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Two Forces of One Power

Apart from his poetry, the best-known work of Coleridge is the 'Literary Life,' or *Biographia Literaria*. It is really the only prose writing that is at all widely read today. Moreover, within the *Biographia Literaria* itself it is to one particular chapter that attention is mainly given. The critique of Wordsworth's poetry which fills four chapters in the second part of the book is, it is true, highly valued by all who are at all deeply concerned with English literature and its history; but it is the famous, truncated Chapter XIII, at the end of Part I, which comes to mind first and foremost, when the *Biographia Literaria* is mentioned. This chapter has been praised, criticised, confuted, confirmed, argued from, argued against, expounded, blessed and cursed over and over again and almost without intermission since the day it was published . . . or rather part of this chapter.

Chapter XIII consists of three parts. First there are three pages of philosophical exposition following, without any appreciable break, on the long philosophical disquisition which constitutes Chapter XII. Then there is a row of asterisks, followed by a letter, printed in italics, which the author says he had just received from a friend, whose practical judgment he has "ample reason to estimate and revere" and who had seen the part of the book already written. The letter begins: "You ask my opinion concerning your Chapter on The Imagination, both as to the impression it made on myself, and as to those which I think it will make on the Public . . ." It goes on to advise that the chapter, "which cannot, when it is printed, amount to so little as an hundred pages," would be quite out of place in a literary biography, and recommends the author to reserve it for "your great book on the Constructive Philosophy, which you have promised and announced." Even then it will be too revolutionary to be readily received. For both its opinions and its

method of argument are "directly the reverse of all I had ever been accustomed to consider as truth . . ."

The chapter then concludes with three short paragraphs stating, says Coleridge, "the main result of the Chapter which I have reserved for that future publication."

This 'letter' we now know[1] to have been composed by Coleridge himself. It is on the third part of the chapter, the three final paragraphs already referred to, that attention has been mainly concentrated. They contain (1) Coleridge's distinction between the 'primary' and the 'secondary' Imagination, (2) his frequently quoted definition of the primary Imagination "as 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," (3) his dictum that the secondary Imagination "is essentially *vital,* even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead," and (4) though this had already been adumbrated in Chapter IV, the famous distinction between Imagination and Fancy.

So much for the content of the three paragraphs. Let us now tabulate what else we know about them. We know, firstly, that they form part of a chapter entitled "On the Imagination, or Esemplastic Power"; secondly, that Coleridge began writing this chapter with the thought that it might run to as many as a hundred pages; thirdly, that the three paragraphs* were substituted for what would have been at most a brief terminal summary of the conclusions ("the main result") to be drawn from the contents of those hundred or so pages; fourthly, that Coleridge had in contemplation a great book on the Constructive Philosophy, which was likely to contain opinions and a method of argument not merely different from, but "directly the reverse" of all that his contemporaries were accustomed to think.

The great book on the Constructive Philosophy never appeared, though it was often mentioned.[2] It was certainly never finished; but equally certainly it was more than merely begun, and there are two substantial MS volumes in the British Museum, which were undoubtedly intended to be the first part of it.† Moreover it is apparent from other published works such as the *Aids to Reflection,* the *Friend,* the *Philosophical Lectures,* and the *Theory of Life,* and it has been becom-

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* In effect there are only two, since the first merely describes the other two.

† The *Treatise on Logic.*

ing more and more apparent during the last few decades from MSS, letters, marginalia, notebook entries etc., that the substance of his projected Magnum Opus was fully available to Coleridge's *mind* before he died, in the shape of a coherent and closely knit psychology, philosophy and cosmology.

How far it was already so available at the time when Chapter XIII was written and how far he continued to develop it afterwards is a matter which need not concern us.

Apart from all this, there is Chapter XII of the *Biographia Literaria* itself, which, though it is difficult reading, is perfectly intelligible, and from which, even if taken by itself, the skeleton of the constructive, or dynamic, philosophy, and in particular the precise significance of the term *primary imagination,* can be constructed by a little serious application.

