S GILES-IN-READING

SOUTHAMPTON STREET

URBANABBEY PUBSTUDY

A SACRED DIVE INTO:
OWEN BARFIELD'S WHAT COLERIDGE THOUGHT,
BY FR DAVID HARRIS

CH. 7: IMAGINATION AND FANCY (2)

CENTRAL ARGUMENT: This chapter argues that imagination is a complex interplay between active and passive forces, rooted in the relationship between self and world, extending from unconscious primary imagination to conscious secondary imagination. This interplay exists in nature and human consciousness. Secondary imagination is a conscious development of primary imagination and uses the same powers of growth and production as nature. The chapter explores the distinction between imagination and fancy, initially as different in kind, but also as different degrees of the same "seminal principle". Fancy aggregates fixed elements, while imagination dissolves and recreates. Imagination is a power of growth and production, while fancy can become a hostile interference, or be debased, limiting its potential.

KEY THEMES:

Imagination as a Dynamic Interplay: Coleridge views imagination as a dynamic interplay between active and passive elements in the relationship between self and world. This interplay is not confined to human consciousness but exists in nature as well. The act of thinking and the act of imagination are both acts of self-consciousness and not sharply distinguished. This is likened to a water insect navigating a stream by both resisting and yielding.

Primary and Secondary Imagination: Primary imagination is an unconscious act that forms our basic experience of the world. Secondary imagination is a conscious extension of primary imagination that involves "unity in multeity" characteristic of both nature and imaginative acts. The "rules" of secondary imagination are the same as the "powers of growth and production" already present in primary imagination and the laws of nature. Secondary imagination acts to create a unified whole where parts are organically related, similar to nature.

Imagination vs. Fancy: While they initially seem different in kind, Coleridge also suggests they are different degrees of the same "seminal principle". Fancy is an "aggregating power" that works with "fixities and definites," while secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create". Fancy can become "debased" when it limits itself to familiar images, whereas imagination can be seen as the power of growth and production. Fancy can be a hostile interference with the seminal principle when it becomes debased. Although initially seeing a clear distinction, Coleridge later recognizes fancy as a complement to imagination.

KEY QUOTES:

"...the life of nature is at all levels a power of "separative projection," and separative projection ("the eternal act of creation") is what the act of self-consciousness—what the act of imagination—is."

"Primary imagination, then, is an act, but it is an act of which we are not normally conscious... Whereas the only thing that could be called the "expression" of primary imagination as such is the familiar face of nature herself."

"The 'rules' of secondary imagination are, however, still 'the very powers of growth and production,' for that is what they were already at the primary stage, when they were simply the laws of nature."

"They and they only can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol, that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar..."

SUMMARY: While Coleride initially emphasizes a difference in kind between fancy and imagination, a deeper philosophical analysis points to a difference in degree, rooted in the fundamental "seminal principle" of intelligence. The ambiguity surrounding fancy reflects a tension between the "objectifying" and "self-knowing" forces within the larger polarity of self and world that defines Coleridge's philosophical system.