The Besetting Sins of Coleridge’s Prose

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Coleridge’s prose is notoriously hard going. Yet we accommodate to it; we develop some of the conscious and unconscious skills Coleridge demands of his readers. In *The Design of ‘Biographia Literaria,* I argued that it helps to categorize the kinds of difficulties we have in reading Coleridge’s prose. The most substantial problems are those created by the complexity of his ideas. Other problems arise from the ideal of discourse toward which he worked, the ideal of engaging us as whole moral beings. And finally, major problems arise from the habitual ways in which Coleridge managed—and mismanaged—the basic tasks of a writer. Yet reading Coleridge becomes much easier going if we know how he handles transition, emphasis, unity, definitions, and the like. I propose to examine three elements of Coleridge’s writerly habits: his definitions, the way he structures or develops arguments, and the way he situates himself historically.

Coleridge’s definitions always ground themselves in extensive metaphor patterns. The famous definition of imagination in chapter 13 has been examined and cross-examined for generations, but the metaphors anchoring this definition have had far less attention. Most of these metaphors arise when the *Biographia* contrasts imaginative people and imaginative works with the character and the work of fanatics. A crucial early point is the definition of fanaticism in chapter 2. The German word for “fanaticism,” Coleridge explains, “is derived from the swarming of bees . . . The passion being in an inverse proportion to the insight, that the more vivid, as this the less distinct; anger is the inevitable consequence” (1:19). This link between violence and blindness repeatedly comes into play as Coleridge describes the controversy over Wordsworth: “the acrimonious passions, with which the controversy has been conducted by the assailants” provide one good estimate of the intelligence and insight of these critics (2:7).
Anonymous criticism perfectly satisfies the early definition of fanati­cism: "These facts, and the intellectual energy of the author [Wordsworth], where it was outwardly and even boisterously denied, meeting with sentiments of aversion to his opinions, and of alarm at their conse­quences, produced an eddy of criticism, which would of itself have borne up the poems by the violence, with which it whirled them round and round" (2:7). Note how the image of swirling upward, tornado-like, repeats the movement of swarming bees: the philosophic critic's activity is later compared to a windmill's (2:88). Anonymous criticism is blasphe­mous, personal and "popular" (1:41–42; 2:211); philosophical criticism is principled, systematic, and noble (1:44; 2:87–89). True poets and philo­sophic critics are genial in both senses of that word: geniuses, to the extent that their imagination supplies genuine insight; and genial because their personalities are literally above the petty, personal, and political squabbles of lesser minds.

Anonymous critics admire an equally decadent modern poetry that offers only "the glare and glitter of a perpetual, yet broken and heteroge­neous imagery" (1:15). Such glare and glitter differ sharply from the illumina­tion Wordsworth provides: "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" (1:59). Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches, Coleridge explains, announced "the emergence of an original poetic genius above the literary horizon" (1:56). Citing Wordsworth approvingly, Coleridge asserts that he knows how to

add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration and the poet's dream.

[cited at 2:124]

Changed light and cleansing water repeatedly characterize the renewed vision genius provides.

Coleridge characterizes modern literature with images of hollow and false things; genial works are described with images for the imaginative acts they both require and elicit. Moderns are fraudulent:

In the days of Chaucer and Gower, our language might (with allowance for the imperfections of a simile) be compared to a wilderness of vocal reeds, from which the favorites only of Pan or Apollo could construct
even the rude Syrinx; and from this the _constructors_ alone could elicit strains of music. But now, partly by the labours of successive poets, and in part by the more artificial state of society and social intercourse, language, mechanized as it were into a barrel-organ, supplies at once both instrument and tune. Thus even the deaf may play, so as to delight the many. . . . Hence of all trades, literature at present demands the least talent or information; and of all modes of literature, the manufacturing of poems. The difference indeed between these and the works of genius is not less than between an egg and an egg-shell; yet at a distance they both look alike. (1:25–26)

