Perception and "the heaven-descended KNOW-THYSELF"

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How does (if indeed it does) perception lead to apperception? So long as I refrain from pretending to offer an answer, the task of investigating Coleridge’s labors with this question will remain fairly simple. Arduous labors they were for Coleridge, arduous and desperate as he tried to construct an answer in the Biographia Literaria. After waxing rhetorical in his enthusiasm over “the heaven-descended KNOW-THYSELF,” Coleridge proceeded to construct the conditions necessary to apperception, the transcendental apperception, in the Kantian sense, of self-consciousness, self-intuition, self-knowledge. The effort, as has been well documented, led Coleridge to verbatim borrowings from the works of Schelling in the presentation of the ten theses in chapter 12. When he again addressed the relation of perception to apperception in his chapter “On the Logical Acts,” also fully documented in J. R. de J. Jackson’s edition of the Logic, Coleridge once more returned to these same theses in reordering and reshaping the argument. When compared with the presentation of the theses in the Biographia, however, the argument in the Logic may be seen to differ in structure as well as in conclusion. For that matter, in neither case does Coleridge hold to Schelling’s argument. He rearranges it.

None of the commentaries which have pointed out Coleridge’s appropriations from Schelling have explained why Coleridge found it necessary to construct the argument from three separate sources, Vom Ich (1795), Abhandlung zur Erläuterung der Idealismus (1797), and System der transcendentalen Idealismus (1800), sources that represent Schelling’s early indebtedness to Fichte (until 1797) but leap over the permutations of the Natur-
philosophie (from 1797 through 1799) to the emergent Identitätsphilosophie (beginning in 1800). Coleridge's selection and manipulation of texts from such differing sources are all the more peculiar, for he could have drawn a cohesive version intact from any one of these works, or from the Naturphilosophie which he ignores here although he borrows from it elsewhere. A fundamental question, then, is why Coleridge has taken the trouble to reconstruct an argument drawn from the various stages of Schelling's attempts to resolve perception and apperception.

Before I look at Coleridge's reshaping of Schelling in the Biographia, and the reshaping of the reshaping in the Logic, it may be useful to review the history of the problem in order to explain why the relation of perception and apperception had become such a philosophical crux for Kant and his followers; and why, too, Coleridge would not accept here, as he often did elsewhere, a facile solution to the problem. Gian Orsini has told part of this story, but a few details should be corrected and a few more added pertinent to Coleridge's peculiar wielding of the passages from Schelling. The story begins with the dissolution of self in Hume's epistemology:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble upon some particular perception or other. . . . I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.  

As Orsini so aptly put it, "the reason why Hume could not find the self in himself was that he looked in the wrong direction." He was so intent upon searching out a lurking "me" or "myself" that he never turned around to confront the "I" who "enters most intimately," who "stumbles" and tries to "catch." Yet this "I," whom Hume has sent on the quest for "myself," is there all the time, asking, deliberating, learning. Hume's position is an extreme yet logical consequence of the empirical definition of the mind as the passive receptor of sense experience; with no activity of its own, the mind is simply the reflex of the continuous and multiple registry of sensations. Thus when Coleridge describes "the necessary consequences of the Hartleian theory" (BL, ch. 7), he complains that "the consciousness considered as a result" renders "the poor worthless I" as nothing more than a reflection, "the mere quick-silver plating behind a looking-glass."  

After Hume had awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumbers, Kant proceeded to sort out the "spontaneous" from the flux of "receptive" data of the external senses. These spontaneous acts provide the form, temporal
and spatial, for receiving impressions. Sensory experience is possible only because the mind spontaneously gives form to the continuous stream of sensory data. Not only does this spontaneous inner sense give form to experience, it also organizes. In his "Transcendental Analytic," Kant develops his categories of "quantity," "quality," "relation," and "modality," the a priori frame in which the judgment of experience is possible. But more fundamental in his answer to Hume than the temporal and spatial forms of inner sense and the categories, is the very arena of consciousness that brings awareness to experience. Kant calls it "the supreme principle of all employment of the understanding" (B136). Orsini is disconcerted that Kant virtually buried this crucial principle in the "Transcendental Deduction," not even giving it the structural recognition of a paragraph heading. Orsini suggests that the apparent neglect and subordination of the principle of "self-consciousness" may have come about because it was introduced late in the long period of Kant's composition of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft. But Kant himself has another explanation that Orsini has overlooked. Prominently featured in the headings of the second section of the Deduction (§§15–27, esp. §§16–19) is the concern with the synthetic unity of apperception. Orsini does not observe that for Kant the immediacy of self-consciousness is only an illusion, an affect. Kant not only carefully distinguishes apperception from the inner sense, he calls attention to the erroneous tendency "in systems of psychology" to equate the two. In §24 he recalls his first exposition of the inner sense in §6. Everyone will have noticed, he says, the paradox in explaining how the inner sense presents consciousness to the self. The paradox arises not from the condition of the self as it actually is (an sich), but only as it appears in introspection. Because we only view our self as we are inwardly affected, we must presume a passive, responsive (leidend) comport with our self. This, he says, may seem to be contradictory. Inner sense, after all, has been defined as spontaneous, in contrast to the receptive sensations. Now we find that in order to discover self within the inner sense, the inner sense must become receptive to its own spontaneity as internal affect. This means that self-consciousness, in spite of a compelling illusion, is not immediate; rather, it is mediated, just as the other affects in the receptivity of sensation (§24, B152–53).

