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**Coleridge's Failed Quest:  
The Anticlimax of Fancy/Imagination in  
*Biographia Literaria***

**Eugene L. Stelzig  
SUNY Geneseo**

He began anywhere: you put some question to him, made some suggestive observation: instead of answering this, or decidedly setting out towards answer of it, he would accumulate formidable apparatus, logical swim-bladders, transcendental life-preservers and other precautionary and vehicular gear, for setting out; perhaps did at last get underway, — but was swiftly solicited, turned aside by the glance of some radiant new game on this hand or that, into new courses; and ever into new, and before long into all the Universe, where it was uncertain what game you would catch, or whether any.

Carlyle, "Portraits of His Contemporaries"

I

T. S. Eliot's assertion in a 1956 lecture still represents the contemporary consensus: "the criticism of to-day ... may be said to be in direct descent from Coleridge."<sup>1</sup> Coleridge is the founding father of modern Anglo-American criticism, even if at times he did no more than introduce the currency of German idealism, sometimes passed off as his own, into the vaults of English thought. Indeed, could it be seriously argued that any concept at the back of modern criticism has been as important as Coleridge's imagination theory? And this brings me to the subject of my essay: if the famous conclusion of the first volume of the *Biographia* is a touchstone of modern criticism, the regularity with which it is anthologized demonstrates something about the reception of Coleridge's testament of his literary life. *Biographia Literaria* is known largely for a few scattered passages of practical criticism and for a number of brilliant but difficult definitions of a philosophical/aesthetic nature. Coleridge's method, or lack of it, in his literary quasi-autobiography encourages such an approach (he himself called it "so immethodical a miscellany"<sup>2</sup>) but the miscellaneous, excerpting approach signally distorts the true character of his essay. The context of questioning and uncertainty in which his thought-formulae are imbedded is overlooked, and the well-known phrases are made to function with a finality which the open-minded and ever-hesitant Coleridge may not have intended, and which, moreover, is not warranted by the overall tenor of the work. There is something paradoxical about such a treatment of a thinker one of whose basic aesthetic premises is "organic form." To dis sever parts of the *Biographia* is to deny in practice Coleridge's vitalist aesthetics: "a living body is of necessity an organized one, — and what is organiza-

tion but the connection of parts to a whole, so that each part is at once end and means."<sup>3</sup>

In the following pages I wish to re-embodiment the most famous and most frequently severed part, the fancy-imagination distinction, and to examine the relationship of part to whole which in Coleridge's own terms is tantamount to seeing the "organization" of the work for what it is. An open-minded reading of this work in terms of its overall structure must admit that it contains not only the highlights of impressive insight but also elements of the absurd. The author of *Biographia Literaria* is something of a literary prankster and escape artist: Coleridge on imagination has been taken too seriously by most modern scholars and critics.<sup>4</sup> Instead of radically over- or underestimating his true stature, we are starting to see the Inquiring Spirit in a truer perspective. From his earliest ventures in poetry and prose to the grand mirage of the Logosophia or grand synthesis that kept always receding just beyond the horizons of the possible during his final decade, the gap between promise and performance in Coleridge's life and works is so large that it makes him a unique figure among major English writers. Whatever unity the *Biographia Literaria* may have is not to be found in the execution of the work, which is pretentiously, albeit feebly, propped up from the start to collapse disastrously by the end of volume I. The deeper, Romantic coherence of the book lies in the conception only. The conception, indeed, is as magnificent as the execution is bungled. Like Hamlet, Coleridge here has that within which passes show. It does not see the light of day, although Coleridge makes a number of grandiloquent gestures in the attempt to deliver the goods he has promised — and promised, and promised. The author of the *Biographia* struts self-importantly to the center of the stage; he informs his audience that he has come to tell them all, but shortly before the climax of his presentation, he makes a clumsy exit. The conception behind Coleridge's discussion of imagination merges into infinite spaces, the performance can be bounded in a nutshell. As in the drama of Hamlet, whose character Coleridge understood more fully than any other, including his own, delay, postponement and anticlimax are the typical features of his mind and art.

