S GILES-IN-READING

SOUTHAMPTON STREET

URBANABBEY PUBSTUDY

A SACRED DIVE INTO:
OWEN BARFIELD'S WHAT COLERIDGE THOUGHT,
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CH. 6: IMAGINATION AND FANCY (I)

CENTRAL ARGUMENT: This chapter explores Coleridge's multifaceted understanding of imagination. It examines three key questions Coleridge grappled with: identifying imagination, understanding its origins, and determining its ontological status. The text traces Coleridge's intellectual journey, highlighting his early philosophical interests and the influence of Wordsworth on his evolving conception of imagination. The author contrasts Coleridge's "primary" and "secondary" imagination with "fancy," drawing upon Coleridge's Biographia Literaria and correspondence. Finally, the chapter analyzes Coleridge's failure to complete a planned chapter in the Biographia Literaria that would have further clarified these distinctions.

KEY THEMES:

The Tripartite Nature of Inquiry: Coleridge approached the question "What is Imagination?" in three distinct ways: (1) Identification (How do we recognize imagination?), (2) Process (How does imagination work?), and (3) Ontological Status (What is the nature of imagination?). This reflects his roles as critic, poet, and philosopher. As the text notes, "One peculiar feature about the mind of Samuel Taylor Coleridge is that the question: What is imagination? appears to have assailed him simultaneously, and upon a sharp encounter, in all of its three different senses."

The Influence of Wordsworth: Wordsworth's genius played a crucial role in shaping Coleridge's understanding of imagination, particularly its process. Their friendship and literary exchanges moved Coleridge beyond mere identification to exploring the workings of imagination. The text highlights "how Coleridge's encounter with that other genius was a major formative influence in his life."

The Importance of Early Philosophical Influences: Coleridge's early engagement with Neoplatonic and hermetic philosophies, including Plato, Plotinus, Ficino, and Bohme, predisposed him to a particular view of the mind-nature relationship, which informed his later conceptualization of imagination. The text emphasizes that "He was a free man, so to speak, of that philosophical and theosophical stream of thought which has not ceased to irrigate the culture of the West."

The Distinction between Imagination and Fancy: Coleridge ultimately distinguishes between primary and secondary imagination, both of which are contrasted with fancy. Imagination involves a creative and vital process of dissolving and recreating, while fancy merely rearranges pre-existing elements. This distinction is crucial to his theory of poetic creation

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KEY QUOTES:

"Poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science."

"In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the Imagination. But, in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary control over it."

SUMMARY: Coleridge's concept of imagination is a complex and multifaceted one, deeply rooted in his personal experiences, philosophical influences, and poetic sensibilities. His distinction between imagination and fancy remains a cornerstone of Romantic literary theory, highlighting the creative and vital nature of true poetic imagination. The provided excerpt focuses on laying the groundwork for this distinction, emphasizing the various influences and inquiries that led Coleridge to his eventual formulation.