Coleridge's Chrysopoetics: Alchemy, Authorship, and Imagination.
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Coleridge's Chrysopoetics:
Alchemy, Authorship, and Imagination

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to assess the creative potential of alchemy as a master trope in Coleridge’s conception of authorship and imagination. It begins with a challenge to the idea that an autonomous author is at the centre of a literary work. This idea is crucial to the reception of literature and to the way in which concepts of “originality” and “authorship” are typically understood. Against this marking out of an author as a singular, autonomous, and uniquely privileged “self”, I posit that, for Coleridge, authorship occurs in a transformative or alchemical interspace between the desire for self-expression and the necessarily other-determined nature of creativity. Offering an alternative trajectory for the author, Coleridge elaborates an imaginative strategy in which the dislocation of the self from itself is the truest path to self-expression, and the author must become other in order to become more fully himself. Demonstrating a unique link between plagiarism and creativity, this thesis suggests that alchemy, better than any other system, accounts for Coleridge’s propensity for plagiarism and for an aesthetic of artifice.

In an attempt to trace Coleridge’s familiarity with Hermetic and alchemical discourses throughout his life, it has been necessary to review works as varied as those of Plato, Marsilio Ficino, Ralph Cudworth, Jacob Boehme, Herman Boerhaave, and F. W. J. Schelling. I then suggest how Coleridge appropriates alchemical terminology to his own aesthetic and imaginative ends. Unable to resolve the desire for aesthetic autonomy with the impossibility of asserting the self in one’s own voice, the thesis posits that Coleridge “plays” in the hermeneutic interspace between selfhood and otherness, creativity and counterfeit, authority and artifice, in order to arrive at an entirely unique strategy of alchemical self-exposition. Arriving at authorial selfhood through the odyssey of alterity, Coleridge’s “play”giarisms, in this view, do not violate the principles of originality, but redefine them. The thesis ends with a consideration of the necessarily negotiated fiction of all acts of imagination and authorship.
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Art is Lies that tell the Truth

Picasso
Introduction

If you or I crib a little something, that's plagiarism.
But if Samuel Taylor Coleridge cribs stuff from Germany,
don't you feel another word for it?

Stanley Cavell¹

Authorship, whether of a poem, a novel, an essay or, indeed most especially, a doctoral thesis, begins with an uncomfortable confrontation with difference. To establish oneself, as one must claim to do in a dissertation, as a distinct, original, creative contributor to a field that has otherwise never known such wisdom as one is about to expound, is to establish oneself in contradistinction to a separative "other." Predicated upon the fundamental validity of a coherent "self" against an objective other who is "not self," authorship begins with alterity.

Everyone who reads Coleridge must come to some conclusion about the nature of self-directed authorship, intellectual indebtedness, and plagiarism. Frequently cast as an embarrassment or as an instance of deplorable authorial insecurity and emotional dependence, Coleridge's plagiarisms have led to a series of critical enquiries that disclaim his authenticity and trace his work back to some other, more original, source. It is the purpose of this thesis to reassess the significance of the act of plagiarism and to question its position in Coleridge's aesthetics.

We are too much in love with Coleridge's plagiarisms. To discuss Coleridge as a thinker is inevitably to discuss Coleridge as a plagiarist. An undoubted literary impostor, Coleridge assumes various different voices and directly copies the works of numerous thinkers. Impressed by his borrowings, critical endeavours to understand Coleridge's theory of the imagination, or to appreciate his attempt to exhibit the relation of philosophy to poetry, often run afoul of a prevailing concern for his lack of originality and authenticity. The result is that it has become impossible to

consider Coleridge without considering the tortured question of his intellectual debt to “others.” Writing in the voice of distanced others, and against the backdrop of numerous translations, adaptations, borrowings and outright thefts, Coleridge confronts his reader with the difficulty of understanding his claim to authorship. It has, as a result, become commonplace to read Coleridge’s prose by turning close attention to critical source-hunting and to highlighting his patchy derivations from other people’s works.  

Most instances of source hunting and claims for precedence used as evidence for Coleridge’s plagiarisms are grounded in a binary configuration of identity and alterity (i.e. Coleridge is Coleridge because he is not Wordsworth; or, Coleridge’s writings are his own because they are not Schelling’s). The problem of intellectual debt and plagiarism, cheek by jowl with the question of originality and authorship, relies upon the Cartesian bifurcation of the “self” and an objective other who is “not self.” Insistent upon locating Coleridge’s sources as “out there”, and envisaging his plagiarism as an inauthentic claim to the words of “other” writers, rather than an assimilation into or an emergence out of his “own” range of thoughts, critics have remained true to their Cartesian heritage.

A philosophy of the self that begins with Descartes can advance only along Cartesian lines. Therefore, it is not my intention to question Coleridge’s plagiarisms, but rather the tradition in which we have understood their relevance. Seen as violating the principles of unity and sacred selfhood by relying upon source texts outside itself, plagiarism is typically characterised as ancillary to the creative process and as a sign of creative incapacity. It is also, traditionally, less worthy of interest. As we shall see, however, to read Coleridge’s reliance upon “other” voices and his

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necessary identification with the “other” as bearing witness against his authenticity is to read Coleridge by the light of a tradition in which he does not belong. Subsuming his voice under the aegis of “other” writers whom he heavily plagiarises, and characterizing much of his poetry as though guided by some “other” hand (“these are very fine Lines, tho’...hang me, if I know or ever did know the meaning of them, tho’ my own composition”), Coleridge realigns his view of authorship and creative imagination with a tradition of thought in which questions of original authentic voice and influence are most markedly perplexed. Deliberately alienating himself from his words in order to vex the question of a unified authorial subjectivity, Coleridge arrives, rather paradoxically, at a deeper understanding of the true nature of the “self.” Coleridge’s tendency, as he puts it, “to abstract...and then by a sort of transfusion and transmission of my consciousness to identify myself with my Object”, surpasses the Cartesian split between selfhood and otherness and performs a unique hermeneutic gesture in which the self is posited not only against the “other”, but can also become it. Simply put, Coleridge’s prose involves the wholesale incorporation of the words of other writers to such an extent that we might say it becomes the work that exerts its effect upon it. This confusion or, more accurately, transcension of the “I am” (self) – “it is” (other) distinction is at the very heart of Coleridge’s theory of imagination and is the key to appreciating his unique aesthetics or, what I have termed, his “Chrysopoetics.”

“Chrysopoetics”, a derivative of the Greek terms “chrysos” (gold), and “polein” (to create), is variously known as alchemy. It is the metallurgical art of extracting metals from their ores, purifying and alloying metals, and transforming base matter into gold. Put simply, it performs the possibility of transmuting one thing into an “other.” Writing of alchemy that: “The essence was truth, the form was folly: and this is the definition of Alchemy”, Coleridge details a metallurgical tradition in which it is possible to go beyond (“meta”) “allon” (“that which differences, makes this

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other than that"). By situating Coleridge in the alchemical tradition, we might reconfigure his plagiarism as an attempt to go beyond the formal limitations of categories of selfhood and otherness. Offering an aesthetic solution to an ontological problem, the Chrysopoetic project proposes a new vocabulary by which the subject-object dichotomy of the Cartesian tradition may be resolved, or better, "dissolved."

It is worth noting here that the concern of this thesis is not physical alchemy per se, but a specific kind of alchemical hermeneutics. Taking Hermes Trismegistus as his guide (after whom hermeneutics itself takes its name), Coleridge evokes a heterodox and fluid notion of authorial voice. Capable of a transformative power which can turn a desired other inward and situate the self in the other, the Hermetic author collapses conventional distinctions between subject and object. As we shall see, alchemy is a quintessentially Hermetic art founded upon the unique decentering multiplication of a "nonoriginal origin" under several pseudonymous identities. By constructing subjectivity and authenticity through a variety of otherness and artificiality, the Hermetic spectrum ranges from misrepresented authorship to an authentic one, and complicates the usual polarisation of authenticity and fraud. Arising out of an undifferentiated source anterior to linguistic differentiation, the nonoriginal origin or prelinguistic "self" transposes itself into a projected "other" in order to express itself as self. This narrative strategy, in which an unwritten "self" writes itself into existence in the form of an "other", emphasises the mutually negotiated nature of creativity. In becoming other, the subject becomes more fully himself and, in the guise of the other, succeeds in heightening the authenticity of the self. Put differently, it is only through the "other" that the Hermetic artist fashions forth an authentic poetic "self" and, in so doing, manages at once to destroy authenticity as well as to preserve it.

It perhaps goes without saying that not everyone has the epistemological strength of a Coleridge. Founded entirely upon a fraudulent art form with a tendentious history, Chrysopoetics is essentially an aesthetic of the impossible. In the Cartesian interstice between "pure" self and

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5 CM II 825, italics mine.
"projected" other, Coleridge locates what he refers to as "a golden tertium aliquid" or "golden third something," in which authentic voice is synonymous with artificial otherness, and the quickest way to the "self" is inevitably through the necessary fictions of the "other." Performing not merely a rhetorical subvention but a complete transcension of the dualist assumptions of modern epistemology, the Chrysopoetic author opposes himself in order to become more fully himself. In this light, the mountebank's art becomes a fitting aesthetic analogue for the workings of the creative imagination, which Coleridge defines in part by its alchemical propensity to "dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate, in order to re-create." More precisely, the Hermetic epistemology promotes an undoubtedly derivative but essentially transformative "play" in the usual interstice between the self and the other. Self-expression is more accurately the expression of the self in the form of an 'other' (a transformative re-creation of the self as other), and all imaginative expression is necessarily a kind of "play"giarism.

In presenting this analysis of Coleridge's plagiarisms, I have no excuses to make. I do not deny that Coleridge plagiarised nor do I suggest that his borrowings have been exaggerated and their importance distorted. Instead, this thesis is based upon an appreciation of alchemical imagery in understanding those stages of authorial creativity usually assigned or dismissed as plagiaristic, uncreative, and unoriginal. It is, in other words, an extended attempt to assess the poetic potential of alchemy in Coleridge's writing. The position which I seek to establish is, quite simply, that Coleridge's plagiarisms re-enact the transformative and performative dimensions of the imaginative and creative act. Redefining the tradition in which the concept of plagiarism is typically understood, Coleridge expounds a uniquely transformative aesthetic in which self-expression necessarily occurs in the form of an other.

In this study, the term "plagiarism" will be taken in a wide sense, encompassing a range of forms of derivative writing, or any writing that confounds the traditional Cartesian boundaries

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6 CL IV 550, italics mine.
7 BL I 304.
between "self" and "other." This definition has the advantage of opening up the discussion of plagiarism proper, that is to say the appropriation of the work of one author by another, to forms of writing which would not necessarily be included in more traditional approaches. The transformations enacted by Coleridge's use of source texts, his manipulation of the voices of others and modification and transplantation of "himself" under the voices of "others", all fail to heed the conventional constraints of Cartesian epistemology and demand a new hermeneutic of plagiarism. Calling into question the very act of authorship, "playgiarism" in the broader sense makes explicit the intertextual and other-dependent dimension of all narrative. Rather than a bifurcation with the self on "this" side and "other" opposite, it is the imaginative potential of a transformative aesthetic that an author not only enters into a dialogue with the other, but necessarily becomes it.

