Annotating the Annotations:
A Philosophical Reading of the
Primary and Secondary Imagination

J. Fisher Solomon

The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

—BL 1:304

Playfully gnomic and self-consciously evasive, Coleridge’s famous definition of the primary and secondary imagination challenges its annotator to provide not only a genealogy for the passage in question, but a meaning as well. Each project equally relies upon the other, and each is equally ambiguous. For if Coleridge’s meaning is unclear, the synthetic nature of his work obscures his intellectual line of descent as well. Thus, one of his most recent annotators can remark that “if Coleridge had a main source he also had many other sources—and his own thoughts as well” (BL 1:lxxxviii). Influence and inspiration blend here in a baffling amalgam whose precise nature is difficult to judge. Without some determination of the influences behind the theorem, we can hardly begin to interpret it; but without some sense of these sentences’ meaning, we cannot be certain just who is behind them.

But Coleridge presents us a third challenge as well. That is, once we
have determined the genealogy and the meaning of Coleridge’s specula-
tions, we have still to consider just what they accomplish. The decline of
the “imagination” as a vital philosophical topic has ushered Coleridge out
of philosophy into history and literature; but while we need not restore
the imagination as such to its former speculative prominence, we may still
reconsider it as a response to some fundamental epistemological and onto-
logical problems that have hardly gone away. In other words, Coleridge’s
remarks on the imagination lay a philosophical as well as a historical claim
upon us, and we can respond to that claim profitably.

Before pursuing this philosophical line of analysis, however, we still
must begin where the annotators begin—with a historical survey of what
the concept of the *imagination in general* once meant and what philosophi-
cal problems it meant to resolve. We cannot begin to distinguish degrees
of the imagination, in other words, without first determining what the
*imagination in general* is. But I will focus here not on the many functions
that the imagination came to serve for philosophy, but rather on the basic
philosophical questions that the theory of the imagination seeks to answer.
And at first, of course, the scope of such questions was rather limited.

As James Engell and W. J. Bate report, the role of the imagination
was traditionally restricted to the “old task of the perception and reten-
tion of sense images for re-presentation” (*BL* 1:lxxxvi). Thus conceived,
the imagination answered a strictly empirical question: How do we per-
ceive our world? Constituted in so narrow a sensory context, the imagina-
tion is a rather empty, passive human faculty, but later developments in
eighteenth-century philosophy would eventually lead to its promotion to
at once a more active and a more “metaphysical” status. Entire volumes,
of course, have been written to trace this evolution of the imagination
from a passively perceptual to an actively productive concept; but rather
than attempting to reproduce the course of that evolution here, we might
more efficiently limit our discussion to the changing questions that the
imagination-as-a-faculty concept came to address. Our focus, then, is not
so much on the imagination as such as it is an inquiry into the problems
that the imagination came to be involved in. And it is by so staging the
*imagination in general* that we may determine its relevance to contemporary
philosophy.

Our inaugurating question now is not “how do we perceive our world?”
but “how do we know our world?” Cartesian rationalism answered this sec-
ond question in such a way as to exclude the first. Knowledge for this
tradition is constituted in accordance with the innate ideas supplied by the intuitive reason. Perception cannot be trusted. Such a perspective, as Engell remarks, has little room for a positive imagination (Engell 1981, 20); but as the British empiricists came to ask the same question, their restriction of the empirically unaided reason to “deduction, logic, and effort” (Engell 1981, 19) necessarily expanded the epistemological role of the imagination. Accordingly, the old perceptual faculty found a new conceptual field in which to flourish.

Still, if John Locke had simply restricted our knowledge to the purely objective perception and retention of direct experience, had held, that is, to the most simplistically positivistic interpretation of the “tabula rasa,” then no pressure for an expanded imagination in general would have been exerted upon English (and continental) philosophy. All that would have been needed would have been a theory of sense perception (of the eyes, ears, and touch). But, of course, Locke conceived the mind in a productive as well as a reproductive sense (see Engell 1981, 18—19). The mind has to organize its simplest experiences in order to constitute its knowledge. It is active as well as passive. A voluntary association of ideas, in other words, presumes some organizational, constitutive power. And here the imagination found its opportunity, eventually becoming a name for this new faculty (see Engell 1981, 19—20).