Discouraging perhaps; but one would have thought that anyone who felt at all deeply concerned with Coleridge's views on imagination and who felt entitled to spread himself on the topic (Walter Pater for instance) would, if he could not bring himself to study Chapter XII, at least have taken the trouble to ponder the opening paragraphs of Chapter XIII *as well as* the three aphoristic paragraphs with which it closes. Yet, with a few honourable exceptions, these opening paragraphs have been completely ignored.

Let us then see how Chapter XIII does begin—omitting the quotations from Milton, Leibnitz and Synesius which are placed at the head of it:

> Descartes, speaking as a naturalist, and in imitation of Archimedes, said, give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe. We must of course understand him to have meant: I will render the construction of the universe intelligible. In the same sense the transcendental philosopher* says: grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or *find* itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you. Every other science presupposes intelligence as already existing and complete: the philosopher contemplates it in its growth, and as it were represents its history to the mind from its birth to its maturity.[3]

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* See Chapter I, p. 15, above.

A cosmology, a philosophy, a psychology, which allows to imagination a 'primary' as well as a secondary role, must begin by recognizing two forces. These two forces will be its ultimate, unquestioned grounds in precisely the same way as matter and motion were the unquestioned grounds of most of the philosophy and all the science of Coleridge's contemporaries. They would appear therefore to be of some slight importance. Nevertheless the majority of those who up to now have sympathetically interpreted Coleridge to us, including some who have honestly sought to interpret him in depth—and have read very widely in him for that purpose[4]—have simply ignored them. To us, on the contrary, it has long been evident that neither his 'system' as a whole, nor his theory of imagination, which is an integral part of it, can be authentically apprehended without first coming to terms with those two forces; and it is with the idea of coming to terms with them at the outset that we have taken the unusual course of dealing, as far as in us lies, with Coleridge's concept of nature *before* coming on to his concept of mind (understanding and reason), of man, of imagination and other things.

To proceed in this order may have some disadvantages, but it will have two important merits. Firstly, everyman's personal experience of nature does precede in time his experience of the working of his own mind, and we have all learned much about the former before we begin to reflect on the latter. Secondly the positivist or materialist (many would say simply 'the scientific') world-view itself adopts this order. It begins by postulating a physical process (whether in terms of "matter and motion" or of energy or of some other physical substratum makes no difference here), it shows how this process produced the human brain (of which the mind is a function) and then proceeds, on the basis of a brain so conceived, to propound whatever it has to propound about the mind. All this, though rarely stated and perhaps not often consciously formulated, is operative as presupposition today whenever the mind, whether conscious or unconscious, whether in its creative or its analytical aspect, is debated or reflected on.[5] It is the tacit assumption of every received system of psychology, whether neural, Freudian, philosophical, theological or aesthetic. A certain concept of nature is in fact implicit in every concept of mind; and Coleridge's own concept of nature—"directly the reverse" of all that most of us "have ever been accustomed to consider as truth"—is implicit in all his reflections and all his utterances on the subject of the mind and its operations. Most of the

criticisms to which these have been subjected, whether fretfully or thoughtfully, are found on analysis to be based on the substitution of the wrong set of presuppositions for the right ones. His conclusions are rejected for failing to accord with premises on which they are not based. In particular they have suffered from the circumstance that a non-Cartesian psychology will not fit into a Cartesian cosmos. Critics who prefer to bestow their attention on more immediate matters, while they take for granted as revealed truth the prevailing metaphysical climate of their age, are sometimes heard to grumble because Coleridge's theory of imagination is for some reason "still around." They are to be commended for their sincerity. There really is no room for Coleridge in their world. Something at least, then, will have been achieved by the method adopted here if it should be appreciated in future that Coleridge's doctrine of, for instance, imagination cannot be refuted, or even intelligently attacked, without first meeting and disposing of Coleridge's premises.