What once demanded divine favor now can be manufactured—apparently—without the least exercise of skill. Such productions lack the truth and permanence of great literature. Coleridge emphasizes this permanence in his first "critical aphorism" in chapter 1: "not the poem which we have _read_, but that to which we _return_ with greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of _essential poetry_" (1:14). His image for this permanence and value is an act:

[In "a just poem,"] The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. (2:11)

This "pleasureable activity" is the working of secondary imagination, earlier imaged by the water-insect:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets . . . 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. . . . (In philosophical language, we must denominate this . . . the _Imagination_. But in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary controul over it.) (1:85–86)

This alternately progressive and retrogressive movement images the imagination for us just as the mechanism of the barrel-organ or the hollowness
of an eggshell images literary fraud. On the one hand we have an image for a producing faculty; on the other, for a useless product. Lacking the productive faculty, moderns provide only a false and mechanical version of the real thing. Their readers are "carried forward" passively, as perhaps on a whirlwind; readers of genuine works travel under their own power, enjoying that activity as such.

Coleridge subsumes all these metaphors, and the realities they name, in two accounts of the poet as a landscape. The false poet is an irritable character because "men, whose dearest wishes are fixed on objects wholly out of their own power, become in all cases more or less impatient and prone to anger.... Even as the flowery sod, which covers a hollow, may be often detected by its shaking and trembling" (1:25). Recall that the *Biographia* *is* to define the trunk and roots of the distinction between fancy and imagination (1:64). The roots of such "shaking and trembling" poetic flowers are not solidly anchored. The careless observer might not recognize the problem at first; but one need not be much of a gardener to realize how poorly such "flowers" will survive the vicissitudes of an entire season—or the tribulations of the years.

All that is false and perverse and ephemeral about such works is captured by Coleridge's most daring description of anonymous critics as ones "whose intellectual claims to the guardianship of the muses seem, for the greater part, analogous to the physical qualifications which adapt their oriental brethren for the superintendence of the Harem" (1:42). Decadent modern literature and its advocates are but a perversion of mankind's most valuable productive powers: "poetry is the blossom and fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language" (2:19). Contrast the description of Wordsworth:

"The soil is a deep, rich, dark mould, on a deep stratum of tenacious clay; and that on a foundation of rocks, which often break through both strata, lifting their backs above the surface. The trees which chiefly grow here are the gigantic black oak; magnolia magni-flora; fraxinus excelsior; platane; and a few stately tulip trees." What Mr. Wordsworth will produce, it is not for me to prophecy; but I could pronounce with the liveliest convictions what he is capable of producing. It is the *First Genuine Philosophic Poem.* (2:128–29)

This is not to be read as an allegory, wherein specific poetic abilities correspond to various geological layers; it is to contrast with the metaphors
describing all that is hollow and ephemeral in modern literature. Even the flower image reappears, in the magnolias and tulip trees. The lines from Milton in chapter 13 also stand in context:

O Adam, One Almighty is, from whom
All things proceed, and up to him return,
If not deprived from good: created all,
Indued with various forms, various degrees
Of substance, and, in things that live, of life;
But more refin'd, more spirituous and pure,
As nearer to him plac'd, or nearer tending,
Each in their several active spheres assign'd,
Till body up to spirit work, in bounds
Proportion'd to each kind. So from the root
Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
More airy; last the bright consummate flower
Spirits odorous breathes. Flowers and their fruit,
Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd,
To vital spirits aspire: to animal:
To intellectual!—give both life and sense,
Fancy and understanding; whence the soul
Reason receives, and reason is her being,
Discursive or intuitive.  Par. Lost. b.V.
(1:195)

The movement from rocks and clay to magnolia magni-flora claims that Wordsworth's genius mirrors God's creation. He is the mirror and the lamp, the one whose genius illuminates reality for the rest of us precisely because he exists in such perfect harmony with it.