## II

Coleridge dictated the *Biographia* between July and September

1815 as a preface to a new edition of his poems. It soon turned into an informal meditation on characteristic themes that can be summed up under the word, imagination, which is the central idea pervading the book. Volume I is meant to lead up to and culminate with a detailed philosophical presentation of a theory of imagination, and volume II is designed to ground the theory back in the actual, and the abstract in the concrete, through its close examination of Wordsworth's poetry: to Coleridge, Wordsworth is the chief modern poet whose works will give a local habitation and a name to that "plastic power" obscurely hymned in *Biographia Literaria*. Thus the two volumes are meant to complement, and in a sense, complete one another. Coleridge had been thinking about imagination for a decade and a half before his attempt to define it in the *Biographia*. The first mention of the fancy-imagination distinction occurs in a well-known letter of 1802: "Fancy, or the aggregating Faculty of the mind — not Imagination, or the modifying, and co-adunating Faculty."<sup>5</sup> Typically, Coleridge defers the exposition of one of his leading notions for so long that when he does get around to the task, it has become such a burden that his heart sinks under him, and he feels compelled to arm himself with much prefatory matter, only to suffer a decisive failure of nerve when the momentous encounter can no longer be postponed. What a trickster he can be in his peregrinations on the road to imagination! Certainly his introductory paragraph is not reliable but positively misleading as an indication of the "motives of the present work":

It has been my lot to have had my name introduced, both in conversation and in print, more frequently than I find it easy to explain, whether I consider the fewness, unimportance and limited circulation of my writings, or the retirement and distance in which I have lived, both from the literary and political world. Most often it has been connected with some charge which I could not acknowledge, or some principle which I had never entertained. Nevertheless, had I had no other motive or incitement, the reader would not have been troubled with this exculpation. What my additional purposes were will be seen in the following pages. It will be found that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally. I have used the narration chiefly for the purposes of giving continuity to the work, in part for the sake of miscellaneous reflections suggested to me by particular events; but still more as introductory to the statement of my principles in politics, religion and philosophy, and the application of the rules deduced from philosophical principles to poetry and criticism. But of the objects which I have proposed to myself, it was not the least important to effect, as far as possible, a settlement of the

long-continued controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction, and at the same time to define with utmost impartiality the real poetic character of the poet by whose writings this controversy was first kindled and has been since fuelled and fanned (*Biographia Literaria*, p. 1).

In view of the actual contents of the book, this introduction is a curious hodge-podge. After a note of exaggerated humility, the author suggests that he is going to attempt a defense of his life and works. But then he gives himself a blank check as far as other "purposes" are concerned. The effusion of authorial benevolence is followed with the claim that he is going to use an autobiographical format to give narrative continuity to his book. The psychogenetic method will allow him to suggest miscellaneous topics (again the blank check) as well as lead up to a statement of his principles in politics, religion, and philosophy. But where in the *Biographia* is there any such comprehensive statement? And can anyone claim in good conscience that he "deduced" from philosophical principles the "application of rules" to poetry and criticism? Coleridge has again confounded intention with achievement. Only the last sentence is valid as summary, for in the second volume he does produce a discussion of the "controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction," as well as what is in some respects still the best analysis of "the real poetic character of Wordsworth."

The inaccuracy of the opening, which claims at once too much and not enough, and which provides only a confused focus on the chapters that follow, may serve as an index of Coleridge's erratic procedure in the *Biographia* generally. His statement of "motives" fails in fact to mention his fundamental concern with the theory of imagination. This does not surface until Chapter IV, where it is acknowledged that Wordsworth's poetry first led Coleridge to those repeated meditations which paved the way for the fancy-imagination distinction. What first struck him so forcibly in Wordsworth's poetry "was the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed ...." (p. 48) Coleridge goes on to say that "repeated meditations" on "this excellence, which in all Mr. Wordsworth's writings is more or less predominant and which constitutes the character of his mind ... led me first to suspect ... that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general

belief, either two names with one meaning, or at furthest the lower and higher degree of one and the same power." (pp. 49-50)

