Blake’s words, “a faint shadow”

of “the real & eternal World”. The proper function of the poet is to proclaim the One Life, and to reveal the faint shadow as consisting of clouds that veil the Almighty from the gaze of fallen man. (34)

It must be asserted, therefore, that according to Coleridge’s understanding of the poet’s relationship to the “one life,” the imagination is the synthesizing element in the composition of poetry that has the ability to echo the “eternal act of creation” that is manifested in the “one life’s” animation of nature.

In his poem “The Nightingale,” Coleridge demonstrates the precedence that the imagination takes over fancy, or any other mental phenomena that relies on mechanical association, in the composition of poetry. Like his other conversation poems, “The Nightingale” examines the poet’s interaction with his natural surroundings, and through this interaction the poem begins to comment on the nature of creative thought. Coleridge accomplishes this in “The Nightingale” by explicitly contrasting the fancy’s inadequate ability to combine disparate experiences into weak compounds with the imagination’s ability to diffuse perception into the self-conscious mind in such a way that provides the poet with materials that he can reform into new, exciting poetic wholes.

Before contrasting the fancy and imagination, Coleridge establishes that the poem’s setting is incomplete and in need of unification. That is not to say that the scene is completely unpleasant, but that it lacks the unifying qualities fundamental to poetic inspiration. Despite the pleasantness of the scene that Coleridge describes in the poem’s opening lines, the poet is dissatisfied with nature’s present state because there is an imbalance between light and sound in the night. After establishing that the night’s sky bears no sign of “sullen light, no obscure trembling hues” (l. 3), Coleridge focuses the

reader's attention on a flowing stream: "You can see the glimmer of the stream beneath, / But hear no murmuring: it flows silently / O'er its soft bed of verdure" (ll. 5-7).

Coleridge's use of the word "but" to introduce the stream's silent flowing indicates that its quietness clashes with the poet's pre-existing expectation of how a glimmering stream should ideally sound. Substituting the word "and" for "but" changes the meaning: the stream's glimmering is joined to its silence rather than contrasted to it. However, Coleridge chooses to contrast the presence of light with the absence of sound, and through this contrast he begins to suggest that there is a fundamental disconnection between what ideally should be and what *is* physically present in the natural world. That disconnect has its basis in the idea that there is an inadequate mixture of light and sound in the poem's nighttime atmosphere – a sort of anti-synesthesia.

Although Coleridge does not describe the stream in unpleasant terms ("the mossy bridge," "the glimmer of the stream" flowing over its "soft bed of verdure," and the "still, . . . balmy night!" are all pleasant, romantic details (ll. 4-8)), he makes explicit that the poet is dissatisfied with the dim quietness:

. . . and though the stars be dim,
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars. (ll. 8-11)

With these lines, Coleridge introduces fancy's role in human perception. Only by recalling the spring rains that darken the skies and associating that recollection with the poem's setting can Coleridge hope to evoke "pleasure in the dimness of the stars." This linking of two separate experiences into one compound sensation corresponds to how the

associationists believed the mind works: if one observed the dimness of the sky during a spring shower, that person's mind might recall the pleasurable sensations they had experienced during that shower when they see other dimly lit skies, even if the rain is absent. However, Coleridge departed from the associationists in one important respect: mechanical association holds that the mind involuntarily recalls complex sense compounds from the memory when the senses are exposed to a separate circumstance resembling any part of that memory, thus creating a new experience colored by one's past exposure to the natural world. Coleridge insists that association is "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" (*BL*, I, 305). It is, after all, a conscious *choice* that the poet is suggesting he and his companions make — the active decision to recall the spring showers from the depths of their memories in order to improve the dim quality of the night.

Still, although Coleridge motions toward the possibility that the fancy can improve the poet's sensory interaction with his natural surroundings, he is quick to illustrate the dangers inherent in associative thinking. Immediately following his suggestion that he and his companions recall the spring rains in order to ease the dimness of the night, Coleridge writes:

And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,

'Most musical, most melancholy' bird!

A melancholy bird! Oh! idle thought!

In nature there is nothing melancholy.

But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced

With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
 Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
 (And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
 And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
 Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
 First named these notes a melancholy strain.
 And many a poet echos the conceit. (ll. 12-23)

Here, rather than improving the quality of the night, Coleridge's imagined "night-wandering man" deforms nature by imposing his memory on its innocent forms. "Gentle sounds" now echo his "sorrow," and people with whom he has no relation suffer as a result of his careless degradation of the natural world: Coleridge's initial excitement at hearing the nightingale's song ("And hark! the Nightingale begins its song," thus filling the void created by the silently flowing stream) is tainted by his familiarity with the nightingale's traditional association with melancholy. What makes this familiar association especially repulsive to Coleridge is that the vehicle by which it was popularized was poetry. He is offended by the notion that poetry has degraded nature rather than glorifying it – slighting the "one life" when it should be magnified. It is after acknowledging the damage that has been done to the nightingale's reputation as a result of careless, fancy-ridden poetry that Coleridge offers an alternative vision of the night-bird:

My Friend, and thou, our Sister! we have learnt
 A different lore: we may not thus profane
 Nature's sweet voices, always full of love

And joyance! 'Tis the merry Nightingale
 That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
 With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
 As he were fearful that an April night
 Would be too short for him to utter forth
 His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
 Of all its music! (ll. 40-49)

Here, the nightingale is full of “love / and joyance!” rather than “grievous wrong, / Or slow distemper, or neglected love.” Coleridge views the bird as being “merry,” and recognizes its only fear is that “an April night / Would be too short for him to utter forth / His love-chant.” Finally, Coleridge does not fill the bird with the burdens of the human soul, but allows the bird to speak of *its* own “full soul,” recognizing that the nightingale is filled with a sacred music of its own.

But how is Coleridge able to see the nightingale’s true form while so many other poets have muddled it with association? What is this “different lore” of which Coleridge speaks? The answer is found in the lines immediately following his criticism of the “night-wandering man”:

And many a poet echoes the conceit;
 Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
 When he had better far have stretched his limbs
 Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
 By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
 Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements

Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
 And of his fame forgetful! so his fame
 Should share in Nature's immortality,
 A venerable thing! and so his song
 Should make all Nature lovelier, and itself
 Be loved like Nature! (ll. 23-34)

Abandoning himself to the “influxes” of nature, “surrendering” his soul to the “shapes and sounds and shifting elements” at work in the natural world, and momentarily forgetting poetry in favor of the magnificence of his immediate surroundings allows the poet’s mind to function at its highest level. By “surrendering” himself to nature, the poet releases his imagination to transform the natural world into its ideal form, and in so doing, he joins the “one life” in its “eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (*BL*, I, 304). Therefore, true poetic power rests in the imagination, that aspect of the mind that imitates the synthesizing movement of the “one life” and allows the poet to “share in Nature’s immortality.”

Considering the spiritual role that Coleridge assigned his poetry, it should come as no surprise that his most striking and memorable reference to the “one life” is not found in the *Biographia* or any of his other philosophical writings, but is embedded in one of his poems – “The Eolian Harp”:

O the one life within us and abroad,
 Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
 A light in sound, a sound-like power in light
 Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where – (ll. 26-29)

Not only does Coleridge name the “one life” in this passage, but he characterizes its nature and describes its primary function. First, he establishes the existence of the “one life” as a phenomenon that can be found both “within us and abroad.” The “one life” is not a notion that exists only in man’s mind, nor is it simply God looking down on the Earth from the heavens. Rather, the “one life” is a force that exists within man and throughout nature. This is very important because it links God, man, and nature in one complete whole – the divine yet natural unity that Coleridge so passionately wanted to realize through his poetry. Second, Coleridge describes the primary function of the “one life”: it “meets all motion and becomes its soul.” Although “meets” is commonly understood to mean “encounters,” Coleridge’s very notion of the “one life” requires us to entertain a more subtle interpretation of the term. Although there are fifty-two definitions for the verb “meet” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, there is only one definition for the word “meets.” The transitive verb “meets” is “used to describe or designate something which combines characteristics or qualities of both the subject and the object of the phrase” (*OED*). To say that the “one life . . . meets all motion” is to say that the “one life” and “all motion” share characteristics and qualities; they are essentially one. This is directly related to Coleridge’s understanding of the “eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” – a process wherein the divine “meets” the natural: a self-reflecting moment that both separates and unifies object and subject. Through this merger, the “one life” becomes the “soul,” the “spirit,” and the very “self” of nature (*BL*, I, 273). Finally, Coleridge gives a concrete description of the “one life”: “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light / Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where.” Up to this point in the poem, Coleridge’s poetic explanation of the “one life” has been wholly echoed

throughout his prose. However, here in “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge suddenly uses strong synesthetic language – literally mixing “light” and “sound” – to explain the physical nature of the “one life.” This line, “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,” eloquently expresses popular scientific and philosophical ideas that were circulating throughout western intellectual communities at the time of its composition. Coleridge fuses these ideas in a unique formulation that exemplifies the central philosophy behind some of his most important work.