Throughout the Biographia one finds an ongoing tension between the vivid particular world—"the table itself, which the man of common sense believes himself to see"—and the transforming power of imagination—"The light that never was, on land or sea" (1:179, 2:124). The fanatic's inability to sustain both poles of creativity reveals—perversely—how genius functions. These complementary accounts are integrated by metaphors that we ignore or slight at our peril because Coleridge's idea of imagination is most lucidly explained not in the abstraction of the "philosophical chapters" but here, in this rich and lively polemic. Chapters 12 and 13 do little more than summarize abstractly what is elsewhere more clearly stated.3
Reading Coleridge's prose comfortably also demands sensitivity to the sometimes eccentric ways in which he structures his arguments. At his best, as Bishop C. Hunt, Jr., so aptly explains, "what we might call the 'dramatic' element in philosophy, the process of search and its written re-enactment, assumes a larger significance. Much of Coleridge's best writing can be read as a kind of dramatic monologue in prose, a mimetic representation, like Wordsworth's philosophic poetry, of the mind in the act of thinking something through." This drama may in part arise from the dictating of the *Biographia*. Most transcribed tape-recordings of conversations are astoundingly incoherent because the transitions and connections are lost. Such connections in Coleridge's prose are feeble beyond reason, given the rigor of his thinking. Consider as well DeQuincey's account of how radically fragmented Coleridge's conversation could be even for those present. And yet DeQuincey also says, "I can assert, upon my long and intimate knowledge of Coleridge's mind, that logic the most severe was as inalienable from his modes of thinking as grammar from his language."

Even when Coleridge seems to turn most distractedly—like the White Rabbit to zip past and disappear—at such times he is probably doing one of a finite number of reasonable things which he (quite unreasonably) does not signal to us in advance. Let me sketch three of these: exploring grounds and presuppositions; defining a new perspective on an old issue; or turning back to an issue now that its grounds are clear and various perspectives have been considered. These strategies supply the "dramatic element" that Hunt described. This is far from a complete list, but for present circumstances it is enough.

Chapter 2 analyzes the supposed irritability of men of genius, a subject Shawcross dismisses as "quite irrelevant" (1:212). Yet this chapter first and most richly contrasts the genius and the fanatic. Shawcross is misled by Coleridge's failure to specify the connection between chapters 1 and 2, but the connections are nonetheless there. In chapter 1 Coleridge describes his study of Bowles, and his attempt to understand the basis of genuine literary value—the difference between "the Greek Poets from Homer to Theocritus inclusive; and still more . . . our elder English poets from Chaucer to Milton" and such moderns as Erasmus Darwin (1:14). He also contrasts his own education with that which produces the kinds of minds that become anonymous critics. The chapter ends with a funny little anecdote concerning literary parodies.

There are two sorts of connection between chapters 1 and 2. Locally,
or superficially, Coleridge goes from wondering why anyone would think him angered by a parody to wondering why people always think poets are irritable. This sort of connection might be no more than Coleridge’s capacity for being “solicited” away from the virtuous path of his argument by a handsome new notion. But he is not wandering off track: he is delving beneath the state of affairs just described. He explores the basis of the difference between great poetry and modern trash, and correlative between great criticism and anonymous criticism. The transition functions as if an imagined interlocutor interrupted Coleridge to ask, “Why is this so? Why did that fellow think you would be so angry?” In answering Coleridge refuses to be “solicited:” he takes his interlocutor to the grounds of what he has been describing throughout chapter 1.

Knowing Coleridge’s abiding interests helps us follow such transitions because we know where Coleridge is apt to turn to answer such a question. But why are the transitions so poor? Coleridge’s use of his notebooks demonstrates how much he relied on set pieces, and yet any set piece would need minute revision to allow Coleridge to explore the grounds he wants while maintaining reasonable unity in his “local” topic. Such revisions are tedious. Rather than submit to such “professional” drudgery, Coleridge unduly relies on metaphor patterns to hold things together. His habit of dictating and the conversational quality of his prose are again relevant: in conversation it is easy to observe how people relate their abiding interests to the topic at hand, and it is easy to follow such integrations. It is for whatever reason far more difficult in prose, and more difficult yet when the abiding interests are as complex as Coleridge’s.

