4

Life

In his *Studies in Words*[1] C. S. Lewis remarks that the modern usage of "one privileged abstract noun" reveals a state of mind that is startlingly close to the Platonic. Conformably with his method through the book he divides his treatment of the word *life* into a number of sections, each of which is devoted to one of its many senses as currently employed, and the above remark occurs in the section on *Life* (*Biological*). He assembles a number of revealing quotations from modern writers, ranging from Nietzsche's "orgiastic, mystical sense of oneness, of life as indestructibly powerful and pleasurable," through Bernard Shaw's dramatic characterisation of evolutionary biology as "the science of the everlasting transformations of the Holy Ghost in the World" to D. H. Lawrence's "sense of richness and oneness with all life," and then reduces them analytically to what they mean if life is in fact only an abstract noun, a mere *ens rationis* or 'creature of discourse.' A man's inner conviction that life is a real thing would then amount to "a conviction that organisms exist," which, as Lewis observes, is a conviction hardly worth mentioning. He concludes that what people in fact have dimly in mind, when they use the word *life* in this sense, is, not a nominal abstraction from particular instances of the living, but a transcendent entity of the kind to which Plato gave the name *eidos,* or *idea.*

It is because the word so very often *is* used in that way that it is well worth while to ponder Lewis's conclusion: "If we want to know what it felt like to be Plato thinking about Beauty, we can get some inkling by noticing how people use *Life* (*Biological*)." But there is a further reason, too. When *life* appears in such contexts as are quoted above, the chances are that it has been introduced by way of contrasting, explicitly or implicitly, the speaker's own way of thinking about things in general with another way. And what is this other way? The other way is precisely the way which reduces *life* (and all other nouns that are not

the names of things) to an abstraction. In other words, what is being positively affirmed is, not only the fact that life is valuable, or that it is one, or that it is pleasurable etc., but also that it is *not* an abstraction, but a factually antecedent unity. Lewis makes it clear that, whenever we speak or think in that sort of way about life, either we are referring to that antecedent unity, or else we mean nothing at all and merely show that we are happy to intoxicate ourselves with vocables.

At the conclusion of the last chapter we spoke of "the mind recognizing in itself the naked idea." And it has seemed worth while to point to an instance of the kind of reflection that can, or perhaps must, lead to some such recognition. Lewis's allusion to the Greek philosopher may perhaps, as he himself suggests, be of some importance for university students (and their name is probably legion) who are being authoritatively informed by their instructors in the history of philosophy that "Plato thought abstract nouns were proper names"; but that is not the main point. The main point at the moment is the recognition itself. What, more precisely, Coleridge meant by an *idea*—whether of life or of anything else—and how it differed from what Plato meant by it, are matters to come to later. But in the meantime it would be quite impossible to give an account of what he thought about "life," and about the way in which it should be defined, without some tolerably sympathetic understanding in the reader's mind—at least for what this word *idea* will *not* mean when it occurs in a quotation.

Coleridge realised that all disputes about the nature or origin of life that fail to take account of this antecedent unity are necessarily misconceived, because life is that very unity in operation. And, because most of the disputes that were going on in his time refused altogether to recognise this, he set himself to secure its recognition. This, he saw, was the main issue; not the secondary question, on which attention was being concentrated: What is the difference between organic and inorganic phenomena? Before we can profitably consider that, we must have some understanding of the principle of existence that is common to them both. And what is common to them both is that they appear and disappear. That is why they are called "phenomena"—the Greek word for "appearing," as Coleridge was wont to emphasise by spelling it "phaenomena." As was brought out by the quotation at the head of Chapter 2, it is not only living organisms that behave in this way. On the contrary, "Everything is in a perpetual state of transformation, motion and change." The true idea of life therefore involves the idea of change.

But in Coleridge's view the idea of change had been ousted from the phenomenal world by the Cartesian dichotomy. The change of an A into a B, as distinct from the mere substitution of B for A, involves the total disappearance of A and the appearance of B, but it also involves the persistence, through the change, of a somewhat which A and B have in common. To look for the "causes" of change in the macroscopic world, no further than to re-arrangements in its microscopic components, is to have abandoned the idea of change altogether. What persists through the event of change of one body into another cannot itself be a "body"; if it were, there would in fact be no such thing as change, but only a macroscopic illusion of it. "The solution of *phaenomena* can never be derived from *phaenomena*." [2] The idea of change entails total disappearances as well as appearances. It requires discontinuity as well as continuity.