As before, we shall proceed by selecting and commenting on a few quotations, drawn from his published and unpublished writings, on the subject of these two 'forces' which, for Coleridge, took the place of the exclusively physical base presumed by the educated opinion of his day, and of our own, to lie at the foundation of the world. And we will look first of all at those early paragraphs of Chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria* from which we quoted above. They are, then, "contrary" forces (p. 28); but on the other hand they are "real" and not mere logical opposites. It is not Hegel but Kant, whom he cites to the effect that:

> Opposites . . . are of two kinds, either logical, that is such as are absolutely incompatible; or real, without being contradictory . . . a body, at one and the same time in motion and not in motion, is nothing, or, at most, air articulated into nonsense. But a motory force of a body in one direction, and an equal force of the same body in an opposite direction is not incompatible, and the result, namely, rest, is real and representable.[6]

Are they physical forces, then? Certainly not, though they do (as will be seen later) give rise to physical forces. The instance of a body at rest, because two physical forces are acting on it from opposite directions, was an illustration only, offered as some help to the imagination. But our two forces are "prior to all direction"; they "counteract each other by their essential nature"; they are "the primary forces from which

the conditions of all possible directions are derivative"; they are "both alike infinite, both alike indestructible." To which we may add (from the Essay on the *Principles of Genial Criticism*): they are "two conflicting principles of the FREE LIFE and the CONFINING FORM." [7]

They thus fulfil his own stipulation that a true system must be grounded neither in a *thing* nor an *abstraction;** and, because they are not abstractions but realities, it is possible for us to "contemplate" them intuitively.

> Every power[8] in nature and in spirit must evolve an opposite as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: and all opposition is a tendency to re-union. This is the universal law of polarity or essential dualism, first promulgated by Heraclitus, 2000 years afterwards re-published and made the foundation both of logic, of physics, and of meta-physics by Giordano Bruno.[9]

Now follows one of the passages in which Coleridge attempts to express the relation between the two forces in abstract philosophical language, and where his adoption of 'Hegelian' (more properly Fichtean) terminology has perhaps hindered rather than helped effective grasp of his meaning by most of his readers:

> The principle may be thus expressed. The identity of *thesis* and *antithesis* is the substance of all being; their opposition the condition of all existence or being manifested; and every thing or *phaenomenon* is the exponent of a *synthesis* as long as the opposite energies are retained in that *synthesis*.[9]

After which he continues with another attempt, this time taken from chemistry, to illustrate concretely and pictorially, the *nature* of "polar opposition":

> Thus water is neither oxygen nor hydrogen, nor yet is it a commixture of both; but the *synthesis* or indifference of the two: and as long as the *copula* endures, by which it becomes, or rather which alone is water, it is not less a simple body than either of the imaginary elements, improperly called its ingredients or components. It is the object of the mechanical atomistic philosophy[10] to confound *synthesis* with *synartesis*, or rather with mere juxta-position of corpuscles separated by invisible interspaces.

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* Chapter 2, p. 24, above.

> I find it difficult to determine, whether this theory contradicts the reason or the senses most: for it is alike inconceivable and unimaginable.[11]

"Every power in nature and in spirit . . ." As has already been emphasised, we are beginning with Coleridge's concept of nature; moreover in this chapter we confine ourselves largely to his concept of *inorganic* nature, the bearing of the two forces on biological evolution being left for subsequent treatment. This again has some disadvantages, since their interpenetration within the processes, alike of organic growth and of phylogenetic evolution makes a readier appeal to the imagination, which is helped there by the rich variety of familiar and picturable forms wherethrough they manifest themselves. Nevertheless it is believed that on the whole the disadvantages are outweighed by other considerations. In any case the question would quickly be raised, which is now raised at the very outset, by the words "in nature and in spirit"; and that is of course the question of the 'ontological status' of the two forces.

To ask some such question as: are they real or are they purely conceptual? would be to accept in advance a categorical disjunction which Coleridge spent much of his life in denying and (as he believed) disproving. A less loaded question would be to enquire if they are of such a nature that any use can be made of them by experimental science. But that is a question to which no answer can be attempted until we have heard a great deal more than we have yet done of what Coleridge had to say about them.