Coleridge also loses readers at the beginning of chapter 5. Chapter 4 ends with the proposal that he investigate the seminal grounds of the distinction between fancy and imagination so as to resolve the controversy over Wordsworth and poetic diction. Chapter 5 ties immediately to that by delving under it, to the more comprehensive issue of mental activity and levels of will. The chapter begins, “There have been men in all ages, who have been impelled as by an instinct to propose their own nature as a problem, and who devote their attempts to its solution. The first step was to construct a table of distinctions, which they seem to have formed on the principle of the absence or presence of the Will” (1:65–66). If you were not lost at chapter 2, as of course many are, then the “problem” of our own “nature” might seem a reasonable enough reference to the fanatic/genius contrast. But even those who follow to this point are following tentatively,
because what ought to be a crucial connection deserves greater emphasis than Coleridge provides. Because the emphasis is missing, we intuitively downgrade the connection, thereby revising our nascent sense of what the Biographia is "about." Almost any reader, then, is likely to throw up hands in despair as chapter 5 gets underway. What has Mackintosh to do with anything? Is the "men of all ages" business just a historical flourish to introduce him?

Coleridge might have made a coherent transition in several ways. Since he attended Mackintosh's lectures in 1800, he might have represented them as one of the series of "influences" which he describes in the first four chapters. Hartley certainly was a major influence who would fit very nicely in that catalogue. He could also improve the transition with a simple bit of emphasis: specify that he will resolve the controversy and explore the roots of imagination and fancy by considering the levels of will, which men of all ages . . . etc. But Coleridge's prose is remarkably without any such aids to orientation. We are to see where we are going by looking about us as we progress. We lose our way here because Coleridge assumes the continuity of his discourse and supplies only the facts. To the extent that we are influenced by the powerful tradition that assumes the discontinuity of Coleridge's discourse, we are blind to relationships which are tolerably obvious but not specified.

(And let me note in passing that this chapter opening is a crucial point for discovering or destroying the unity of the Biographia generally, because it is profoundly important to keep in mind the short table of will here provided. Coleridge refers to it, adds to it, argues with other philosophers about details of it, all as if it were written on a blackboard behind him.)

But what is going on with Mackintosh, after all? We who were comfortable with critics and poets are now rightly annoyed. And, of course, Coleridge does this to us all the time. At such points of apparently massive dislocation, Coleridge is introducing a new perspective, or a new set of perspectives on the issue at hand. The new perspective here is philosophy: Coleridge cannot explore the roots of imagination without talking about the nature of the mind itself. Fair enough. This reaching to first questions and fundamental issues is part of why we value Coleridge so much as a thinker.

But he does more than this. He adds to the contrast between true poets and false poets, or that between anonymous critics and philosophic critics. He adds a parallel distinction between false philosophers and true philoso-
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phers and a parallel problem to the evil politics of poetry in a pernicious politics of philosophy, which must in modern times be addressed to the multitudes rather than to an intellectual and moral elite. Later he does this again, drawing the same contrast between fanatic political writers and genial ones (i.e., Burke, and also Coleridge himself in the Morning Post). And the politics of philosophy all comes to bear when Coleridge’s imaginary friend dissuades him from publishing chapter 13. In short, he is both providing a new perspective—philosophy—and continuing to elaborate the preceding set of issues. His ultimate point is to argue for the cultural importance of secondary imagination, wherever it is manifest. But he does not, as more linear minds might, separate explaining what imagination is from explaining why it is so important. Byron’s wicked lines are marvelously apt.

Coleridge’s transitions also disorient us when he attempts to close one of his “huge circuits,” as he does for instance at the opening of chapter 14. Transitions like these demand a close review of the beginning of that circuit to locate the issues and metaphors that will reappear. Such a comparison of chapters 1 through 4 with 14 to 16 uncovers both new emphases and entirely new issues. Central among these new issues is an argument about the nature of language and the relation between language and consciousness. These are evident in the opening chapters as well, with their concern for purity and precision of diction; but at this point they come richly to the fore.

