

**Coleridge and Emerson:
A Complex Affinity**

by

Sanja Sostaric

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Abbreviations

- CW *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn et al. (London: Routledge, 1971-1990).
- CL *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1959).
- PL *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Hitherto Unpublished*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: The Pilot Press, 1949).
- CN *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn et al. (London: Routledge, 1957-1990).
- ECW *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971-1994).
- EW *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. James Elliot Cabot, Standard Library Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1855-1887).
- JMN *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-1982).
- L *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939-1995).
- EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959-1972).
- ES *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert von Frank et al. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989-1992).
- SE *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982).

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Introduction

The ties of American Transcendentalism to English Romanticism and, more specifically, Emerson's indebtedness to Coleridge have long been noted. Thus the present work is by no means a spectacular launch into unknown or unexplored territory. However, it claims to offer an in-depth study of the general assumptions that Coleridge was the important mediator of Kantian notions for Emerson, that Coleridge's concept of Reason and his demand for an internalized religion significantly contributed to the formulation of Emerson's transcendentalism, and that Coleridge's theory of imagination had a profound impact on Emerson's aesthetics. My aim has been to move beyond these assumptions and to offer a more differentiated view of what has too frequently been taken for granted. For instance, with regard to the Kant-Coleridge-Emerson link, I will show that Emerson drastically extended both Kant's and Coleridge's notion of Reason, while he justified such a radical modification by drawing on Coleridge's definition of Reason, i.e. by using Coleridge's ideas against Coleridge himself.

As a result, this study hopes to shed light on the complexity of Emerson's intellectual ties to Coleridge. I will argue that this complexity stems from an ambivalence inherent in both Coleridge's and Emerson's thinking. The depth of this ambivalence has not been fully appreciated.

The first half deals with Coleridge and, considering Coleridge's insistence on the fundamental connection of philosophy, religion, and art, concentrates first on the philosophical and theological foundations of Coleridge's system, and second, on Coleridge's central aesthetic concepts. The Coleridge section 'prepares' for Emerson, insofar as it topicalizes the perennial tension in Coleridge's system between Christian dualism and 'subversive' monism, a tension which Coleridge attempted to resolve by drawing on a variety of conflicting theories and which was responsible for the subsequent misinterpretation of Coleridge in America.

Coleridge's attempt to harmonize the concepts of Christianity and monism, which determined all aspects of his thinking, was applied in aesthetics above all through his notion of imagination, which was, in opposition to neoclassicism, designed to secure a divine authorization for art and, at the same time, to ensure adherence to poetic convention to guard against the overpowering neoplatonic Spirit and/or the Schellingian unconscious, which threatened to destroy the individual.

My discussion of Coleridge opens by identifying the reconciliation of opposites as a central theme of Coleridge's whole work. A connection is established between Coleridge's philosophical attempts at formulating a 'unified' theory of life and his disappointment with the limited perspective of both empiricism and rationalism.

The subsequent chapters on Coleridge offer a detailed account of Coleridge's search for a suitable theory which could effectively revitalize Christianity without questioning its basic premises. Therefore, these chapters show how Coleridge successively tested associationism, Kant's transcendental idealism, and monism as to their compatibility with the Christian view.

The chapter on associationism includes a survey of the principal associationist tenets contained in David Hartley's theory which, in turn, represent a refinement of Locke's ideas. Also, it records the history of Coleridge's fascination with and subsequent rejection of associationism and shows that Coleridge's disappointment with associationism stemmed from his realisation that associationism failed to adequately reconcile scientific and religious truth.

After the 'associationistic' phase, Coleridge turned to other, more promising theories. He devoted himself with equal energy to Cudworth and Berkeley, Plotinus and Spinoza. Nevertheless, it was only Kant's philosophy that, at least temporarily, seemed to offer an ideal combination of not only self-consciousness and nature but also science and religion. However, Coleridge violated the Kantian balance

and used Kant for purposes of his own. This aspect of Coleridge is treated in chapters three through five.