We will begin by hearing what they are *not*. They are not phenomenal; another way of putting it would be to say that, unless we are prepared to accept, at least for the sake of argument, the distinction, already discussed, between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans,* and to accept it as a distinction between two forms of reality, we had better not trouble ourselves further with them. For it is only in *natura naturans* that we shall ever find them. But let us hear Coleridge himself on the subject:

> All our inquiries respecting Nature (that is, the objects of the senses, or whatever is seen, heard, smelt, touched, tasted or weighed) may be generalized into two questions:
>
> First, what are the *Powers* that must be assumed in order for the Thing to *be* that which it is: or what are the primary constituent *Powers* of Nature, into some modification or combination of which all other Natural *Powers* are to be resolved?

> Second Question. What are the Forms in which these Powers *appear* or manifest themselves to our senses—or What are The primary *Things,* into some combination of which all other *things* are to be resolved, as into their first Elements?
>
> Answer to the First Question. In answer to the First Question I say, that all the primary Powers of Nature may be reduced to Two, each of which produces two others, and a third as the union of both.[12]

In the second place they are not hypotheses invented to "account for" phenomena. Coleridge himself carefully distinguished between accounting for a thing and "explaining" it in his *Theory of Life,* but it will be better to deal with this when we come on to the relation, in his system, between a 'law of nature' and an 'idea.' Meanwhile any sceptic may quite properly *treat* them as hypotheses and therefore decline considering them further if he finds the notion of them incompatible with fact observed or verified.

But that is of course quite different from rejecting them simply because they are not to be found among the phenomena observed, or the hypotheses invented, in trim with post-Cartesian scientific method. When for instance Sir Herbert Read remarks that: "The *Natur-geist* [*natura naturans*] is not a phenomenon recognized by natural science," one can only reply, patiently and with all due courtesy: "But *of course* it isn't!" How could that which is by definition not a phenomenon be recognized as a phenomenon by anyone? And how could it be recognized *even as a hypothesis* by a natural science, which up to the present has proceeded on the assumption that "the final solution of phenomena" *can* "itself be a phenomenon"; for which "nature" is, not only theoretically but also methodically, presumed to be exclusively *natura naturata?* [13]

The two forces, then, are not parts of phenomenal nature; they are not body, nor in any conventional sense the "causes" of what is bodily. They are not material in the sense that, for instance, the forces of electricity and magnetism are material. These 'constituent powers,' as Coleridge calls them in the passage previously quoted, are acts or energies that are "suspended and, as it were, quenched in the product." * They are the 'inside' of anything to which we can apply the noun *matter* or the adjective *material.*[14]

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* Chapter 2, p. 24, above.

> It is peculiar to the Philosophy, of which I have given this slight sketch as far as its introductory Science is concerned, to consider matter as a Product—coagulum spiritus—the pause, by interpenetration, of opposite energies . . .[15]

And here the word *pause* is important. It will be recalled that in Chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria* the two forces are characterised as "both alike infinite and indestructible." It follows that, when they are "quenched" in their product, they do not simply cease to exist. They are merely "suspended." (In the illustration, hydrogen and oxygen *are* water "so long as the copula endures"—but they are also still potentially hydrogen and oxygen.) Consequently the 'constituent powers,' which have given rise to a body, may then 'reappear' in it as its function:

> a Power, acting in and by its Product or Representative to a predetermined purpose is a Function . . .[16]

> The first product of its energy is the thing itself: *ipsa se posuit et iam facta est ens positum*. Still, however, its productive energy is not exhausted in this product, but overflows, or is effluent, as the specific forces, properties, faculties, of the product. It reappears, in short, as the function of the body.[17]

And this will be particularly important for biology, where

> The vital functions are consequents of the Vis Vitae, Principium Vitale, and presuppose the Organs, as the Functionaries.[18]

Before however we can proceed to the organic level, there is still some more to be said on the general subject of the two forces and the relation between them at the inorganic level.

