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‘The Whole Soul of Man’

(i) The conscious will and dream consciousness

Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* has dominated the way we think about Coleridge, his poetry and his imagination for far too long. Coleridge himself disowned it towards the end of his life.

All that metaphysical disquisition at the end of the first volume of the Biographia Literaria is unformed and immature; it contains the fragments of the truth, but it is not full, nor thought out. It is wonderful to myself to think, how infinitely more profound my views now are, and yet how much clearer they are. The circle is completing; the idea is coming round to, and to be, the common sense.

*(TT, 1, 492)*

*Biographia Literaria* is an attempt to understand the nature of poetic composition written many years after the author composed the poetry for which he is most remembered. By the time he wrote it Coleridge had changed in fundamental ways and this is apparent in his creative work as well as his critical and philosophical writings. In 1815–16, when he was writing *Biographia*, he was experimenting with philosophical influences which he soon rejected. Also by this time he had made important changes to the text of *The Ancient Mariner* and several other poems and there is evidence that in doing so had revised not only the poems, but also his understanding of what a poem should be and do. However, there is a great deal in *Biographia Literaria* which is acute and revelatory about the nature of poetry and the processes of poetical composition.
These revisions raise the whole question of intention. Coleridge’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ refers to the way that, for instance, in watching, say, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, we may deliberately modify or suspend the activities of the rational mind (perhaps when certain functions of the frontal lobes are relatively less active). This echoes Coleridge’s profound interest in the related but involuntary alteration of consciousness in dream-states, where free will may be suspended and we experience and accept without demur actions and events which the conscious mind would reject as absurd. In the Notebooks he invents the phrase ‘dreamatis personae’ (*CN*, 5, 182; 5, 195) to refer to one aspect of this process. These states of consciousness – the spectator’s yielding to dramatic illusions and the dreamer’s helpless acceptance of the delusion of dreams – are only two aspects of a very complex series of types of parenthetic belief. We also have those moments when Keats’s ‘Negative Capability’ takes over the creative process, when the way the poet writes is given energy and direction by forces which he accepts but does not pretend to understand, a formulation which might have been suggested by Coleridge himself: ‘That *illusion*, contradistinguished from *delusion*, that *negative* faith, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own force, without either denial or affirmation of their real existence by the judgement’ (*BL*, 2, 133–4). Such moments may be thought of as relaxation or cessation of the will but, perhaps better, may be seen as permitting a changing geometry in the relative aspect of the will to the act, the intelligence to the effect, the motive to the argument.

It follows that in *Christabel*, or *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, or any work of the imagination which draws upon modes of thought, perception and feeling which approach closely to the dream state, the intention with which the writer or artist later declares he began may be almost irrelevant. We think, rather lazily, of works of art as demonstrations of a pre-formed and fully articulated idea. In Coleridge, as in many other imaginative writers, there may be an initial idea, but that may be overtaken by what appears to the artist himself as an unpredictable event – something uncanny and unexpected. Such events cannot be thought of simply as retreats from reason into irrationality. There is another mode of activity here, one which operates at a pre-linguistic level, shaping itself before the writer is conscious of the fact. The normal uses of the words *reason*, *activity* and *passivity* do not apply.

In Chapter VII of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge uses analogies drawn from physics and natural history to explore his insight into the deep