Coleridge's "first and most important point" is his desire to "desynonymize ... two conceptions perfectly distinct [fancy-*imagination*] ... confused under one and the same word." Thus only in Chapter IV does he come around to the real subject of Volume I. Through the systematic discrimination of fancy from imagination "the theory of the fine arts and of poetry in particular could not ... but derive some additional and important light. It would in its immediate effects furnish a torch of guidance to the philosophical critic, and ultimately to the poet himself." (p. 51) With a peculiar blend of vanity and humility, Coleridge adds that "metaphysics and psychology have long been my hobbyhorse," and that "there was a time, certainly, in which I took some little credit to myself in the belief that I had been the first of my countrymen who had pointed out the diverse meaning of which the two terms were capable and analysed the faculties to which they should be appropriated." We are to appreciate that STC is an original thinker: he has already informed us that he got his basic insight from reading Wordsworth's poetry, but he wishes to make it plain that the fancy-*imagination* theory is not indebted more directly than that to the author of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

The explanation which Mr. Wordsworth has himself given will be found to differ from mine chiefly, perhaps, as our objects are different.... it was Mr. Wordsworth's purpose to consider the influences of fancy and imagination as they are manifested in poetry, and from the different effects to conclude their diversity in kind; while it is my object to investigate the seminal principle, and then from the kind to deduce the degree. My friend has drawn a masterly sketch of the branches with their *poetic* fruitage. I wish to add the trunk, and even the roots, as far as they lift themselves above the ground and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness (p. 52).

Clearly Coleridge intends to get to the bottom of this matter in a way that nobody has ever done before. And so, at the conclusion of Chapter IV he begins to gird up his loins for the encounter with Imagination. He winds up the chapter with a curious array of self-serving disclaimers, warnings, and equivocations (pp. 52-53), the upshot being that he has committed himself to "this labour" of formally expounding his theory. Like Wordsworth at the end of Book I of *The Prelude*, Coleridge has finally adumbrated his true subject. He is

big with its conception; he will give us the hard “deductions” that will either produce fundamental conviction or be capable of fundamental confutation. The road lies plain before him. Or does it?

### III

As the puzzled readers of *Biographia Literaria* can testify, it does not. With the first step the philosopher-poet takes toward his theory, he begins stepping away from it. Caught in an expository dilemma, he fails at first to recognize that he is approaching the subject from a tangent that will eventually get him side-tracked in a maze of his own myriad-mindedness. In Chapter V Coleridge recoils so that he may strike the better, but in subsequent chapters he keeps recoiling farther and farther, to the point that when he finally decides to take up his central argument “on the imagination” he is exhausted and out of striking distance — the recoil has become a rout. The chief impasse Coleridge finds himself in is that he feels compelled to acquaint his readers with the philosophical territory he has traversed on the road to imagination. He has already acknowledged Wordsworth’s poetry as a catalyst, but he has not yet mentioned David Hartley’s associational psychology, Coleridge’s reaction to which is the second major influence on the genesis of his theory. So at the beginning of Chapter V he proceeds to trace his philosophical debts, and in so doing loses sight of his primary objective and, like an overzealous historian, falls into the psychogenetic trap of regressive recapitulation. Once Coleridge has succumbed to this, his exposition of imagination is lost, at least for the present, because he cheers himself up with the illusion of finishing it — like “Christabel” and “Kubla Khan” — at some more auspicious time.

Coleridge could have accounted for the importance of his obligations to Hartley in a few pages, but instead he drifts off for three chapters on a tedious disquisition, beginning with “the law of association — Its history traced from Aristotle to Hartley.” This title is the beginning of the end: ostensibly projected as a bridge to his imagination theory, the discussion will turn into a catch-all. It is too bad for Coleridge and his readers that he succumbs to a Shandyan retrogression. Doubtless, his initial enchantment with and subsequent reaction against Hartley’s system is crucial to an understanding of the development of his concept of the imagination. His valid intention is to