One way of putting it, as has perhaps appeared, would be to say that, in order to think with Coleridge, we have to supplement the familiar contrast between 'potential' and 'kinetic' energy with some such contrast as that between 'energy as free power' and 'energy as structure.'[19] It is however a peculiarity of the two forces that we cannot even imagine them without at the same time imagining the special *relation between* them. This is the relation for which Coleridge normally used the word *polarity*, and which was for him such a common and indispensable tool of thought that in his notebooks, marginal annotations and some of his

letters to friends he habitually employed the symbol)(, to avoid the tedium of writing out in full some such phrase as "is polarically related to" or "is the polar opposite of"; as others, writing in a hurry, will often put "=" for "is equivalent to" or "is the same as."

We come, then, to the question: what *is* this "polarity"? And perhaps, to begin with, a few observations on the word itself may be of some assistance. Originally it derived its meaning from terrestrial magnetism, being found in the seventeenth century (according to the Oxford Dictionary) both in the particular sense of "the quality or property possessed by a lodestone or magnetised bar of iron turning so as to point with their two extremities to the two (magnetic) poles of the earth" and then in the general sense of a quality or property *analogous* to that of magnetism. The dictionary subdivides the general sense into two branches (*a*) and (*b*), of which (*a*) is defined as "the having of an axis with reference to which certain physical properties are determined; the disposition of a body or an elementary molecule to place its mathematical axis in a particular direction." It is in this sense that the word is used in, for instance, crystallography. Subdivision (*b*) is still more generalized: "The quality of exhibiting contrasted properties or powers in opposite or contrasted directions; the possession of two points called poles having contrary qualities or tendencies"; and here the earliest supporting quotation is dated 1818 and taken from Coleridge himself: "Contemplating in all Electrical phenomena the operation of a Law which reigns through all Nature, viz. the law of *polarity,* or the manifestation of one power by opposite forces." [20]

We shall return in a moment to the reference to "Electrical phenomena." Meanwhile the precise wording should be carefully noted. Polarity is, according to Coleridge, a "law"; it is a law which reigns through all Nature; the duality of the "opposite forces" is the *manifestation* of a prior unity; and that unity is a "power." It is not, that is to say, any abstract "principle of unity" or of identity—a point which it is hardly possible to over-emphasise, since that is precisely what it is commonly presumed to be by the few who go so far as to interest themselves at all in these fundamentals of Coleridge's thought. Moreover, most of the much that has been written, in the last few decades, concerning the "reconciliation of opposites" in literature, and often with express reference to Coleridge as its putative father, betrays a lamentable failure to understand what "opposites" and their "reconciliation" actually signified in Coleridge's vocabulary. There is a world of difference between

Coleridge's polarity and those "gorgeous ballets of dialectical opposition," [21] to which we have been treated not only by literary critics theorising about poetry, but also by psychologists, and more lately by theologians seeking to 'reconcile' the sacred and the profane.*

Polarity is dynamic, not abstract. It is not "a mere balance or compromise," but "a living and generative interpenetration." [22] Where logical opposites are contradictory, polar opposites are generative of each other—and together generative of new product. Polar opposites exist by virtue of each other *as well as* at the expense of each other; "each is that which it is called, relatively, by predominance of the one character or quality, not by the absolute exclusion of the other." [23] Moreover each quality or character is present *in* the other. We can and must distinguish, but there is no possibility of *dividing* them.[24]

But when one has said all this, how much has one succeeded in conveying? How much use are definitions of the undefinable? The point is, has the imagination grasped it? For nothing else can do so.[25] At this point the reader must be called on, not to think about imagination, but to use it. Indeed we shall see that the apprehension of polarity is itself *the basic act of imagination.*

For that reason a single vivid picture of the law of polarity at work in nature may well prove more effective than a dozen definitions or statements of principle; and it happens that the 1933 Supplement to the Oxford Dictionary gives us just such a picture, when it hazards as an additional definition of *polarity:* "The tendency observed in some animals of a severed head-piece to develop a tail or of a severed tail-piece to develop a head; a similar tendency in parts of plants."

To think of directionally opposed mechanical forces, giving rise by their equilibrium to a state of rest, is very well; and at least it shakes us out of any obsession with merely logical contradictories. But to think *only* of that will in the end prove more of a hindrance than a help. We do better to envisage something like two nations at total war, each with a network of spies and a resistance movement, distributed throughout the whole of the other's territory—and each with a secret underground passage opening into the citadel in the heart of the enemy's metropolis.