In the third chapter, the emphasis is on Coleridge's modification of the Kantian phenomenon/noumenon distinction: Coleridge interpreted Kant's dualism as an argument for Christianity insofar as he insisted that the ideas of Reason reflected objective reality. This was in sharp contrast to Kant, who had used his dualistic system to emancipate philosophy from dogmatic metaphysics, irrationality, and/or mysticism and thus to confirm philosophy as a science.

Chapter four deals with Coleridge's similar modification of Kant's famous Reason/Understanding distinction, in which Coleridge rejected Kant's skepticism regarding the knowableness of ideas of Reason. An attempt has been made to show how Coleridge sharpened the Kantian differentiation of Reason and Understanding and how he promoted a view of knowledge as something that did not necessarily depend on external experience. At the same time, Coleridge enlarged the authority of Reason by admitting that the Kantian limitations applied exclusively to speculative Reason, and by representing practical Reason as a source of valid knowledge. Although even Kant—in the realm of morality—allowed for the possibility of ideas of Reason to be constitutive, Coleridge expanded the sovereignty of Reason from morality to epistemology and aesthetics. Furthermore, he overcame Kant's skepticism by insisting that Christian doctrine represents a true interpretation of the ideas of practical Reason, i.e. by relating the concept of Reason to the concept of the Christian God.

Chapter five introduces the last five chapters on Coleridge which concentrate more specifically on aesthetic issues. It focuses on Coleridge's abandonment of Kant's aesthetics as well as on the crucial differences between Coleridge's and Kant's understanding of art, i.e. Coleridge's establishment of a closer link between imagination and Reason, which, more specifically, entails his elevation of imagination above

Understanding, a belief which led to his rejection of not only the neoclassical position, but also of Kant's.

In chapter six, I discuss Coleridge's radical differentiation between fancy and imagination which turned art into a mode of Revelation. Coleridge's view of these two faculties is also placed in the wider context of the frequently confusing history of usage of the terms *phantasia* and *imaginatio* from Antiquity to Coleridge's time.

Chapter seven focuses on Coleridge's interest in monism as an expression of his desire to establish a more immediate link between God and the world. I show that, despite Coleridge's 'correction' of monism with Christianity, he readily explored the views of mind/matter interaction offered by Plotinus, Spinoza, and Schelling. With respect to Plotinus, I not only point to the significance of his theory of the One and the Many for Coleridge's understanding of the mind/nature relationship, but I also highlight differences between Coleridge's and Plotinus' panentheism. A further theme treated here is Coleridge's criticism of Plotinus, prompted by the realisation (reminiscent of Coleridge's earlier disappointment with associationism) that Neoplatonism threatens Christianity. The chapter closes with an investigation of Coleridge's application in *Biographia Literaria* of Schelling's theory of subject/object identity as well as his criticism of epistemological realism.

In chapter eight I show that the monistic position proved to be more compatible with Coleridge's poetic concerns than with his philosophy. The important issue here is how Coleridge's aesthetics were affected by Plotinus' theory of the beautiful and Plotinus' view of the soul/body interaction as well as Schelling's synthesis of art and philosophy. At the same time, I point out that the impact of monism on Coleridge should not be over-emphasized. The final part of this chapter deals in more detail with Coleridge's modification of Schelling's aesthetics through the Christian concepts of the trinity and the Logos. It also deals with the connection between Coleridge's distinction of primary and secondary

imagination and Schelling's theory of *Potenzen*, and touches on the controversy concerning the relationship between these two kinds of imagination.

Another aspect of Coleridge's belief in art as religious knowledge, treated in the final chapter of the section on Coleridge, was articulated through Coleridge's theory of the symbol, which combined Schelling's and Schlegel's positions. Furthermore, I show that the result of Coleridge's reconciliation efforts, also expressed in the theory of the symbol, was characterized by an ambivalence reflected in the fact that Coleridge's acceptance of the organic theory collided with his affirmation of the conscious element in art. Furthermore, I show that whenever Coleridge wanted to link art to the noumenal realm, he, paradoxically, used monistic instead of Christian rhetoric, unaware that it relativized his professed Christian view.