We can never reach and recognise the idea of changes in nature, if our idea of nature itself is exclusively a picture of bodies already formed. This very picture however is the one which the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and matter had been busy riveting on the mind of the Western world through the two hundred years before Coleridge's birth. That it is a false picture; that elementary particles do not merely exist from eternity and keep on setting to partners; that the proposition "matter has no *inward*" [3] is a false proposition, was accordingly not simply an interesting metaphysical speculation, but a vital and neglected, or "lost," verity which he felt he had to re-establish before he could usefully say anything else to his contemporaries upon almost any subject, whether religion, politics, history, imagination[4] or life. Hence those "logical swim-bladders and metaphysical life-preservers" with which Carlyle had so much fun. They stem from one of the principal differences between Coleridge and those German philosophers with whom his thinking is most often associated—Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel. It is a difference of circumstance. Speaking, as he had to do, to his already empirically minded English contemporaries, he had, so to speak, to lay down his track as he went along, and caterpillar wheels are slow compared with ordinary wheeled traction. But then they can go into much cruder places. If the German thinkers could count on at least a second-class road of understanding into the minds of their readers, Coleridge tried to penetrate where there was no longer a road at all; to awaken to active thought minds for which "the *conceivable*" had already been "reduced within the bounds of the picturable." [5]

What has been said in this chapter about the idea of change or transformation applies to the phenomenal world as a whole, not only to the world of "living" organisms. One should ask, not: What is life? but what is *not* life? "Remember, that whatever *is, lives*. A thing absolutely lifeless is inconceivable, except as a thought, image, or fancy, in some other being." [6] This leading principle in Coleridge's thought is one of the two reasons why, surprisingly enough, it may be inaccurate and misleading to adduce his theory of poetry as an example of "organicism." The other reason can be left to the next chapter.

Of course the word *life* is most commonly applied to organic phenomena. But that is only because it is in the realm of organic life that the process of transformation is most rapid and therefore noticeable. All nature is in a perpetual evolution, for which the words *change, life* and *growth* become appropriate at one point and another. Vegetable growth is merely the type in which we most readily recognise the idea. And it was quite clearly for that reason, and not because of some horticultural mystique, some "sentimental passion of a vegetable fashion," that Coleridge was fond of illustrating the nature of life, whether physical or mental, by pointing to the phenomena of plant growth. As, for instance, in the following striking passage from *Aids to Reflection:*

> . . . in the world we see everywhere evidences of a unity, which the component parts are so far from explaining, that they necessarily presuppose it as the cause and condition of their existing as those parts; or even of their existing at all. This antecedent unity, or cause and principle of each union, it has since the time of Bacon and Kepler been customary to call a law. This crocus, for instance, or any other flower, the reader may have in sight or choose to bring before his fancy. That the root, stem, leaves, petals, etc. cohere to one plant, is owing to an antecedent power or principle in the seed, which existed before a single particle of the matters that constitute the size and visibility of the crocus, had been attracted from the surrounding soil, air, and moisture. Shall we turn to the seed? Here too the same necessity meets us. An antecedent unity (I speak not of the parent plant, but of an agency antecedent in the order of operance, yet remaining present as the conservative and reproductive power) must here too be supposed. Analyse the seed with the finest tools, and let the solar microscope come in aid of your senses, what do you find? Means and instruments, a wondrous fairy tale of nature, magazines of food, stores of various sorts, pipes, spiracles, defences—a house of many chambers, and the owner and inhabitant invisible! [7]