Moving away from the notion of plagiarism as a kind of creative incapacity, the starting point for this thesis is an awareness of the coexistence of plagiarism and creation in the Coleridgean corpus. In order to expound upon this idea, it has been necessary to review Coleridge's plagiarisms in the context of the Hermetic and alchemical approaches with which he was familiar. Tracing Coleridge's various encounters with the Hermetic tradition throughout his life, in works as varied as those of Plato, Marsilio Ficino, Ralph Cudworth, Jacob Boehme, Herman Boerhaave, and F. W. J. Schelling, I hope to emancipate Coleridge from the misnomer of "plagiarism" that has too long muddied his true achievements. For Coleridge, locating oneself in the words of an other is not so much the activity of an impostor poet, but a fundamental expression of a hermeneutic which goes beyond the formal limitations of categories of "otherness" altogether, and employs a literary fraud in order to manifest a philosophical truth. While in Cartesian terms, Coleridge falls short of a standard of sincerity and originality, the Chrysopoetic formulation offers a more detailed attention to, and respect for, the artificiality of authenticity and, accordingly, the authenticity of Coleridge's art(ifice).
PART ONE: THE HISTORY OF WHAT NEVER WAS
Chapter One:  
Authoring the Self: Towards a Historiography of Others

[Perhaps it is his] nature,  
Not to be other than one thing.  

Shakespeare, Coriolanus, IV, vii, ll. 41-2.

i. The Mirror, the Lamp, and the Line of Direct Contact

I. A. Richards writes that in order to expound Coleridge’s theory of imagination, one must “start where he himself in the Biographia...really started: that is, with a theory of the act of knowledge, or of consciousness, or, as he called it, ‘the coincidence or coalescence of an OBJECT with a SUBJECT.’”8 Since Descartes, the central problem of philosophy has been the relationship between the individual self and the external world. One consequence of the “birth” of the subject in Cartesian dualism, and a crucial problem in aesthetics, is the attempt to explain how a subject can have thoughts which correspond to an object essentially separate from it. Specifically, how do ideas in the mind relate to the world around it? How does the mind know the material realm? Essentially, what is the relationship between the subject and the object, the self and the other, the mind and the world? The way in which we choose to answer these questions determines the way in which philosophies of selfhood, authenticity, originality, and creativity, ultimately progress.

The evolution of the imagination in the history of philosophy, after the claims of Cartesian dualism had taken hold of the Enlightenment mind, is typically granted a rather straightforward genealogical progression. The conventional lineage concerning the relationship between the individual self and the external world, between subject and object, begins with an early mimetic concern with the “object”, then traces the rise of the “subject” in Western thought with its “birth” in Cartesian philosophy and its culmination in German idealism, through to its “death” in post-modern...

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James Engell, in *The Creative Imagination*, is one proponent of this progressive and linear configuration of the development of the imagination. Positing the mechanists on one side and the idealists on the other, Engell sustains a clear line of development from the materialist to the idealist view, suggesting that the imagination either reflects reality and is therefore object-centered, or is created by the observer and is therefore subject-regulated. Enlisting Coleridge to support his position, Engell quotes his distinction between the early natural or material philosophers who “give the whole to the object and make the subject the mere result of that”, and the later idealists who “give the whole to the subject and make the object a mere result involved in it.”

This divisive conceptualisation of the historical development of the imagination is the product of a system of thought which sees the inception of the “self” in Cartesian philosophy advancing out of the allegedly inferior mimetic trends of the past and progressing through to, and culminating in, the primacy of subject-oriented idealism. The subject eventually comes to prevail over the object, and this becomes the hallmark of the romantic imagination.

Recently, Robert J. Griffin, in his study of literary historiography, notes that a genealogical assessment which documents the evolution of imagination from object-focused materialism through to subject-focused idealism is operative “in every student’s initiation into Romantic periodization,” and continues to be the prevalent view in almost any survey of the history of imagination, “particularly one that uses the Norton anthology.” One classic example of this conventional historiography is M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Tracing a great shift in the historical conceptualisation of the creative mind, supposedly, through a change in the metaphors used to describe it – the mirror and the lamp of his title – Abrams divides authorship into either a mimetic or an essentially productive act: “If Plato was the main source of the philosophical archetype of the

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For more on this conventional lineage, both its elaboration and its subversion, see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: the Struggle against Subjectivism 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 1-2, 6, 9.


reflector,” writes Abrams, “Plotinus was the chief begetter of the archetype of the projector.”\textsuperscript{12} For Abrams, while mirror metaphors are continuous through Locke and the eighteenth century, lamp metaphors are prominent in the Cambridge Platonists who influence Coleridge.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, suggests Abrams, the shift of emphasis from the former to the latter, from the “mirror” to the “lamp”, is the informing impetus behind the romantic theory of creativity as it emerges around the beginning of the nineteenth century, and it is from this decisive switch that art is reconfigured as no longer merely mimetic but expressive.

The notion of a linear progression of the imagination out of an early object focus to a later concentration on the subject is widely dispersed throughout literary criticism. René Wellek, in his volume on ‘The Romantic Age’ in A History of Modern Criticism (1955), published two years after Abrams’s The Mirror and the Lamp, links “the rise of an emotional concept of poetry” to “the implied rejection of the imitation theory.”\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, in The Order of Things (1966), Michel Foucault sustains the view that:

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them… And representation – whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge – was posited as a form of repetition: the theatre of life or the mirror of nature, that was the claim made by all language, its manner of declaring its existence and of formulating its right of speech.\textsuperscript{15}

More recently, Richard Kearney in The Wake of Imagination (1988) applies Abrams’s titular metaphors to represent the difference between pre-modern and modern theories of imagination.

“The mimetic paradigm of imagining is replaced by the productive paradigm,” summarises Kearney, “the imagination ceases to function as a mirror reflecting some external reality and

\textsuperscript{12} M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 59. It is worth mentioning here that Abrams appropriates the mirror-lamp distinction from William Butler Yeats. I will return to examine the precise nature of Abrams’s (mis)appropriation of Yeats’s words in the final chapter of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{13} Abrams, p. 59.


\textsuperscript{15} Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 19, italics mine.
becomes a lamp which projects its own internally generated light onto things." Similarly, in *Instruments and the Imagination* (1995), Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman note: "the mirror is an image of the mind reflecting nature through poetry; this is the neoclassical goal of clear picturing. The lamp, on the other hand, portrays the mind as a radiant projector illuminating the objects perceived and actively operating on the world that the poet inhabits; this is the romantic goal." In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (1994), Martin Jay provides what is perhaps the most summative view: "If the Romantics abandoned the mirror, they did so – to borrow the metaphor M. H. Abrams appropriated from William Butler Yeats – in order to light the lamp of inner inspiration.” He explains: “They saw creation as emanation on the model of rays of light sent out from the sun; the mind was less a receptor of illumination than its expressive projector.” Following the general contours sketched out by Abrams, critics continue to identify an evolutionary continuum of creativity throughout history. Ranging from mimetic to expressive theories of English (and somewhat earlier, German) romantic criticism, or, from mimetic to “I-representative” literature which expresses the experiences and state of mind of the poet in his “proper person” as opposed to the experiences of some objective “other”, contemporary criticism stresses the central opposition between self-inspired and other-directed theories of inspiration and creativity. Upholding a linear temporal axis of progressive development with the self on ‘this’ side and the other on ‘that’ side, critics represent the development of creativity as a tidy linearity, advancing along an “accumulative wave, across the century line”, and reaching its apex in the subjective idealism of the romantic age.

The pervasiveness of such historiographies is particularly exacerbated in Coleridge studies where the development of his thought is considered an exemplary model of this historical

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19 Abrams, p. 98.
20 ‘Editors’ Introduction’ in BL lxxi.
development. Since it is really only with Kant and the German idealists in the late eighteenth and
nineteenth century that the productive imagination becomes, as it were, officially recognised by
mainstream Western thought, Coleridge is important for the decisive role he plays in shaping
British romantic discourses on the self by importing central concepts from German romanticism and
idealism into contemporary debate. Afraid of reducing the mind to cold mechanism, Coleridge is
said to have put behind him the associationist psychology of Hartley and to employ the language of
Kant, Fichte, and Schelling in order to frame his opposition. Saturated with German concepts and
terminology, Coleridge’s aesthetic speculations are typically understood as progressing out of early
mimetic and materialist explanations towards the triumph of the subject in German idealism.
According to James Volant Baker, for instance, it is only after Kant takes hold of Coleridge “as
with a giant’s hand” that the coup de grace is irrevocably administered to the object-based
materialism of Hartley.21 Advancing out of an early “wobble” in mechanical and associationistic
explanations, writes Baker, Coleridge moves onto the more “mature” traditions of Kantian idealism
and Schellingian Naturphilosophie.22 This straightforward chronology informs the critical tendency
to divide Coleridge’s life according to the prevailing character of conventional historiographical
enquiry in which earlier mimetic and object-based mechanistic concerns prevail and are later ousted
by the more sophisticated metaphysics of subject-focused creativity. Progressing, as Engell
explains, from “Gerard to Tetens, then Tetens to Coleridge – with the added interpolations of
Schelling”, Coleridge’s metaphysics advance in “one line of direct contact” and pursue the legacy
of the mimetic model of imagination to its final and justifiable ends.23 As we shall see, this
insistence upon a linear progression of thought, emerging out of mere object-directed mimesis and
culminating in the primacy of the self, not only informs our understanding of the development of

21 BL I 153.
1957), pp. 9-12, 22-31.
23 Engell, p. 123.
Coleridge’s theory of the imagination but also, and rather more damagingly, feeds our tendency to criticise his apparent lack of originality and authenticity in the formulation of it.

ii. Authoring Coleridge's Plagiarisms: The Myth of Solitary Authorship

Because a philosophy of the “self” that begins with Descartes can only progress in a Cartesian way, one outgrowth of this subject-object dualism is that it colours not only our concept of the “development” of the creative imagination, but also our understanding of notions of “authenticity” and “authorship.” Since the Cartesian mind is bent upon dividing the world into a series of binary oppositions progressing along a path of linear development, and culminating in the predominance of the “subject”, a key function of this system (and our particular inheritance from it) is the perpetuation of a fundamental rift and promotion of the sacred “self” against an external “other.” Indelibly marked by the finitude of indissoluble distinctions, Cartesian discourses of authorial “selfhood” and “authenticity”, like discourses of historical progression, are predicated upon the privileging of a coherent “self” over an objective other who is “not self.” Because of the high premium put upon the unified “self”, ideas of originality and invention are defined against the counter-ideal of mere classical imitation or mimetic repetition of “others.” Originality, according to this view, is defined as the product of a “unique” self, unfettered by the impurities of an external “other”, and the sole source and origin of its discourse (i.e. I am me because I am not you, or, my writings are my own, and therefore “original”, because they are not yours). Preserving the sanctity of a unified identity and coherent originality, the truest and most original “author” in the Cartesian light is one who is associated with the purity of singularity and selfhood alone. Originality, simply put, is the product of one who is entirely “self.”