The section on Emerson begins in chapter one with a survey of Emerson's early intellectual position, primarily determined by Scottish common sense philosophy and Unitarianism, and establishes a connection between Emerson's Unitarian tradition and his later transcendentalism. With respect to Coleridge, the investigation of early Emerson is interesting, not because it parallels Coleridge's early fascination with associationism, but because it shows how Unitarian insistence on Reason as a reliable inner guide prepared Emerson for his adoption of Coleridge's concept of Reason.

Chapter two explores Emerson's intellectual movement from Unitarianism to transcendentalism, in which Coleridge's ideas played a crucial role. In the first part of the chapter, I specifically refer to Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, a book in which he most comprehensively expressed his demand for the reconciliation of practical Reason and Scripture. Also, I discuss James Marsh's publication of the book. My aim is to point out both the ambitiousness and the ambivalence of Coleridge's attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, i.e. to combine intuitionism with official Christianity, and also, to

indicate that the difficulty (if not the insolubleness) of that task made Coleridge's theory subject to misinterpretation. I show that the misinterpretation of Coleridge in America began with the very publication of *Aids*, a book which, instead of settling, intensified American theological controversy.

In the second part of the chapter I turn to Emerson's transition from Unitarian intellectualism to Coleridgean emotionalism after his disillusionment with both Locke and the Scottish school. I also concentrate on Emerson's modification of Coleridge's concept of Reason, which is reflected in Emerson's tendency to confound the divine and the human, which went far beyond Coleridge's intention.

The third chapter represents a detailed exploration of Emerson's 'monistic reading' of Coleridge's Reason/Understanding and genius/talent distinctions. Here, I describe the connection between Emerson's modification of Coleridge's distinctions and the powerful influence of the neoplatonic doctrine of the Two Worlds founded on the antagonistic view of the soul/body relation on Emerson's theory. Furthermore, I show that the genius/talent distinction in Emerson is less restricted to aesthetics, insofar as it, just as the distinction made between Reason and Understanding, was basically a form of the soul/body dichotomy.

In the final chapter I show that, with respect to aesthetics, Emerson's dedication to mysticism, which is reflected in part in his modification of Coleridge's concepts, resulted in his insistence on inspiration, in his problematization of the notion of authorship and, finally, in his theoretical neglect of formal issues. All these factors distinguish his aesthetics from Coleridge's, despite their common initial position, which is characterized by an endeavor to link art to the noumenal, an endeavor prompted, in Coleridge's case, by dissatisfaction with associationism and Kant, and in Emerson's case, with Scottish philosophy.

First, I focus on Emerson's neglect of Coleridge's imagination/fancy distinction which was propelled by the

soul/body polarization in Emerson's system and by Emerson's inclination toward identifying imagination with Reason itself. Then, I deal with further aspects of Emerson's aesthetics, all of which are included in his radical emphasis on content in art, and which reflect his mystical preoccupation with the Spirit, i.e. Emerson's disregard of Coleridge's secondary imagination linked to his one-sided interest in the imagination's 'symbol-piercing' force, his interpretation of creativity in terms of a suppression of the individual, and his use of the organic theory as an argument against theoretical discussion of poetic form. Also, a connection is established between Emerson's poetic theory and the neoplatonic theory of the beautiful, which are both tied to the notion of immaterial beauty. Finally, Emerson's dilemma regarding art's significance, formulated in his theory as a constant shift between the desire to retreat into the silence of mystical vision and the desire for expression, is compared to Coleridge's point of view.