demonstrate that associationist psychology is inapplicable to the higher reaches of the mind. In striving to trace the history of associationism from Aristotle to its authoritative modern version in Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749) that had enlisted the young Coleridge's enthusiastic allegiance, he is trying to undermine the radical empirical foundations of eighteenth-century English psychology that in Hartley's source-book accounted for all mental and emotional processes through the law of the association of ideas. Coleridge's eventual reaction against Hartleyan psychology helped him as much as his reading of Wordsworth's poetry in evolving his concept of the imagination because he came to perceive that associational psychology mistakes a part of the mind for the whole. The fancy-imagination distinction is founded on the insight that Hartley's mind-picture is reductive because applicable only to lower thought-processes, which may be adequately understood under the mode of fancy, "the aggregative and associative power." What Coleridge calls *fancy* English philosophers from Hobbes and Locke on up to the eighteenth-century psychologists had equated with imagination. Coleridge wished to desynonymize the words because the lower mode of fancy is not adequate to explain the genesis and production of a work of art, which depends on imagination or the "shaping and modifying power." Fancy is nothing but "memory emancipated from the order of time and space" and "must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association." But the (esemplastic) Romantic imagination cannot be summed up in such limited terms, because it does not receive sense impressions passively (the empirical model), but actively transforms them into something wondrous, rich, and strange (the idealist model). For Coleridge, in short, the laws of imagination begin to operate only on a level on which the laws of fancy cease to apply.

The difficult and fragmentary distinction at the end of Volume I, the key to his critical theories and the subject of much on-going controversy, has its origins, then, in his ambivalent relations to Hartleyan associationism as much as in his initial response to Wordsworth's poetry. But instead of concisely setting forth the significance of the former to his theory, Coleridge begins to lose himself in a pedantic history of associationism; and this, as we discover to our dismay, serves in turn only as the prelude to further digressions which dramatize what Fruman has described as Coleridge's "failures to pursue an argument to a conclusion." (*Coleridge, the Damaged*



*Archangel*, p. 79) These failures are amply demonstrated in the five chapters sandwiched between the three on association and the fancy-  
imagination paragraphs at the end of Volume I, and which reveal on a  
large scale the collapse of the exposition in the first half of the  
*Biographia*.

Coleridge widens the scope of his discussion in Chapter VIII, beginning with "the system of Dualism introduced by Des Cartes" and wending his way from Leibniz to Hylozoism. To compound the problem that the center will not hold and that things are falling apart, he employs a discursive style that comes close to being a parody of philosophical argument. And he begins to digress even from his digressions. Chapter IX opens with one of the unanswerable questions: "Is philosophy possible as a science, and what are its conditions?" and proceeds to discourse on his intellectual obligations, especially to the "Teutonic theosophist, Jacob Behmen," and to the "illustrious sage of Koenigsberg, the founder of the Critical Philosophy," the "clearness and evidence" of whose works "took possession" of Coleridge's mind "as with a giant's hand." (p. 84) From thence he proceeds to the thorny problem of his borrowings from the Germans, only to conclude with the famous disclaimer, "I regard truth as divine ventriloquist" — another instance of Coleridge giving himself a blank check. Having trekked to Chapter X, we discover that he drops all pretence of being still on target: "A chapter of digression and anecdotes, as an interlude preceding that on the nature and genesis of the imagination or plastic power." After nearly forty pages of anecdotes (the best about "Spy Nozy") we arrive rather the worse for wear at Chapter XI, only to be told that we are not, after all, to have the promised chapter, but instead "an affectionate exhortation to those who in early life feel themselves disposed to become authors." And once we have finished this, we find that Coleridge disappoints us further with the delaying action of "a chapter of requests and premonitions [only too well founded] concerning the perusal or omission of the chapter that follows." One does not have to read it to realize that by now his prolonged stalling has become absurd.