Coleridge’s familiarity with Newton’s theories concerning the inter-relatedness of light and sound, and the way in which they have an impact on the human senses, is vitally important considering the role that synesthesia plays in the advancement of the “one life” theory. Newton’s influence on Coleridge is particularly apparent when we compare the “one life” passage from “The Eolian Harp” with the twenty-third query in *Opticks*:

Is not vision perform’d chiefly by the Vibrations of the Medium, excited in the bottom of the Eye by the Rays of Light, and propagated through the solid, pellucid and uniform Capillamenta of the optick Nerves into the place of Sensation? And is not Hearing perform’d by the Vibrations either of this or some other Medium, excited in the auditory Nerves by the Tremors of the Air, and propagated through the solid, pellucid and uniform Capillamenta of those Nerves into the place of Sensation? And so of the other senses. (353)

Starting with the lines, “O the one life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,” one finds significant parallels between the two men’s understanding of nature. Both thinkers suggest there is a common movement through

nature that gives life to the elements: Newton suggests light and sound are animated vibrations that travel through the aether before they are intercepted by man's sensory nerves, while Coleridge suggests that there is an energy (the "one life") that gives nature its life ("soul") through animation ("motion"). The next two lines of Coleridge's famous "one life" passage are equally revealing when considered in relation to Newton's query: "A light in sound, a sound-like power in light / Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere." Here again, there are clear parallels between the two texts: Newton suggests that light and sound are essentially the same element (vibration through the atmosphere) simply perceived differently depending on which human sensory nerve receives it; Coleridge suggests that light and sound share in each other's composition, and that the perception of their shared qualities creates a "rhythm" in the human senses ("thought"). So, both science and poetry agree: there is a single movement through nature that acts on both the natural world and the human mind.

That Coleridge uses synesthesia to describe the physical nature of the "one life" is significant because it "meets" Coleridge's interest in science and metaphysics, combining them in one concise image. Although the synesthetic reference in "The Eolian Harp" is framed in relatively scientific terms, Coleridge eases into his "one life" passage with a highly metaphoric section of the poem that uses a more subtle reference to synesthesia. After describing the sound of a wind harp, Coleridge writes:

Such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight Elfin's make, when they at eve
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,
Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,

Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,

Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!" (ll. 20-25)

This passage is clearly rooted in fantasy and metaphysics, yet Coleridge introduces a synesthetic image that directly foreshadows the more scientific synesthetic language he uses to describe the "one life." He describes "Melodies" as "birds of Paradise" flying around "honey-dropping flowers," using a simile that compares sound to brightly colored objects ceaselessly swirling through the atmosphere. Coleridge is a careful writer, and we can be sure that he chose this image deliberately. Rather than likening music to owls or even nightingales (birds famous for their songs), Coleridge selects birds that are valued for their brilliantly colored feathers. Sound, therefore, resembles brightly colored shapes moving through the air. It is immediately following this image that Coleridge delivers his famous "one life" passage.

Synesthesia does not play a central role in only "The Eolian Harp," but is a central rhetorical technique that Coleridge employs throughout much of his conversational poetry – a poetic form in which Coleridge often uses opposing natural elements to explain nature's inner workings, and nature's intermingling to explain God's movement through nature into the heart and mind of man. For example, in "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge writes:

. . . so shalt thou see and hear

The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible

Of that eternal language, which thy God

Utters, who from eternity doth teach

Himself in all, and all things in himself. (ll. 58-62)

This “language” is at the core of Coleridge’s “one life,” and is described in synesthetic terms. It unifies both auditory and visual stimulation (“shapes and sounds”) into one “intelligible” mode of communication, and – like the “act of creation in the infinite I AM” – is described as being “eternal.” This synesthetic language is also used to “teach” the central principle of the “one life”: that God is “Himself in all, and all things in himself.” It is with this wonderful notion of a fundamentally involved and involving God in mind that Coleridge eloquently wonders in “The Eolian Harp” if the natural world consists of

... organic harps diversely framed,
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. (ll. 45-48)

Coleridge also fills “The Nightingale” with brilliant synesthetic descriptions that demonstrate the supernatural movement of the “one life” through nature. After encouraging the potential poet to

... [stretch] his limbs
Beside a brook in mossy forest dell,
By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit, (ll. 25-29)

– lines that closely resemble those found in “The Eolian Harp”:

... as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,

Whilst through my half-closed eye-lids I behold
 The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
 And tranquil muse upon tranquility;
 Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
 And many idle flitting phantasies,
 Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
 As wild and various as the random gales
 That swell and flutter on this subject lute! (ll. 34-43),

Coleridge delivers two of his most strikingly beautiful synesthetic passages. Both rely on the literal and figurative use of light and sound, and both recall the image of the “one life” animating the natural world. When describing the beauty of a chorus of nightingales singing in a thicket, Coleridge writes:

They answer and provoke each other's song,
 With skirmish and capricious passagings,
 And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,
 and one low piping sound more sweet than all –
 Stirring the air with such a harmony,
 That should you close your eyes, you might almost
 Forget it was not day! (ll. 58-64)

Coleridge's use of synesthesia in this passage is fairly direct: the nightingales' songs create a sensation of bright light in the poet's mind, despite the fact that he is surrounded by darkness. By “stirring the air with such a harmony,” natural sound produces the sensation of light in the poet's imagination. However, as the birds sing, the poet begins

to notice physical light in his surrounding environment:

. . . On moon-lit bushes,
 Whose dewy leaflets are but half disclosed,
 You may perchance behold them on the twigs,
 Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,
 Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade
 Lights up her love-torch. (ll. 64-69)

Coleridge's repetition of the word "bright" and his focus on gentle emanations of light (the moon and glow-worms) are used to complete the scene. The nightingales' song is incomplete without the fulfilling presence of "Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full, / Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade / Lights up her love-torch." Just as the poet's mind is unified by creating the sensation of light to balance that of sound, so the "one life" unifies the natural world by animating both auditory and visual phenomena.

If there is any doubt that Coleridge is creating a connection between the imagination, the "one life," and synesthesia, consider his second synesthetic description of the natural world in "The Nightingale":

. . . and oft a moment's space,
 What time the moon was lost behind a cloud,
 Hath heard a pause of silence; till the moon
 Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky
 With one sensation, and these wakeful birds
 Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,

As if some sudden gale had swept at once

A hundred airy harps! (ll. 75-82)

In this passage, Coleridge brilliantly removes light from the natural setting of his poem, and its removal causes a dramatic effect – the suspension of sound. As the moon passes behind a cloud, the many singing nightingales fall silent. It is only when the moon re-emerges that the nightingales burst into song once again. What is most striking about these lines is that Coleridge attributes synesthesia, nature's "one sensation," to the influence of the "one life," and through the "one life" to the imagination.

By comparing this passage to lines found in "The Eolian Harp" – a poem that focuses on a wind harp as the ultimate symbol of the way the "one life" moves through the natural world, and synesthesia as the best description of the way the "one life" moves through the human mind – we are able to witness how Coleridge reaffirms the central premise of his most important philosophical and poetic position: that God is engaged in "an eternal act of creation" that takes the form of the movement of the "one life" through nature, and that man can join God in this "act" by dissolving the natural world in his imagination and restoring it to its ideal state through poetry.

III. "More Invisible Natures Than Visible Ones"

Coleridge's understanding of the human imagination and its ability to encounter, reflect, and ultimately join the "one life" in its eternal act of creation is fundamentally grounded in a complex amalgamation of philosophical thought. In fact, Coleridge has been criticized by such eminent scholars as René Wellek and G. N. G. Orsini for being unable to construct a unique Coleridgean philosophy (although Coleridge did attempt to articulate what he called his "dynamic philosophy") out of the many other philosophies that engaged his thinking.¹ But Coleridge never sought to be a "philosopher." He desired only to chart the experiences of his own mind – a mind that happened to be highly complex and problematic, often requiring deep philosophical speculation to explain. Part of those experiences, as noted in the previous chapter, was a peculiar sensitivity to the synesthetic relationship between the spiritual and physical aspects of the natural world. In fact, Coleridge believed that the results of philosophical pursuits should include an intimate knowledge of spirituality: "Know thyself: and so shalt thou know God, as far as is permitted to a creature, and in God all things" (*BL*, II, 240). Not only must man understand himself in order to understand his world, but he must also understand God; and only through this understanding can man hope to understand nature.

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See René Wellek's *Immanuel Kant in England* and G. N. G. Orsini's *Coleridge and German Idealism*.

Early in his poem “Fears in Solitude,” Coleridge writes a series of lines that echo the pantheistic passages in “The Eolian Harp” and “The Nightingale,” but with a decidedly religious focus:

Here he might lie on fern or withered heath,
While from the singing-lark (that sings unseen
the minstrelsy that solitude loves best),
And from the sun, and from the breezy air,
Sweet influences tremble o’er his frame;
And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,
Made up a meditative joy, and found
Religious meanings in the forms of nature!
And so, his senses gradually wrapt
In a half sleep, he dreams of better worlds,
And dreaming hears thee still, O singing-lark;
That singest like an angel in the clouds! (ll. 17-28)

Here, as in “The Eolian Harp” and “The Nightingale,” Coleridge presents a man who lounges in nature, submitting his mind to the sensual influence of the natural world. And again, through his submission to nature, this man is filled with strong emotional, intellectual, and spiritual responses. But in “Fears in Solitude,” Coleridge explicitly states that the emotional and intellectual “joy” that one finds through submission to “the forms of nature” leads to “religious meanings.” He also suggests that such “religious meanings” will lead to “dreams of better worlds” – *ideal* worlds where the singing of a bird will be transformed into the spiritual song of an “angel in the clouds!” Although

these images parallel Coleridge's philosophical understanding of man's interaction with nature, they also share a relationship with certain aspects of religious thought. The spirit is at the center of Coleridge's approach to philosophy; religion and theology become synonymous in Coleridge's pursuit of self-knowledge. This is not to say, however, that philosophy leads to theology, but that philosophical thought *is* theological thought. For Coleridge, as Douglas Hedley so perceptively writes, "Philosophy . . . is not the maid of theology, supplying apologetic arguments, but the conceptual expression of a specifically Christian vision of the relationship of world and its source: philosophy is itself a form of Christian theology" (12). Philosophical thinking, therefore, is spiritual in nature because it requires an investigation of both God and the godlike qualities of man.