Emerson's intricate use of Coleridge's theory shows that correspondences are just as important as differences or, more precisely, that the relation between the two theories consists of extremely subtle shifts which should not be oversimplified. It is important to recognize that, just as Coleridge always felt compelled to assert his Christian position against the temptation of monism, Emerson sought ways to reassert his, essentially, mystical belief in the ultimate conquest of Spirit in view of growing skepticism and the sense of human limitation. Thus, neither was Coleridge an uninhibited reconciler, nor was Emerson an uninhibited mystic.

Yet, despite their similarities, the most difficult task is not to lose sight of views and formulations which distinguish Coleridge's and Emerson's philosophy and aesthetics from each other. Stressing Emerson's modifications of Coleridge illustrates the essential difference of positions at which the two theories finally arrived, although these positions were basically generated by an identical attempt to establish a

closer link between the individual (and, more specifically, the poet) and the divine sphere.

With regard to secondary literature and criticism, this work is connected with two studies which, each in its own way, refer to the central importance of Coleridge's ideas for Emerson: Thomas Krusche's *R. W. Emersons Naturauffassung und ihre philosophischen Ursprünge* (1987), which explores the philosophical origins of Emerson's concept of nature, and Peter Carafiol's *Transcendent Reason* (1982), a book which describes the role of James Marsh in the propagation of Coleridge's ideas in the United States.

Krusche sees Coleridge as a thinker who crucially influenced the development of Emerson's transcendentalist views. My perspective corresponds to Krusche's insofar as I confirm Krusche's main thesis regarding the connection between Coleridge and Emerson, according to which Emerson's philosophy represents the last phase of a process initiated by Coleridge. This process can be seen as a dramatic 'romantization' of Kant, in the sense that Emerson's interventions practically mark the end of an evolutionary process in which Coleridge's concept of Christian transcendence first ousted Kant's concept of hypothetical transcendence, only to be itself replaced by a kind of Emersonian 'mystical' transcendence which was, basically, monism and, therefore, incompatible with Kant's original position.

On the other hand, this work contains important additions to Krusche's conclusions. First, it investigates in detail the circumstances under which Coleridge's modification of Kant's concept of Reason, i.e. of Kant's distinction between Reason and Understanding, as well as Emerson's further modification of Coleridge's concepts occurred, which inevitably imposes as a next goal of the investigation the establishment of the exact nature of both Coleridge's and Emerson's connection to a number of theories other than Kant's. Furthermore, in addition to acknowledging the central significance of the notion of Reason, my investigation

also describes how the modification of this notion was reflected in aesthetics and religion and shows how Coleridge's and Emerson's views on religion conditioned all other relevant shifts in their respective theories.

Carafiol focuses on the notion of Reason and records Marsh's unintentional 'transcendentalization' of Coleridge's concept of Reason which encouraged a more literal identification of Reason with divine insight and thus blazed a trail for Emerson and other transcendentalists. Hence, my work may to a certain extent be thought of as a continuation of Carafiol's study, in that it deals with Emerson's theory which, according to Carafiol, is one of the results of Marsh's interpretation of Coleridge.

Regarding Coleridge, my aim is to show how and why his Christian worldview crucially influenced the formation of his theory as a whole. This 'religiocentric' approach reveals the consistency and regularity in Coleridge's theory, which have been frequently denied by the critics, and thus focuses on a comparatively little explored dimension of Coleridge's work. This makes Mary A. Perkins' book, *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (1994), all the more important as one of the few thorough studies of the issue which treats Coleridge's use of the fine points of Christian theology in solving the dilemmas imposed by both philosophical dualism and philosophical-mystical monistic doctrines.

In stressing Coleridge's adoption of diverse philosophical theories to Christianity, my work inevitably draws attention to critical studies which emphasize Coleridge's eclectic approach.

As regards Coleridge's connection with German idealism, two books proved to be especially useful: Giordano N. G. Orsini's *Coleridge and German Idealism* (1969) and Gerald McNiece's *The Knowledge that Endures* (1992). Both explore the impact of German idealists from Kant to Hegel on Coleridge's theory and thereby confirm Coleridge's status as an independent thinker. These books reject or ignore older

interpretations, such as René Wellek's, according to which Coleridge, due to either ignorance or lack of profundity, distorted Kant's philosophical views and irresponsibly plagiarized those of Schelling.