In Romantic Theatricality, Judith Pascoe refers to this as the defining “romantic mythology” of the writer who seeks inspiration in solitude and for whom “the encroachments of the
[other] wreak havoc on the authenticity of the composition process." Almost invariably, she explains, the self is defined against the alterity of a perilous nether world of exteriority, peopled by estranged "others" who contaminate the pure unity of the authorial self. Discriminating against the "other" in favour of the self-same, a text may be said to have "authentic" value only if it is the work of a particular author, or of a particular self, unsullied by an extraneous "other." Denouncing the mimetic model of creativity as object-based reproduction and duplication, authorship must arise from within and be perfectly unborrowed. The accusation of inauthenticity, then, is founded upon the formalist opposition between a self-originating artist and one who takes on the words of an other who is not part of himself but who impresses upon him from without. Unsurprisingly, in Coleridge criticism this strategy of separating pure self from impure other, or authentic from inauthentic authorship, is deftly employed not only in understanding the progress of Coleridge's theory of imagination, but also in fuelling charges of plagiarism against him since his death. Since an author has formal value precisely because he does not bear witness to the influence of some "other" more "original" mind, Coleridge, as the product of numerous unacknowledged debts, fails to free his work from the influence of "others" and - so to speak - fails to "author" it.

It is worth pausing here to point out that Harold Bloom's seminal work, The Anxiety of Influence, appears to be one of the most obvious and glaring exceptions to this general trend. Against the otherwise inflexible notion of singular authority and subjective autonomy, Bloom raises awareness of the importance of the influence of the "other" upon the "author" and rebukes the common insistence upon originality at the expense of the other: "We need to stop thinking of [the] poet as an autonomous ego," he writes, "every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship... with another poet or poets." Expanding upon this idea in a companion volume, A Map of Misreading, Bloom suggests that poetic production is a series of deflections of the burden of "others." Every poet "misreads" his predecessors in order to establish his own individuality, and

every poem is thus a "misprision" of an earlier one. Enumerating six varieties of poetic misprision, Bloom even goes so far as to concede that plagiarism is one form of this "revisionary ratio" of what has come before.\(^{26}\) However, while Bloom goes some way in elucidating the indebtedness of every author to a series of "others", he nevertheless ends up reiterating the Cartesian bias. Stressing that authorial indebtedness to "others" causes "anxiety" among authors, Bloom asserts that it is justifiably so: "for what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself?"\(^{27}\)

While authorship is certainly other-determined, he writes, it inevitably results in a constant struggle against beleaguering forces, in which the poet "wrestles" with his precursors.\(^{28}\) Showing his allegiance to authorial "selfhood" alone, Bloom surmises that the "influence, and more precisely poetic influence" of another is "more of a blight than a blessing"; where it does operate successfully, it operates "as misprision, as deliberate, even perverse revisionism."\(^{29}\) Thus while Bloom's premise appears to be an exception to the trend of positing authorship against otherness, he still upholds poetic singularity and autonomy as the ideal, separating it off from any evidence of poetic influence or vicarious expression which he refers to as "a particular kind of catastrophe", namely "the primal catastrophe of poetic incarnation."\(^{30}\) Whilst denying the possibility of sacred autonomous authorship, Bloom's expostulations on the negative influence of the "other" continue to betray his treasuring of sacred "self-same" originality.

Much has been made of the record of Coleridge's frailties – particularly his fondness for borrowing the words of other writers. That his work is highly derivative and "externally" sourced by several "others" is unquestionable. The bearer of many intellectual debts, Coleridge weaves quotations and material from numerous writers into the fabric of much of his work. Our usual attempts to understand such borrowings betray our critical heritage and frequently earn Coleridge the reputation of an unmitigated liar and inauthentic fraud. As Dorothy Wordsworth put it: "He

\(^{27}\) Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 5, italics mine.
\(^{29}\) Bloom, *Anxiety*, p. 50.
plagiarised; he procrastinated; he spent a dismaying amount of effort in deceiving himself, and seeking to deceive others.”

Accepting the validity of the fundamental dualism between self and other, and treasuring singularity while concomitantly denying derivativeness, our historiographical solipsism is encoded in critical discussions of Coleridge’s authorship. As Walter Jackson Bate explains: “Throughout most of his life the unconfident Coleridge -- inhibited when he tried to write directly and formally in his own voice (inhibited, that is, when he was trying to write anything he felt really important) -- became most completely alive and the resources of his mind most open when he could talk or write vicariously.” Similarly, R. A. Foakes, in his introduction to Coleridge’s *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, contends that they “can hardly be thought of as ‘composed’ like books,” instead they are “full of quotations or echoes of other writers.”

Richard Haven notes that Coleridge’s most sustained and systematic philosophical arguments are those “which follow most closely the thought of someone else”, and Norman Fruman in *Coleridge: the Damaged Archangel* presents Coleridge as “an anxious man of limited intellectual powers,” driven by the security of a reputation which can be “won only by appropriating the work of others.”

Certainly, in the vocabulary of Cartesian dualism, the “self” that claims authorship of Coleridge’s texts appears to be nothing more than a curious array of free-floating “others.” The authorial self we encounter upon reading Coleridge is not an autonomous agent. Consequently, estimates of the value of Coleridge’s writings and his stature as an original philosopher have not fared very well. The improprieties of his plagiarisms inspire little confidence in his “originality”, and the failure of Coleridge’s philosophy, particularly his philosophy of the imagination, to stand up under the aegis of a singular self-contained authorship tends to disintegrate it into disrepute.

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35 For more on this view see Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge’s Poetics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher ltd., 1983), pp. 8-12.
Charges of plagiarism have much exercised Coleridgean commentators, and particular interest circulates around the controversy of his unacknowledged borrowings from the German philosophers. Kant, Schelling, and his disciple Steffens, are the most obvious examples. Engell states simply that Coleridge’s idea of the imagination, and his use of it to form critical values and to apply them to particular works, “is not original”: “In forming his conception of the imagination, Coleridge draws on nearly every other writer who discussed the subject.” Likewise, T. M. Raysor dismisses Coleridge’s central theory of imagination as “unfortunate”, and René Wellek perceives Coleridge roving amidst the ideas of transcendental Germans with little originality. In a section entitled ‘Coleridge’s Philosophy and Criticism’, Wellek points out that: “at crucial points in his writings Coleridge uses Kant, Schelling, and A. W. Schlegel, reproducing the very pattern of sentences and the exact vocabulary.” The result, he suggests, is that much of what impresses critics about Coleridge’s theory of imagination “is simply the teaching of Schelling and cannot be made the basis of a claim for Coleridge’s philosophical greatness.”

It is well known that book twelve of *Biographia Literaria* embarks upon a discussion that is a verbatim translation of Schelling. Going further, Joseph Warren Beach holds that “every leading idea” in Coleridge, “every turn in the argument, every ingenuity of metaphysical invention, is taken straight from either Steffens or Schelling.” While Engell and Bate in their introduction to *Biographia* propose that “a strong case could be made for the Fichtean, rather than Schellingian provenance of these chapters”, Nigel Leask retorts with what has become a commonplace in Coleridge criticism: “it’s really a quibble which of the Germans most influenced Coleridge”, what is important is that “his theory of the Imagination is best approached via the German debate.” This train of argument is further sustained by John Stuart Mill who asserts that: “Coleridge is anticipated in all the fundamentals of his theory by the great Germans of the latter half of the last century”, and

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36 Engell, p. 328. *italics mine.*
38 Wellek, II, pp. 152-3.
39 Joseph Warren Beach, ‘Coleridge’s Borrowings from the German’, *English Literary History*, IX (1942), 36-58 (p. 49).
by Mary Warnock who, treading closely on the heels of Mill, asserts in her book *Imagination*: “I shall take it for granted in the following pages that there is no need to dispute Mill’s words, and hardly any need to amplify them.”\textsuperscript{41} Warnock’s condemnation of Coleridge is particularly decisive: he is “a voracious, though a careless and inaccurate reader.” He not only copies out great passages of philosophy without stating his sources, writes Warnock, but “he pretends to have thought of things for himself which he obviously borrows” and he claims to be “the first to think of things which he plainly recognizes, when he reads them, as somehow speaking directly to him, but which he never actually formulates himself.”\textsuperscript{42} Where Coleridge’s musings are first articulated in the work of previous thinkers, she stresses, “Coleridge just copies it” and “we should not risk claiming, therefore, any of Coleridge’s views as his own original thought, even those which look most as if they were derived from his introspection.”\textsuperscript{43} In the end however, it is still Fruman, throwing up his arms as if in defeat, who sounds the most definitive death knell: “Coleridge really ha[s] no coherent theory of the imagination, or of mental functioning in general,” he writes, “…and because his sources are so diverse, it is futile to expect consistency…The scattered bits and pieces represent diverse coins, jewels, bullion, and promissory notes, mainly (but not entirely) scooped up in repeated raids on the unguarded Brinks truck of German romanticism.”\textsuperscript{44} While Fruman’s version has not gone uncontested, he nevertheless poses the question that must of necessity haunt any study of Coleridge’s thought:

> When we consider how deeply the insights and principles of Schlegel are diffused throughout Coleridge’s works, and when we remind ourselves further of the multitude of borrowings from German thought elsewhere in the prose writings, are we not forced substantially to modify the exalted claims made for Coleridge as an *original* critic and aesthetician?\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{42}Warnock, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{43}Warnock, pp. 73, 76.


\textsuperscript{45}Fruman, *Damaged Archangel*, p. 211.
As a product of all the "others" who come before him, and as an amalgam of all the thinkers whose words he employs in place of his own, Coleridge incites us to ask whether his writings may accurately be considered his "own."

Certainly, Coleridge has done little to dissuade his readers from such misgivings. Admitting the provenance of his German predecessors in an 1804 notebook entry, Coleridge teases: "In the Preface of my Metaph. Works I should say - Once & all read Tetens, Kant, Fichte, &c - & there you will trace or if you are on the hunt, track me." Indeed, as he prophesies, Coleridge's violation of the principle of intrinsic originality and his proclivity for supplementing his thought with the words of "others", has led to a long tradition of scholarship in which critics generally satisfy themselves with pointing out his sources and aligning comparative passages in target texts.

In fact, instances of source-hunting and cataloguing abound so readily in Coleridge criticism that any attempt to establish his uniqueness as a thinker tends to become obscured. As Warnock rather flippantly remarks: "Where Coleridge stops quoting someone else, he becomes more than usually incoherent", but "none of this need concern us in detail." To study Coleridge, then, is traditionally to study all the "others" to whom he is heavily indebted; and of course Coleridge scholars have found no lack of relevant evidence. Carving out inventory style histories of Coleridge's source material, examining the relation of his writings to those whom he read, by whom he was influenced, or from whom he borrowed, and cataloguing his ideas as but a mere amalgam of all the "others" who came before him, Coleridge's critics have remained true to their Cartesian heritage. However, as we shall see, to study Coleridge's sources is by no means the same as to understand his meaning.

In order to expound upon this in more detail, let us return first to the question of the fundamental validity of the historical rift between the subject and the object in the development of theories of imagination and authorship.