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* Though I am not aware that he ever did, STC might very well have invented the words *contrafaction* and *contrafactories,* to set against *contradiction* and *contradictories.*

Coleridge remained all his life deeply interested in the progress and the problems of natural science.[26] His Notebooks, in particular, are replete with observations on chemistry, biology, metallurgy and other sciences. He was an intimate friend of Sir Humphry Davy. His foremost concern was with electricity and magnetism, then still in their infancy, and particularly the no-mans-land between electricity and chemistry—so much so that, among the many misunderstandings which he suffered from his friends as well as from his enemies, was the belief that he held electricity to be "the foundation of life." [27]

This is of course a complete misconception. Coleridge's two indestructible "forces" are located in *natura naturans,* and are pre-phenomenal. The positive and negative forces or energies of electricity, though they are not directly perceptible (as neither, for that matter, are mechanical forces), are nevertheless present in the phenomenal world. The way he himself put it was to say that, though they are not embodied, they *are* "material." [28]

But though the material, and precisely quantifiable, positive and negative energies which we meet with in electricity are not the two forces spoken of at the beginning of Chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria,* they are, like the rest of the material world, effects, or products, of those forces and they happen, in their relation to each other, to provide a particularly telling illustration both of the two forces themselves and of the peculiar relation (polarity) which subsists between them. To this they come, so to speak, so near that one could almost say: Here we have *natura naturata* masquerading as *natura naturans.*

It is to this circumstance that we must look for an explanation of Coleridge's abiding interest in all he could learn about electricity and magnetism. The poles of the magnet, positive and negative electricity—these were not in themselves the "two antagonist Forces" that all creation entails. But they were forcing men's attention to themselves; and in so doing they were compelling them to begin thinking about nature in a different way, a way which might end in their again finding the forces themselves—in the only realm where they can be found—a realm to which the understanding alone has no access, but which is communicable, between one mind and another, only by an understanding laced with imagination.[29] The very histories of the two sciences and the contrast between them seemed to him to rub this in. Thus, we find him writing in the *Friend:*

But in experimental philosophy, it may be said how much do we not owe to accident? Doubtless: but let it not be forgotten, that if the discoveries so made stop there; if they do not excite some master IDEA; if they do not lead to some LAW (in whatever dress of theory or hypotheses the fashions and prejudices of the time may disguise or disfigure it):—the discoveries may remain for ages limited in their uses, insecure and unproductive. How many centuries, we might have said millennia, have passed, since the first accidental discovery of the attraction and repulsion of light bodies by rubbed amber etc. Compare the interval with the progress made within less than a century after the discovery of the phaenomena that led immediately to a THEORY of electricity. That here as in many other instances, the theory was supported by insecure hypotheses; that by one theorist two heterogeneous fluids are assumed, the vitreous and the resinous; by another, a plus and minus of the same fluid; that a third considers it a mere modification of light; while a fourth composes the electrical aura of oxygen, hydrogen, and caloric; this does but place the truth we have been evolving in a stronger and clearer light. For abstract from all these suppositions, or rather imaginations, that which is common to, and involved in them all; and we shall have neither notional fluid or fluids, nor chemical compounds, nor elementary matter,—but the idea of *two-opposite-forces,* tending to rest by equilibrium. These are the sole factors of the calculus, alike in all the theories. These give the *law,* and in it the *method,* both of arranging the phaenomena and of substantiating appearances into facts of science; with a success proportionate to the clearness or confusedness of the insight into the law. For this reason, we anticipate the greatest improvements in the *method,* the nearest approaches to a *system* of electricity, from these philosophers, who have presented the law most purely, and the correlative idea as an idea: those, namely, who, since the year 1798, in the true spirit of experimental dynamics, rejecting the imagination of any material substrate, simple or compound, contemplate in the phaenomena of electricity the operation of a law which reigns through all nature, the law of POLARITY, of the manifestation of one power by opposite forces; who trace in these appearances, as the most obvious and striking of its innumerable forms, the agency of the positive and negative poles of a power essential to all material construction; the second, namely, of the three primary principles, for which the beautiful and most appropriate symbols are given by the mind in the three ideal dimensions of space.