But what I wish to suggest is that in the Romantic development of the “imagination,” the failure to rid it of its lingering reproductive and representational nature would eventually lead to its own ontological contradiction. That is to say, as the imagination came to occupy a greater and greater place in Romantic epistemology, the fact that it continued to carry with it a representational as well as a constitutive connotation finally led to the sort of metaphysical contortions that we find in our own passage from chapter 13 of the Biographia Literaria. But rather than announce that the “imagination” therefore constitutes its own contradiction, I will argue that the ontological difficulties that a representational imagination may raise can be resolved once we see that the power that the Romantics called the imagination (and which might be called something else) has no simply reproductive or representative side at all. The mind is not both passive and active: it is wholly active. And the implications of this require of us not only a rethinking of the imagination, but (in a more contemporary context) a rethinking of ontology itself.

To demonstrate the wholly nonrepresentational nature of the imagi-
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nation, we might begin with the same Kantian epistemological challenge that Coleridge faced. When Kant divided reality into its phenomenal and noumenal realms—arguing that outward “objects are quite unknown to us in themselves, and what we call outward objects, are nothing else but mere representations [Vorstellungen] of our sensibility” (Kant 1884, 28)—he effectively inscribed a gap between knowing and being, a representational spacing that would quickly raise a new question for philosophy. That is, we now have to ask just how phenomenal subjects can ever achieve ontological unity with the noumenal objects that ground their experience. How does “mind” match “reality”? Taking his lead from Schelling, Coleridge himself first decided that if such questions were to receive any answers at all Kant’s own remarks concerning the Ding an sich would have to be reexamined and qualified. And so, in chapter 9 of the Biographia, Coleridge observes how:

In spite of [Kant’s] declarations, I could never believe, it was possible for him 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 form, which is doubtless inconceivable. (BL 1:155)

For Coleridge, in other words, nature in itself could not be conceived as mere shapeless matter. It too had to embody a formal principle, had to be creative just as the mind is creative. As natura naturans (as well as natura naturata) nature thus had something in common with phenomenal subjectivity, and what it had in common, of course, was the imagination (see Engell 1981, 333).

To demonstrate this imaginative essence of outward nature, the transcendental philosopher had first to demonstrate that the material phenomena of our categorical experience are finally ephemeral. Matter has to be sublimated to uncover the formal principle within. In this, too, Coleridge closely follows Schelling, remarking in chapter 12 of the Biographia that:

The phaenomena (the material) must wholly disappear, and the laws alone (the formal) must remain. Thence it comes, that in nature itself the more the principle of law breaks forth, the more does the husk drop off, the phaenomena themselves become more spiritual and at length cease in our consciousness. . . . The theory of natural philosophy would
be then completed, when all nature was demonstrated to be identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-consciousness. (BL 1:256)

Thus in the grand Romantic dialectic, human intelligence discovers through its own imaginative acts of self-consciousness that nature too, as it is governed by laws, is also an intelligence. The spirit of man and the spirit of nature finally meet: the gap between mind and matter is crossed.

But there's a hitch. For if, as Coleridge notes in chapter 12 of the Biographia, subjective intelligence must be "conceived of as exclusively representative" (Vorstellende in Schelling) and objective nature must be conceived "as exclusively represented" (Vorstellbare in Schelling), then we still have a representational gap inscribed between being and knowing, a difference between the representation and the represented (see BL 1:255 and 253, n.3). Coleridge tries to resolve this contradiction in his own definition of the imagination, but we have yet a stubborn representational space to cross, and in attempting to cross that space Coleridge finally obscures his own solution.

At this point we may turn back to our passage from chapter 13 of the Biographia. Epistemologically, Coleridge's definition seems quite clear. The primary imagination, which we might see to be a kind of synthesis of Schelling's erste Potenz (or sensory perception) and zweite Potenz (or productive perception; see Engell 1981, 306–07), is that faculty responsible for our essential perception of the world. It both receives and organizes sensory stimuli, passively responding to and actively reproducing its perception of outer reality. The secondary imagination, or the esthetic power, reorganizes what the primary imagination has received and constituted in order to create supranatural configurations still tied to nature through their connection to the primary imagination but not to be found, as such, in nature. But even Coleridge saw that his epistemological explanation did not wholly achieve what it had set out to do. That is, the concept of the imagination in general was conceived to answer not only the question "how do we know our world?" but also "how can we be reunified with our world; how can being and knowing be reconciled?" So Coleridge adds to his epistemological definition of the imagination an ontological dimension, insisting that the primary imagination functions "as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." But now we are faced with yet another spacing, for if the finite primary imagination repeats the acts of an infinite imagination, how can the two ever be
brought into unity? What mediation can there be between finitude and infinitude?