47 Warnock, pp. 100, 73. Two of the most exemplary cases of the inventory style approach to Coleridge's writings are McFarland's Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition cited above, and John Livingston Lowes, The Road to Xanadu (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927).
iii. Mythical Progressions: A Critique of Progress

It seems necessary here to say something more about the lineage upon which histories of authorial imagination and creativity, along with criticisms of Coleridge’s alleged inauthenticity, have been understood. Specifically, it is worth pausing to reconsider whether or not we have been entirely accurate in our adoption of the linear scheme of historical progression which posits “self” on one side and the “other” against it. By Abrams’s own admission, the historiography of The Mirror and the Lamp offers a systematic distinction between philosophies that are essentially co-existent. Abrams tells us in the opening lines of his chapter on “The Development of the Expressive Theory of Poetry and Art” that his study posits “separately and in sequence developments that are in fact concomitant and interdependent.”48 Dividing literary history into periods dominated by either the mirror or the lamp, Abrams separates procedurally, that is, methodically or even falsely, what is in fact inseparable and “interdependent.” He writes that many of “the characteristic patterns of romantic theory”, that is, expressive or anti-mimetic modes of thought, are to be found “variously developed, in earlier writers.” By “shifting the focus and selecting the examples,” Abrams self-confessedly and strategically chooses to emphasise “the novelty” of early nineteenth-century thought rather than its “continuity” with the past.49 By isolating interdependent elements into chronological sequence, Abrams sets the stage for his notion that the imagination progresses along a linear path of development until its radical, epochal break from the past in the late eighteenth century. Opting for dramatic narrative over historical accuracy, Abrams’s bifurcation of mirror and lamp, receptor and projector, other and self, is in fact founded upon the false division of concomitant faculties for the sake of creating a linear chronology and divisive epistemology. Laying down this “simplification”, as he terms it, Abrams rearranges interdependent processes “for convenience of exposition” and, in so doing, provides a historical division between object– and subject–based creativity, or between the early configurations of the “mirror” and later

49 Abrams, p. 70
concentrations on the “lamp”, solely for purpose of ease of understanding.\footnote{Abrams, p. 70-1.} As we have seen, this neat delineation of subject-based originality in the romantic age has informed most critical histories written after it. Rather problematically for our purposes then, a narrative division which Abrams recounts in order to stage a linear development and “evolution” in the history of imagination, because it is inherent to story telling and a simple aid to understanding, has become the prevailing tradition of our thought and has tended to obscure the more complex literary history which underlies it.

Like Abrams, Engell notes that his account of the development of the creative imagination also rests upon sweeping generalisations for the sake of clarity rather than accuracy. Classifying early thinkers as propounding a solely mimetic form of art, he writes: “in the Middle ages and the Renaissance…there was comparatively little psychological penetration into exactly how the mind recreates and holds within itself a picture of the world, or why genius in art is more than technical superiority.”\footnote{Engell, p. 11.} Against this mimetic strain, Engell posits Coleridge’s notion of creativity, which is “almost the reverse of that found in classical and mediaeval thought, and which, in fact, persist[s] into the eighteenth century.”\footnote{Editors’ introduction to BL, xcvi.} Employing naïve historicism in order to emphasise the romantic exultation of the authorial “self” over the merely mimetic re-presentation of the “object”, Engell sustains the conventional, albeit mistaken, historiography of linear imaginative progression. Having asserted the rift between the eighteenth century and all that came before it, Engell in the very next breath concedes that “in this simplified overview exceptions come to mind”, and he specifies that the speculations of Ficino are a general exception to the rule.\footnote{Engell, p. 11.} However, while he begins to signal to his reader the inherent falsification in any history which divides an entirely mimetic past from a more self-expressive romanticism, Engell develops the issue no further and abandons any specific enquiry into “the speculations of Ficino”, never to return. Like Abrams, while Engell admits his
divisive misnomer, he does little to remedy it. The pervasiveness of Engell’s historiography of romantic imagination is evinced in George J. Leonard’s work, *Into the Light of Things: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage*. Following Engell, Leonard asserts that: “In Coleridge…high art’s attention has been turned 180 degrees from Ficino.”54 Such critical assertions, as we shall go on to see in the following chapters, are by no means an accurate or even fair assessment of the work of either Ficino or Coleridge. Given the overwhelming influence of the mirror-lamp historiography upon the writings of many thinkers, and the more rudimentary influence of the rift in Cartesian constructions of selfhood and otherness upon our understanding of notions of authorship, originality, and authenticity, I would suggest that it is necessary to emancipate our understanding of Coleridge’s thought from this fraudulent linearity. Studies of Coleridge’s plagiarisms have too long suffered from the fundamental misnomer of the schism between subject and object, self and other, and if Abrams and Engell admit that their division is flawed, how indeed can we persist in understanding Coleridge by it?

Upsetting established chronologies even further, Frederick C. Beiser in his recent study *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism 1781-1801*, demonstrates that the historical and epistemological divide which traditionally situates German idealism against earlier materialist philosophies is equally misguided. Demonstrating fissures in the conventional lineage, Beiser maintains that German idealism is not the story of the triumph of the subject against earlier object-based materialism, but is in fact an account of progressive de-subjectivization. In Beiser’s words, the accepted chronology which interprets the development of the dominant epistemology out of object-centered materialism towards subject-centered idealism is “tendentious philosophically and anachronistic historically.”55 Where the conventional view holds that German idealism is a radical form of subjectivism, expanding the powers of the self to encompass the entire world, Beiser suggests that idealism is in fact the product of another, if not entirely opposite, impulse. Rather

55 Beiser, p. ix
than an increase in subjectivity, writes Beiser, German idealism never abandons the importance of
the thing-in-itself and, as such, is “an attempt to establish a satisfactory form of realism” and
naturalism.\textsuperscript{56} In Beiser’s analysis, idealism emerges not as the logical progression of a Cartesian
tradition of philosophy in which the self is sacred and primary, but as the first important break with
that divisive tradition.\textsuperscript{57} What this suggests is that not only are all charges of plagiarism and a lack
of originality founded upon a fundamental bifurcation of self and other or materialism and idealism
which has been grossly misrepresented in critical historiography, but if we insist on thinking of
Coleridge as the conceptual heir of a system of natural philosophy that can be traced back to
German thinkers such as Schelling, a system which itself is founded upon the transcension of all
divisive categories of selfhood and otherness, subject and object, mind and materiality, then it
makes little sense to continue to understand Coleridge in the vocabulary of such divisions. In the
System of Transcendental Idealism, for instance, Schelling makes it clear that both object-based
materialism and subject-centered idealism are rooted in dualisms that he does not accept. He
writes: “If the real world is a thing wholly independent of us, to which our presentation must
confirm, it is inconceivable how the real world, on the contrary, could conform itself to
presentations in us.” In other words, he continues, “\textit{If there is to be any philosophy at all, this
contradiction must be resolved.}”\textsuperscript{58} Replacing the division prevailing in philosophy from Descartes
through Fichte with a vision of a living, responsive nature which supplies a new mythology of unity
superior to the abstract counters of subject and object, mind and nature, finitude and infinitude,
Schelling offers an insightful union under the aegis of the imagination. As Coleridge writes in
chapter twelve of \textit{Biographia}, echoing Schelling, “the true system of natural philosophy places the
sole reality of things in an ABSOLUTE...in the absolute identity of subject and object.”\textsuperscript{59} The point

\textsuperscript{56} Beiser, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{57} Beiser, p. viii.
\textsuperscript{58} F. W. J. Schelling, \textit{System of Transcendental Idealism}, transl. by Peter L. Heath (Virginia: University of Virginia Press,
\textsuperscript{59} BL 1285, \textit{italics mine}. It is perhaps also worth noting that while many castigate Coleridge for obscurity or plagiarism,
Schelling himself had a different view of the matter. Benjamin Jowett writes that he had spoken to Schelling “about C.’s
plagiarism; he seemed very good-natured about it, and said that C. had expressed many things better than he could
to be made here is that if, upon the evidence of his plagiarisms, we think of Coleridge as the natural
heir of transcendental idealism, and if indeed his aesthetic formulations perform the same
unification of thought that Schelling suggests, then we must employ a new kind of ambidextrous
move by which to understand Coleridge’s aesthetic musings on the nature of the subject and object.
If the imagination is to be defined by its ability to surpass, eschew, and ultimately transcend
binaries of self and other, then it requires a vocabulary other than that of authorial influence,
anticipation, and precedence by which to understand it.

To return to the “problem” of Coleridge’s plagiarisms, then, it is a problem only to the
extent that it fails to respect the formalist categories of self and other. Employing the words of
another thinker to make his own point, and frequently employing the first person singular in
reference to himself where he is translating the very pronoun from someone else, Coleridge makes it
impossible to determine where the authorial “self” leaves off and the “other” begins. The self that
we confront upon reading Coleridge is precisely not-self. In the Cartesian analysis, this violation of
singular authorship leads us to confront a whole host of critically absurd questions. For instance, H.
M. Margoliouth records the appearance of so many “Wordsworthian” lines in Coleridge that he
begins to wonder “how much of ‘Wordsworth’ is Coleridge.” Similarly, the influence of the
German tradition upon Coleridge is so disruptive that Henry Crabb Robinson muses: “There is no
doubt that Coleridge’s mind is much more German than English.” Where Seamus Perry is content
to resolve the conundrum by asserting that Coleridge is “unhappily in love with plurality, or a
pluralist in spite of himself”, Stephen Potter goes so far as to make a case for split personality in
which there are in fact “two Coleridges”, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge the poet, and S. T. C. the
self-recrematory, broken, opium-eating man whose plagiarisms, self-justifications, whinings, and

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(London, 1897), I, p. 146.
61 H. C. Robinson, Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondences of Henry Crabb Robinson, ed. by Thomas Sadler, 3 vols
expostulations almost beg being posited as “other.”\textsuperscript{62} What is happening here is that conventional Cartesian divisions are coming up against an important philosophical point about the otherness of others. If indeed the self and other are irrevocably split, then how can there even be the possibility for such a line of questioning? How is it possible for Coleridge (whose “self” is so entirely “other-determined”) to have anything of the “other” in him? Simply put, if subject and object are split, how can we be concerned at all with anything which is not fundamentally already the same as ourselves? Disallowing any form of authorship that derives from multifarious “others”, the Cartesian tradition, when applied to Coleridge, comes face to face with its own logical incongruities, and leads itself into its own logical impossibility.