Orsini's book is a fundamental study of the connection between Coleridge and German idealism. Orsini treats the philosophers Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel separately and concentrates on relevant passages and doctrines in their respective systems, trying to establish the exact nature of their influence on Coleridge by investigating their direct or indirect influence of a particular idea and in what part of Coleridge's theory that idea found its application.

McNiece's book is structured somewhat differently, focussing on literary-theoretical issues, such as imagination, symbolism, or irony. McNiece presents the views of the four German philosophers on each issue in order to indicate which philosopher influenced Coleridge the most.

Both studies reveal Coleridge's strong interest in Schelling's monistic solutions and show that Coleridge, repelled by the rigidity in Kant's system, gradually turned toward more dynamic theories. Thus they indicate more or less directly Coleridge's need to 'correct' dualism with monism. At the same time, they note Coleridge's dissatisfaction with the monistic canceling of differences between God and the world, which confirms that Coleridge's theory is multi-layered and ambivalent. Thomas McFarland's *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (1969), which explicitly discusses Coleridge's ambivalence toward monistic doctrines as well as his frustrating endeavor to unite monism with Christianity without succumbing to their extremes, supplements McNiece and Coleridge by drawing attention to the overwhelming importance of the Christian viewpoint for Coleridge, which prevented him from wholly supporting any particular philosophical school. Therefore, my work combines the views of Orsini, McNiece and McFarland in order to identify the different voices Coleridge tried to unite within the Christian super-discourse, while, on the other hand,

following in the footsteps of Perkins, it perpetually reverts to the harmonizing effect of Christian dogma on Coleridge's system, which allowed for Coleridge to be frequently ambivalent, but never entirely incomprehensible.

In the second part of this work, which deals with Emerson's application of Coleridge's theory, the view of Emerson as a thinker who greatly contributed to the demise of moderate rationalism, initiated by Coleridge, by finally overcoming the last Coleridgean restrictions which distinguished the over-soul and the soul, inevitably follows not only Krusche, but also, more generally, a line of criticism close to the views of Allan Hodder, which emphasize Emerson's inclination toward mysticism. On the other hand, the view that Emerson's theory lays the foundation for both mysticism and pragmatism, proposed, for example, by Harold Bloom, has perforce been neglected in the treatment of Emerson's 'mystical' interpretation of Coleridge's concept of Reason. However, this view has been given some prominence in the part dealing with Emerson's aesthetics, where it accounts for one of the main differences in the treatment of form between Coleridge, who was governed by Christian sternness, and Emerson, who was characterized by modernistic flexibility. Emerson's 'pragmatic' orientation toward matter and experience, which was founded in spirituality and to a certain extent echoed Coleridge's endeavor to reconcile the opposites, did not, however, mean returning to the Christian position of Coleridge, but, instead, meant that by concentrating on the power of the individual, i.e. in aesthetics, on the liberty of the poet, Emerson became an anticipator of modernism.

In view of the criticism that emphasizes Emerson's pragmatism, this work may be understood as an elaboration of what critics like David Robinson tend to mention in a footnote, namely that Emerson's pragmatism has a spiritual quality, because it originates in the firm belief in the ultimate predominance of Spirit over matter. Emerson's pragmatic approach cannot be separated from the transcendental or the

spiritual, which means that a better understanding of Emerson's transcendentalism—characterized by the influence of Coleridge and mysticism—significantly advances our understanding of Emerson's pragmatic solutions. In this context, Christopher Newfield's book *The Emerson Effect* (1996) is particularly interesting, because, disregarding the prevailing pragmatic current in Emerson's criticism of the 90s, it once again refers to the fundamental mystical dimension of Emerson's thought.

Furthermore, my study aims to partly fill a gap in Emerson research by having a closer look at the connection between Emerson and Neoplatonism (more precisely Plotinus), which although treated in a few short articles, has not yet been the subject of a comprehensive study.