That such questions are no mere anachronism (questions we impose upon the past) can be seen through Coleridge’s own attempts to ontologically ground his conception of the imagination in general. He too sought for a convincing point of mediation between an infinite and a finite imagination. Thus, in chapter 12 of the Biographia, Coleridge tries to demonstrate how self-consciousness must lead necessarily to absolute consciousness: how finite knowledge leads us irresistibly to infinite Being. Coleridge’s proof runs as follows:

**THESIS I.**
Truth is correlative to being. Knowledge without a corresponding reality is no knowledge . . . To know is in its very essence a verb active.

**THESIS II.**
All truth is either mediate, that is, derived from some other truth or truths; or immediate and original. The latter is absolute . . . the former is of dependent or conditional certainty . . .

Thus:

**THESIS III.**
We are to seek therefore for some absolute truth . . . a truth self-grounded, unconditional and known by its own light. In short, we have to find a somewhat which is simply because it is. In order to be such, it must be one with its own predicate . . . to preclude the possibility of requiring a cause or antecedent without an absurdity.

But:

**THESIS V.**
Such a principle cannot be any thing or object. Each thing is what it is in consequence of some other thing . . .

But neither can the principle be found in a subject as a subject, contradistinguished from an object . . . It is to be found therefore neither in object or subject taken separately, and consequently, as no other third is conceivable, it must be found in that which is neither subject nor object exclusively, but which is the identity of both.

And so:

**THESIS VI.**
This principle, and so characterized manifests itself in the sum or I am; which I shall hereafter indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self,
and self-consciousness. In this, and this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. . . . It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses. (BL 1:264–73)

In chapter 13 of the Biographia, of course, Coleridge will equate this self-duplicating power with the imagination, thus identifying the imagination in general (as knowledge) with absolute truth (as being). But the success of Coleridge’s dialectical union of knowing and being through the imagination finally relies less upon logic than faith, as Coleridge openly proclaims in his ninth thesis how “We begin with the 1 KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute 1 AM. We proceed from the self, in order to lose and find all self in God” (BL 1:283). In later experimental attempts to synthesize religion and philosophy, Coleridge will continue to identify the dialectical ground of knowing and being with a personal God (as a Prothesis), and with each successive readjustment first of the Pythagorean Tetractys (see Engell 1981, 364–65) and then of his various Pentads, Coleridge will increasingly shore up his philosophy with religious appeals that his own sources felt compelled to resist. Indeed, Schelling himself observed “that theoretical philosophy cannot, given its own criteria, successfully assert that God is the ground of our knowledge” (BL 1:274, n.2).

But I do not raise this sufficiently obvious objection in order to dismiss Coleridge’s philosophy of the imagination out of hand as a mere appeal to an undemonstrated presence. Rather, I suggest that if we look less at what Coleridge’s words seem to say and more at what they actually do, we may discover how his philosophy leads to a new ontological reconciliation between being and knowing on the basis of a power that we need neither ground in God nor strictly identify with a transcendency, but which can be discerned precisely within Coleridge’s own definitions.

So let’s repeat the problem: as an epistemological faculty, Coleridge’s primary and secondary imagination offers us no particular difficulties. As a nonphysiological explanation for the facts of sensory perception and aesthetic construction, the imagination simply names a psychological agency (accounts, that is, for our knowledge and creativity). But when this same concept attempts to explain just how our knowledge transcends itself to attain union with what it knows, our epistemological problem becomes an ontological one. Knowing must become being, and in the imagination, Coleridge thought that he had found the dialectical link. But without an
appeal to a divine imagination able to mediate fully with our finite imaginations, knowing remains cut off, as Kant predicted, from the noumenal being that grounds our knowledge. All that we really have are representations, and even Coleridge's primary imagination can only come so close to absolute reality as a repetition can afford.

But what if we look at knowledge differently? What if outward objects are not conceived as mere representations, Vorstellungen, of our sensibility? The whole problem of a "knowing" cut off from "being," I suggest, begins precisely where we define knowledge as representational at all, as Vorstellen: something placed before, a substitution. And although the Romantic development of the imagination was constituted exactly to combat the passive sense of representational knowledge, the imagination, either as Vorstellungskraft (see BL 1:1xxxvi) or even as Einbildungskraft, still retains a duality that it cannot really overcome as so conceived. But this does not mean that the power that the concept of the imagination seeks to name is itself so frustrated.