When Coleridge commands his audience to "Know thyself," he is not insisting that we understand only our biological natures, but pleading for us to investigate also those aspects of our nature that cannot be explained through human physiology. To truly "Know thyself," one must understand *all* of human nature, both material and immaterial, body and spirit. In order to satisfy his desire to understand the workings of the spirit (in both God and man), Coleridge was forced to look beyond the tangible universe for answers. Although he understood that physics must be acknowledged if one hopes to comprehend the nature of human potential, he rejected the notion that man's entire intellect exists solely in the material world. Coleridge believed that the mind is intimately related to both the natural and the supernatural worlds, and to explain the aspect of the mind that is related to the supernatural, one must gaze beyond physics into the realm of metaphysics. In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge's seminal work on the relation between philosophy and theology, he writes, "How is it possible that a work not *physical*,

that is, employed on Objects known or believed on the evidence of the senses, should be other than *metaphysical*, that is treating on Subjects, the evidence of which is not derived from the senses[?]" (81). Although Coleridge was deeply interested in the natural world (the world of the senses), he was primarily interested in it as a reflection of the supernatural world (the world of the spirit). As I discussed in Chapter Two, Coleridge believed that creation was God separating himself into both subject (spirit) and object (material) so as to produce a divine intellect. But objective creation, when viewed in a fragmentary state (man's only way of viewing it) rather than in its vast wholeness, is an imperfect reflection of the subjective consciousness that serves as its ground. The belief that the material world is an imperfect reflection of a perfect idea (just as all reflections are to some degree distortions of what they reflect) is a fundamentally Platonic notion. Coleridge's approach to the ideal is "the theory that *ultimate* reality does not consist of material objects but of consciousness or personality. It is not a *res* or thing but mind or spirit that constitutes [Coleridge's] fundamental ontology" (Hedley 23). So, when Coleridge writes in "The Eolian Harp":

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
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? (ll. 44-48),

he is suggesting that the material world is simply an instrument that the "one life," or divine intellect, uses to produce music. The "*ultimate* reality" in a world such as this consists, first and foremost, in the musician (the mind from which the music originally

emanates), then in the music (the imperfect reflection of the musician's mind), and finally in the musical instrument itself (the rude tool that the musician uses to produce the music). Coleridge attempted to explain the natural world by looking for answers in the supernatural; a musical instrument does not produce sound without a musician. His impulse to seek the answers to his physical existence by looking to both philosophy and spirituality ultimately separated Coleridge from his materialist contemporaries and propelled him into metaphysical speculation.

As I established in the previous chapter, Coleridge defined the imagination as a phenomenon that can actively dissipate those sensations passively transferred from the material world to the brain before reconstructing them into new wholes with the potential to restore the world to its ideal state. I also established that Coleridge viewed poetry as the most effective way for a thinker to communicate these ideal wholes to his fellow man.

Although there is no evidence to support the view that Coleridge considered the writing of poetry to be his primary occupation, it is clear that he valued the role of poetry in thought and spirituality above any other form of expression. Coleridge's preference for a poetic over a scientific understanding of the world can be seen in his comparison of Newton with Shakespeare and Milton in a letter to Thomas Poole: "The more I understand of Sir Isaac Newton's works, the more boldly I dare utter to my own mind, and therefore to *you*, that I believe the souls of five hundred Sir Isaac Newtons would go to the making up of a Shakespeare or a Milton" (*CL*, II, 709). Coleridge valued poetry so highly because he considered it to be a restorative mode of communication. That is, he believed that the imaginative use of language in poetry could restore the natural world to its ideal state in the mind of man. Because Coleridge believed that poetry, through the

use of imaginative language, could reunite the ideal with the actual, it follows that he believed poetry could restore some semblance of man's originally perfect relationship with the creator of the ideal if the imagination joined the "one life" in the "eternal act of creation." Poetry, therefore, as Coleridge used it, is a distinctly religious mode of communication. By describing areas of experience that reach far beyond literary or aesthetic concerns, poetry externalizes the internal (or spiritual) state of man's existence and mirrors religious language that seeks to make apparent (in text) the transparent (God/spirit) (Bernstein 245). Because of poetry's ability to externalize the internal, an ability that owes its existence to the synesthetic power of the imagination, Coleridge found it to be the most appropriate use of language when discussing the spirit's movement through the natural world.

Although Coleridge considered all inspired poetry to be the language of the imagination, modern critics of his work have found it useful to divide his major poems into two distinct categories: "Conversation Poems" and "Poems of the Imagination." "The Eolian Harp" and "The Nightingale" are examples of the former, while "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel" are examples of the latter. It is clear, for example, from the often unorthodox imagery and action that fill the Mariner's journey that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is, quite literally, charged with imagination in the most basic sense of the word. After all, ghost ships and re-animated corpses do not belong to the natural world, but exist exclusively in the creative minds of poets, readers of poetry, the superstitious, and children. But it is precisely because of these obviously imaginative details that we must entertain the following consideration: if Coleridge believes that man's imagination has the potential to reunite humanity with the

“one life” in all of its creative power, thus restoring the ideal to the actual, then might Coleridge’s “Poems of the Imagination” provide the most eloquent illustration of the movement of the “one life” through nature?

In his “Conversation Poems,” Coleridge demonstrates the process by which man is united with the “one life” through imaginative interaction with natural elements.

Although the true significance of these poems is the poet’s insight into the animation of the natural world by the “one life,” they approach this revelation by closely examining natural elements just as they will appear to anyone who studies them with the same passionate dedication as Coleridge. The spiritual, supernatural aspects of the “Conversation Poems” are inseparable from the literal, natural aspects that the poet examines. As M. H. Abrams explains when characterizing Coleridge’s “Conversation” poems,

The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deeper understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.
(527-28)

As I have noted in the previous chapters, Coleridge’s desire to understand the workings of the human mind as a fantastic exchange between God, man, and nature led

him to study such materialist thinkers as Hartley and Newton, both of whom argue for a degree of synesthesia in their formulation of how man's mind incorporates sensual perception into thought, and their theories can be seen as significant influences on some of Coleridge's most important lines that deal with the movement of "one life" through the natural world. Coleridge's "Poems of the Imagination," on the other hand, do not rely on Hartley and Newton to the same degree because they do not rely on *nature* to the same degree that the "Conversation" poems do. Rather than examining the "one life" as it is revealed in the natural world, Coleridge's "Poems of the Imagination" attempt to deal directly with the "one life" in all of its *supernatural* wonder. It is partially in response to the belief enunciated in Thomas Burnet's motto (which Coleridge attached to the 1817 edition of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") – "Facile credo, plures esse Naturas invisibiles quam visibiles in rerum universitate"² – that Coleridge writes his "Poems of

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This is a part of the motto that appears as follows in Coleridge's 1817 edition of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": "Facile credo, plures esse Naturas invisibiles quam visibiles in rerum universitate. Sed horum omnium familiam quis nobis enarrabit? et gradus et cognationes et discrimina et singulorum munera? Quid agunt? quæ loca habitant? Harum rerum notitiam semper ambivit ingenium humanum, nunquam attigit. Juvat, interea, non diffiteor, quandoque in animo, tanquam in tabulâ, majoris et melioris mundi imaginem contemplari: ne mens assuefacta hodiernæ vitæ minutiis se contrahat nimis, & tota subsidat in pusillas cogitationes. Sed veritati interea invigilandum est, modusque servandus, ut certa ab incertis, diem a nocte, distinguamus. – T. Burnet: *Archæol. Phil.* (68)."

In the *Bedford Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, Paul H. Fry translates this motto as follows: "I can easily believe that there are more invisible natures than visible ones among the entities in the universe. But who will explain for us the family of all these beings? And the ranks and relationships and distinguishing features and qualities of each? What they do? What places they inhabit? The human intellect has always tried to approach knowledge of these matters, but has never touched it. Meanwhile, I do not deny that it is sometimes better to represent in the spirit as on a tablet, the image of a greater and better world, lest the mind, used to the daily occurrences of life, contract itself and subside completely into petty thoughts. But at the same time

the Imagination”: poems that focus on the supernatural rather than the natural, and which rely on metaphysical sources of knowledge rather than physical sources. Whereas Coleridge looked to Hartley and Newton to explain the nature of man’s perception of the physical universe, he looked to such thinkers as Plotinus, Giordano Bruno, and Jacob Boehme to explain man’s awareness of and interaction with the metaphysical universe. The most important of these thinkers is Jacob Boehme, the seventeenth-century German mystic who Coleridge repeatedly defends and admires throughout his own philosophical writings. Boehme is a valuable resource when considering the literary uses of synesthesia, its affect on our spiritual awareness, and Coleridge’s use of it as a rhetorical device in his “Poems of the Imagination.”