In defining the connection between Coleridge and Emerson I also consulted the studies by Kenneth W. Cameron, Anthony J. Harding, Alexander C. Kern, and Frank Lentricchia, each of which explores isolated aspects of that connection, e.g. by means of comparing Coleridge's and Emerson's views on nature, organicism, or limits of poetic expression. However, since the goal of this study is to offer as complete a view as possible of the connection between Coleridge and Emerson, it draws on these studies while bringing to light additional, equally important aspects, not treated in them.

The above-mentioned studies of Coleridge, Emerson, or their mutual connection, as well as those not mentioned here which discuss more specialized issues in Coleridge and Emerson studies will be fully cited in the relevant chapters below.

Finally, I would like to mention Jonathan Levin's recently published book *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism and American Literary Modernism* (1999), which deals with Emerson's turn toward modernism and pragmatism, and is thus related to the final part of this study touching on this theme. Unfortunately, I did not manage to

read it because of time-limits and the fact that it was not readily available.

I Coleridge's Aesthetics: Art for God's Sake

I. 1 Coleridge's Philosophical Legacy

When Coleridge writes, in the twelfth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, that “All knowledge rests on the coincidence of an object with a subject” (CW 7,1: 252), he is displaying the typical Coleridgean strategy of wishful thinking rooted in a pious search for the Holy Grail—the reconciliation of opposites. Coleridge’s obsession with a unified theory of life, a theory shared with other poets and thinkers of the Romantic Period, can be understood both as *Zeitgeist* and as a personal, intellectual struggle against the increasing disillusionment found at the turn of the century, a time associated with the rise of industrial society and the success of the natural sciences. Along with prosperity, this period also sparked skepticism, atheism, alienation, crime, and all kinds of intellectual fears, of which we, at the end of this millennium are also all too aware. Coleridge’s unifying ‘drive,’ therefore—revealed in the attempt to fuse seemingly or actually incompatible realms, and the constant reading of transcendent presence into artistic utterances—should not, in today’s skeptical, post-modern, anti-logocentric age, be viewed with intellectual snobbery.

A high-brow sneer and the ironic epithet of “reconciler”—the predictable reaction of a cursory student of Coleridge—are both likely to give way eventually to psychological solidarity with this poet and thinker who attempted to resolve the conflicts of both mind and heart (Coleridge often expressed the belief that the two were indivisible). But to achieve this, one must follow the most difficult and the least rewarding path: a search for truth which avoids the exclusivity of antagonistic philosophical positions.

Rather than condescension, Coleridge’s works deserve respect. His romantic readiness to conjoin the divine and the human may be compatible with the efforts of contemporary

astrophysicists who are endeavoring to confirm the hypothesis about the existence of an “original moment” at Time Zero in the Universe. Surprisingly enough, Coleridge has much more in common with those modern stargazers than with today’s philosophers, probably because natural science has now replaced philosophy in the passionate search for the answer to the ultimate, Faustian question: ‘what holds the world together.’ The space research of today is probably more Coleridgean than the philosophy of today, in its attempt to provide the last refuge for (meta)physical speculation. The unification theme, too—besides supplying a parallel between the most current space exploration and Coleridge, which might strike some literature professors as a little odd, to put it mildly—is the mortar which cements Coleridge’s diverse and often seemingly incompatible or useless bricks of thought into a single structure.

What emerges at the philosophical level, such as the One and the Many theory or the subject/object identity theory, will be echoed at the aesthetic and religious level, in this particular case as the organic theory in aesthetics and the idea of “trinity” as separateness-in-unity in religion, and vice versa. Therefore, it is necessary to view Coleridge’s aesthetic concepts as answers to more general philosophical questions which have been applied to the specific, aesthetic area of human experience.