Before turning to the words that might more accurately define the dynamically constitutive nature of the power that the term "imagination" tries to designate, we might first explore the shortcomings of the available terms further. As Vorstellungskraft, the imagination only substitutes a sensory image for what it perceives; it places something before and hence erects a barrier between knowing and being. It connotes a purely representational, substitutive power. But as Einbildungskraft, the imagination still erects a barrier, albeit an inadvertant one. To refer to Coleridge's own understanding of this term, we find Einbildungskraft meaning "the power of forming into one, an act on which all creation is founded. It is the power through which an ideal is also something real, the soul the body . . ." (see Engell 1981, 304). Or, as Engell glosses Schelling's understanding of the imagination as Einbildungskraft:

In each object or work of art it creates, the imagination fuses a universal form, the infinite or 'Unendliche,' and a finite, individual manifestation. The idea of form, and form's concretion as matter, become indivisibly one and exist in and through one another. In the imaginative act two unities are formed, each of which is really the other. Form becomes being and being becomes form. (Engell 1981, 305)

But so long as we conceive reality in terms of any polar oppositions at all (infinitude/finitude, ideal/real, form/matter), we have set up polarities that we need not have set up. Indeed, when we do set them up, even in
the name of a power that will reconcile them, we find ourselves in such ontological difficulties that we must speak of one “unity” that is “really” another. What does it mean, ontologically, to say that one thing is only insofar as it is something else? Doesn’t this suggest a dialectical ontology that is “always already” divided by a prior difference; that nature itself is hinged, and thus never fully available to knowledge?

Readers of Jacques Derrida will immediately recognize such observations as these, but I raise them here not to suggest that the imagination must thus face up to its own contradictions. To the contrary, I suggest that the power (Kraft) that the imagination (either as Vorstellungskraft or as Einbildungskraft) seeks to define is not well served by terms that either work by representational substitution or by oppositional unification. But if, as I am arguing, “imaginational knowledge” is not representational, then what is it? And if “being,” or “reality,” is never present either in oppositional terms or as the unity of its oppositions, then what is it? How can we say that “being” is neither dualistically divided nor fundamentally unified?

What I wish to suggest is that when we look closely at the power that the imagination names, we discover an ontology that is neither precisely dualistic nor unified, neither dyad nor monad, and that it is only by this understanding that such statements as Engell’s that in “the imaginative act two unities are formed, each of which is really the other” can make any sense. I am not arguing that Schelling and Coleridge are “wrong”; however, their descriptions of the imagination imply an ontology according to which we have neither finite singularity nor infinite universality available at any moment for unification. Instead, the ontology of the power before us appears the moment we cease to oppose any two such “unities” for even an instant. We have neither a simple (or unified) self-present power (the imagination) nor the dialectical difference between dissolved oppositions. What we have, as I shall argue, is a power with a difference: what I shall call “power-and-difference.”

At this point our project becomes enormous, but some outlines for a demonstration of the imagination as an ontological and epistemological structure in power-and-difference may be briefly provided by examining a fragmentary commentary of Coleridge’s on Aristotle’s Categories that we find appended to the Bollingen edition of his Logic (1981, 287–89). Here Coleridge seeks rather desperately to sort out exactly what Aristotle meant to say about the relation between knowing (or “what is said,” ta legomena) and being (or “what really is,” ta onta) in the Categories, crossing out one
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explanation after another only to finally abandon the attempt. But before abandoning his essay, Coleridge precisely indicates the problem at hand and even a possible solution.

The trouble, Coleridge finds, is that Aristotle appears to make a distinction between “what is said” (the *legomenon* or “Dicta”) and “what is” (the *onta* or “Entia”), a distinction that Coleridge “confesses” he “cannot at all understand” (289). “But,” Coleridge continues, “it by [no] [sic] means appears, that Aristotle meant absolute distinction” (289). Coleridge thus questions the distinction between *legomena* and *onta* because of his discovery that if *legomena* are “general terms” rather than singulars, so too are *onta* (as universal substance, particular accidents, and universal accidents: 288). *Both* the *legomenon* and the *onta* appear to be “general terms,” knowledge: “what is said.” But if this is the case, what has happened to the “what is”? Have we only knowledge without being?