Hume lost the self in consciousness, because "I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception." Kant reaffirms self-consciousness as the transcendental I (das
transzendentale Ich) by observing the form of time given to perception. In that act of transcendental synthesis he observes also the unity of synthesis from which he deduces apperception, the consciousness of self. The synthesizing and unifying act of apperception is in itself spontaneous. It belongs to the subject as self-activity (Selbsttätigkeit), exercised only by the subject (§15, B130). Further, the synthesizing, unifying act of apperception reveals the Kantian cogito (Das: Ich denke) which determines being (§25, B157n). Because he overlooks Kant’s explanation of the apparent paradox here, Orsini finds Kant inconsistent: sometimes, according to Orsini, Kant “speaks practically like Fichte,” wading into the idealism of scholastic dogma and “getting into very deep water indeed”; “at other times,” Orsini adds, “Kant succumbs to his habitual fears of transcendent speculation, and says that the ‘I think’ is only ‘a representation’ and that it merely ‘accompanies’ all other representations” (B 132). The confusion is Orsini’s not Kant’s. Kant does not make the mistake in some “systems of psychology” of identifying the unity of apperception with the inner sense as a thing-in-itself (Ding-an-sich), the noumenal center of consciousness. Indeed, Kant allows no compromise on this point: self-consciousness is a mediated affect, a phenomena; like all other noumena, the noumenon of our own inner nature remains inaccessible to consciousness (§24, B153—56). The unity of apperception presents the phenomena of self-consciousness that accompanies all the form-giving activities of perception, all the categorical organization of thought, all activity of mind per se.

Kant describes a self-consciousness that, to be sure, has an a priori given form and determination, but that can be known only as a reflection. Clearly, such a self-consciousness cannot be Coleridge’s “heaven-descended know thyself.” Coleridge anticipates the problem in chapter 10, when he first acknowledges “obligations to Immanuel Kant,” whose doctrine “took possession of me as with a giant’s hand.” Even after fifteen years of reading Kant “with undiminished delight and increasing admiration,” Coleridge confesses that a “few passages . . . remained obscure to me.” He points in particular to “the chapter on original apperception.” Coleridge’s difficulty is precisely that which we have just seen repeated by Orsini: the belief that Kant was caught in “contradictions.” As Coleridge explains, Kant really wanted to affirm that apperception was noumenal and revealed universal idea, but “he was constrained to commence at the point of reflection, or natural consciousness” because “he had been in imminent danger of persecution.” Coleridge’s alternative, a “heaven-descended
KNOW THYSELF,” would not set well with the “priest-ridden superstition.” The religious censorship prompted such acts of “confiscation and prohibition,” Coleridge argues, “that the venerable old man’s caution was not groundless.” He thus presumes a “difference between the letter and the spirit of Kant’s writings”; specifically, Coleridge refuses to believe that “it was possible for him [Kant] to have meant no more by his *Noumenon, or Thing in Itself,* than his mere words express; or that in his own conception he confined the whole plastic power to the forms of the intellect, leaving for the external cause, for the *materiale* of our sensations, a matter without a form, which is doubtless inconceivable” (*BL* 1:155). This interpretation of Kant, as Wellek has shown, follows Schelling in close paraphrase. But it is indeed Coleridge’s disappointment that Kant allowed for no heaven-descending in his deduction of the unity of apperception.