When Coleridge reaches back like this, we are less seriously disoriented than at other eccentric transitions, because repetition is so rare in his prose that it collects its own emphasis. There is another reason as well. Working as I have with Coleridge’s organizing habits has made me scrupulously aware of my own modes of organizing. And at one point I realized—perhaps you will too—that I used such huge circuits in the classroom all the time. A bright student asks a complex question, or reveals a historical or philosophical lacuna that has to be filled. One stops to provide the necessary information or analysis, then takes a deep breath and returns to the original topic at hand, a topic that has now been to some extent transfigured. It is as if the energy of that inhalation is to lift the class with me to see all the transfigurings the new ideas provide.

Coleridge supplies this energy too, or this guidance, in the extraordinary density of his prose at such closings-of-circuits. The connections to the origin of the circuit are so many and so potent that they easily force an
entire rereading of the chapters to which they refer, which in turn triggers other rereadings and reconsiderations, in what strikes me as a quintessentially Coleridgean way. Although no doubt a master of the fragment, perhaps even of the aphorism, Coleridge is simultaneously a most sustained and systematic thinker. He expends little energy on the niceties of composing, and especially on the small mechanical tricks of transition and structure; but the essential continuities are so obsessively, overwhelmingly present that either we lose our way in the tangle of connections, or we let the text engage us in a closely directed reflection upon the topic at hand. We, too, then become "minds in the act of thinking something through."

Finally, allow me to sketch an issue which deserves major new study: how Coleridge situates himself historically. We know that Coleridge saw himself not as an original and innovative thinker, but as one of a substantial and ancient community of thinkers working on closely related issues from roughly the same presuppositions. This idea of an intellectual community underlies not only the famous plagiarisms, but also the seldom-examined problem of how Coleridge changes the texts he incorporates. It also underlies both the anachronism and the teleologism of his version of Western intellectual history. Coleridge's idea of history, in short, is elaborate and complex to an extent seldom properly understood and never adequately defined.

Coleridge's idea of history shapes his texts in innumerable ways, three of which are simple enough to be briefly summarized. First, references to the ancient community of thinkers commonly define major suppositions and starting points. For instance, chapter 5's reference to "men in all ages":

There have been men in all ages, who have been impelled as by an instinct to propose their own nature as a problem, and who devote their attempts to its solution. The first step was to construct a table of distinctions, which they seem to have formed on the principle of the absence or presence of the will. Our various sensations, perceptions, and movements were classed as active or passive, or as media partaking of both. . . . Our inward experiences were thus arranged in three separate classes, the passive sense, or what the school-men call the merely receptive quality of the mind; the voluntary; and the spontaneous, which holds the middle place between both. But it is not in human nature to meditate on any mode of action, without enquiring after the law that governs it; and in the explanation of the spontaneous movements of
our being, the metaphysician took the lead of the anatomist and natural philosopher. (1:65–66)

Coleridge then argues that perception is not passive (as the tradition seems to suggest). Perception, he argues, is a form or mode of the spontaneous, because “the will and reason are perhaps never wholly suspended” (1:77). This eventually leads to his definition of primary imagination as “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception” (1:202). The voluntary quality of the mind Coleridge calls “fancy” (1:87, 202). The faculty of the spontaneous is the imagination, although “in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary control over it” (1:86).

These distinctions and definitions are not quite the commonplaces Coleridge suggests, and not quite original either. He is on the one hand referring to a rich tradition not widely known by his English contemporaries, and on the other asserting that a rich and ancient tradition leads directly to the argument he wishes to make. The truth of the matter is not wholly in either hand. To discover and define that truth, to understand the argument about perception and imagination that Coleridge makes in *Biographia*, we must watch carefully what happens when Coleridge invokes “tradition” (see also 1:89–90, 94, 133–36).