Coleridge, however, remarks a fourth species of *onta*, Aristotle’s “particular substance” (“Thomas,” “John,” or “Peter”), which appears to resolve our difficulty. Certainly “John,” as a *particular* substance or entity, is no mere general term. Certainly “John is” whether we say so or not. Aristotle evidently thought so, and took care to categorize the individual entity as the primary ground for knowledge and being, defining it thus as primary *ousia* (C5, 2a, 11–14). And yet, even primary *ousia* has its implicit complications, as well as certain explicit ones. That is to say, as Joseph Owens points out with respect to the explicit intentions of Aristotle’s later definitions of primary *ousia* in the *Metaphysics*, what is most primary in primary being is not a solid individual but a *form*, a “this,” a *tode ti* (Owens 317, 388–89). “What is,” then, qua “form,” “cannot be a singular,” Owens explains, “because it is knowable and definable,” and “... cannot be universal, because it is Entity, and the primary instance of Entity” (388–89). But if primary being is thus neither singular nor plural, then we must find some name for it. “The term ‘a this,’” Owens remarks, “serves the purpose quite conveniently” (389).

Let us look at this “this,” this *tode ti*, a moment. As the *Metaphysics* makes clear, it is not the sole “entity” (or “substance,” or “being”), only the most prior. Matter, and the composition of matter and form, are also “entity” (see Owens 330). But now (to depart from Aristotle) we might ask if it is either necessary or possible to so prioritize being. If matter consists in its potency (*dunamis*) or its power to become formally actual, is it not the composition of potency and actuality, matter and form, that determines a
being, a “this”? This is not Aristotle, but it might be Coleridge, because in this dialectical complement of matter and form in the non-Aristotelian “this” we may find a model for an imagination that is also a kind of “this”: a being that is neither singular nor plural.

If we may regard the “thisness” of being, that is, as a dialectical structure that can be reduced neither to material potency alone nor to formal actuality alone, then what is required is a power to perform the composition of the “two.” But do we really need to transcendentalize this power as, for example, an “efficient cause” or an “Infinite Imagination”? Might we not say that the power (dunamis) or potency for the composite is immanent in the very relation between matter and form? Could it not be argued that every “this” constitutes the dialectical complement of a material potency and an actualizing form (which, by determining its material complement, simultaneously differentiates or discriminates it from undetermined matter) whose very potential is inscribed within the relation? Do we not have here a certain power with its own differentiating capacity which is never “outside” it, a neither singular nor plural “being” that we might equally call “power-and-difference”?

In so questioning, I do not mean to identify such questions with either Aristotle or Coleridge (Aristotelian “difference,” for instance, cannot be equated with “form”), but if we look at the “this” in this non-Aristotelian way we find a being that is actually quite close to the Romantic “symbol.” For in the symbol’s own complementary dialectic of matter and form or expression and meaning we find a similar phenomenon that is neither singular nor plural, but not simply a pure form. And the imagination that is so involved in the symbol is not something that is outside the symbol: it is the idea that both particularizes matter and is expressed by matter. It, too, is a structure in power-and-difference.

Thus, we might say that the infinite I AM is simply the dialectical being, the “this,” of nature: the power-and-difference of material potency and formal determination. The primary imagination, in constituting its own “this,” and the secondary imagination, in constituting its own “this” as esthetic symbol, thus instantiate the structure of being on the order of the same, not as a mere repetition or representation. Should we not say that our knowledge and our symbols are not simply substitutions (Vorstellungen) for being, but are being itself: that is, a complex, dynamic process of phenomenal constitution that cannot be differentiated simply from any tode ti? Is not “what is real,” finally, the structure of such constitutions, and isn’t the imagination one such structure, one such “this”?
Perhaps we might see that the imagination neither unifies opposites (*Einbildung*) nor repeats a "higher" power. It is its own power and potency with its own formational actualization. I have called this integration of undifferentiated potency (*dunamis*) and differentiated actuality "power-and-difference" in order to suggest by hyphenation and italic emphasis a term which, like a "this," is neither singular nor plural. This is where Coleridge's mysterious pronouncements on the imagination may possibly lead us: to an understanding that nothing, neither imaginational knowledge nor the world that it knows, ever subsists either simply or with any order of priority. "What is" has no singular component, no *first* principle, but it may still be *principled*.