Coleridge’s plagiarisms bring the Cartesian concept of individuality into conflict with itself. The reason for this conflict, simply, is that Coleridge does not operate in the Cartesian tradition. If we are fully to understand him, we must first realise the failure of its formalist logic when applied to him. As we have seen, in their criticism of Coleridge’s plagiarisms and his alleged lack of originality, readers are especially put off by what seems to them Coleridge’s muddying of the Cartesian waters. While the objection is nothing new, I suggest that such criticism evinces an ignorance of the very innovativeness of Coleridge’s thought. Coleridge’s disruption of the formalist categories of subject and object, self and other, is not a flaw in his aesthetics, it is his aesthetics. To claim otherwise is to uphold a mistaken historiography and to misunderstand Coleridge by it. Upon closer examination, it will become clear how Coleridge’s plagiarisms proffer a critique of formalist categories of exteriority and otherness, as well as a corresponding suspicion of notions of sameness, originality, and selfhood. So while it may be interesting and perhaps even helpful to posit a historical linearity and a genealogical interpretation of all the “other” sources that have influenced Coleridge, to suggest that his philosophy suffers as a result of them involves an implicit acceptance of those very principles that Coleridge himself rejects. We cannot impose categories of selfhood

and otherness upon a system in which they are not operative. To do so is to analyse Coleridge in terms of a system in which he does not belong. Simply put, it is no longer adequate to employ a Cartesian vocabulary to explain an imaginative tendency which resides *beyond* it. Coleridge must be read not by hard and fast standards of historical perspective, linear progression, or Cartesian bifurcation, but by the general tendency of his own imagination. In the end, the immediate question is not whether Coleridge borrowed, but whether or not it makes him less of a philosopher or great thinker in his own right. I will suggest that Coleridge’s literary plagiarisms point to an entirely unique philosophical and critical tradition concerning the nature of the identity between subject and object, or mind and world. By negotiating a new aesthetics by which to understand Coleridge’s plagiarisms, we may begin to gain some insight into their ironic achievement.
Chapter Two:  
The Nonoriginal Origin: Coleridge and the Hermetic Tradition

Hermes...in arts gymnastic, and in fraud divine.  
Thomas Taylor, *The Hymns of Orpheus*. 63

i. ‘My Darling Studies’: The Author That Never Was

We are all the heirs of those who have so thoroughly and scrupulously mapped the course of Coleridge’s borrowings. As we have seen, however, the resources of recent theory are more limiting than helpful, and one reason that modern terms are often unhelpful is that Coleridge’s notions of subjectivity and authorship do not easily fit the terms that shape the modern debate. Simply put, the ability to transcend categories of subject and object is difficult to discuss in terms that do not already presuppose them, and our vocabulary is such that it employs the very configurations that we are trying to eschew. If a mistaken historiography historicises our approach to Coleridge, by explaining his purpose, his principles, and his plagiarisms in historically relevant terms, I suggest that we place Coleridge in an entirely different tradition altogether; one which evades the usual concerns of historicism and claims a separate literary-philosophic hermeneutic by which to understand him. Indeed, while there is no denying Coleridge’s plagiarisms, we may nevertheless reposition ourselves in how we choose to understand them.

While the task of tracing the history of Coleridge’s intellectual development, important as it is, has been broached by several critics in the Cartesian tradition, the full history of Coleridge’s relation to the Hermetic tradition has yet to be written. The Hermetic tradition is important not so much for what it suggests about the true line of descent of Coleridge’s thought, but rather more for what it tells us about his liberation from the bonds of historical and temporal antecedence, priority, anticipation, and influence, altogether. For the Hermeticists, as we shall see, “self” and “other”

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speak with the same unified purpose, voice is indistinguishable from echo, and poetic truth prevails over historical accuracy. Violating every principle of solitary authorship or sacred selfhood, Hermes, the generally designated and shape-shifting “author” of the corpus of collected Hermetic texts, enacts a vicarious, or incarnational, poetics through the voices of multiple “others.” Rather than emerging out of coherent stability and singularity, Hermetic authorship is self-representation by virtue of a deviation or a falling off from a standard of sincerity. With more detailed attention to and respect for the artificiality of authenticity, the Hermeticists, in their proliferation of pseudonymous identities, evoke a heterodox and fluid notion of originality, authenticity, and authorship. Perverting any attempts to uphold the absolute lawfulness of selfhood against external otherness, or of solitary unity at the expense of multiple others, or even of historical linearity and accuracy advancing by aggregate steps along a progressive continuum, the Hermeticists fashion forth a torrent of literature predicated upon fabrication and fraud. Authenticating authorship as the repetition of the self under various voices, and presenting an eternal circuit of self-circling actions upon which the Hermetic author revolves and reveals himself unceasingly in the forms of multiple others, the Hermetic strategy necessarily proves fascinating to anyone looking with suspicion upon Coleridge’s own conceptions of authenticity, sincerity, and originality. By positing Coleridge as a writer in the Hermetic tradition, we might begin to understand Coleridge’s authorship as he understood it.

The keystone in the arch of Coleridge’s familiarity with the Hermetic tradition is hinted at in a letter addressed to John Thelwall in 1796. In the letter, Coleridge asks Thelwall to purchase for him a small collection of Neoplatonic texts translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino and printed at Lyons in 1570.64 The volume includes a work by Iamblichus, as well as selections from Proclus, Porphyrius, Psellus, and two Hermetic writings entitled Pimander and Asclepius.65 While it is uncertain whether or not Coleridge actually received and read the entire volume, the request to

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64 CL I 262.
65 see CN I 180n; see also Lowes, p. 234.
Thelwall is important for what it tells us about the general vein of Coleridge’s interest at this time.\textsuperscript{66} Coleridge asserts in the letter that he is deep in the study of “all out of the way books”, one of which concerns the most ancient source of all wisdom and his “darling study”, “Thoth the Egyptian”.\textsuperscript{67} While it is uncertain where precisely Coleridge would have encountered the writings of such an ambiguous figure, there are some clues in the Bristol Library record of 1796. According to Coleridge’s borrowings for that year, it appears that in the very same month in which he makes his request to Thelwall, he is also reading Ralph Cudworth’s \textit{The True Intellectual System of the Universe}.\textsuperscript{68} It is here that Coleridge encounters Thoth, the ibis-headed god of ancient Egypt who presides over wisdom, literature, and magic. According to Cudworth, “Tauth” or “Ibis” is the messenger and scribe of the gods. As the god of learning and the arts, he is credited with many inventions, including writing, geometry, astronomy, and alchemy, as well as the games of checkers and dice.\textsuperscript{69} Cudworth explains that the Greeks aligned Thoth with their god Hermes, and identified him as “Hermes Trismegistus”, the author of \textit{Pimander} and \textit{Asclepius}.\textsuperscript{70} Coleridge’s allusion to Thoth, possibly from Cudworth’s account of him, and his request to Thelwall to procure the two texts of the \textit{Hermetica} in the Latin translations of Ficino, situates his interests squarely in the Hermetic tradition.

Before I turn to examine the precise nature of Coleridge’s Hermeticism, relying mostly on the evidence of variously scattered references, quotations, hints, and allusions throughout his life, it is necessary to pause here to make a few remarks concerning Cudworth’s influence upon Coleridge,

\textsuperscript{66} Lowes notes that, according to E. H. Coleridge, Thelwall successfully executed his commission. “The Jamblichus and the Julian were afterwards presented by Coleridge to his son Derwent.” and as E. H. Coleridge asserts, “They are still in the possession of the family.” According to Lowes, the works “are now in possession of the Rev. Gerard H. B. Coleridge, through whose kindness I have been permitted to see them.” Coleridge, however, makes no mention of having received them. See Lowes, pp. 231, 533 n.28.

\textsuperscript{67} CL I 260.

\textsuperscript{68} The Bristol Library records for 1795 and 1796 show that Coleridge borrowed Ralph Cudworth’s \textit{The True Intellectual System of the Universe} from the Bristol Library twice, for three weeks in May of 1795 and for a month in November of 1796. See George Whalley, “The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793-98”, in \textit{The Library: Transactions of the Bibliographical Society}, ser 5 IV no 2 (Sept 1949), pp. 114-32.

\textsuperscript{69} Ralph Cudworth, \textit{The True Intellectual System of the Universe: wherein all the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted} (London: printed for J. Walthoe, D. Midwinter, J. and J. Bonwick, W. Innys, R. Ware [and 17 others in London], 1743), p. 321.

\textsuperscript{70} Cudworth, p. 320.
as well as upon my intended strategy in the analysis of the progression of Coleridge’s Hermetic thought. According to Richard Haven and Douglas Hedley, two of the most prominent Coleridge scholars to have examined Cudworth in any detail, many of Coleridge’s earliest readings are gleaned from Cudworth’s True System, which is itself a derivative or encyclopaedic collection of ancient thought. Upon the evidence of Cudworth’s text, for instance, Haven points out that Coleridge’s exposure to complete and original works, especially during his early years, is less extensive than has usually been assumed. There are several instances, particularly in the early notebooks, writes Haven, where quotations that appear to have been gathered from Plato, Proclus, and Plotinus are in fact derived not from the originals but second-hand from Cudworth. These findings, he suggests, stress Cudworth’s intellectual priority in laying the foundation of Coleridge’s thought. Expanding upon Haven’s findings, Hedley traces Cudworth’s influence “quite clearly in the Pantheismusstreit between Jacobi and Lessing”, and even as “a significant source for Schelling.” Reading Cudworth’s System as a handbook of philosophical ideas which provide much of the foundation for the German philosophy of the eighteenth century, Hedley, like Haven, resolves upon Coleridge’s unequivocal “indebtedness” to, and anticipation by, Cudworth. Focusing on questions of intellectual priority, precedence and source-hunting, both Haven and Hedley trace Coleridge’s thought back to its “origin” in Cudworth. It seems to me necessary here to disabuse us once more from the incitement to engage in further Coleridgean source-study, this time with Cudworth rather than any German philosopher at the lead. It is not the purpose of this thesis, nor should it be the purpose of any critical study of Coleridge, to displace Coleridge himself and to assign some “other” author the position of a greater, more “original”, authority. It seems to me rather more propitious here to employ Cudworth’s text in order better to understand Coleridge’s reception of the Hermetic epistemology of “selfhood” and “otherness” more generally, and to

73 Hedley, p. 39.
understand the Hermetic reformulation of the conventional notions of authorship and originality more precisely. Specifically, if we wish to understand Coleridge as a writer in the Hermetic tradition, it is first necessary to emancipate ourselves from our usual reliance upon questions of historicity, priority, and anticipation altogether in our consideration of the development of Coleridge’s thought. The Hermetic tradition, as it shall become increasingly clear, is a tradition defined by its ahistoricity. Hermes himself is an “origin” which places origination itself into question, coming into “himself” only in the form of his wandering derivations as “other.” As a thinker in this tradition, Coleridge does not have the same relation to the past as we might assume for ourselves. The ahistoricism of the Hermetic tradition conveys a broader sense of origination, and a special relationship to the problem of time and to the possibility of beginnings in general. Hermeticism, as we shall see, originates at a point from which there can be no origin. Operating in the gap between the pre-historical realm and the domain of historicity, as well as between singular and multiple narratives, the Hermetic tradition is a statement on the essential impossibility of historicism, and therein resides its relevance for this study of Coleridge.