In Coleridge's time the biological reference of the word *evolution* was itself beginning to undergo a transformation, which has since been completed. Its original significance was ontogenetic, not mainly phylogenetic as it is today. Its relevance was, not to the problem of how a new species came about in the first place, but that of how a single organism in any species habitually reproduces itself. Here the theory of "evolution," or "epigenesis" as it afterwards came to be called, had recently ousted an older theory of encapsulation, or *emboîtement,* according to which the future plant or animal, and all subsequent ones, are already encased, in miniature, in the germ. Against this the evolutionists maintained that the substance of the new organism, as it grows, is wholly derived from the world around it, by apposition or assimilation. Growth is not the unfolding of an actual ("I speak not of the parent plant"), but the "development" of a potential. The two problems, and therefore the two meanings of the word *evolution,* may look to us more like two different problems than two aspects of the same one. Moreover popular interest during the nineteenth century was to become concentrated entirely on the phylogenetic aspect—as is reflected in the predominantly current meaning of the word *evolution.*

It may be remarked in passing that it is somewhat odd that so many millions should have come to feel that the existence of, say, a poppy *as well as* a rose is a mystery deserving the closest attention, whereas the transformation of a minute poppy-seed into a full-blown poppy can be comfortably taken for granted. Coleridge at all events had no means of foreseeing that this would be the case. In the twentieth century it is advisable to bear all this in mind when we come to look at those reflections on the nature of organic life, which form part of the long posthumous essay called *Hints Towards a More Comprehensive Theory of Life.*[8]

This is a work which, like most of Coleridge's prose, repays very careful reading, though, like much of it, it suffers from his weakness not so much in expounding as in marshalling his materials. Because of its importance in our opinion and because it is comparatively rarely referred to, we shall not on this occasion be content with sporadic reference and quotation, but shall endeavour to give a brief, connected account of its content.

It begins, after a eulogy of the physician John Hunter, with a critique of various recent attempt to define life, such as "the sum of all the functions by which death is resisted"; "assimilation for the purposes of

reproduction and growth"; "nutrition by digestion"; "the power of resisting putrefaction"; and it objects to them that they are all either tautologous or inaccurate: tautologous when they merely "translate the word Life into other more learned words" [560],* inaccurate when "a single effect is given as constituting the cause" [562]. They all alike *presuppose*

> the arbitrary division of all that surrounds us into things with life, and things without life—a division grounded on a mere assumption. At the best, it can be regarded only as a hasty deduction from the first superficial notices of the objects that surround us [559].

Coleridge regards the last of the attempted definitions given above as superior to the rest, since at least it does not identify life with a single one of its effects. Yet it still "confines the idea of Life to those degrees or concentrations of it, which manifest themselves in organized beings, or rather in those the organization of which is apparent to us" [563] and thus "substitutes an abstract term, or generalization of effects, for the idea, or superior form of causative agency" [563]. It would have been better therefore to say: "a power which, during its continuance, resists or subordinates heterogeneous and adverse powers" [563].

All this leads up to—or rather it partly leads up to and partly is interwoven with—reflections on the true nature of definition; definition, that is, of concretes: "real" definition, as distinct from the mere definition of a verbal abstraction. Above all (he has in effect been saying) in the case of the word *life,* a verbal abstraction—that is a common noun denoting all the properties observed in particular instances—must be futile. For it can be no more than a generalization a posteriori from particular objects. Whereas the whole point of having such a word at all, its very *raison d'être,* is to denote an antecedent somewhat that is not merely derived from objects but is effective to produce them. What then should we look for in a "real" or "physiological" definition? Such a definition

> must consist neither in any single property or function of the thing to be defined, nor yet in all collectively, which latter, indeed, would be a history, not a definition. It must consist, therefore, in the *law* of the

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* Numbers in brackets in this chapter are page references to *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (see n. 8).

> thing, or in such an *idea* of it, as being admitted, all the properties and functions are admitted by implication. It must likewise be so far *causal* that a full insight having been obtained of the law, we derive from it a progressive insight into the necessity and *generation* of the phenomena of which it is the law [562].

He goes on to distinguish between *accounting for* life and *explaining* it. In the former case "We are supposed to state something prior (if not in time, yet in the order of Nature) to the thing accounted for" [568–69]. But as regards life, this is *ex hypothesi* impossible. For life itself *is* the "something prior." Those, for instance, who assign any kind of phenomenon as the "cause" of life overlook the obvious difference between phenomenon and power; they overlook the fact that "visible SURFACE and *power* of any kind, much more the *power* of life, are ideas which the very forms of the human understanding make it impossible to identify" [568]. While those who assign structure or organisation as its antecedent "make A the offspring of B, when the very existence of B as B presupposes the existence of A [568]."