The time is, perhaps, nigh at hand, when the same comparison between the results of two unequal periods, the interval between the knowledge of a fact, and that from the discovery of the law,—will be applicable to the sister science of magnetism. But how great the contrast between

magnetism and electricity at the present moment! From remotest antiquity, the attraction of iron by the magnet was known and noticed; but, century after century, it remained the undisturbed property of poets and orators. The fact of the magnet and the fable of the phoenix stood on the same scale of utility. In the thirteenth century, or perhaps earlier, the polarity of the magnet, and its communicability to iron, were discovered; and soon suggested a purpose so grand and important, that it may well be deemed the proudest trophy ever raised by accident in the service of mankind—the invention of the compass. But it led to no idea, to no law, and consequently to no Method: though a variety of phaenomena, as startling as they are mysterious, have forced on us a presentiment of its intimate connection with all the great agencies of nature; of a revelation, in ciphers, the key to which is still wanting. I can recall no event of human history that impresses the imagination more deeply than the moment when Columbus, on an unknown ocean, first perceived one of these startling facts, the change of the magnetic needle.

In what shall we seek the cause of this contrast between the rapid progress of electricity and the stationary condition of magnetism? As many theories, as many hypotheses, have been advanced in the latter science as in the former. But the theories and fictions of the electricians contained an *idea,* and all the same idea, which has necessarily led to METHOD; implicit indeed, and only regulative hitherto, but which requires little more than the dismission of the imagery[30] to become constitutive like the ideas of the geometrician. On the contrary, the assumptions of the magnetists (as for instance, the hypothesis that the planet itself is one vast magnet, or that an immense magnet is concealed within it, or that of a concentric globe within the earth, revolving on its own independent axis) are but repetitions of the same fact or phaenomenon looked at through a magnifying glass; the *reiteration* of the problem, not its solution. The naturalist, who cannot or will not see, that one fact is often worth a thousand, as including them all in itself, and that it first *makes* all the other facts, who has not the head to comprehend, the soul to reverence, a central experiment or observation (what the Greeks would perhaps have called a *protophaenomenon*),—will never receive an auspicious answer from the oracle of nature.[31]

We have already emphasised the fact that the difficulty in expounding Coleridge's concept of nature lies, not in its being incoherent or fragmented, but rather in its total integration; so that every part of it tends to involve every other. Thus, the foregoing quotation virtually plunges us into the issue of the relation between 'law' and 'idea,' and of both of these to 'method,' which it is our plan to reach only later. This

much however should perhaps be said here: that the bearing, on precisely this issue,* of the discoveries that were being made in the domain of electricity was another (and yet, in a way, it is the *same*) reason for the special concern Coleridge felt with them. The understanding can apprehend only phenomena (that is, *natura naturata*) and the causal chain that links them together. If it 'goes behind' them, it can go only to other phenomena, hitherto unapprehended but forming part of the chain. Accordingly there must be ultimate phenomena, behind which the understanding cannot go. The understanding has played its part when it has delivered them to the imagination to contemplate (and here again we find ourselves pushed ahead into the issue of the relation between understanding, imagination and 'Reason'). These are the *protophaenomena*—"central phenomena," or Goethe's *Urphänomene*—and they are by no means confined to electricity and magnetism. They demand, though they rarely receive, our attention in every growing plant. But the positive and negative 'charges' with which electrical research in Coleridge's time, and now also atomic and nuclear research, are at last confronted, are conspicuous examples of them. To look beyond that stage for still other 'supporting' phenomena is (so Coleridge held) to wander off into the realm of fancy. At this point it is no longer for the understanding to continue exploring and analysing what the senses deliver to it, but for the mind to recognise the presence in itself of the naked 'idea' and, as it were, to exclaim: "Oh, it was *you,* was it!"

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* See Chapter 10 (conclusion).