Like Newton, who so heavily influenced Coleridge’s most directly synesthetic line: “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light” (“The Eolian Harp” l. 28), Boehme, to a great extent, relies on synesthesia to explain the central ideas of his philosophy. Beyond their mutual interest in synesthesia, however, Newton and Boehme share little in matters of scientific and philosophical ideas: whereas Newton conceives of the world as a vast conglomerate of tiny solid particles in constant motion (a theory that Coleridge does not altogether reject), Boehme considers both natural and supernatural realms of existence to be constructed through the relationship (a conversation of sorts) between pre-phenomenal powers. In his wildly imaginative and complex first book, *Aurora*, Boehme attempts to explain the creation of the universe in what, at the time of its composition, would have been considered “scientific” terms; that is, Boehme’s philosophy on the

we must be vigilant for the truth and keep due proportion, so that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night.” (27)

origins of the world was informed by what he observed through archaic scientific processes. These processes, however, were informed more by alchemy than by what thinkers of Coleridge's day would have considered scientific experiments. In fact, during his time as a student, Boehme studied under an alchemist, a circumstance that certainly played an influential role in the development of his ideas (Snyder 617-18). Despite the processes by which Boehme reached his conclusions, his ideas are obviously rooted in deep religious conviction. All of his work is motivated by the desire to explain the divine nature of creation and, in his most interesting theory relevant to Coleridge's work, the possibility of nature's return to its ideal state.³

According to Boehme, all created things exist as a result of the divine relationship between various forces, or powers, that he designates as "qualities." These "qualities" (bearing such titles as "hard," "cold," "bitter," "sour," and "dark" – all sensual descriptions – and described as "the mobility, boiling, springing or driving of a thing" (Boehme 40)), in certain combinations, constitute the two principle "properties" of the natural world: the "*Salitter*" and "*Mercurius*." Boehme consistently describes the "*Salitter*" as consisting of color or light, while he describes "*Mercurius*" as consisting of sound. For example, when describing "*Mercurius*" early in *Aurora*, Boehme writes:

The *second* form or property of heaven in the divine pomp or state is

Mercurius or the sound, as in the *Salitter* of the earth there is the sound,

3

Aurora is a Neo-Platonist work as much as it is a Christian one. Although Boehme aligns himself with Christian principles, his thinking is quite unorthodox. He incorporates platonic principles into his Christian doctrine, uses alchemical processes to confirm his theses, and eventually establishes an approach to the natural and spiritual world that is thoroughly mystical in its conclusions.

whence there groweth gold, silver, copper, iron and the like; of which men make all manner of *musical instruments* for sounding or for mirth, as bells, organ-pipes and other *things* that make a sound: There is likewise a sound in all the creatures upon the earth, else all would be in stillness and *silence*. By that sound all powers are moved in *heaven*, so that all things grow joyfully, and generate very beautifully: And as the divine power is manifold and various, so also the sound or *Mercurius* is manifold and various. (94)

It is clear from this passage that Boehme considers “sound” to be an inherent quality in both the natural and supernatural world – a quality that permeates the universe in much the same way that Coleridge believes the “one life” does. However, Boehme is not satisfied with the general nature of this permeation, but continues to characterize it in increasingly synesthetic language:

For when the powers spring up in God they *touch* and stir one another, and move one in another, and so there is a constant harmony, *mixing* or concert, from whence go forth all manner of colours. In those colours grow all manner of *fruits*, which rise and spring up in the *Salitter*, and the *Mercurius* or sound mingleth itself therewith, and riseth up in all the powers of the Father, and then sounding and *tunes* rise up in the heavenly joyfulness. The sound is in every power, and the tone or tune of the sound is according to the quality of every power; and therein consisteth the total heavenly kingdom of joy. (99)

Here, Boehme is essentially confirming Newton’s hypothesis concerning the

intermingling of light, sound, and all manner of natural phenomena, but Boehme's method of determining his conclusions shares little in common with those of eighteenth and nineteenth-century English materialists. Whereas Newton conducts a series of physical experiments to determine his conclusions, Boehme claims that his hypotheses are passed to him directly from God (although he does "scientifically" test his conclusions), and that this divine transfer of knowledge renders his ideas indisputable. Despite his open admiration for Newton's experiments, Coleridge ultimately rejects them based on their material nature. He chooses instead to fully align himself with the mystical hypotheses set forth in the works of Boehme. Simply put, there are clear connections among Boehme, Newton, and Coleridge concerning the synesthetic nature of sensual phenomena. But whereas Newton is careful to restrict his ideas to the judgement of his intellect, Boehme and Coleridge allow the imagination, with all of its spiritual implications, to influence the development of their respective beliefs.

Having established the connection between Boehme, Newton, synesthesia, and Coleridge's "one life" theory, I can make several observations about "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" that will further our understanding of Coleridge's proposed "dynamic philosophy." It must be stressed, however, that Newton and Boehme play very different roles in informing Coleridge's approach to the natural world, and Coleridge considered their ideas with different levels of interest. For example, because of the widespread popularity and debate surrounding Newton's *Opticks*,⁴ it would have been very difficult

4

Originally published in English rather than Latin, *Opticks* was unusually accessible and extraordinarily influential in our understanding of how both light and human perception function. It is widely regarded as one of Newton's most important scientific

for Coleridge to resist Newton's influence when writing about synesthesia (not that Coleridge would necessarily want to resist Newton's ideas), whereas Boehme's influence emerges from Coleridge's genuinely rare interest in *Aurora's* fantastic content. It is logical, therefore, that Boehme's ideas would reveal themselves most completely in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a poem that delves into realms far removed from the mainstream thought of Coleridge's day, and that metaphysics would come to dominate physics through the course of one of his most imaginative works.

At its most basic level, the Mariner's story is one of man's sin against nature, and his subsequent sentence to an endless life of penance. When considered in light of Coleridge's belief that the natural world is the objectified existence of God, an assault on nature becomes synonymous with an assault on the "one life." The poem's most important action, without which the rest of the work could not stand, is the moment when the Mariner kills the albatross. Although, at first glance, the Mariner's crime does not seem to warrant the horrific punishment that he is forced to endure, there is a serious underlying spiritual implication inherent in his actions: that of creature rising against creator. Before the Mariner can kill the albatross, he must first *judge* the albatross to be unworthy of life. This judgment reflects a level of pride within the Mariner that is incompatible with the attitude needed to commune with the "one life" – an attitude thoroughly saturated in submission to the powers of the divine in nature. The consequences, then, are the result of the Mariner's separation from the animating power of the "one life" – a horrifying existence utterly devoid of the joy and rejuvenation

contributions.

inherent in a fully synthesized world. Having a firm understanding of Coleridge's "one life" theory helps to clarify the often bizarre, metaphysical nature of the Mariner's story, and reveals "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to be a poem that explores man's relationship with nature and the divine in nature, the nightmarish consequences of separation from the "one life," and the possibility of renewal and re-creation – those most divine potentials of the imagination.

When discussing original sin in *Aurora* (which he defines as the fall of angels, rather than the fall of man), Boehme writes:

Therefore the quality or fountain spirits became stately and proud, and supposed that they had a *much fairer* little son or light than the son of God was; and therefore they would also the more earnestly and eagerly qualify or operate, and elevate themselves, and so despise the qualifying or acting which is in God their father. (351)

Unlike the version of original sin that blames the fall of nature from its ideal state on Adam and Eve's disobedience, Boehme clearly attributes the original fall to pride, suggesting that man's disobedience is dependent first on spiritual pride. A similar level of pride can be seen in the Mariner's killing of the albatross, for one can argue that the bird is a divinely-inspired guide (similar in many respects to the dove sent forth from Noah's ship) sent to aid the Mariner and his crew on their journey. By killing it in a sudden fit of pride, the Mariner makes a concerted decision to rely on his own powers to navigate the vessel. Through a sort of poetic stage direction early in the poem, Coleridge establishes the Mariner's active reliance on his intellect to navigate the vessel by interpreting the movements of celestial bodies:

The sun came up upon the left,
 Out of the sea came he!
 And he shown bright, and on the right
 Went down into the sea. (ll. 25-28)

Even under the watch of the albatross, the Mariner continues to rely on his understanding of navigation and the movement of celestial bodies:

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,
 It perched for vespers nine;
 Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,
 Glimmered the white moon shine. (ll. 75-78)

The Mariner's preoccupation with his own understanding of navigation, and his ultimate rejection of the albatross as a God-sent aid to their journey – no longer viewed as a “Christian soul, hailed . . . in God's name,” but maliciously attacked and mortally wounded – suggests a possible motive for the killing of the albatross that may very well warrant the degree of punishment that the Mariner ultimately suffers: pride. The Mariner's reliance on his own navigational abilities results in his rejection of spiritual guidance. He cuts himself off from the synthesizing power of the “one life” as it moves through nature.

Coleridge's description of the punishment that is visited on the Mariner as a result of his crime against the divine in nature – “Life-in-Death” – is quite suggestive when considering the role of the “one life” in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” After floating adrift for some time upon the open sea, the Mariner's punishment comes in the shape of a nightmarish woman gambling for the right to determine his fate:

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
 Her locks were yellow as gold:
 Her skin was as white as leprosy,
 The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
 Who thicks man's blood with cold. (ll. 190-94)

With the woman's declaration of, "The game is done! I've, I've won!" (l. 197), the Mariner's crew, who have made themselves complicit in the Mariner's crime by praising his actions (justifying injustice is injustice), fall dead. He alone is left to live with the reality of his sin. This same concept of "Life-in-Death" is found in Boehme's description of the consequences of man's prideful disobedience:

Now when *Adam* did eat of the fruit, which was good and evil, then he suddenly gat *such a body* also. The fruit was corrupt or perished, and palpable, as to this day all fruits now on earth are; and so such a fleshly and palpable or comprehensible body *Adam* and *Eve* gat instantly." (448)

Here again, Coleridge's interpretation of the consequences of man's resistance to the "one life" is in accord with Boehme's philosophy. As a result of shooting the albatross, the Mariner is cursed to experience eternal physical life in a dying world.

