Coleridge yearned to believe in the oneness of all things. However this aspiration is always in tension with a delight in multiplicity. ‘Each man will universalize his notions, & yet each is variously finite. To reconcile therefore is truly the work of the Inspired! This is the true Atonement -/ i.e. to reconcile the struggles of the infinitely various Finite with the Permanent’ (CN, 2, 2208). From the viewpoint of one who demands logical clarity Coleridge’s arbitrations between the one and the many may sometimes seem to be incoherence. But, if that is so, incoherence becomes, for Coleridge, a necessary move in a negotiation of meaning, simultaneously offering apparently contradictory theses as a theoretical physicist might, with the reservation that there must be a tertium aliquid.

Coleridge was attracted by Spinoza’s monism. He gives as the simplest possible summary of Spinoza’s view of God and Nature:

\[ W - G = 0; \text{i.e. the World without God is an impossible Idea.} \]
\[ G - W = 0; \text{i.e. God without the World is ditto.} \]

\( TT, 1, 72 \)

Thus, like Wordsworth, Coleridge asserted that ‘Every Thing has a Life of it’s own, & that we are all one Life’ (Letters, 2, 864). After Coleridge visited Germany and began to immerse himself in German Romantic philosophy he decided that Spinoza’s conclusions betrayed as much about the mind’s imperfections as they did about the wholeness of the universe: ‘a cracked Looking-glass – such is man’s mind – Spinoza’ (CN, 1, 705). In Biographia Literaria, decades later, Coleridge claims to remember an ambiguity in his early attitudes: ‘For a very long time indeed I could not reconcile personality with infinity; and my head
was with Spinoza, though my whole heart remained with Paul and John’ (*BL*, 1, 201).

Coleridge asserts elsewhere that the conviction of an ideal unity was his natural predilection from childhood. The failure of the search for that ideal unity is at the very least a sense of fragmentation and isolation. Beyond that failure there is a condition that is even more terrifying, a fusion of contradictions expressed ironically, but fearfully, in *Limbo*, beyond that of the ‘blank Naught-at-all’: ‘Hell knows a Fear far worse, / A Fear – a future State; - ’tis positive Negation!’ (*PW*, 2, 478, 37–8).

If this is so one of the tasks of art is to reconcile the many with the one. Coleridge praised Rubens for painting in such a way as to compose humble and ordinary fragments into the grand singularity of the Universe (see, for example, Figure 2.1):

Rubens does not take for his subjects grand or novel conformations of objects; he has, you see, no precipices, no forests, no frowning castles &c—nothing that a poet would take at all times, and a painter take in these times! No! he takes little ponds, old tumble-down cottages— that ruinous chateau — two or three peasants – a hay-rick and such humble images, which looked at in themselves and by themselves convey no pleasure and excite no surprise; but he – and he Peter Paul Rubens alone – handles these every-day ingredients of all common landscapes, as they are handled in nature – he throws them into a vast and magnificent whole, consisting of Heaven and Earth and all things therein. He extracts the latent poetry out of these common objects.... In other landscape painters the scene is confined and as it were imprisoned; in Rubens the landscape dies a natural death; it fades away into the apparent infinity of space.

(*TT*, 1, 228)

The aesthetic impulse may seem to transform manifold sensuously perceived objects into a formal, intellectual unity, at least in art. In actual experience there may be insurmountable difficulties such as those Coleridge expressed on first seeing the Harz mountains: ‘almost a Sea of huge motionless waves/ too multiform for Painting, too multiform even for the Imagination to remember them/ yea, my very sight seemed incapable by the novelty & Complexity of the Scene’ (*Letters*, 1, 513).

The aesthetics of this is interesting from the neuroscientific point of view, giving some indication of the nature of that constant traffic between (constructed? imagined? willed?) cognition of a unitary whole and a perception of the multiplicity of the parts. Global and local visual