For such an explicit avowal of idealism, Coleridge turned to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of Fichte which he praised as “the key-stone of the arch.” Fichte made precisely the equation which Kant denied. For Fichte, self-consciousness is immediate. The Kantian abyss between the noumenal and the phenomenal is bridged, for Fichte claims access to one noumenal presence: the “I” itself. To be sure, the “I” is no thing-in-itself. Just as Kant presented the *cogito* (*Das: Ich denke*) as verb rather than noun, as act, so too for Fichte the “I” (*das Ich*), as Coleridge emphasizes, is “an act, instead of a thing or substance.” Departing from his mentor, Fichte made it an act exercised in and through the dynamism of universal idea. If Coleridge approved Fichte’s “key-stone” which linked the phenomenal with the noumenal “I,” why then did he add his harsh “burlesque on the Fichtean Egoismus”?

Here on this market-cross aloud I cry:
1, 1, 1! I itself 1!

Coleridge explains that Fichte’s “fundamental idea” was “overbuilt with a heavy mass of mere *notions,* and psychological acts of arbitrary reflection.” The net result, Coleridge charges, was that the *Wissenschaftslehre* “degenerated into a crude egoismus, a boastful and hyperstoic hostility to Nature, as lifeless, godless, and altogether unholy.” Having closed the arch to the noumenal, the universal “I,” Fichte was unable to cross over. His system became ever more encumbered with subjective apparatus. Instead of access to the divine, Fichte proved only self-centered deductions and grammatical postulates of God. As Coleridge’s mock-Fichte proclaims:
Self-construed, I all other moods decline:
Imperative, from nothing we derive us;
Yet as a super-postulate of mine,
Unconstrued antecedence I assign
To X, Y, Z, the God infinitivus!

The keystone, nevertheless, was in place; only the way across, the way to postulate all things in the absolute, was missing. "My Faith is with Fichte!" Coleridge exclaimed in an 1804 notebook entry. But even here, where he appreciates Fichte's reduction of the trinity—feeling, perception, thought—to the one universal of pure thought, Coleridge balked at the dehumanizing consequence: "never let me lose my reverence for the three distinctions, which are human & of our essence, as those of the 5 senses" (CN 2:2382).

In his commentary on Coleridge's references to Fichte, Orsini has included a remarkable identification of the Fichtean element in Coleridge's 1801 notebook entry on Tintern Abbey. Orsini could neither relate this passage to the Fichtean matter in the Biographia, nor describe its relevance to Coleridge's further concern with perception and apperception. His identification, however, provides valuable evidence. Dating the entry "February-March 1801," Coleridge begins with the Wordsworthian lines and proceeds to discuss apperception in the act of perception.

—and the deep power of Joy
We see into the Life of Things—

i.e.—By deep feeling we make our Ideas dim—& this is what we mean by our Life—ourselves. I think of the Wall—it is before me, a distinct Image—here. I necessarily think of the Idea and the Thinking as two distinct & opposite Things. Now let me think of myself—of the thinking Being—the Idea becomes dim whatever it be—so dim that I know not what it is—but the Feeling is deep & steady—and this I call I—identifying the Perceipient & the Perceived—.

Why, Orsini asks, should Coleridge think of a wall? Such an obtrusive image must have a pertinent source, he reasons. After a round-about search, he traces "the wall" through Henrik Steffens back to Fichte. Steffens recollects Fichte's lectures at Jena in 1799. Fichte had devised a mental experiment to demonstrate to his students the self-conscious presence in the act of perception:

'Gentlemen', said he, 'collect yourselves—go into yourselves—for we have here nothing to do with things without, but simply with the inner
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self. Thus summoned, the auditors appeared really go into themselves . . . ‘Gentlemen’, continued Fichte, ‘think the wall’.—(Denken Sie die Wand). This was a task to which the hearers were evidently all equal; they thought the wall. ‘Have you thought the wall?’ asked Fichte. ‘Well, then, gentlemen, think him who thought the wall’. It was curious to see the evident confusion and embarrassment that now arose. Many of his students seemed to be utterly unable to find him who had thought the wall.

Fichte, Orsini finds, had used as early as 1797 this mental experiment to demonstrate in the very act of thinking the unity of the thinker and the thing thought of. Orsini is so preoccupied with the Fichtean “wall” in Coleridge’s entry that he pays no attention to the non-Fichtean emphasis on feeling in Coleridge’s version of the mental experiment. Nor is Coleridge’s emphasis, however peculiar, merely an amalgam of Wordsworth and Fichte, for the commentary is as non-Wordsworthian as it is non-Fichtean. Wordsworth, to be sure, stresses feeling in describing memory’s first gift of “beauteous forms” in his isolation “in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din / Of towns and cities.” Here the remembered images bring “sensations sweet” which are felt through the body as they pass into “purer mind,” a process perhaps accompanied, Wordsworth suggests, by other “feelings . . . / Of unremembered pleasure.” The first gift of memory prompts a second,

Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of mystery
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened.