The Mariner's sin, however, not only brings physical sorrow, but spiritual sorrow as well, for a great silence, or lack of spiritual communion, pervades the Mariner's world. Even the phrase "Life-in-Death" suggests a spiritual element, for it is the opposite of "Life-in-Life," or the imaginative communion with the "one life." In some of the poem's strongest language, the Mariner laments his isolation from all the beautiful things that he

associates with the imaginative fulfillment of life in harmony with nature, or the “one life.” He utters such desperate remarks as

Alone, alone, all, all alone!
 Alone on a wide wide sea!
 And never a saint took pity on
 My soul in agony. (ll. 232-235),

and, in a passage that directly illustrates the Mariner’s isolation from God,

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
 But or ever a prayer had gusht,
 A wicked whisper came, and made
 My heart as dry as dust. (ll. 244-247)

Not only is the Mariner physically isolated, but he is spiritually isolated: altogether exiled from communion with both physical and metaphysical life. The Mariner’s isolation from the natural and spiritual order of man’s existence is a powerful example of the consequences of the mind’s resistance to the synthesizing movement of the “one life” through the natural world, for it is when the mind is out of rhythm with nature that he falls out of communion with God and his fellow man, suffering a drought of the imagination – a spiritually detached existence that falls farther and farther away from ideal creation. In some wonderfully suggestive lines, Coleridge writes:

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
 ‘Twas sad as sad could be;
 And we did speak only to break
 The silence of the sea!

...

Day after day, day after day,

We stuck, nor breathe nor motion,

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean. (ll. 107-18)

The “one life,” “Which meets all motion and becomes its soul” (“The Eolian Harp” l. 27), is absent from this scene. There is no motion, no breeze (like the “one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of All” (“The Eolian Harp” ll. 47-48)), and no joy, but only silence and sadness. The Mariner’s existence is like living a painting. Not only is he removed from the ideal, but he is removed from the actual world as well; he has become an imperfect reproduction of an already imperfect reproduction.

Only when he accepts the natural phenomena that God sets in his path is the Mariner permitted to resume his communion with nature. He must humble himself and accept that there is untold value in the strange, phosphorescent sea snakes that have so appalled him; he must accept nature in its entirety. Just as the Mariner’s judgment of nature falls away, so does the albatross:

O happy living things! No tongue

Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,

And I blessed them unaware.

...

The selfsame moment I could pray;

And from my neck so free

The Albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea. (ll. 282-291)

As noted earlier, both Boehme and Coleridge consider nature to be complete only when it reaches a point of harmonic joy, and it is only when the Mariner resigns himself to partaking of this natural state of joy that he is liberated from the oppressive weight of the albatross. Coleridge affirms this notion quite explicitly in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’s” moral:

He prayeth well, who loveth well

Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small;

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all. (ll. 616-21)

This moral is completely consistent with Coleridge’s description of the “one life” in “The Eolian Harp,” where immediately after describing its synesthetic power in nature, Coleridge writes these beautiful lines:

Methinks it should have been impossible

Not to love all things in a world so filled;

Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air

Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (ll. 30-34)

In both the “Eolian Harp” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the poet recognizes that exposure to the movement of the “one life” through nature will lead to a

natural love of *all* creation, and that this love is an integral aspect of man's restorative potential.

When the Mariner accepts nature in its entirety, the whole of which is the objective aspect of God, nature bursts into supernatural life. He is no longer stranded in the doldrums, but is acted on by supernatural agencies that propel him toward a reunion with his fellow man. These supernatural agencies are steeped in metaphysical concepts of varying levels of spiritual reality, and may be seen as the metaphysical acknowledgment of the "one life" rather than the physical acknowledgment of its movement through nature via an "intellectual breeze" that blows over "organic harps diversely framed" ("The Eolian Harp" ll. 45-48). Because "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is not a meditation on nature, but rather a fantastic tale of a man's sin against nature and the subsequent spiritual exile that he is forced to endure, it is fitting that Coleridge approaches the "one life" through metaphysical avenues rather than physical ones. But despite the varied nature of Coleridge's approaches to the "one life" in these separate circumstances, there is a single striking similarity: both approaches describe the "one life" in synesthetic terms.

Immediately following the Mariner's liberation from the physical weight of the Albatross hanging around his neck, the poem's atmosphere erupts into life. The Mariner recalls:

And soon I heard a roaring wind:
It did not come anear;
But with its sound it shook the sails,
That were so thin and sere.

The upper air burst into life!

And a hundred fire-flags sheen,

To and fro they were hurried about!

And to and fro, and in and out,

The wan stars danced between. (ll. 313-16)

Although this passage may seem to depict a storm producing thunder and lightning that the Mariner simply observes from a distance, there are several aspects of this passage that clearly distinguish it as a supernatural occurrence. First, the “roaring wind” that the Mariner hears (which should be differentiated from “roaring thunder”) is loud enough to shake the ship’s sails. Although sound can move physical objects in space, the volume of such a sound requires a degree of amplification not technologically available in Coleridge’s time. That is not to say that Coleridge was unaware of sound’s ability to physically impact inanimate objects, for he was intimately aware of Newton’s hypotheses concerning the physical nature of sound’s vibration through the atmosphere, but rather to say that Coleridge intentionally exaggerated sound’s potential in this passage to give it supernatural implications. Furthermore, the order in which these events occur is contrary to the natural order of storms. Coleridge has the sound precede the strange lights flashing through the atmosphere, whereas in nature, lightning always precedes thunder. Despite the natural incongruity in this passage, the strange sound and lights do seem to be intimately connected, and one can see a parallel between their relationship and synesthetic phenomena (sound producing visual sensation, for example). Coleridge is not, however, using the synesthetic reaction of light to sound in order to explain the workings of the

natural world, but rather in an attempt to explain the metaphysical nature of the “one life.”

Coleridge stresses both the relationship between sound and light and the supernatural nature of this scene by following these two stanzas with three stanzas that mimic the alternation between sound and light:

The coming wind did roar more loud,
And the sails did sigh like sedge;
And the rain poured down from one black cloud;
The Moon was at its edge.

The thick black cloud was cleft, and still
The Moon was at its side:
Like waters shot from some high crag,
The lightning fell with never a jag,
A river steep and wide.

The loud wind never reached the ship,
Yet now the ship moved on!
Beneath the lightning and the Moon,
The dead men gave a groan. (ll. 322-34)

In these stanzas, Coleridge maintains a pattern of light responding to sound, which, as I noted above, is the opposite of the pattern found in nature. Furthermore, the manifestation of this sound and light is unlike any manifestations of these qualities found

in nature: a sound capable of propelling a ship is not a sound that belongs to the natural world, and lightning that descends straight to the earth like a waterfall “steep and wide” is not the natural result of a thunderstorm. These occurrences are thoroughly supernatural in nature, yet they parallel the phenomena that the poet experiences in the “Conversation” poems. In both cases, the spirit manifests itself in nature through the interplay of light and sound (the moonlight affects the nightingales’ song in “The Nightingale,” for example), and animates the world through its activity. Whereas the animation in the “Conversation” poems is relatively subtle (the breeze stirring through a tree’s branches; a bird’s song; the stirring of a person’s imagination), the animation in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is blatant and outrageous: under the influence of a supernatural mix of light and sound, the dead begin to move.

Despite the supernatural agencies at play in the previous stanzas, they are still connected to some degree to the natural world, suggesting that the supernatural can only exist in the natural. However, Coleridge includes two important passages in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” that deal with subjects of an explicitly metaphysical nature: angelic spirits. These spirits are responsible for the re-animation of the Mariner’s dead crew; and, like the animating lights and sounds in the previous examples, Coleridge describes these spirits with imagery that suggests a synesthetic attraction between light and sound. In the first passage, Coleridge writes:

‘Twas not those souls that fled in pain,
Which to their corpses came again,
But a troop of spirits blest:

For when it dawned – they dropped their arms,
 And clustered round the mast;
 Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,
 And from their bodies passed.

Around, around flew each sweet sound.
 Then darted to the Sun;
 Slowly the sounds came back again,
 Now mixed, now one by one. (ll. 351-361)

Coleridge describes these “angelic spirits” as being pure sound; there is no physical quality beyond that of auditory sensation. Yet Coleridge describes them in terms that seem to suggest a visual awareness of the sound: “Around, around flew each sweet sound. / Then darted to the sun.” These lines echo those that describe sound in “The Eolian Harp”: “Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers, / Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise, / Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!” (ll. 23-25). In both passages, sound flies through the air like a bird, and both are connected to light; the “Melodies” in “The Eolian Harp” are analogous to colorful birds from sunny, tropical environments, while the “Sweet sounds” in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” are entities naturally attracted to the sun. But whereas Coleridge describes sound in visually explicit terms in “The Eolian Harp,” his description in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” only suggests that sound has visual qualities. Still, the question must be asked, how could the Mariner have known that each sound flew “Around, around . . . / Then darted to the Sun” unless he had seen them perform such an action? It is clear in this

passage that Coleridge is describing metaphysical spirits using visually suggestive auditory images.

Near the conclusion of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’s” sixth part, Coleridge returns to his description of metaphysical beings, but with a decidedly different approach.

Rather than using auditory imagery to describe the spirit realm, he shifts to strong visual imagery (specifically light imagery) to describe what he had previously established as pure sound:

I turned my eyes upon the deck –

Oh! Christ! what saw I there!

Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,

And, by the holy rood!

A man all light, a seraph-man,

On every corse there stood.