But all this is to anticipate. It is enough for us to note here that not only does Hermeticism arrogate texts over vast periods of time into itself, even though it is historically illegitimate to do so, we too in our analysis of Coleridge’s relation to the Hermetic tradition must set aside our obsession with questions of chronology, anticipation, and influence in order to open up a new horizon of originality and ahistoricity. Because Coleridge does not expound upon the Hermetic tradition in any one place exclusively, but to various extents throughout his life, our analysis is obliged to progress ahistorically, drawing from scattered allusions, marginal annotations, letters, and passages from the *Opus Maximum* and *Biographia Literaria* wherever necessary. Mindful of Hermeticism’s tendency to ahistoricity, Coleridge’s own Hermeticism is best understood ahistorically. It will be worth keeping this in mind as we progress. However, that said, I will begin my exposition on the Hermetic tradition first by elucidating upon what little, albeit contentious, history there is.
Direct contact for the West with the corpus of texts ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus was established in the second half of the fifteenth century, when a Greek manuscript was brought to Florence from Macedonia by one of Cosimo de' Medici's many agents. The manuscript reached Italy in 1463 and was translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino. Ficino was the president of the Platonic Academy and the foremost Renaissance translator of works by Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius. His Latin translation of Plato with commentary was published in 1482, and was followed by a Latin translation of Plotinus published after Ficino's death. But in 1463, a collection of texts attributed to “Tauth the Egyptian” were brought to Ficino's attention. While the Plato manuscripts were already assembled and awaiting translation, Cosimo ordered Ficino to put them aside and to translate at once the works of Hermes Trismegistus. For the Renaissance, Hermes was recognised as a more ancient authority than Plato and, since Egypt was naturally before Greece, history demanded that the Hermetic texts be translated before Plato's Republic or the Symposium. Ficino translated the first fourteen books of the Pimander and the separate work Asclepius, and published them together under the title of the first text of the collection, “Poimandres.” The landmark translation appeared in print in 1471 and formed what today is collectively referred to as the Corpus Hermeticum or Hermetica, the collected writings of Hermes Trismegistus.

While it is uncertain whether or not Coleridge read Ficino's translation of the Hermetica, we know that he was familiar with Ficino's Theologia Platonica, which was completed immediately after Ficino's Hermetica and which undoubtedly bears its influence. In the Biographia, Coleridge tells us that he studied the commentaries on Plato by "the illustrious Florentine", and we know that he owned and annotated the 1525 edition of Ficino's Platonica.

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74 With Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, new horizons such as Hermeticism and the Kabbalah were opened up to the early Renaissance. For more on Coleridge's relationship to the kabbalistic teachings of eternal philosophy and its relation to language see Tim Fulford, Coleridge’s Figurative Language (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Theological de Immortalitate Animorum in October 1805. Based undoubtedly upon what he had read and believed in the Hermetica, Ficino’s Theologia Platonica leans heavily on the idea that Plato learned much of his doctrine from ancient Egypt. Charting the succession of sages throughout the ages, Ficino propounds a fount of pristine wisdom extending back to ancient Egypt, which parallels the Mosaic wisdom divulged by God at the outset of human history. This wisdom is transmitted to the Hebrews in the form of the Pentateuch, which is later inscribed in the books of the Kabbalah, down through Pythagoras, and on to Plato. Asserting the Mosaic, and therefore revealed, origins of Platonic doctrine, Ficino’s genealogy of ancient wisdom unites Egyptology, Kabbalism, Pythagoreanism, and Christianity under a syncretic philosophia perennis or “eternal philosophy” extending back to Hermes Trismegistus. “Hermes,” writes Ficino,

[is] the first author of theology...succeeded by Orpheus, who came second amongst ancient theologians: Aglaophemus, who had been initiated into the sacred teachings of Orpheus, was succeeded in theology by Pythagoras, whose disciple was Philolaus, the teacher of our Divine Plato...Hence there is one ancient theology...taking its origin in Mercurius and culminating in the Divine Plato.

In his genealogy of ancient wisdom, Ficino places Hermes (or his analogue in Roman mythology, Mercurius) at the beginning of theology. Insisting upon the continuous transmission of one and the same doctrine of esoteric thought from Hermes to Pythagoras, and from Pythagoras to Plato, Ficino goes so far as to assert that when Plato is treating certain ideas, “he d[oes] not present his own view but that of certain Egyptians.” What is important here for our purposes is that, even if Coleridge never sets eyes on the Corpus Hermeticum itself, it is fair to say that the Plato Coleridge meets upon reading Ficino’s Theologia Platonica is Plato significantly Hermeticised. For Ficino, Plato merely

76 BL 1 114 and n. 1.
78 This version of Ficino’s genealogy of ancient philosophers occurs in Ficino’s Argumentum which precedes his translation of the Pimander. It is cited by Copenhaver in his introduction to the Hermetica, p. xlviii. While Ficino places Hermes at the beginning of this genealogy, he would later move Zoroaster to the first place and drop Hermes to second. What is important here, however, as Copenhaver points out, is that the idea of a theological genealogy extending back to Hermes remains powerful with Ficino and with European intellectuals for the next two centuries. The genealogy is repeated by Ficino in Theologia Platonica, transl. by Michael J. B. Allen, 6 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), II, 125; IV, 25; and VI, p. 7.
79 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 61.
reproduces for Greek philosophy what Moses has already established in the Scriptures, and what Hermes has revealed in the Corpus Hermeticum.

Believing Hermes to have been contemporary with Moses and to have communicated a parallel wisdom to a line of adepts throughout the ages, Ficino not only grants Hermes the status of Christian prophet but wonders whether Hermes Trismegistus is in fact Moses. In the Theologia, he writes: “Mercurius Trismegistus has expounded this same origin of the world’s generation even more plainly. It should not seem surprising to us that Mercurius knew such things if he was the same man as Moses (as the historian Artapanus uses a number of conjectures to show).”80 Reading Christian theology back into Plato, and thence back into the Hermetica, Ficino propounds a syncretic philosophy in which Hermes Trismegistus is the one authorial and originating source of all other philosophies. Indeed, the Hermetica is a collection of thoughts of a very mixed character. The philosophies of Plato, Plotinus, Pythagoras, and Christianity, are all stirred together in an incongruous literary-philosophical mixture which characterises the syncretic historical scene out of which much of Coleridge’s own reading emerges. The result is a strange mixture of ancient science and alchemy, sacred and mystical geometry, astronomy and arithmetic. Showing a complete agreement between the teachings of Hermes, Moses, Plato, and Christ, Ficino suggests that Genesis may be made to yield to the same message as the Timaeus, and both to yield to the one philosophy expounded in the Pimander.

The idea of Hermes as the originating fons et origo of a tradition of wisdom which leads in an unbroken chain from Moses through to Plato was the dominant genealogy for two centuries following Ficino’s translation of the Hermetic texts.81 However, Ficino’s unquestioning belief in

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80 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 83.
81 Historian Frances Yates points out that a mosaic pavement laid down in the Cathedral of Siena during the fourteen-eighties depicts Hermes Trismegistus not only “as a great Gentile prophet of Christianity” but next to a figure, perhaps intended to be Moses, standing in a deferential attitude, almost bowing, on Hermes’ right. Presenting Moses in a position of reverence to Hermes, the mosaic is a visual testament to the Renaissance belief in a perennial philosophy extending back to Hermes Trismegistus. As Yates explains: “the representation of Hermes Trismegistus in this Christian edifice, so prominently displayed near its entrance and giving him to lofty a spiritual position, is not an isolated phenomenon but a symbol of how the Italian Renaissance regarded him.” For more on how this theory remains basic in the Renaissance mind see Frances Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002), pp. 44-
the historical primacy and importance of Hermes was toppled by classical scholar Isaac Casaubon in 1614. After much rigorous scholasticism, Casaubon announced that the entire Hermetic tradition had been founded upon an irrefutable historical error. The Hermetic texts, Casaubon revealed, were in fact a deliberately fraudulent presentation of a chronologically post-Christian literature as if it were pre-Christian prophecy. A history written after the event, rather than a prophecy before it as it pretends to be, the Hermeticum was not written in remotest antiquity by an all-wise Egyptian priest, contemporaneous with or perhaps even earlier than Moses, but was in fact collated by various unknown authors, all probably Greeks, of no doubt considerably varying dates between the first and third centuries.

According to Casaubon, the problem began around the first century A.D., when a circle of syncretic theologians flourished in Alexandria and composed a corpus of writings that they then attributed (falsely) to the Egyptian divinity. As an attempt at a comprehensive synthesis against the backdrop of early Christianity, Neopythagoreanism, and Neoplatonism, these works contained a mixture of popular Greek philosophy of the period, alongside Platonic, Jewish, Christian, and probably Persian influences. Combining the teachings of biblical religions with Greek and Egyptian philosophy, the various writers of the Corpus Hermeticum bequeathed its fabricated heritage to subsequent ages all forged under the name of “Hermes Trismegistus.”

It is important to note here that Casaubon’s main objection to the Hermetica is not its syncretism, which he explains as a natural result of its being a post-Christian-Neoplatonic invention. Casaubon’s criticism against the Hermetica is that it is falsely sourced back to one authorial “Hermes”, who is in fact not one author but a multiplicity of different authors writing under the Hermetic pseudonym in various different ages. Taking exception to the series of “Pseudomercuriuses” who author the Hermetica over the ages, Casaubon asserts that “it is most
false to say that these works were written by, or were even translated from, Mercurius Trismegistus, an ancient Egyptian. As a record of multiple and falsified authorship, the Hermetica for Casaubon violates the conventions of sacred authorship and therefore cannot be read as coherent scholarship.

While the critical and historical problems of Hermetic historiography and authorship were unknown to Ficino, they are in the post-Casaubon age very important. By the eighteenth century, Casaubon’s debunking of Hermetic antiquity enters firmly into canonical accounts of intellectual history. Denouncing the Hermetica as simple forgeries written after the time of Christ and influenced by a sort of primitive Christianity, Casaubon denies these forgeries any real religious or mystical value and dismisses them as little more than a collection of philosophical banalities. For Casaubon, Hermes is by no means an “author” in the conventional sense. An originary “no-thing”, Hermes only becomes “something” by virtue of multifarious “others.” He does not exist in historical reality but only in the minds of his forgers and, as a result, his writings fail to represent an authentic tradition of thought. Since, for Casaubon, an authoritative text arises solely out of the individuality of its creator alone, and cannot properly be understood unless we know who and what that creator is, the multiple anonymity and pseudonymity of the Hermetic corpus merits nothing but suspicion.

ii. Responding to Casaubon: Ralph Cudworth and the Poetic Truth of Historical Fiction

While one might think that with his tools of Greek scholarship, philological precision and historical accuracy, Casaubon irremediably demolished any faith in the Corpus Hermeticum for subsequent ages, it was not to be. Casaubon’s findings did not immediately dislodge its influence. Historian Frances Yates explains that while his discoveries afford a historical and scholarly “coup” even by today’s standard, “the seventeenth century was too early a date at which to put the ending

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85 Pattison, p. 322ff.
The anachronistic and pseudonymous inauthenticity of the Hermetic doctrine survives the apparent triumph of Casaubon’s philology and historical accuracy. For readers in the Hermetic tradition, there is something redeemable and enduring in the *Hermetica*, even if it is historically incorrect and its authorship questionable. Founded upon a system of multiple authorship, inauthenticity, and historical fraud, the text subverts the rigid distinction between authorial selfhood and multifarious otherness, and reconfigures the traditional constraints of authorship and originality in an entirely unique manner.