To *explain* a power, on the other hand, is "to unfold or spread it out," as the etymology of the word suggests. So that an explanation of life would consist in

> the reduction of the idea of Life to its simplest and most comprehensive form or mode of action; that is, to some *instinct* or *tendency,* evident in all its manifestations, and involved in the idea itself . . . the tendency having been given in *kind,* it is required to render the phenomena intelligible as its different degrees and modifications [569].

And this is what his own explanation endeavors to achieve. But first he raises the question: what is the purpose of "generalizing the idea of life thus broadly"? And he answers, that, if no other use were conceivable, there would at least be *some* advantage in merely "destroying an arbitrary assumption in natural philosophy"; in "filling up the gap between physics and physiology" and justifying use of "the former as a means of insight into the latter" [572]. Since, in our own time, there is no lack of endeavour to fill up the "gap" between physics and physiology, it may be well to pause here and take a brief look at its history. For it was this presumed gap between the inorganic and the organic kingdoms of nature, and the passionate interest it had aroused, that set the stage, and determined the form, of Coleridge's Essay.

The use of the word *life* with that particular reference which Lewis identified as *life* (*biological*) is a comparatively recent habit. If we compare earlier with later contexts, we shall be left in no doubt that it arose only with that diremption of the world of experience into supposedly mental and supposedly extra-mental components, which was part cause and part effect of the scientific revolution. Before that the word certainly could, and generally did, include or imply this meaning, but never as a reference noticeably separable from other reference.[9] Descartes, who first adequately formulated the diremption, included animals, as well as plants, in the extra-mental component. But this contradicted common experience, which is sure that animals at least are "animate," and led to prolonged philosophical and scientific disputes. Apart from obvious signs, not only of sentience in all animals but also of intelligence in the higher species, there were difficulties in the way of accepting it even for the vegetable kingdom, since it appeared to leave unexplained the whole phenomenon of growth. For Descartes, and increasingly for the world of scientific thought as a whole, the extra-mental realm was, and always had been, exclusively answerable to the laws of mechanical causality; yet it is difficult, or rather impossible, to study plant growth and obtain either practical or theoretical results without retaining some concept of "form" or "pattern," which is incompatible with mechanism, especially if the mechanism is undesigned; without assuming, that is, that the end-pattern of the developed plant is present in some way in its patternless origin in the germ. In this respect not only animals, but plants also, appear to differ markedly from the mineral kingdom. The earliest recorded uses of the word *inorganic* (and of *organic* in the specific sense of its opposite) occur in the last third of the eighteenth century, after Coleridge was born. For the first time a word was needed as a class name for "inanimate matter" and bodies formed from it. For the first time *life* and *living* had become the correlatives, not of *death* and *dying,* but of *inorganic* or, in its later sense, *inanimate.*[10]

It is quite apparent from the disputes of that time, some of which Coleridge refers to in his essay, that the definition of life had become a bone of contention just because the concept in itself betokened the reappearance, or attempted re-appearance, of a half-way house between the mental and the extra-mental, which, for Descartes himself and for Cartesian science, had become simply an excluded middle between two contradictories. (That this concept of life is in fact performing much

the same function in a great many minds today, and that, in doing so, it echoes a period in the history of thought before the dualism of mental and extra-mental had been enthroned in the general consciousness are two of the points made by Lewis in his essay quoted at the beginning of this chapter.) Very few made any attempt, as Coleridge did, to resolve the contradiction itself. Rather both parties to the disputes accepted it as axiomatic, but claimed "life" for their own side of the frontier. The materialists claimed it as exclusively material; the idealists and the religious claimed it as exclusively ideal. Thus, the materialists ostracised any reference to a teleological principle in living organisms as an impermissible "argument from design"; while the religious seized on it as evidence of the direct intervention of God in an otherwise admittedly clockwork universe. *Tabula in naufragio!* [11]

Perhaps this historical digression[12] may have helped to make it clear why Coleridge, whose whole system of thought, as we have seen, was rooted in, and must stand or fall with, his critique of the Cartesian dualism, was inevitably deeply interested in these debates about the nature of life. It was the bundle of hay which the two donkeys, whom that dualism had brought about, were each tugging the opposite way; and it was for him to show that the proper solution was to share it undivided between them.