This seraph-band, each waved his hand:

It was a heavenly sight!

They stood as signals to the land,

Each one a lovely light;

This seraph-band, each waved his hand,

No voice did they impart –

No voice; but oh! The silence sank

Like music on my heart. (ll. 490-504)

What was previously described as “Sweet sounds” is now described as “a lovely light” and “a man all light.” And again, as in the previous examples in which Coleridge used visually suggestive sound to describe spirits, he uses light that functions like music. After repeating that “seraph-band” has “No voice” in lines 502 and 503, Coleridge acknowledges that light, even physically silent light, has the power to act “Like music on [the] heart.” Although auditory music belongs to sound, music is the mode of communication that Coleridge decides to use when describing the way that spiritual light acts on the human heart.

By acknowledging that the same spirits consist of two distinct phenomena – light and sound – Coleridge asserts that spirits consist quite literally of light and sound synthesized into one nature. By having the angelic host embody both light and sound in equal measure, Coleridge assigns auditory and visual sensations a common source – the metaphysical, spiritual world. In fact, in both passages, Coleridge casts an ideal shadow over the physical, sensual world: when describing the spirits as sound, he writes, “And now it is an angel’s song, / That makes the Heavens be mute” (ll. 369-370); when describing the seraphs as “all light,” he writes, “This seraph-band, each waved his hand: / It was a heavenly sight” (ll. 496-97). Pure light and pure sound synthesized into one metaphysical sensation belongs to the ideal – the heavenly realm of existence from which the “one life” moves, and to which man’s imagination can elevate him. Synesthesia, therefore, is not simply the natural result of the movement of the “one life” through nature, but a fundamental quality of the ideal world.

Without an adequate understanding of the relationship between Boehme, Newton, synesthesia and Coleridge's "one life" theory, this interpretation of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" would not be possible. It is only by grasping the relationship among these men and their ideas that we can maintain a consistent interpretation of the important role of the "one life" in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Boehme, Newton, and Coleridge all agree that the propagation of one natural phenomenon by another is evidence of a single force moving throughout nature.⁵ It is fitting, therefore, that Coleridge would compose a poem that attempts to examine the physical nature of this metaphysical force and to exemplify the spiritual danger of being out of rhythm with it. Although man may be able to live apart from nature, he will be living a "Life-in-Death," and although he may secure some degree of wisdom through his spiritually isolated life, he will permanently lack the *joy* that comes only through communion with the movement of the "one life" through nature.

5

See Newton's theories regarding the influence of light, sound, and gravity on man's perception of tone and color in *Opticks*, Boehme's account of the phenomenological evidence of the "*Salitter*" and "*Mercurius*" in *Aurora*; and the Coleridge poems cited in this thesis.

IV. "Joy Is the Sweet Voice, Joy the Luminous Cloud"

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, physical nature (natural man and his physical surrounding) is of central importance to Coleridge's work. It is necessary, however, to understand that Coleridge did not simply value natural qualities based on their own merits, but believed that man can perceive elements of the divine through his observation of the natural world. Much of his thinking – philosophical, religious, and poetic – relies on this belief to maintain its shape, its coherence. That is not to say that Coleridge believed nature contained, in itself, elements of the divine, for he understood that it is only through the synesthetic reconstruction of the natural world that man is able to recognize the divine through natural elements, just as one recognizes meaning through symbols (a symbol allows access to meaning, but is not the meaning itself). Because of this approach to the natural world, considering it a window of sorts through which he could perceive both his inner nature and the nature of God, Coleridge often places nature at the center of his poetry. Nature itself, however, has no value unless it is imaginatively interpreted by man; only after the natural world is synthesized through the imagination is it able to speak the divine language that Coleridge hoped to diffuse throughout his poetry.

Although Coleridge pursued an understanding of the divine by examining the various qualities of the natural world, he was never satisfied with what he perceived in nature, but was driven by the insatiable desire to unify what he perceived in the outer

world with what he *felt* within himself. He was extremely sensitive to the divisions between body and spirit, and he constantly sought ways to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable conditions. Coleridge was motivated by a pressing need to *feel* rather than to simply observe his surroundings, and he struggled throughout his life to identify a common source of physical and emotional states. As James Engell notes in *The Creative Imagination*, “Coleridge wants to infuse the scenes and movements of nature with passions and sensation, with motives and emotions felt in the psyche” (348). In essence, Coleridge wants to identify qualities of his spiritual and emotional self in the objective natural world, to “effect a balance between the forces within and without” (Miller 95).

Although Coleridge often experienced heightened emotional states through communion with nature, he attributed these emotional reactions to the imaginative reshaping of his perceptions into ideal wholes rather than to the inherent qualities of the natural elements themselves. In fact, Coleridge did not believe that natural forms have true value until they are shaped by one’s feelings, an emotional response inseparably tied to the imagination. It was his desire to establish a

union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations (*BL*, I, 80)

that ultimately forced Coleridge to reject the materialist notions of his day – theories hypothesizing that nature vitally exists as its own ground. Instead, Coleridge insisted that nature is essentially dead without the animating power of *spirit*: an immaterial force that

is most powerfully perceived through emotion, or “feeling.” It is only through establishing a balance between physical perception and spiritual intuition that nature is infused with vitality and life. Without such a balance, one will be unable to perceive the world’s ideal potential. The results of such spiritual blindness, as in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” is “Life-in-Death” – the lonely, joyless interaction with a grotesque world. But to infuse the natural world with “feeling” is to infuse it with virtuous “meaning.” In fact, Coleridge goes so far as to assert that “The great business of real unostentatious Virtue is . . . to establish a concord and unity betwixt all parts of our nature, to give a Feeling and a Passion to our purer Intellect, and to intellectualize our feelings and passions” (*CN*, II, 2344). In order to fully understand Coleridge’s relationship with nature, we must acknowledge that he believed a consideration of the natural world’s qualities for their own sake (intellectual observation) is an inadequate approach to understanding nature that will ultimately yield insignificant results. It is only through the synthesis of “feeling” and “intellect” that man can have a meaningful relationship with the natural world.

Coleridge’s determination “to establish a concord and unity betwixt all parts of our nature” consumed much of his intellectual and creative efforts, and this determination culminated in the development of his “dynamic philosophy.” Coleridge’s “dynamic philosophy” is an all-encompassing approach to the world that attempts to unify the natural with the spiritual and, through this unity, to stimulate mankind’s awareness of the spiritual meaning that is veiled by the natural world. Although Coleridge’s “dynamic philosophy” is largely fragmented, disorganized, and – ironically – incomplete, it is of central importance to our understanding of his poetry because his impulse to unify what

he perceived in the natural world with his internal emotional states is one of his fundamental poetic pursuits. In his introduction to the *Biographia Literaria*, Engell acknowledges the central role that Coleridge's fascination with unity played in his thinking: "However incomplete we may regard his effort to find an all-embracing philosophical or theological framework to express it, the ideal of unity that haunted him was not a matter of mere theory but a living, formative instinct constantly awake to connections" (*BL*, intro., cxiv). Coleridge's definition of the imagination emerges from this "formative instinct" and provides him with the means of understanding man's potential to recognize and to unify the myriad diversities in the natural world. By diffusing and reshaping one's perception of the world's diverse elements into a single, synesthetic, divine whole, the imagination mimics the divine act of creation and, through communion with the "one life" in the process of this act, allows man to pass through the natural world and into the ideal. However, without the intercession of man's imagination, the world will remain divided and essentially dead – meaningless, nonsensical, lacking the power to excite one's emotions.

After establishing that the "primary IMAGINATION" essentially mimics the movement of the "one life" through nature, thus establishing a creative relationship between God and man that results in an intuitive awareness of the ideal, Coleridge defines what he terms the "secondary" imagination:

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 only differing 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. (*BL*, I, 304)

As can be seen here, Coleridge did not consider natural elements to be “*vital*” without the blending power of the human imagination, but considered them to be “essentially fixed and dead.” This phrase is especially relevant to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” considering the static condition of the Mariner’s “Life-in-Death.” However, despite nature’s inherent lack of vitality, the imagination does rely on the natural world to provide the materials through which, after an imaginative re-shaping, one can behold a unified, ideal world. Coleridge understood that he must combine his internal powers of imagination with external elements in order to produce a philosophical mode of thinking that could account for man’s total experience – physical, emotional, and spiritual – as one complex involved act. In his introduction to the *Biographia*, Engell observes:

[Coleridge’s] total and undivided philosophy assumed, even demanded, a power to resolve the dialectic between mind and nature. This “synthetic and magical power” is inevitably the imagination, the highest degree of which is the “poetic.” Imagination belongs neither to the purely subjective nor to the purely objective, neither to the ideal nor the real, to the spiritual or the concrete. Reconciling and harmonizing these opposites, it partakes of both. Coleridge designates it as a force or power, an energy that transforms and blends idea and image, thought and thing. It connects external nature to the acts of reflection performed by the inner life of the self-conscious mind. (lxxxix)

Coleridge desires to establish not only a unity among natural elements, but also a unity between the material world and man's immaterial spiritual nature. Through this larger unity, Coleridge believed that man could join the "one life" in a dynamic relationship with nature, a relationship that has the potential to vitally restore a fundamentally "fixed and dead" world to its ideal state.