Just as he described the bodily process of sensations “Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,” he now describes the affections which “lead us on” spiritually yet suspend bodily motion until the very pulsation “Felt in the blood” seems still. At this moment, “we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul.” It is not the body stirred by feeling that can “see into the life of things,” but the soul “made quiet by the power / Of harmony and the deep power of joy.” For Wordsworth, material being is suspended in order to attain spiritual intercourse between the “living soul” and the essential “life of things.” Feelings are subdued that ideas may be released. Coleridge quotes these lines but describes the opposite process: ideas are subdued by feelings. The very dominance of perceptual sensation renders
the idea “so dim that I know not what it is—but the Feeling is deep & steady.” For Coleridge, the domination of feeling reveals the “I.”

This very same emphasis on feeling, the aesthesis of sensory engagement, produces the peculiar tension with the German texts in Coleridge’s efforts to adapt Schelling’s construction of apperception out of perception. This moment of identity, Schelling declared, was most fully realized in art. The act, which for Fichte provided the keystone in the arch between phenomenon and noumenon, Schelling recognizes as an aesthetic act. Thus the philosophy of art becomes the keystone for the entire philosophical structure (SW 3:349). Although Schelling argues that the most complete unity of subject and object, conscious and unconscious, is attained in aesthetic activity, he does not enter into the activity. He merely posits it, then traces its history. Principles and powers are the concern of Schelling’s discourse; he does not indulge the mental experiments of Fichte or verbally reenact the processes of perception. Even in his repeated examples of mental construction, Schelling limits his visual metaphors to bare geometric shapes: the circle, the triangle. Coleridge, of course, elaborates the visual metaphors. But his reshaping of Schelling is no mere cosmetic application of apt images. Coleridge delineates the process of perceptual engagement in order to confirm the Gestalt of the aesthetic act. Before examining this crucial modification, I shall briefly review Schelling’s presentation of apperception.

It is not enough for Schelling to declare that in apperception, subject and object coincide. He has to explain the coincidence. In opposition to Kant, he argues that this principle is independent, unconditional, immediate. Unlike Fichte, who began with the discovery of the perceiver in the thing perceived, Schelling plotted a two-fold course. The essays in his Zeit­schrift für spekulative Physik pursued +/− polarities as primal and formative principles in physical nature. The Jahrbücher der Medizin als Wissenschaft represented a parallel endeavor addressing human physiology. Schelling sought to establish these same formative principles in the living organism and its capacities of conscious reflection.11 Acknowledging that Coleridge owned the journals both on physics and medicine, Orsini apparently didn’t take them seriously as sources for Coleridge’s thought, for the jest with which he dismisses them seems pointless: “one can only hope that he [Coleridge] did not use them to prescribe for himself.” But Coleridge did indulge their prescriptions.12

In the Naturphilosophie, Schelling drew from contemporary physics the
argumen that the material world was wrought through the dynamism of electricity, magnetism, and galvanic or chemical affinity. But so, too, was mind. The energy of mind, he claimed, was identical to the energy of nature. Consciousness is a temporal affect of the spatial construct of electrical-magnetic-chemical interaction. In tracing that identity from the subjective rather than the objective perspective, Schelling defined his System der transcendentalen Idealismus as a necessary counterpart to his Naturphilosophie (SW 3:332). Through fundamental geometric postulation and construction, Schelling sought to demonstrate the principles of spatial and temporal intuition. The geometry does not merely demonstrate, as Kant would have it, the organizing activity of individual consciousness, it reveals the absolute. The System has six parts: 1) He posits self-consciousness as the highest principle of philosophy and deduces this principle from the coincidence of knowing and being in perception (here is the initial source for the ten theses in the Biographia); 2) he defines the productive imagination as a subject-object dialectic and demonstrates that its activity is potentially limitless, therefore absolute; 3) he recapitulates the activity of self-consciousness in the deduction of the absolute and recounts the three major "epochs" in the rise of self-consciousness: from sensation to productive imagination; from productive imagination to reflection; from reflection to the absolute act of will (the source for Coleridge's four stages of "inner sense"); 4) he investigates the practical implications (freedom, morality) of the self-consciousness as willing and acting; 5) he reviews the problem of freedom versus determinism in the teleological argument of nature; 6) he presents the philosophy of art based on the identity of mind and nature, freedom and necessity.