Coleridge also situates himself historically by citing from his “ancient community”—often by plagiarizing. Even when these passages are verbatim transcriptions, Coleridge usually changes what he takes by placing it in a new context that inevitably changes how we read it. Given the extent to which he demands a scrupulous attention to his own contexts, he may have written with great awareness of how he was forcing a rereading of what he incorporated. That might be part of why he did not rewrite sufficiently to preclude the charge of plagiarism: perhaps he is quite in control of the tensions thereby created.

But often he does not simply incorporate. Often there are major interpolations, or major redefinitions of key terms preceding the plagiarized passage. These changes are sometimes just ignored, or worse yet condescendingly brushed aside as the “mere” Christianizing of ideas or systems otherwise too bold or too free for what is then characterized as a rigidly orthodox personality. All such settings-aside are monumentally mistaken: these changes commonly reflect or share in the central issues of the argu-
ment Coleridge is making. If we are to understand that argument in all its complexity, these changes need to be mapped in just as much detail as the plagiarisms themselves.

I am not a comparative literature scholar; I cannot offer this mapping with the necessary detail and precision. But let me offer a couple of interesting examples. In chapter 12, in the famous “range of hills” passage, Coleridge compares consciousness to a stream. At the conclusion of this passage, he underscores the metaphor: “That the common consciousness itself will furnish proofs by its own direction, that it is connected with master-currents below the surface, I shall merely assume as a postulate pro tempore” (1:167). Later, then, Coleridge incorporates a considerable passage from Schelling that talks about the “direction” of a point in motion. Coleridge is using the passage to say something different from what it says in Schelling, because what for Schelling is mathematics, for Coleridge is metaphor.9

Or again, Coleridge appends to thesis vi a connection between the Schellingian “I am” and the traditional, Biblical, divine “sum quia sum” (1:183). It is a mistake, a profound and serious mistake, to blur the difference between Schelling’s “I am” and Coleridge’s “great eternal I am.” Let me explain why. The real gap in the Biographia is not in chapter 13; it is between thesis vi and its Scholium. The essential connection that Coleridge cannot define to his or our satisfaction is the relation between human cognition and the knowledge and power of God. In the Biographia, Coleridge asserts that through faith we have immediate knowledge of both a personal God and a real world of physical objects immediately known (see 1:133–36). The Logosophia will explain how this can be so (it is necessarily indemonstrable, given its origin in faith and free will). He draws this thorny issue into the Biographia in order to ground the moral value of the highest exercise of secondary imagination, “the vision and the faculty divine.” Coleridge forthrightly acknowledges that his position can never be proven without losing its moral force (see 1:135–36: “It could not become intellectually more evident without becoming morally less effective.”). Schelling, on the other hand, is performing a sophisticated maneuver in a highly technical kind of epistemology. The central issue for Coleridge is not epistemology but theology. To deny the difference is to become blind to the foundation of Coleridge’s argument about the cultural centrality of literature and literary criticism.

Coleridge’s idea of history also shapes his texts through his proper use
of quotations. Whether separated from his text as headnotes and epigrams, or whether embedded as citations that are properly identified as such, these passages usually summarize and thereby emphasize central aspects of the issue at hand. Because Coleridge's prose provides so few structuring elements, these citations deserve and reward thoughtful attention. Chapter 13 begins with three citations, one from Milton, one from Leibniz, and one from Synesius. Chapters 12 and 13 have been written about more than any other two chapters in the *Biographia*, yet I have never seen a discussion of these three headnotes.

Milton's lines trace the relation from God, or pure knowing, to creation. This is the subjective pole of philosophy, as defined in chapter 12 (1:176). I quoted these earlier, but they are worth rereading.