Conversely, Coleridge’s religious worldview was intertwined with his aesthetic theory, so that examining his aesthetics requires an awareness of a strong link with philosophical and religious-metaphysical levels. Hence, the above-quoted sentence from *Biographia Literaria* regarding the identity of subject and object gains value as a demonstration of Coleridge’s frame of mind at a particular time, during the writing of *Biographia Literaria* in 1815, when a great deal of what Coleridge wrote reverberated with Schellingian tones. Apart from illustrating Coleridge’s interest in epistemology, this sentence, which, by insisting on the fusion of the subjective and the objective, touches on the

imagination theme, may also serve as a starting point for a discussion both of Coleridge's aesthetics and of his Christian perspective.

On the other hand, the position expressed above relates to a general tendency in Coleridgean thought characterized by his preference for philosophical systems offering, or at least for a moment seeming to offer, a way out of the philosophical debate between the extremes of rationalism and empiricism. Coleridge's insistence on a reconciliation of the world of perception with the faculties of mind, embodied in this quotation, illustrates his conscious opposition to the dominant theories of the 17th and 18th centuries which tended to distinguish the spheres of matter and mind by acknowledging only subjective or objective principles as the crucial determination of their approach to human existence and the universe in general.

Coleridge particularly directed his theory against, on the one hand, Descartes and, on the other hand, the 18th century mechanistic school represented by English empiricists and French psychologists. Descartes, having arrived at the *cogito ergo sum* criterion of certainty, expressed for modern times the idea of the priority of the subjective by pointing out "the ontological presuppositions of all 'self' philosophy [and is] historically the prototype for much of that philosophy's development since the seventeenth century."¹ Around the same time, the empiricist Locke, the associationist Hartley and the 'necessitarianist' Godwin favored the other side of thinking, favoring an objective approach which was determined by the axiom of the reality of 'thing' instead of the reality of 'self'. The self, denied priority, was diminished to the category of 'thing,' becoming an entity subject to scientific classification and examination. Coleridge, who possessed a great deal of philosophical knowledge and whose obsession with and interest in philosophy was unmatched by

¹ Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford, 1969), 55.

any English poet of the period, was not only well aware of the dichotomy in the philosophy of his age, but also recognized that the original gulf in philosophy had opened up as early as Antiquity. Here, he expresses his conviction of the essential difference between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy:

for Every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist. I don't think it possible that any one born an Aristotelian can become a Platonist, and I am sure no born Platonist can ever change into an Aristotelian.[...] The one consider Reason a Quality or Attribute; the other consider it a Power. I believe Aristotle never could get to understand what Plato meant by an Idea;[...] Aristotle was and is still the sovereign lord of the Understanding—the Faculty judging by the Senses. (CW 14,1: 172-73)

This passage reflects the common belief that, up to now, all of Western philosophy could be roughly divided into two main categories—Materialism and Idealism—so that Aristotle is considered the father of the former, Plato of the latter. In *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, Thomas McFarland offers an interesting view concerning this division, in that he maintains that the two basic styles of philosophical thinking can be qualified as philosophies either of 'I am' or 'it is'; not all 'I am' philosophers are necessarily idealists nor are all 'it is' philosophers inevitably realists, although usually that is the case. Bacon, usually labeled as a materialist is, thus, according to McFarland, an 'I am' philosopher, using only the empiricist method. And to McFarland, certain mystics, usually seen as representatives of differing varieties of idealistic philosophy, should be treated as 'it is' philosophers (*cf.* II. 4. 2, 345).

Coleridge himself, contemplating this issue in the fifth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, regards Descartes as modernity's first philosopher, someone who exaggerated the dichotomy which Coleridge sees as so fatal for philosophy:

“To the best of my knowledge DesCartes was the first philosopher, who introduced the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence, and the body as matter” (CW 7,1: 129). This dichotomy, which establishes the absolute priority of the self along with the full subordination of a nature turned into a lifeless entity, satisfies Coleridge just as little as the associationistic emphasis on external experience as the sole source of human knowledge. He denies the impenetrability of matter, rather believing in its ability of ‘admission’ which places the essence of matter in an act or power, which it possesses in common with spirit; and body and spirit are therefore no longer absolutely heterogeneous, but may without any absurdity be supposed to be different modes, or degrees in perfection, of a common substratum (CW 7,1: 129).