Coleridge's "dynamic philosophy" relies, in large part, on his metaphysical understanding of the spiritual world in order to justify its unifying principles. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Coleridge's philosophical theses often blended with his theological beliefs. This co-mingling of philosophy and theology was not merely a necessary condition of Coleridge's "dynamic philosophy," but its explicit aim:

In its very idea therefore as a systematic knowledge of our collective KNOWING, (*scientia scientiæ*) it involves the necessity of some one highest principle of knowing, as at once the source and the accompanying form in all particular acts of intellect and perception. This, it has been shown, can be found only in the act and evolution of self-consciousness. We are not investigating an absolute principium essendi [principle of *being*]; . . . but an absolute principium cognoscendi [principle of *knowing*]. The result of both the sciences [intuitive/metaphysical and perceptual/physical], or their equatorial point, would be the principle of a total and undivided philosophy. . . . In other words, philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become inclusive of philosophy. (*BL*, I, 282-83)

That Coleridge's "dynamic philosophy" includes theological influences is significant because it further illustrates the all-encompassing nature of his understanding of man's relationship with the natural world. Coleridge not only seeks to synthesize mind and matter, but he also attempts to synthesize the spiritual and the material. When considered in light of the theological influences contained within his "dynamic philosophy," the inner "feeling" that Coleridge insists we must diffuse throughout the natural world in order to re-vitalize it must be acknowledged as having spiritual, metaphysical implications.

Although much of his prose attempts to define and explain these metaphysical concepts, it is through his poetry that Coleridge most successfully demonstrates the unifying principles of his "dynamic philosophy." Part of the reason for this success is that poetry is more accessible than the other genres in which Coleridge worked. By appealing to the poetic imagination in order to express metaphysical ideas, the poet allows the reader to observe the synthesis of the actual. This approach is especially effective because the poetic imagination, as Engell notes,

stands between and connects – it provides the only true link between – the "primary" imagination, our outward perception, and the philosophic imagination, our inner intuition. It symbolizes them together in art, which is accessible to everyone's perception. The creative imagination of art becomes a completing power. It is synthetic in the highest sense. The synthesis of syntheses, it reconciles the products of perception with those of inner perception or intuition, consciousness with self-consciousness,

and the whole mind – on every level – with the whole of nature, a symbolic presence itself, the artwork of God. (*BL*, intro. xcv)

By unifying the poet's observations in nature and his inner intuitions, poetry can illustrate the result of an imaginative approach to the natural world. It is for this very reason that Coleridge values the role of poetry over scientific inquiry in explaining man's inner workings. Throughout his life, Coleridge maintained that "A great poet must be, implicite if not explicite, a profound metaphysician" (*CL*, II, 810). The poet is an individual who has the refined ability to gaze beyond what is apparent and to observe those transparent qualities in the world that remarkably stimulate one's emotional and spiritual conditions. "The poet," Coleridge claims,

brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of his faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative. . . . (*BL*, II, 15-17)

Coleridge values poetry as a mode of spiritual communication because he believes that the poet wields the metaphysical ability to unify the world's many differences into a single, concise image.

As is fitting for a writer who so clearly values the powers of poetry over those of any other form of communication, Coleridge presents the most accessible version of his

“dynamic philosophy” in one of his poems – “Dejection: An Ode.” As in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the poet laments the loss of spiritual contact with nature, and illustrates the inherent emptiness of a world unaffected by the imagination. Although “Dejection: An Ode” is a poem motivated by the desire to find answers to spiritual problems by turning to an observation of the natural world, Coleridge ultimately rejects nature as the source of spiritual truth. Early in the poem, he writes:

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
 Have I been gazing on the western sky,
 And its peculiar tint of yellow green;
 And still I gaze – and with how blank an eye!
 And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
 That give away their motion to the stars;
 Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
 Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
 Yon crescent Moon as fixed as if it grew
 In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
 I see them all so excellently fair,
 I see, not feel how beautiful they are! (ll. 27-38)

Coleridge goes to great length in these lines to describe the natural world in pleasing terms. The evening is “balmy and serene,” and he explicitly defines the natural elements as “excellently fair.” But despite its excellence, the natural world cannot remedy the poet’s troubled spiritual condition, a condition defined as static and empty. In the lines preceding this beautiful description of nature, Coleridge describes his emotional state:

And oh! that even now the gusts were swelling,
 And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
 Those sound which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
 And sent my soul abroad,
 Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
 Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
 A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
 Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
 In word, or sigh, or tear – (ll. 15-24)

The poet's central concern at this point is to find a cure for the grief that has paralyzed his life. It is clear from these lines that he looks to the natural world for relief from his sorrow, and that there was a time when interaction with nature would have stirred his soul from its current "unimpassioned" state. But his focus is misdirected, for nature itself does not contain the power to provoke spiritual life. In fact, Coleridge eventually acknowledges nature's inability to move man's spirit:

It were a vain endeavour,
 Though I should gaze forever
 On that green light that lingers in the west:
 I may not hope from outward forms to win
 The passion and the life, whose fountains are within. (ll. 42-46)

In these lines, Coleridge explicitly states that nature's outward forms do not, in themselves, contain the ability to move man's spirit and emotions. Simply observing nature will result in "Life-in-Death," for "all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (*BL*, I, 304); man must intuitively feel nature in his spirit if he hopes to commune with the spiritual life that moves through the natural world.

This notion that one "may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within" may seem to be at odds with Coleridge's other "Conversation" poems, works within which Coleridge establishes vivid and memorable connections between man's interaction with nature and his spiritual relationship with the "one life." But "Dejection" is not at all at odds with these other "Conversation" poems. It actually affirms man's relationship with the "one life" through nature. Coleridge is careful, however, to express the central importance of the synesthetic re-shaping of nature in this relationship. Immediately after denying that one's spiritual condition can be improved by observing nature, Coleridge writes:

Oh Lady! we receive but what we give,
 And in our life alone does nature live:
 Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!
 . . .
 Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth,
 A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
 Enveloping the Earth –
 And from the soul itself must there be sent
 A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,

Of all sweet sounds the life and element! (ll. 47-58)

Here, rather than claiming that human interaction with nature causes man's spirit to burst into activity, Coleridge insists that it is the human soul that provides the ground upon which nature can achieve vital spiritual importance. These lines are remarkably consistent with Coleridge's stated desire to establish a

union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations. (*BL*, I, 80)

But the degree to which nature can provide man with relief from spiritual woes depends on the degree to which man endows nature with this spiritual "*atmosphere*." When Coleridge writes, "Oh Lady! we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does nature live" (ll. 47-48), he is suggesting that the amount of imaginative effort we dedicate to our observation of the natural world will determine the degree to which the natural world will deliver spiritual aid to us in our time of need.

Coleridge proceeds to illustrate this "original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms" by composing a synesthetic definition of "Joy":

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me
What this strong music in the soul may be!
What, and wherein it doth exist,
This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,

This beautiful and beauty-making power.
 Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,
 Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
 Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
 Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
 Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower,
 A new Earth and new Heaven,
 Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud –
 Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud –
 We in ourselves rejoice!
 And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
 All melodies the echoes of that voice,
 All colours a suffusion from that light. (ll. 59-75)

In this passage, Coleridge clearly defines man's ability to envelop the natural world in an imaginative atmosphere that restores nature to its ideal state as being an inner, spiritual "Joy" belonging to the pure of heart. But like the angelic host in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," this "Joy" is described as consisting entirely of a relationship between light and sound. Coleridge uses light and sound interchangeably in describing this phenomena, as when he writes,

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me
 What this strong music in the soul may be!
 What, and wherein it doth exist,
 This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,

This beautiful and beauty-making power. (ll. 59-63)

Coleridge structures these lines in such a way as to create a certain degree of ambiguity in the pronoun “it” in line sixty-one. “It” can refer back to “this strong music in the soul,” but Coleridge then proceeds to describe “it” as “light, this glory, this fair luminous mist.”

This ambiguity allows the pronoun “it” to refer to both “music” and “light,” and suggests that “it” may in fact be both “music” *and* “light.” He emphasizes this synesthetic unification of light and sound when he specifies that “Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud” (l. 71). Here again, Coleridge describes the essence of a single phenomenon as consisting of two disparate elements: light and sound. When considered beside line 71, the ambiguity of the pronoun “it” gains a degree of stability that is not initially evident. If “Joy” is both “the sweet voice” and “the luminous cloud,” then logically “it” does refer to both “this strong music” and “This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist.”

Coleridge is also careful to explain that this “Joy” from which “flows all that charms or ear or sight, / All melodies the echoes of that voice, / All colours a suffusion from that light” is the product of man’s “shaping spirit of imagination”:

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
 This joy within me dallied with distress,
 And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
 Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
 For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
 And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
 But now afflictions bow me down to earth:

Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth,
 But oh! each visitation
 Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
 My shaping spirit of imagination. (ll. 76-86)

As in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the poet suffers the consequences of a world devoid of imaginative life. His "shaping spirit of imagination" is suspended, and its suspension prohibits him from feeling the movement of the "one life" through nature. He is forced into a position of empirical observation rather than spiritual intuition, and the result is a world that lacks the sensual unity inherent in the imaginative "Joy" that can provoke the poet's spirit to "move and live" (l. 20).