O Adam, One Almighty is, from whom
All things proceed, and up to him return,
If not depraved from good: created all
Such to perfection, one first nature all,
Indued with various forms, various degrees
Of substance, and, in things that live, of life;
But more refined, more spirituous and pure,
As nearer to him plac'd, or nearer tending,
Each in their several active spheres assign'd,
Till body up to spirit work, in bounds
Proportioned to each kind. So from the root
Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
More airy: last the bright consummate flower
Spirits odorous breathes. Flowers and their fruit,
Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd,
To vital spirits aspire: to animal
To intellectual!—give both life and sense,
Fancy and understanding; whence the soul
Reason receives, and reason is her being,
Discursive or intuitive. \(\text{Par. Lost. b.V.}\)

(1:195)

These lines summarize chapter 12 in far more accessible and familiar terms, especially for an English audience. God creates and orders the universe, maintaining both our being and the being of the world around us, and thereby guaranteeing or grounding the possibility of our knowing that world.\(^{10}\) Human knowing is the most nearly divine of human powers.
There follows a passage from Leibniz that travels in the opposite direction, from matter to mind. This is the objective pole of philosophy, as defined in chapter 12 (1:175).

If indeed corporeal things contained nothing but matter they might truly be said to consist in flux and to have no substance, as the Platonists once rightly recognized. . . . And so, apart from the purely mathematical and what is subject to the fancy, I have come to the conclusion that certain metaphysical elements perceptible by the mind alone should be admitted, and that some higher and, so to speak, formal principle should be added to the material mass, since all the truths about corporeal things cannot be collected from logistic and geometrical axioms alone, i.e. those concerning great and small, whole and part, shape and position, but others must enter into it, i.e. cause and effect, action and passion, by which the reasons for the order of things are maintained. It does not matter whether we call this principle of things an entelechy or a power so long as we remember that it is intelligibly to be explained only the idea of powers.  

The lines from Leibniz recapitulate the major conclusion of chapters 5 through 9: we cannot explain the real world and our knowledge of it by assuming that the mind is passive in perception. The lines say more than this, of course, more that also involves the significance of Kant for the Biographia’s argument and for Coleridge’s position generally. But the essential thrust here is the inadequacy of materialism as a philosophy, a central and recurrent concern throughout the first volume: “all the truths about corporeal things cannot be collected from logistic and geometric axioms alone.”

The lines from Synesius which follow have been variously translated; I follow George Watson.12

I worship the hidden order of intellectual things.
The Mean dances and is not still.

And this is the imagination, a spontaneous act, a dancing, which at its basic level is perception, but at its highest level is art. Great poetry grounds itself on close and shrewd perception, on a renewed vision of the beauties around us; but it can do so only because it sees within this material world the translucence of the divine. Coleridge argues so bitterly with Wordsworth’s emphasis on observation because it seems that Wordsworth undervalues or fails to recognize the necessary priority of the mind who is observing.
Why does Coleridge do this? Why does he supply citations where we surely expect a firm, lucid summary, emphases duly allotted? No doubt there are layers and categories of reasons why; let me select just one. Coleridge's entire argument about the value of Wordsworth's poetry, about the value of great poetry generally, and therefore about the character of imagination and fancy depends at last on Coleridge's assertion that it is contranatural to doubt the existence of a real world correspondent to sense, and to doubt the existence of some divinity (1:133–36). Grant this, you grant him everything; deny this, and the Biographia offers only a muddled Shellingeanism and some interesting comments on poetry and a good deal of inconsequential rambling. Faith is at once the strongest and the most fragile of bases. Given that it is impossible to solve the metaphysical problem of mind and matter, faith is as good an answer as we are apt to find. And yet a systematic structure built on faith is fragile indeed: the best answer we are likely to find is nonetheless far less certain than anyone would like. The best guide, then, is tradition. I may err, you may err, but if the One Almighty exists, then surely over time the truth will emerge from the ancient community of those who think about such issues with open minds and hearts. Coleridge cites rather than summarizes to bolster his argument, to persuade us that the "unscientific" argument he is making has its own power, its own prestige, its own history.

And maybe he was lazy, or maybe he was crazy, or maybe he hated revising. Maybe he synthesized with such ease that he thought he was being quite clear. It's an unanswerable question. The best we can do, I propose, is to discover Coleridge's eccentricities and understand them. If we understand his habits as a composer of arguments, we will follow those arguments more easily. We will see his place in history more accurately, and we will learn from his genius more fruitfully. He is a difficult writer, but he is not impossible; and above all, his prose works are worth the effort they demand.