Coleridge struggled with his preoccupation with this ‘common substratum’ from the beginning of his intellectual life, an effort in which he remained essentially isolated. Hence, he admits in a somewhat reproachful tone: “To this possibility, however, it was not the fashion to advert. The soul was a thinking substance; and body a space-filling substance. Yet the apparent action of each on the other pressed heavy on the philosopher...” (CW 7,1: 130).

By recognizing the identity of object and subject, Coleridge believed to have resolved the crux of this problem and offered his solution of ‘how thought can come to terms with things’. Perhaps Coleridge’s efforts at the reconciliation of mind and matter, self and nature, were the consequence of his reluctance to unequivocally accept either materialistic or idealistic conceptions. In an intellectual atmosphere within which, ever since Descartes, “the specter of irreconcilable dualism had flitted in and about the halls of European philosophy” (CW 7,1: LXXVII), Coleridge pondered an ‘interpenetration’ of things and thoughts while resisting the idea of lifeless nature implied by the dualistic emphasis on knowing/thinking as the criterion of existence. He insisted on the unity of knowing and being, thus rehabilitating nature

while retaining self-consciousness as the starting point of philosophizing.

Yet, a reconciliation of nature and mind, brought to being by the mind's highest faculty, imagination, was for Coleridge only an initial, although necessary, step towards one final great aspiration—the reconciliation of world and God, philosophy and religion, or, more precisely, the pantheistic view that the world was occupied by the Divinity and the idea of a God who is simultaneously and pantheistically immanent and idealistically transcendent. Such a view, often characterized by the term *panentheism*² to indicate its essential difference from pantheism, was reflected in the final part of the twelfth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* by Coleridge's claim for "a total and undivided philosophy", one which would symbolize the fusion of "the two Polar Sciences" (CW 7,1:282)—the natural sciences and transcendental philosophy—with, ultimately, the expression of Christian belief.

Coleridge's desire for a single system which would blend the idealistic and the materialistic standpoint, as expressed in *Biographia Literaria*, was preceded, however, by years of study, search and inner conflicts during which fascination was followed by a refutation of doctrines and by their replacement with others temporarily more suitable for personal projects. Ideas and theories with which he had become acquainted during those formative years continued to exert an influence on him throughout his life; he either modified them, struggling to incorporate them in his 'unified theory' at the cost of unresolved contradictions, or embedded them into his

² Both pantheism and panentheism are considered versions of theism, insofar as they stress the theme of the indwelling presence of God. Yet, pantheism insists on an identity between God and the world while panentheism holds that, although the world is included in God, God is more than the world. Furthermore, there is a controversy as to the essence of panentheism: it may be treated either as a modification of pantheism or as opposed to it, i.e. as a part of orthodox Christian doctrine (*cf.* I, 7, 107n).

system but assigned them an inferior position. The first case occurred with Spinoza's pantheism and Neoplatonic monism, the second with associationism.

Kant's system accelerated Coleridge's rejection of associationism but was, nevertheless, subsequently rejected. This example can serve as a measure of Coleridge's passion for transcendence, the lack of which he regarded as Kantian transcendental philosophy's greatest shortcoming. Significantly, such a passion led Coleridge away from Kant into the complicated and impossible adventure of creating a blend of German romantic pantheism and Christianity. Within this synthesis, the ideas of the German 17th century mystic Jakob Böhme and the Neoplatonic influence of Plotinus can be traced, which combine Coleridge's romantic aesthetics with the more obvious Schellingian/Schlegelian features. These ideas will be discussed in connection with particular aspects of Coleridge's aesthetics. First of all, we shall investigate Coleridge's theory of imagination by examining to associationism and Kant as the main initial impulses in its formation.