We come back, then, to the *Theory of Life* at the point where Coleridge explicitly asks the question "What is Life?" and answers it with another question: "What is *not* Life that really *is?*" [571]. We need not pursue the intricacies of the argument, which leads to the conclusion that "since by the agreement of all parties Life may exist in other forms than those of consciousness, or even of sensibility, the *onus probandi* falls on those who assert of any quality that it is *not* Life." The work itself should be read. But Coleridge's own attempts at defining formulae must be mentioned. The most comprehensive one, we are told, would be "the internal copula of bodies," or "the *power* which discloses itself from within as a principle of *unity* in the *many*." Again, life is "*the principle of individuation* or the power that unites a given *all* into a *whole* that is presupposed by all its parts." And there follows a passage on the connection, and the contrast, between life and mechanism, which calls for quotation in full:

> Thus, from its utmost *latency*, in which life is one with the elementary powers of mechanism, that is, with the powers of mechanism, considered

> as qualitative and actually synthetic, to its highest manifestation (in which, as the *vis vitae vivida,* or life *as* life, it subordinates and modifies these powers, becoming contradistinguished from mechanism, *ab extra,* under the form of organisation), there is an ascending series of intermediate classes, and of analogous gradations in each class [573].

All this is summed up in a footnote, the content of which reverberates through the *Lectures on Shakespeare* (though there, of course, as the context demands, it is always the contrast, never the connection, that is stressed):

> Thus we may say that whatever is organized from without, is a product of mechanism; whatever is mechanized from within, is a product of organization [573n].

Morever:

> the unity will be more intense in proportion as it constitutes each particular thing a whole of itself; and yet more again, in proportion to the number and interdependence of the parts, which it unites as a whole.

But:

> a whole composed, *ab intra,* of different parts, so far independent that each is reciprocally means and end, is an individual,

and:

> the individuality is most intense where the greatest dependence of parts on the whole is combined with the greatest dependence of the whole on its parts; the first (namely, the dependence of the parts on the whole) being absolute; the second (namely, the dependence of the whole on its parts) being proportional to the importance of the relation which the parts have to the whole, that is, as their action extends more or less beyond themselves. For this spirit of the whole is most expressed in that part which derives its importance as an End from its importance as a Mean, relatively to all the parts under the same copula [574–75].

There follows a concise and classic statement of the principle sometimes rather vaguely alluded to, whether for the purposes of aesthetics, of psychology, or of ontology, as "organicism":

> Finally, of individuals, the living power will be most intense in that individual which, as a whole, has the greatest number of integral parts presupposed in it; when, moreover, these integral parts, together with a proportional increase of their interdependence, as *parts,* have themselves most the character of wholes in the sphere occupied by them [575].

Having now reduced—or expanded—his definition of life to the *tendency to individuation,* Coleridge proceeds very briefly to illustrate from nature. His accompanying apology for brevity may be condensed by saying that he points out, in effect, what the title of his Essay already proclaims: that he is not establishing but "hinting." He has however already, a little earlier, claimed that the "proof of the probability" of his theory

> is to be found in its powers of solving the . . . phenomena . . . more satisfactorily and profitably than has been done, or even attempted before [575–76].

It will be observed that there are imbedded in the foregoing account of the nature of "individuation" four distinguishable stages or gradations of the process: (1) absolute dependence of parts on whole; (2) additional dependence of whole on parts; (3) greatest number of integral parts presupposed in whole; (4) parts themselves possessing character as wholes, and this involving their increased interdependence. Referring to these, perhaps a little sanguinely, as "the preceding gradations, as above defined," he illustrates (1) with metals, (2) with crystals, (3) with the whole subject-matter of Geology, and (4) with vegetable and animal life.