Coleridge himself was familiar with the controversy surrounding the problematic origins of the *Hermetica*, not least of all from his reading of Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. Against the Cartesian rigidity of Casaubon’s mind, Cudworth develops and reformulates the historical and originary debate in a meaningful way. While the *Hermetica*’s intermingling of several different voices under the aegis of singular authorship is offensive to Casaubon’s tidily organised mind, and affords for him a licence to dismiss Hermes out of existence altogether, Cudworth suggests that the *Hermetica*’s apparently haphazard authorial eclecticism forms an important part of the data to be analysed. In the *True System*, Cudworth begins by conceding that the Hermetic or “Trismegistic texts” are undoubtedly “counterfeited by pretended Christians, or at least several spurious and supposititious passages here and there inserted into some of them”, and he acknowledges that this fact has already been demonstrated by “Isaac Casaubon, who was the first discoverer.”

However, while Casaubon condemns the Hermetic texts as “cheats and impostures”, Cudworth sets out to “vindicate these ancient fathers [the multiple authors of the Hermetic texts]...”

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86 Yates, p. 16. Remarkably, even today, the historical origins of the Hermetic tradition, its initial nature and aims, its genealogy, and the primary figures that played a role in its development remain matters of scholarly debate. Modern scholarship has not yet reached agreement as to how much, or how little, genuinely Egyptian teachings they may contain. For more on recent debates concerning the Egyptian authenticity of the *Hermetica* see: J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (London, 1960), pp. 116-127, 255-275; Peter Kingsley, “Paimandres: the Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica”. in *From Poimandres to Jacob Bohme: Hermetism, Gnosis and the Christian Tradition*, ed. by R. van den Brock and Cis van Heertum (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000), pp. 41-76; Roelof Van den Boek, “Religious Practices in the Hermetic ‘Lodge’: New Light from Nag Hammadi” in *From Poimandres to Jacob Bohme*, pp. 77-95. Notably, some readers continue to believe the *Hermetica* to date from Pharaonic Egypt, while others affirm the later dating but nevertheless suggest continuity with the culture of Egypt.

87 Cudworth, p. 319.
from the imputations either of fraud and imposture, or of simplicity and folly."88 Thus, while he
acknowledges that the tradition is founded upon an ahistorical lineage and pseudonymous fraud,
Cudworth nevertheless goes on to assert that: “Moses himself is said to have been instructed in that
learning which owed its original to [Hermes],” and Mosaic teaching is “wholly drawn from
Egyptian fables.”89 Reformulating the concept of “originality” altogether, Cudworth not only
acknowledges and accepts Casaubon’s analysis of the Hermetica as perpetrating a mistaken lineage
and authorial fraud, he places his definition of “origination” beyond it.

Acknowledging Casaubon’s criticism in the main, Cudworth insists that the Corpus
Hermeticum is still valuable as a source of Egyptian wisdom.90 Authorial counterfeit and fraudulent
origins, suggests Cudworth, are no firm indictment against the illumination and value of the
Hermetic texts. Artfully perplexing the question of authentic voice and influence, Cudworth notes
that: “notwithstanding all that Casaubon has written, there may very well be some Hermetick or
trismegistick books genuine…though perhaps not written by Hermes Trismegist himself, nor in the
Egyptian language.”91 While “this book must needs be counterfeit and suppositious”, he continues,
it is nevertheless Egyptian in spirit.92 He explains:

…we conceive it reasonable to conclude, that though there have been some Hermaick
books counterfeited…yet there were other Hermaick books, which though not written
by Hermes Trismegist himself, nor all of them in the Egyptian language, but some of
them in Greek, [that] were truly Egyptian, and did, for the substance of them, contain
the Hermaick doctrine.93

The notion that a text can be “truly Egyptian” even if written in Greek, and “Hermaick” in
substance even if written by someone other than Hermes, is ingenious. Insisting that the words of
one author can express the meaning of another, Cudworth proffers a notion of authorship and
authenticity completely foreign to us. Reluctant to abandon the Hermetica altogether, Cudworth
provides the means by which to retain something of its influence, albeit fraudulent. A manifest

88 Cudworth, p. 334.
89 Cudworth, pp. 322, 313, italics mine.
90 For another reading of Cudworth’s response to Casaubon see Yates, pp. 461-469.
91 Cudworth, p. 321.
92 Cudworth, p. 320.
93 Cudworth, p. 327, italics mine.
forgery and historical fiction, he continues, can nevertheless belie a philosophical and aesthetic truth:

Because every cheat and imposture must needs have some basis or foundation of truth to stand upon, there must have been something truly Egyptian in such counterfeit Egyptian writings (and therefore this at least of one Supreme Deity) or else they could never have obtained credit at first, or afterwards have maintained the same. 94

Cudworth’s argument is inspired. Insisting that there must be some originary truth to the Hermetic texts or that the Egyptians would have cried out against them, Cudworth adopts the position that every fraud contains at least some truth in it. There is something of the truth even in a lie, he writes, “as it cannot well be conceived how there should have been any counterfeit Egyptian books, had there been none at all real." 95 He continues: “Notwithstanding the fact that all the Trismegistick books, that now are or have been formerly extant, had been forged by some pretended Christians”, this is still no considerable argument to the validity of their “truth”, “for faith is not a mere believing of historical things, and upon inartificial argument or testimonies only; but a certain higher and Divine power in the soul, that peculiarly correspondeth with the Deity.” 96

That the Hermetica were not, and are not, invalidated as profoundly important documents of experience by being at last correctly dated is essential. Historical distinctions of dating and naming are inconsequential to Cudworth, for whom the final appeal is to ideas whose truth is intrinsic and unaffected by history. That historical fact need not ruin the beauty of a philosophical tradition is an interesting hermeneutic proposition, and bears immediate relevance to our own understanding of notions of authenticity, or lack thereof. As Cudworth suggests, what is literally impossible or historically untrue can nevertheless still have a “poetic” or “aesthetic truth.” In Cudworth’s system of thought, so foreign to us today, every lie betrays a philosophical truth, and the line between self and other, truth and fiction, art and artifice, becomes daringly thin.

94 Cudworth, p. 320, italics mine
95 Cudworth, p. 321, italics mine.
96 Cudworth, pp. 320, xxxvii-xxxviii.
The idea that poetic and philosophical truth can withstand charges of historical inaccuracy and authorial misconception is a quintessentially Hermetic notion. In the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge himself has something to say about determining the authenticity of spurious texts from historical and chronological data. To determine the authenticity of the New Testament in this way, for instance, is to base the concept of authenticity on “external evidence” alone. Coleridge explains:

> [T]he Authenticity (we take the word here in its narrowest sense and here are speaking of external evidence exclusively) – the authenticity of the Books establishes in the first instance only the chronology of the Doctrines.  

If the true validity and authenticity of a document is to be ascertained, Coleridge muses, we must look beyond the evidence of historiography and chronology to the nature and task of authorship itself:

> If their validity, as documents, is to extend beyond this point...some testimony or facts equivalent to such testimony, supplying proofs or presumptions at least of the circumstances and characters of the Writers drawn from other sources than the Writings themselves, must be adduced in the first instance. This done, we may then consider the New Testament as a collection of contemporary yet separate works by several independent Authors, each of whom may furnish available evidence in behalf of the others.

This passage, in which Coleridge discusses the authenticity of the New Testament, could just as well have been written about the *Hermetica*. Against the “external evidence” of the text, insists Coleridge, we might turn to look at the characters of the writers themselves and expound upon the manner in which “separate works by several independent Authors” can furnish a collective truth on “behalf of the others.” Going beyond a formalist system of thought which sees multifarious otherness violating the sanctity of singular authorship, Coleridge promotes a unified vision of otherness and authorship; one where authenticity is a question of artificiality, where several voices bespeak the same truth, and the surest way to the self is through the other.

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*98* OM 350.
Stressing the importance of philosophical and aesthetic truth over historical accuracy, Coleridge devotes considerable attention to the varying traditions between Platonism and modernity in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* delivered between 1818 and 1819, where he states: “It was the Genius of poetic Greece in the earliest period to transform that which must be *thought* into a something that had happened (in the literal sense of the words) taken *place, timeless truth into historic event.*”\(^{99}\) Rather than being obligated to produce a “correct” history, suggests Coleridge, the ancients reconfigured their histories in order to convey their metaphysical and philosophical convictions. Bearing particular resonance for the deliberately confounded historiography of the Hermetic tradition, these lines recall Coleridge’s much earlier declaration of discontent with genealogical tedium: “I do not *like* history”, he writes in the 1796 letter to Thelwall, precisely two lines after confessing himself deep in the study of his darling “Tauth”\(^{100}\). Implying that certain texts and traditions are impermeable to the claims of historical criticism and scholarship, Coleridge returns to the idea in the *Biographia* in 1816, where he notes that there is a deeper standard of truth than just mere dates or formalist configurations of solitary authority:

> Whether a work is the offspring of a man’s own spirit, and the product of original thinking, will be discovered by those who are its sole legitimate judges, by better tests than the mere reference to dates.\(^{101}\)

Certainly, it is no unsatisfactory irony that where Casaubon’s re-dating is a scholarly attempt to debunk the *Hermetica* on the basis of its fabricated chronology, his failure to renege its influence for either Cudworth or Coleridge actually bears witness to the true *timelessness* of its philosophy. Since it is not upon their dates but upon their content that their authenticity rests, the historicity of Hermes’ authorship neither establishes nor diminishes the “authenticity” of the works that bear his name.

\(^{99}\) *LHP* 196, *italics mine.*  
\(^{100}\) *CL* I 260, *italics in original.*  
\(^{101}\) *BL* I 164
iii. The Nonoriginal Origin: Authorship as Narrative Incarnation

That so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech.

Ralph Waldo Emerson\textsuperscript{102}

In his response to Casaubon's criticism of the Hermetica, Cudworth considers the complex relationship between two approaches to language and to historical discourse. One is the way of scholarly analysis and linguistics where the objective is to reduce language to its purest logical form. This is the approach adopted by Casaubon. The other is the way of hermeneutics and rhetoric where the aim is to preserve the multifariousness of discourse as it occurs in the Hermetica and to expound upon its philosophical truth. Underlying this dichotomy is the even more fundamental opposition between truth-telling and lying, between being and non-being, subjectivity and objectivity, selfhood and otherness. As we shall see, for Cudworth, while the authorial Hermes appears to violate the criteria of solitary authorship and to promote the voices of multifarious "others" in his place, he does so in order to introduce an entirely unique system of vicarious poetics. Put differently, the emphasis in the Hermetica is upon a deliberately subversive poetics of incarnation, or of self-expression through an other. This unique narrative strategy raises all sorts of questions about authorship, and opens up an entirely different kind of interpretative freedom. Indeed, how is it possible that something written in Greek remains Egyptian in spirit? How can a text be "authored" by Hermes, albeit written by various "others"? How can the words of one author bespeak the message of an other? And how is it that one person can speak in the voice of an "other" and yet remain faithful and adherent to him "self"? The Hermetica, it would seem, is an intricately coded exegetical performance, with its own unique understanding of such questions as: What does a text mean? How does it mean? And who is its author?