Coleridge is careful in his selection of the word "Joy" to describe the workings of the imagination. In fact, "joy" and "joyance" are words that he uses to describe the imagination and the movement of the "one life" through nature in many of his poems. For example, after rejecting the Fancy as an inadequate mode of re-creating our perceptions in "The Nightingale," Coleridge writes:

My friend, and thou, our Sister! we have learnt
 A different lore: we may not thus profane
 Nature's sweet voices, always full of love
 And joyance! . . . (ll. 40-44)

Likewise, in "The Eolian Harp," Coleridge describes the "one life" in strikingly similar terms:

O the one life within us and abroad,
 Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,

A light and sound, a sound-like power in light

Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where – (ll. 26-29)

And again, in “Fears in Solitude,” the word “joy” appears in connection with the spiritual movement of the “one life” and its human parallel, the imagination:

Here he might lie on fern or withered heath,

While from the singing-lark (that sings unseen

The minstrelsy that solitude loves best),

And from the sun, and from the breezy air,

Sweet influences tremble o’er his frame;

And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,

Made up a meditative joy, and found

Religious meanings in the forms of nature! (ll. 17-24)

Finally, in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the absence of “Joy” serves as the poem’s central conflict. The Mariner’s separation from the “one life” is as “sad as sad could be” (l. 108), and the Mariner’s tale of imaginative decay and isolation from positive spiritual life has the power to make one “A sadder and a wiser man” (l. 628). Although the Mariner’s tale may educate, its details speak of a joyless world where, as in “Dejection: An Ode,” man is detached from his “shaping spirit of imagination.” All of these important poems bear evidence of Coleridge’s concern with the relationship among man’s imagination, the “one life,” and the sensual inter-penetration of light and sound, and Coleridge consistently uses the words “joy” and “joyance” to describe this significant, spiritual relationship.

Having established that there is a definitive connection between synesthesia, the “one life,” man’s imagination, and “Joy,” it is important to determine how this “sweet voice” and “luminous cloud” (“Joy”) that emerges from within man affects our relationship with the natural world. Coleridge explains in “Dejection: An Ode” that

Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower,
A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud – (ll. 67-70)

“Joy,” or one’s “shaping spirit of the imagination,” which Coleridge characterizes as the synthesis of light and sound, weds man to nature, and as wedding gift gives “A new Earth and new Heaven.” Again, this poetic description of the imagination’s highest function is compatible with Coleridge’s early definition of the imagination in the *Biographia*, where he praises the imagination’s “original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations” (I, 80). By steeping the natural world in imaginative “Joy,” one can produce “A new Earth and new Heaven” – “forms, incidents, and situations” that reflect “the depth and height of the ideal world.

Restoring nature to its ideal state was of central importance to Coleridge’s “dynamic philosophy.” He believed that the human mind contained echoes of the divine, and that the greatest of human achievements were those works that reintroduced humanity to the ideal world. Rather than being the work of scientists, politicians, or intellectuals, Coleridge believed that this important work was the duty of poets. As I noted in Chapter Two, Coleridge believed it would take the souls of five hundred Newtons, one of the

mankind's most brilliant scientific minds, to make the soul of one Shakespeare, one of the world's most imaginative minds. The reason for Coleridge's high esteem for poetry is that poetry's immediate goal is beauty rather than truth, and he believed that the imaginative qualities of beauty had the power to reveal truth to a degree that far surpassed the power of philosophy or science. In *The Creative Imagination*, Engell argues:

In poetry or art, it is the harmonious fusion of many elements into one that Coleridge calls beauty. Art, differing from philosophy in having pleasure, not truth, as its prime or immediate object, affords this pleasure by the presence of beauty. In a fallen world, truth is not identical with beauty. The concept of truth frequently implies what should be rather than what is. Moreover, it is often too general and abstract, or ineffable, and art cannot seize on it as a first goal. Instead, truth is the ultimate end of art. Art presents truth at one remove by the use of harmonious symbols and the beauty these compose. (357)

To Coleridge, beauty and unity were synonymous. To conceive of nature's many diversities as part of one vast whole, an undivided organic universe – both physical and spiritual – was to conceive of a fundamentally beautiful world: "A new Earth and new Heaven."

Coleridge found poetry to be the most effective mode of communicating the imaginative potential to transform fallen nature into an ideal, beautiful world because poetry often includes complex symbolism and imagery that unify nature's many disparate elements. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this thesis, one of Coleridge's central techniques in illustrating this unifying potential is synesthesia. Some of these synesthetic

passages are concrete and specific: Coleridge's famous "one life" passage in "The Eolian Harp," for example, where he explicitly describes the "one life" as being "A light in sound, a sound-like power in light" (l. 28); his description of "Joy" in "Dejection: An Ode," where he writes, "Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud" (l. 71). Some of Coleridge's synesthetic passages, however, are highly suggestive rather than explicit: for example, the nightingales' reaction to the moonlight in "The Nightingale"; or the attraction of the angelic host to the sun, and the musical effect of the "man all light, a seraph-man," on the Mariner's heart in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (l. 494). But the suggestive can often act just as powerfully as the explicit. Engell observes that Coleridge often relied on "the concept of 'suggestiveness', through which, in the half-declared, the imagination is induced to fill out the picture (rather than to receive it passively in elaborate detail, an act that also involves an interplay of the senses: e.g., the excitement of the sense of sight through sound, or *vice versa*" (*BL*, intro., cxi). Whether suggested or explicitly illustrated, synesthesia is one of Coleridge's central poetic techniques in demonstrating the amalgamating nature of the human imagination. Considering the value that Coleridge places on poetry in the development of his philosophical/religious thoughts, synesthesia should be placed at the center of our attempt to understand the mind of this unique and extraordinary man.

Coleridge attempts to understand man's relation with both nature and God by attempting to understand the human mind. His desire to understand the nature of his mind led him through a complex labyrinth of studies that included some of the most important and difficult works of science, philosophy, theology, and metaphysics. Through intense study of these works and through meditation on his personal

experiences, Coleridge formulated a system of thought that he hoped would restore a fragmented world to its unified state. He hoped to synthesize irreconcilable opposites into ideal wholes, and through this process to unify man with the divine spirit. Poetry served as his most effective instrument in this attempt at universal reconstruction, and synesthesia functioned as one of his central poetic techniques. Because of its role in his poetry and its very unifying nature, synesthesia must be regarded as a central phenomenon in the study of Coleridge's life and work, for without the possibility of the synthesis of nature's many disparate elements, the foundation of Coleridge's philosophical, religious, and artistic aspirations can be discounted as impossible ramblings of a confused and profoundly misdirected man. Coleridge is not confused or misdirected, but unique in his ability to sense the overriding unity in the natural world. Understanding his interest in and use of synesthesia permits us a peculiarly sharp method of understanding Coleridge's intensely complex notions and their illustration throughout his poetic works.

CONCLUSION

Since Coleridge's time, we have come to a more sophisticated understanding of why and how synesthesia is perceived. Although synesthesia has interested mankind for millennia, it was not until the twentieth century that synesthesia was recognized as a distinct neurological phenomenon. Today, with the help of new technologies such as the PET and CAT scans, scientists have been able to determine that synesthesia is a physical condition with physical causes. Scientists recognize that the divisions between our senses are not as sharp as we have traditionally believed them to be, and perceiving one sensation can immediately affect the perception of a separate sensation. For example, researchers have managed to induce certain tastes by changing the temperature of certain areas of the tongue. For some of those participating in these experiments, "warming the front of the tongue to temperatures between 20 and 35°C created a mild but clear sweet sensation. Cooling the same area resulted in the perception of a sour or salty taste" (Harrison 3). In this example, the exposure to a specific tactile sensation causes the participants to experience a distinct taste; the division between taste and touch is not as definite as we once assumed.

Synesthesia is most often experienced as "color hearing" (seeing colors that correspond to sounds), but there is a wide variety of recorded synesthetic experiences. For example, synesthesia can also be experienced as sound producing taste, taste

producing color, color producing taste and smell (both pleasant and repulsive), physical pain producing color, and smell producing shape. An example of the latter is “AJ,” a synesthete who describes the odor of pizza as a “black flex arrow from top,” cherry as a “wave shape,” pine as an “upward moving,” and wintergreen as having “ragged edges” (Harrison 171). Even among those who profess to experiencing a single type of synesthesia, there is a remarkable variety of different ways that they perceive it. In fact, scientists argue that no two synesthetes experience their synesthesia in the same way. For example, participants in a “color hearing” experiment claim to see different colors when hearing the same note. When hearing C major, participant A sees “red” while participant B sees “white”; when hearing D major, both participants see “yellow”; when exposed to E major, participant A sees “bluish-white” while participant B sees “sparkling sapphire” (Harrison 123). Although there are varying degrees of synesthetic experience, synesthesia is relatively common and is thought to be hereditary.⁶ These enlightening and exciting neurological findings allow doctors and scientists to understand the nature of human perception to a degree that far surpasses that of centuries past.

But how does our understanding of synesthesia as a neurological condition influence our understanding of Coleridge’s thought and work? Should we accept Coleridge’s distinction between the fancy and imagination, knowing full well that the unifying aspect of the imagination that he so passionately defended as belonging to one’s free will actually *is* mechanical, as Hartley suggested? Does our understanding of

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For detailed analyses of synesthesia as a neurological condition, see Etzel Cardeña, *et al.*, eds., *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* and John Harrison’s *Synesthesia: The Strangest Thing*.

Coleridge's "one life" theory change if we accept the position that the "imaginative" unification of our perceptions belongs to unusual neurological conditions rather than spiritual ones? And what of the poems? Do their synesthetic images and associations point to a fundamental weakness in Coleridge's understanding of man's interaction with the natural and spiritual world, or do they further illustrate Coleridge's inventive and poetic genius? Finally, considering the number of strong synesthetic descriptions throughout Coleridge's poetry, should he be investigated as a possible synesthete? These are questions to be answered in another study. What is certain now is that our understanding of synesthesia as a physical condition of the brain should incite us to re-examine Coleridge's writings, both philosophical and poetic, with fresh, informed, and curious minds.

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