Thus, gold, as a whole, has some sort of unity which an ingot, as ingot, has not. It has "the simplest form of unity, namely, the unity of powers and properties . . . the form of unity with least degree of tendency to individuation" [576]. In the crystal however there is "a union, not of powers only, but of parts." A crystal has not only unity, therefore, but also, in its simplest form, *totality.* The third illustration ("those vast formations, the tracing of which generically would form the science of Geology") is the first to bring him into direct conflict, with the overall theory then, and now, received; for he rejects an "inorganic" origin for *any* geological formations. Rather than holding up this already dubiously effective summary of a summary, we quote in full what he has to say on this in a note.[13] These formations are, he affirms,

> still connected with the present order of vegetable and animal Life, which constitutes the fourth and last step in these wide and comprehensive divisions [577].

In other words, with the lowest forms of vegetable and animal life—with the "organism," which, in a much more noticeable way than was the case at the previous stages, "maintains for itself a distinction from the universal life of the planet"—"we perceive totality dawning into *individuation*" [577].

He has now dealt with the tendency to individuation and detachment, and in doing so has shown, he says, that it cannot be conceived without the opposite tendency to connect:

> even as the centrifugal power supposes the centripetal, or as the two opposite poles constitute each other, and are the constituent acts of one and the same power in the magnet [578].

We have in fact (and we shall gain by keeping this particular formulation constantly in mind): *"the tendency at once to individuate and to connect, to detach, but so as either to retain or to reproduce attachment"* [578].

Thus, when Coleridge asks at the beginning of the next section: "The tendency having been ascertained, what is its most general law?" [14] it virtually follows, for us, from the previous chapter that he will reply:

> —*polarity,* or the essential dualism of Nature, arising out of its productive unity, and still tending to reaffirm it, either as equilibrium, indifference, or identity [578].

and that he will add:

> In its *productive* power, of which the product is the only measure, consists its incompatibility with the mathematical calculus [578].

What polarity *is* compatible with is, of course, imagination. But that is not here his topic, and he merely remarks in passing that no man who has "paralysed his imaginative powers" can be expected to see the necessity from without, nor learn the possibility from within,

> of interpenetration, of total intussusception, of the existence of all in each as the condition of Nature's unity and substantiality, and of the latency

under the predominance of some one power, wherein subsists her life and its endless variety . . . [584].

He now goes back to the beginning and traces the genesis of nature, proceeding from its origin in spirit as productive unity, under the law of polarity, through ascending gradations of reality; through time and space ("the oneness of space and time is the predicate of all *real* being"), length, breadth, depth, force, motion ("depth + motion = force"), to attraction and repulsion ("attraction + repulsion = gravitation"), in the synthesis of which "you have matter as a fluxional antecedent, which, in the very act of formation, passes into body by its gravity" [580–82]. But it will be better to leave this for the present, to omit the eristic digression,* and to continue from the point to which he had taken his exposition of the tendency to individuation, before he explicitly introduced the law of polarity; that is to say, to the vegetable and animal kingdoms and the principle of their "evolution."

If, at the inanimate level, magnetism is the "central phenomenon" for revealing to us the law of polarity, at the organic level the central phenomenon is reproduction. For there is clearly "separative projection" at work whenever like produces like. It will be recalled from Chapter 3† that the constituent productive powers or forces are not extinguished by their synthesis in a structure—let us say in a body—but continue as that body's function. Another way of putting this is to say that polarities are themselves polarised; and that "life," so far as it is answerable at all to analytically ordered thought, is best conceived as this exponential process. It is at all events this conception that Coleridge seeks to elucidate in the *Theory of Life,* and which he illustrates most extensively, or least cursorily, in his account of organic life.

Every polarity, while being a duality from the point of view, so to speak, of either pole alone, is nevertheless a unity. It is in fact perpetually engaged in restoring, or rather renewing, the original unity, from which it springs. Thus, while *qua* duality it has already been polarised, yet *qua* unity this commencing polarity may again be polarised into two further opposites, and so *ad infinitum,* or rather *ad hominem sapientem.* It is by this proceeding that nature rises from stage to stage of complexity. Diagrammatically, if a commencing polarity is

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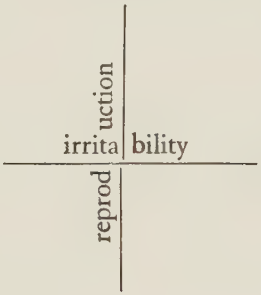
* See n. 8.