Chapter XII is a prime example of Coleridgean mystification. He opens by putting the reader in his place with the maxim, "until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding." (p. 134) With that put-down of his audience, he goes on to request that the reader "will either pass over the following

Chapter altogether or read the whole connectedly. The fairest part of the most beautiful body will appear deformed and monstrous if dissevered from its place in the organic whole." (p. 135) With this cautionary preamble, Coleridge enters on an obscure rehash of the subject-object dilemma of modern philosophy. Again the English philosopher-poet seems a rickety imitation of the German idealists. In reading it one is reminded of Carlyle's account of Coleridge's conversation, or of Byron's description (in the Preface of *Don Juan*) of Coleridge as "a hawk encumbered by his hood, — / Explaining metaphysics to the nation — / I wish he would explain his Explanation." Chapter XII culminates with ten heavily inflated "Theses" to sustain those "readers who are willing to accompany" him "through the following chapter, in which the results will be applied to the deduction of the imagination." (p. 149) But this is followed by a digression on Coleridge's disagreement with Wordsworth's views on the imagination (in the Preface of 1815). And then, finally, after the hundred-odd pages of digression subsequent to the end of Chapter IV, where he announced his intent to "deduce" the imagination, Coleridge will begin "Chapter XIII On the imagination, or esemplastic power." The issue is at hand.

#### IV

I have traced Coleridge's labyrinthine build-up to this chapter of chapters, the intended pivotal point of the two volumes of *Biographia Literaria*, because I think an overview of his expository method is essential to our perception of how his attempt there to make good on his promises disintegrates quite absurdly. In the actual organization of its argument Chapter XIII deserves the close scrutiny Coleridge had repeatedly asked for in the earlier sections, and one that is rarely receives from commentators intent only to explain those enigmatic passages at the end, often by simplifying whatever meaning they have for the sake of a false textbook clarity.<sup>6</sup> It opens with more mystification in the form of several paragraphs on "the transcendental philosophy" of "the venerable Sage of Koenigsberg." Coleridge's desire to lean on a philosophical father figure when the going gets tough only serves to aggravate his difficulties, because the transcendental portions he serves up get increasingly indigestible, until we are

mercifully released with the sudden collapse of a paragraph in the middle of a sentence: "Now this *tertium aliquid* can be no other than an inter-penetration of the counteracting powers, partaking of both." (p. 164) And here we are, dangling in the void of *counteracting inter-penetration*. Even Coleridge must have realized that the metaphysical mumbo-jumbo that is to deduce the imagination was becoming preposterous.<sup>7</sup> He was trapped, having written eight introductory chapters only to paint himself into a corner. But rather than face his dilemma, Coleridge chooses to employ the rogue's age-old gimmick for squeezing out of a tight spot. He makes a forced exit with a rhetorical sleight-of-hand:

Thus far had the work been transcribed for the press, when I received the following letter from a friend whose practical judgement I have ample reason to estimate and revere, and whose taste and sensibility preclude all the excuses which my self-love might possibly have prompted me to set up in plea against the decision of advisers of equal good sense, but with less tact and feeling (p.164).

This bogus letter from an invented correspondent is a face-saving device that renders the last chapter of Volume I ridiculous in a manner reminiscent of the literary high jinks of *Tristram Shandy*. The "friend" answers Coleridge's request for his "opinion concerning your Chapter on the Imagination, both as to the impressions it made on myself and as to those which I think it will make on the *public*" deferentially with the advice that it is much too difficult for the benighted audience of the *Biographia*:

... as for the public, I do not hesitate a moment in advising and urging you to withdraw the Chapter from the present work, and to reserve it for your announced treatise on the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity. First, because imperfectly as I understand the present Chapter, I see clearly that... you have been obliged to omit so many links from the necessity of compression, that what remains looks ... like the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower (p. 166).

Coleridge's ruin would strike the readers of his "literary life and opinions" like "Bishop Berkeley's *Siris*, announced as an *Essay on Tar-water*, which beginning with Tar ends with the Trinity."<sup>8</sup> His friend concludes by recommending that the imagination chapter be deferred until "that greater work to which you have devoted so many years, and study so intense and various," where "it will be in its proper

place." The letter ends, as J. A. Appleyard puts it, with "Coleridge's expressions of good will toward himself" (*Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature*, p. 198): "All success attend you, for if hard thinking and hard reading are merits you have deserved it." Not surprisingly, Coleridge is only too willing to accede to the plea to reserve his aborted chapter for the "announced treatise on the Logos or communicative Intellect in Man and Deity."