By affirming that the world known through perception is the real world, Schelling intended to deflate the counterargument of the Empiricists and Realists, whom he accused of leaving the perceiver isolated from reality and trapped in a world of illusions. But in avoiding the causality of sense impressions, Schelling simply assumed the truth of perception without delineating how sensations and feelings are transformed into images, or how the rapid and multiple barrage is unified into the whole of conscious experience. Even in his first effort to extrapolate the pertinent theses from Schelling's System, in his notebook entry of September, 1815 (CN 3:4265), Coleridge resisted the argument by principle and attempted to reinvoke the perceptual process. From Schelling's discussion of the relation of content to form, presented as a vicious circle in which every pretension to
form becomes a content yet to be ordered, Coleridge assembles thesis 2 (thesis 4, Scholium, in the *Biographia*). Schelling asked how to close this apparently open circle. Coleridge answers by taking the paradoxical circle as a literal, or rather, as a visual illusion, thus transforming the thesis into an account of the "endless cycle, a perpetual Interfusion . . . in a common Chaos" as opposed to the ordered circle or sphere.

But Coleridge does not stop here: when he elaborates the point in the *Biographia*, Schelling's endless train of philosophers searching for a systematic form, which always becomes subset within a yet unordered science, becomes "a string of blind men, each holding the skirt of the man before him." Not content to allegorize the fallacy of "a chain without a staple," a logical sorites without a valid first principle, Coleridge goes on to explain how perception, as well as reason, can be duped into overlooking the absurdity, "owing to a surreptitious act of the imagination, which instinctively and without our noticing the same, not only fills out the intervening spaces, and contemplates the cycle . . . as a continuous circle giving to all collectively the unity of their common orbit; but likewise supplies by a sort of *subintelligitur* the one central power, which renders the movement harmonious and cyclical" (*BL* 1:267).

The account in the *Logic* carries the problem of perceptual order even further. Here, before he introduces the Schellingian theses, he ponders the "mental forms or primary moulds" through which the mind has its "power of conferring unity." Indebted to Schelling's use of geometric construction as "primary intuition," Coleridge talks of "predetermining the figure" in the mind as an act of conception that precedes and informs perception. He presents apperception as catching the mind in this very act of imposing conception upon perception. He might have followed the arguments in *Ideen zu einer philosophie der Natur* (1797), *Von der Weltsseele* (1798), or *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (1799). But these emphasize construction as physical energy rather than as cognitive process. Instead of adopting Schelling's terms of construction, *scheme, image, symbol*, Coleridge introduces the eidetic imagination. In order to reveal the informing activity, the *energeia theoretike*, he chooses to rely on some mental experiments of his own: "there is but one way—that of placing yourself in such situations, or as it were positions, of mind as would be likely to call up that act in our intellectual being and then to attend to it as its necessary transient and subtle nature will permit" (*Logic* 73–74). His first situation is commonplace: the eye "connecting two bright stars" and
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seeming, at the outset, "to have something between a sense and a sensation of length" and then, "to find myself acting as it were in the construction of that length undisturbed by any accompanying perception of breadth or inequality which must needs accompany all pictures of a line." From this simple situation, he turns to one more complex, cited from a report of Reaumur and confirmed, twice Coleridge says, by his own experience: the triangles and circles or spirals seen in the night-flight of ephemerae by torchlight or moonlight. The purpose of "this apparent digression," he declares, is to call attention to "acts of imagination that are one with the products of those acts" and to reveal the mind "as a subject that is its own object, an eye, as it were, that is its own mirror, beholding and self-beheld" (Logic 75–76).

In the notebook Coleridge relies on the System des transcendentalen Idealismus (1800) without the recourse to the earlier Fichtean position. In revising the argument for the Biographia, he returns in the first six theses to Schelling's early response to Fichte's presentation of sensory engagement; he alters 5 and 6, and expands 7 and 10. Then, in revisiting the argument in his Logic, he builds a more careful introduction on perceptual processes and rearranges the theses: 7, 5, 6, 2, 4. This sequence, from individual to universal, reiterates the act of perception in each extension of apperception as the ultimate principle of unity.

There is no departure from Schelling in Coleridge's confirmation that "a principle of unity is contributed by the mind itself." However, it is only Coleridge, not Schelling, who discriminates the perceptual modes, even when he declares that "it is altogether indifferent whether it be the matter of a waking perception, as a perception of a rainbow, or the matter of a waking intuition, as in the imaginative formation of a diagram in the geometrical contemplations, or lastly the matter of a phantasm, 'the stuff that dreams are made of'" (Logic 77). It is only Coleridge, not Schelling, who describes how the "perciipient energies" give form and shape and how the mind discovers this activity in reflection. Schelling merely posits; Coleridge reenacts the performance.