† See p. 34.

represented by a line, then the two extremities of the line represent its duality, its poles. But the whole line nevertheless remains a unity and can itself be polarised. Its whole length then becomes the *axis* of a new polarity; or, deserting the diagram for the reality, the original tension itself becomes tensile. In terms of life, a new natural quality is engendered, and this genesis is symbolised on the diagram by taking it into a second dimension. Thus, throughout the whole of life, not only as its foundation but also as continuing agent, the principle of "productive unity" remains paramount.

But so also does the "tendency to individuation," the "tendency to detach but so as to retain or to reproduce attachment," which Coleridge traces in ascending gradations, though the corals and conchylia ("characterised by still passing away and dissolving into the earth, which they had previously excreted, as if they were the first feeble effort of detachment") through the molluscs and vermes, to the point in life which he takes as the central phenomenon of his second-degree polarity, namely *irritability* or (as he elsewhere suggests to be a better term) sensibility.



Nature, he comments:

> has succeeded. She has created the intermediate link between the vegetable world, as the product of the reproductive or magnetic power, and the animal as the exponent of sensibility . . . Had she proceeded no further, yet the whole vegetable, together with the whole insect creation, would have formed within themselves an entire and independent system of Life [594].

We will telescope the remainder of the section. Insects are a sort of *externalised* version of something that is essentially *inward,* that is, of sentience. That which is later to become a purely inward process is here seen externalised in a spatial form. The morphology of the plant is an

expression of the principle of reproduction ("growth and identity of the whole, amid the change or flux of all the parts") [584]. The irritable antenna of the insect displays reproduction raised to another power. It reproduces *movement.* An insect is your perfect behaviourist. It immedately echoes in its own motion the external stimulus that excited it. Yet these subtly irritable organs are themselves only a sort of physical caricature of those far subtler motions that are proper to nature's next production—the animal and human soul. But first Coleridge pauses to point out the startling metamorphosis of outward form that characterises nature's transition to this next stage of animal existence. For the opposite forces of the one power, though they never act singly, and though they invariably interpenetrate, do alternate in the temporary *predominance* of the one over the other. The exuberant complexity of structure typical of the insect disappears altogether from the surface, having withdrawn to the interior parts of the body. The outlines of the fish are the simplest and severest that can well be conceived. Nature sinks back exhausted, as it were, from the line she has hitherto been following and in her repose gathers strength for her newest creation—consciousness. The insect's organ almost mechanically reproduces the external stimulus. The soul reproduces and retains, in the form of afterimages, the impressions that come to it through the senses. This is the foundation on which later there is to be built the self-conscious life of the spirit.

This part of Coleridge's exposition makes the easiest, as it certainly makes fascinating, reading.[15] The above brief summary has been largely stripped of the illustrative detail that gives it its colour, and anyone not prepared to read the whole work is strongly recommended to read from page 589 to the end. We shall be referring in the next chapter to the culminating paragraphs depicting and characterising the ultimate "ascent" to human consciousness; but meanwhile the very word *ascent,* which is certainly not inappropriate to the theory, introduces another consideration. A modern reader can hardly peruse Coleridge's "explanation" of life without its continuing to grow on him that what he in fact has before him is a good deal more than an explanation. He suspects more and more definitely as he proceeds, and by the time he has reached the section on organic life the suspicion has become a certainty, that what he is really being fed is a full-fledged theory of evolution alternative to, and largely incompatible with, the one he has been taught to revere.