What is particularly revealing about Coleridge's practical joke of a laudatory letter by himself to himself is that it allows him not merely to squirm out of a tight spot, but that it aims, characteristically, to enhance further his claims to being a profound thinker. He will have his cake and eat it too: his dismal failure in the here and now as the theorist of imagination will be more than compensated for by some greater work in the future, by an all-encompassing Logos that will turn relative defeat into absolute triumph. His philosophical pretensions go from the absurd to the pathetic to the extent that he has partly talked himself into believing them, for the imagination account of the *Biographia* is almost as much a hoax on himself as on his public. For the sake of shoring up his threatened sense of self-esteem, it is the saving illusion he wanted to preserve. But as Appleyard points out, "after the collapse of the argument in the first volume of the *Biographia* Coleridge never again attempted a complete description of his literary theories." (*Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature*, p. 209).

Such is the intricate expository web in which the fancy-imagination paragraphs are entangled. By way of lead-in to those celebrated pronouncements, Coleridge humbly concludes:

in consequence of this very judicious letter, which produced complete conviction in my mind, I shall content myself for the present with stating the main result of the chapter, which I have reserved for that future publication, a detailed prospectus of which the reader will find at the close of the second volume (p. 176).

(It should not surprise us that the promised "prospectus" is nowhere to be found in the *Biographia*.) After the famous definition of fancy and imagination, Coleridge winds up the first volume with a pontifical gesture:

Whatever more than this I shall think it fit to declare concerning the powers and privileges of the imagination in the present work will be

found in the critical essay on the uses of the supernatural in poetry and the principles that regulate its introduction: which the reader will find prefixed to the poem of *The Ancient Mariner*.

The essay on the supernatural too is nonextant, the notice of it being part of the greater tissue of plagiarisms and histrionics that makes up the last chapter of Volume I. As for Chapter XIII itself, aside from the oft-quoted, enigmatic fancy-imagination paragraphs, it is both farcical and anticlimactic. Anyone who takes the trouble to examine its actual contents or those of the digressive sections leading down to it cannot take the claims of Coleridge the theorist of imagination at face value.

## V

Having suggested that whatever unity the *Biographia* may possess lies in Coleridge's conception alone, and not in his exposition of the imagination theory, and having re-embodied the two paragraphs usually disserved from the whole by plotting the actual structure of the argument in volume I, I conclude with some general comments about the *Biographia* as an expression of the Romantic sensibility which reveals more of its weaknesses than its strengths.

Many Romantic works are built around a series of epiphanies (to use Joyce's term) and frequently build up to a plateau of sublime feeling and perception that can have a cathartic effect. Perhaps this is the literary equivalent of the grand finale in music, of the climactic crescendo, which in some Romantic symphonies (Beethoven's *Ninth*, for instance) can have an overwhelming impact. The best example in English Romantic poetry is probably the concluding book of Wordsworth's soul-biography, *The Prelude*, which with the Mount Snowdon "spot of time" hymns majestically "the discipline and consummation of a poet's mind." Other major instances that come readily to mind are the conclusions of Blake's *Jerusalem*, with its triumphant note of alienation overcome ("All Human Forms identified"), and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, where Demogorgon's choric close is the philosophic climax to an entire act of epiphanic celebration. In German Romanticism too, the final uplift is just as notable a feature, as manifest in the chant of the Chorus Mysticus at the conclusion of the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, or in the ending of Part I of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (which conjures with a visionary fable "the

realm of eternity"), and the conclusion of his *Hymns to Night* with an ecstatic *unio mystica* of love and death.

As a defining trait of many longer Romantic works, the final epiphany serves both as a unifying perspective and a triumphant finish — this is the way a positive Romantic ends, with a bang, and not a whimper. Such an aesthetic mode has its dangers and pitfalls. What if the grand conclusion is bungled? Even some of the best Romantic writers come close to disappointing the readers' aroused expectations with a flat finish. Clearly this is one of Coleridge's major weaknesses. It has often been pointed out that he had trouble finishing what he started, and that some of his most famous compositions are fragments — a not untypical situation, given the overweening and grandiose ambitions of many Romantic artists. Of those he did complete, the most perfect is *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. But even that nightmare of Life-in-Death has a rather prosaic ending with the proverbial coda:

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.

