2 Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?

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I INTRODUCTION

Coleridge’s theory of imagination has all too frequently been misunderstood throughout its history, with a few notable exceptions. Both recent critical works and, lamentably, the new edition of the Biographia Literaria perpetuate the past misunderstandings, in spite of the well-charted pitfalls of previous interpreters. The problem arises from a lack of attention to the import of Coleridge’s numerous, if scattered, statements related to the theory, combined with a tendency to undervalue the significance of the philosophical context of his theory, as well as its origins, inspiration and aims. The theory of imagination lies at the heart of Coleridge’s aesthetic and philosophical projects, situating Coleridge clearly in relation to rationalism, empiricism and idealism. For it cuts through many of the pseudo-problems of philosophy, based as they were upon unexamined assumptions, often couched in terms of dualities or reified entities inherited from earlier philosophy. A closer examination of the intellectual context within which Coleridge was formulating his discoveries and answers to traditional problems helps us to clarify his theory and its contribution to an understanding of processes of perception and knowledge.

Surprisingly, misinterpreters of the theory, as in the new Biographia edition, suggest that the primary–secondary imagination distinction is an analogy of the copy–imitation distinction. The primary imagination is unconsciously confused with the
memory and the fancy in these accounts, which say that primary imagination merely repeats and copies what already exists in nature or is created by other individuals. Originality, or ‘true imitation’, is denied to the primary imagination; yet, curiously, primary and secondary imagination are said to be of one kind. A moment’s reflection reveals the contradiction in such an account: primary imagination cannot merely repeat and copy; it is not memory or fancy with a glorified title. Imagination, primary or secondary, is in Coleridge’s words the ‘very power of growth and production’; it is originality par excellence. An unexamined assumption leads to such mistaken accounts – namely, that the primary imagination is supplied from without with its ‘raw material’, which it receives and then presents to the secondary imagination to refashion. I. A. Richards sought to expose this assumption in Coleridge and Imagination, but without making explicit the context of the theory that would have given his account more force and clarity. As Richards makes clear, the primary imagination is not even in a modified sense a vis receptiva; rather primary imagination originates, creates, unifies, and synthesises. Coleridge offered us in the concept of primary imagination an account of perception which completely rejects the passive accounts of mind as a repeater or copier of an already or even partially constituted objectively conceived world of real or external objects independent of perception and imagination. Perception itself, like secondary imagination or artistic creativity, is for Coleridge originative and constitutive. If by ‘perception’ we mean an even partially passive receptivity, a repeating or copying of an objective world, then for Coleridge such ‘perception’ simply does not exist. This is not, however, to say that Coleridge espoused either an idealist position or any theory of knowledge that sets the knower, subject or observer up over against a world of objects, and then describes knowledge as a transcript of the real nature of that world. On the contrary, Coleridge’s efforts to resolve such dualities and emphasise that all experience, including knowledge experience, occurs within a context inclusive of all dualities, is a rejection of the basic epistemological assumptions of rationalism, empiricism and idealism alike. Moreover, this ‘context’ is not reified into a fixed, determined, static entity, nor is it a metaphysical ‘presence’. Rather, it is a means of insisting upon the interactive, non-subjective nature of experience, such that ‘reality’ is understood to reside neither in an absolute