The conclusion is an inescapable one, and we shall return to some of its implications in a later chapter. Meanwhile however we should beware of assuming that Coleridge had clearly before his mind, in writing, that picture of a vast temporal process which has become so real to post-Darwinian minds. He speaks frequently of successive gradations, or stages, but rarely of *periods,*[16] in what he nevertheless alludes to as "the whole history of nature." The truth appears to be that his whole conception of time past was less quantitative than ours, and this for two reasons, one of which he probably shared with most of his contemporaries, while the other was more peculiar to himself. As to the first, he was thinking and writing in the early dawn of that new dimension of consciousness, for which perhaps the most satisfactory name is "historicism," though there are certain grave objections to it;[17] and to which we partly owe the radically altered meaning of the word *evolution.* In this respect he was in advance of, and leading,[18] his contemporaries. The *Philosophical Lectures,* for instance, show an awareness, of the evolution, not now of nature, but of consciousness itself, which has rarely been evinced before our own time. As to the second, our whole arithmetically calibrated image of a remote, pre-human past of indefinite extension would appear to stem from the Cartesian dualism.[19] Experience, or Fancy, in that mode has been increasing, and was still steadily increasing in the minds of those around him, but Coleridge deliberately rejected it and, in that respect, may indeed be regarded as *behind* his contemporaries. Change in the concept of "evolution" went hand in hand with change in the concept, and image, of "matter"; for if one takes the older picture of *emboîtement* and looks it steadily in the face, it becomes evident that, in order to be barely credible, it requires a far less antiseptically spatial, and notionally visible, idea of matter than mechanistic theory entails. In a word the older perspective was radically different. Ontogenesis was the reality, was the knotty problem; while phylogenesis was no more than its telescoped and shadowy background—rather as the opening genealogical pages of a Victorian novel, covering perhaps several centuries, are the telescoped and shadowy background to the story we are really interested in, covering a few months or years. As to the mysterious relation between the two, it was not in issue, since the whole process was viewed as substantially one. It is only as general attention has increasingly focussed on the phylogenetic component, and lost interest in the ontogenetic, that the fact

of the persistent "recapitulation" of the former by the latter has turned into an important, but unaccountable, freak of nature.

Coleridge was in fact writing out of the old perspective into the new; and this comes out especially clearly at the point where he seeks to substitute the image of the ladder for that of the chain. A chain is suspended from above, but a ladder rises upward from below, and "It has before been noticed that the progress of Nature is more truly represented by the ladder, than by the suspended chain . . ." [591]. Yet this need not signify a merely linear ascent, for he continues: "and that she expands as by concentric circles." [20]

For the reasons just advanced caution must be exercised in characterising the *Theory of Life* as a teleological one. It depends what we mean by *teleological.* In the perspective of time quantitatively measured—clock time—a teleological explanation entails design and the argument from design[21]—a sort of anthropomorphic "planning"—but this is something quite different from that relation between potential and actual, between the lower kingdoms of nature and the higher, between parts and whole, between efficient cause and final cause, and thus between past and future, which Coleridge envisaged. For this he sometimes used the term *irradiation;* and we shall be returning to it in a subsequent chapter.

This one has already perhaps grown too long. But it should not be closed without a few observations on the relation between the concept of *life,* as it is built up in the *Theory of Life,* and Coleridge's concept of *nature,*[22] which is a term he used far more frequently in his other prose writings. The word *nature,* he pointed out, had been used in two different ways, one of them active and the other passive; "energetic (= forma formans), and material (= forma formata)." [23] We have seen how he himself adopted an older distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata.* When the topic is nature itself—the nature of Nature—it is of the utmost importance to distinguish these: and we have seen that he censures Aristotle for confounding them. In other contexts, where for instance the topic is the distinction between *man* and nature, the former distinction does not need to be maintained, and Coleridge himself does not always maintain it. What matters *then,* is that in nature, whether *naturans* or not, "there is no origin." [24] It is "self-organizing," but not, as is the case with a willed act, "self-originating."

As far as science and philosophy are concerned, the prevailing tend-

ency among his contemporaries was to lose sight of, or to deny altogether, the former of the two distinguishable senses of *nature* and this tendency, as we know, he set himself to combat. There seems no need to regard *life* and *natura naturans* as other than virtual synonyms, or to doubt that in the *Theory of Life* we have his most extensive, and most nearly systematic, treatment of what he elsewhere called *natura naturans*—but sometimes also by other names: *forma formans, vis vitae vivida* and so forth. The only difference is that none of these technical terms has ever become part of our common vocabulary. It is otherwise with *life,* and, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, contexts abound today in which, if *life* does not mean *natura naturans,* it would be difficult to say what, if anything, it does mean.