Like the conclusion of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," it has struck many readers as an anticlimactic homily which undercuts the stature of the visionary experience that has preceded it.

When considered in terms of the epiphanic paradigm according to which some of the best Romantic texts are structured, Coleridge's presentation of his theory of imagination in *Biographia Literaria* may strike us not only as a dismal explanatory collapse, but also as a failed epiphany. He falters at epic length in his theodicy of imagination, only to abandon the reader in a rhetorical fog. Again the genius of Wordsworth, whose life and work is so closely intertwined with that of STC, presents an interesting parallel *and* contrast. Like the *Biographia*, *The Prelude* is a personal, digressive, miscellaneous and meandering work that has a way of getting lost in the turnings of its sinuous structure. But where Wordsworth succeeds in the end with the breathtaking mountain vision that consummates the search for his poetic identity and that embodies the higher unity of his development, conceived under the banner of imagination, Coleridge suffers a definitive failure of vision in his concluding chapter "on the imagination." The

Mount Snowdon “spot of time,” after the monumental, epic quest for a personal past, represents the true Romantic sublime; Coleridge’s fancy-imagination paragraphs are the false sublime, the ruins — and runes — of a failed vision after a long and fruitless quest. In a sense we are back to the loss of his “shaping spirit of Imagination” lamented much earlier in “Dejection: An Ode.” The fundamental irony of Coleridge’s failed quest in *Biographia Literaria* is that without the aid and guidance of the spirit that forms unity out of multeity, the poet-philosopher of imagination can hardly expound a *theory* of the imagination. Instead of the illuminations of esemplastic power, Coleridge only serves up (to recur to the words of “Dejection”) the regurgitations of “abstruse research” that has stolen from his “own nature all the natural man,” having by now become the confirmed “habit” of his soul. Thus, the imagination quest of Coleridge’s literary self-portrait, pursued a decade and a half after the prophetic grief of his great ode, attests on a massive scale to the collapse of his “genial spirits.”

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “The Frontiers of Criticism,” in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York, 1961), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Biographia Literaria, Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson (London, 1965), pp. 52-53. All subsequent citations of *Biographia Literaria* are of this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Coleridge on “organic form,” in *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London, 1960), 1:197.

<sup>4</sup> This recognition has been gaining momentum in Coleridge studies. Norman Fruman’s *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (New York, 1971), is the most hostile modern reevaluation of Coleridge the man, thinker, and poet. Fruman challenges us to realize that the image of Coleridge’s “character, mind and art that has emerged from the tremendous surge of scholarly and critical studies of the past half century is seriously askew,” (p. xv) and that “Coleridge plain is a far more absorbing figure than the exalted seer fitfully glimpsed through the painted mist of illusion.” (p. xix) Other notable studies are J. A. Appleyard’s *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Literature* (Cambridge, 1965) and Thomas McFarland’s *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford, 1969). Appleyard presents a judicious and balanced summary of Coleridge the literary theorist which, although not slighting legitimate claims, notes that “the long-awaited analysis of imagination which is to complete the argument of the first volume is almost a total disappointment.” (p. 197) and that “Coleridge promised to ‘deduce’ the imagination, but he never did so.” (p. 211) McFarland works with the premise that Coleridge is “the most profound of English

wrote the *Biographia*." (pp. xxiii, 41)

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford, 1956), 2:864.

<sup>6</sup> The major recent instance of this is Owen Barfield's *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown, Conn. 1971), Chapters 6 and 7, "Imagination and Fancy." The classic example is still I. A. Richards' *Coleridge on Imagination*, which wrenches Coleridge's "imagination" into Richards' own fanciful context.

<sup>7</sup> As Fruman observes, Coleridge "suddenly breaks off ... having breathlessly unloaded tons of ill-digested metaphysics ... as if he realized that, after all, he had little to say on the subject," *The Damaged Archangel*, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> With these descriptions Coleridge seems to be lampooning his work in the process of writing it, a stylistic device of self-conscious irony popularized by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* and central to many of the leading modernists of our century.