Straining the conventional boundaries between selfhood and otherness, Cudworth explains in *The True System* that Hermes is manifest in three different incarnations throughout history. Vexing any conventional standards of identity or authenticity, Hermes is originally known as the Egyptian god “Thoth,” who then reappears as the Greek god “Hermes,” and later, as the Latin “Mercurius.” Because of this triplicate identity, he earns himself the title of Hermes “Trismegistus”, or *tri*-megistos, “Thrice Great.”\(^{103}\) The first of the name, explains Cudworth, is comparable to Thoth and is an initiator into the mysteries of the divine science and wisdom that animate the world; he carves the principles of this sacred science in hieroglyphs. The second Hermes is the initiator of Pythagoras, and the third Hermes is the first teacher of alchemy.\(^{104}\) This triplicate identity is repeated in William Enfield’s translation of Johann Jakob Brucker’s *History of Philosophy*, which Coleridge consults in the same year he is reading Cudworth. According to Enfield, another post-Casaubon historian who nevertheless upholds the mistaken Hermetic chronology, Hermes exists in three different incarnations in which he writes throughout the ages.

Expounding upon the threefold nature of Hermes Trismegistus, as if there could in fact be *multiple* instances of the same *one* person, Enfield notes:

> [B]esides the first Hermes... there was another, who at a later period, was equally celebrated... he translated the sacred characters written by the first Mercury, and wrote the explanation in books. This second Hermes recovered the written monuments of the first Hermes.\(^{105}\)

Enfield goes on to credit Hermes with the authorship of “over twenty thousand volumes” of immense antiquity and high standing over the span of “*nine thousand years.*”\(^{106}\) Instead of a conventional or historical understanding of a singular author as the monolithic creator of a text, Enfield suggests that the *Hermetica* consists of numerous writings over the years which must of necessity be variously attributed to *different* authors but which are all nevertheless united under the

\(^{103}\)Cudworth, pp. 321-322.


\(^{106}\) Enfield (transl.), *History*, I, 67-68, *italics mine*. 

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name of Hermes. In both Cudworth’s and Enfield’s versions of Hermetic authorship, then, one looks in vain for any formalist understanding of authenticity or originality since from the start we are dealt an identity in multiplicity, or a unity in threefold. Hermes conveys an aesthetic of the impossible in which any references to “Thoth’s authorship” or to the “writings of Thoth” are not only historically, but literally, impossible.

The threefold incarnation of Hermes is not only a record of impossible authorship, fluctuating between the counters of selfhood and otherness, it is also a restatement of the age old philosophical and theological conundrum of “the one and the many.” At once expressing him “self” and entering into a series of multiple “others”, Hermes reconciles unity with multeity. The mystery of Hermes’ triplicate authorship is the mystery of the alterity and ipseity of an original fons et origo that is at once capable of being all things and yet is itself no-thing; He is at once a manifest multeity and an immeasurably indistinct unity. Capable of remaining entirely “self” whilst becoming wholly “other”, Hermes partakes of a system of deliberately vicarious and pseudonymous self-expression in the other. Demanding an entirely different hermeneutic than the one in which we have been operating, Hermes requires us to make sense of an aesthetic of the impossible: How can we assign “authenticity” to an identity which is thrice originating and yet remains the same? How do we trace the origin of that which has no stable origin? And how can anything “originate” from that which is neither externally present nor anything in itself?

Elucidating upon the Hermetic conundrum of unity and multeity, Cudworth provides the following solution:

Besides the Hieroglyphicks written by the first Hermes, and the books composed by the second (who was called also Trismegistick it cannot be doubted), there were many other books written by the Egyptian priests successively in several ages...Hermes, the God of eloquence, and president or patron of all true knowledge concerning the gods, was formerly accounted common to all the priests, insomuch, that...they dedicated the inventions of their wisdom to him, entitling their own books to Hermes Trismegist...by whose inspiration therefore all such books were conceived to have been written.\(^\text{107}\)

\(^{107}\) Cudworth, p. 322.
It is customary among the Egyptian priests, explains Cudworth, to attribute their own philosophic and theological books to “Hermes” since, as “the tutelary God, and father of all arts and sciences”, Hermes is the true “author” of all knowledge. As the philosophical origin and source of all written work, Hermes is the conceptual rather than chronological author of all literature. Believing that they are writing under one tradition, the Hermetic writers attribute their work to Hermes Trismegistus as though it is really “his” message, albeit written by various “others.” “Originality”, in this view, is not something singular and therefore unimpeded by an external other, but something which arises out of a common origin, and is therefore in fact shared with all “others.” Hermes represents at once the absence of origin as well as the attributable and allocated origin of all writing. This conundrum, suggests Cudworth, is best treated philosophically rather than historically. Subverting the Cartesian myth of solitary authorship and offering in its place a proliferating matrix of “other” voices by which the authorial “self” is made manifest, Hermes challenges any conventional burdens of authenticity and originality and is a kind of “invisible” or nonoriginal origin that is made manifest only by the alterity of other voices in place of his own. Put differently, Hermes is a nonoriginal origin that exists only in his vicarious incarnation in others.¹⁰⁸

Upon reading Cudworth, one realises how much one might credit the Hermeticists with a concern for “originality” and an awareness of the other-determined nature of self-representation. In its proliferation of pseudonymous identities, the Hermetic tradition evokes a heterodox and fluid notion of originality, authenticity, and authorship. The record of Hermes’ authorship is the record of vicarious manifestation and variant self-expression in the guise of multiple “others.” Hermes, as the nonoriginal origin of all writing, upsets conventional standards of stability and sincerity in favour of a performative self-expression in the form of something “other.” It is only by virtue of a deviation or a falling off from a standard of sincerity that Hermes attains his “authenticity.” In one

fell swoop, Hermes emancipates us from the fetters of names, dates and history which have so far confined all conventional interpretations of identity, authorship, and originality.

It is one of the great ironies of the Hermetic tradition that the Egyptian god who invents writing himself writes nothing, and takes his form from his manifestation in several "other" forms. Hermetic authorship, at its very root, is a narrative incarnation of the self in the other. As a nonoriginal origin, or free-floating source, that enters into and manifests himself in various different "expressions", Hermes exists only through a series of multifarious and vicarious avatars. Therefore, to enquire immediately after who the "author" is in the Hermetic tradition is to miss the point.

Hermes is a "nameless name" or amorphous abyss, explains Cudworth, who is expressed only through a compendium of variant other voices:

[It] is everywhere insisted upon throughout the Hermaick or Trismegistick writings that the author of majesty, and the father and lord of all things, by any one name, though compounded of never so many names. Call him therefore by every name, forasmuch as he is one and all things; so that of necessity, either all things must be called by his name, or he by the names of all things. 109

The Hermetic godhead, Cudworth surmises, is at once beyond all names and yet must be referred to "by every name" for he is "one and all things." 110 This assessment of the unity and multeity of the Trismegistic deity affords him the paradoxical ability to be at once "all things" and yet "entirely himself." Transcending any conventions of sameness and alterity, selfhood and otherness, Hermes is at once all names, and yet remains himself without name. Disallowing the notion of a proper name for the triplicate godhead to be indicated as either this or that, the Hermetic tradition reconfigures the notion of originality. Betraying the impossibility of the nameless name, or nonoriginal origin, to speak itself forth in its own voice, the Hermetic view suggests that the surest route from self to the self is necessarily through the other. Since the Hermetic epistemology holds that the authorial and authoritative unity and authenticity of the "self" has a narrative identity founded only upon multiple "others", existence itself becomes narrative, for there is no immediate

109 Cudworth, p. 346.
110 Cudworth, p. 346.
access to a transparent and transcendent source or origin without its expression and manifestation in a varied and verifiable "other." Thus, the essential burden of "originality" as it is expounded by the Hermetic tradition is that authorship is defined not by its reliance upon, or a tracing back of, a written text to a unified solitary singular author, but by the expression of an amorphous originary absence in the multifarious vocal and written manifestations of others.

A clever intermediary between the Cartesian boundaries of self and other, source and speaker, art and artifice, Hermes is a nexus of exchange between otherwise indelible categories. Able to express himself in the voice of all "others", and yet remaining entirely true to himself, Hermes demands a new cartography. Operating in the lacunae between historical fiction and poetic truth, that is, in the interspace between selfhood and otherness, creativity and counterfeit, Hermes subverts any conventions of abiding, coherent, self-authorship and originality. The anonymity and pseudonymity of Hermetic "authorship" affords a full appreciation of the authenticity of the Hermetic "artifice." It could not have escaped Coleridge's notice, for instance, that the god of writing is ambiguously both the source of language and learning as well as the creator of all artifice. That Hermes is at once the god of wisdom and a patron of deceiving philosophy – specifically alchemy – is expounded upon by Cudworth who credits Hermes with the invention of all "ludicrous recreations". Similarly, in a section on the philosophy of the Egyptians in Enfield's History, Enfield stresses that: "the art of alchemy [was] known by antient Egyptians" and, "after the founder of the Egyptian philosophy, it has been called the Hermetic art." Coleridge would also have read in Plato’s Cratylus that Hermes is credited not only with being the father of writing, but with being an agent of the ambivalent and metamorphic powers of writing itself: “The name ‘Hermes’ seems to have something to do with speech”, explains Socrates, “he is an interpreter (hermeneus) a messenger, a thief and a deceiver in words, a wheeler-dealer – and all these activities involve the

111 Cudworth, p. 321.
112 Enfield (transl.), History, I, 72.
power of speech." At once the god of writing and the transformative agent of a deceiving narrative strategy itself, Hermes is at once both the instigator and the very aim of his own deceptive aesthetics. This confusing ambiguity has to do precisely with the nature of creativity itself, and provides a general epistemological background by which we might not only sustain the fraudulent practice of alchemy and authorship but develop it critically and philosophically. I will explore this idea in more detail in the following chapters. Alchemy, we shall see, is the Hermetic science par excellence and goes some way in explaining the transformative process by which Hermes passes through the alembic of other voices in order to express himself. In its critical narrative gesture, the Hermetic tradition performs its own philosophy.

For now, it is enough to note that the Hermetica forsakes not only the bifurcations of selfhood and otherness but also, and perhaps even more difficult, the bonds of chronology in order to represent the ultimate conundrum of the Hermetic conception of authorship. Hermes, at once the inventor of language and himself a floating signifier, lays claim to the ahistorical nature of authenticity and partakes of a creative process by which a nonoriginal origin, or amorphous abyss, does but vary and renew its form in multiple others. Propounding an aesthetic of the one and the many, an incarnational poetics in which one can become other and yet remain entirely self-same, the Hermetic epistemology is strange and almost unreadable to a modern post-Cartesian mind. But if its pseudonymous strategy seems problematic, the problem is not in the Hermetica but in us. Founded entirely upon a fraudulent art form with a tendentious history, the Hermetic tradition shows no obligation to respect the usual boundaries of origination. Our success in understanding it depends on our ability to transcend the neat divisions of our Cartesian scholasticism and to penetrate its uncanny metaphysics. As we shall see, in removing ourselves from the Cartesian fold, we remove ourselves from the difficulty.

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Chapter Three: 
Metamorphic Mind: The Aesthetics of the One and the Many

I would make a pilgrimage to the Deserts of Arabia to find the man who could make understand how the one can be many! Eternal universal mystery! It seems as if it were impossible; yet it *is* - & it is every where!

Coleridge, *Notebooks*, 1, 1561.

As we have seen, and as Coleridge read in Cudworth and Enfield, the pilgrimage to Arabia “to find the man who could make understand how the one can be many” had already been made by philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato; and they had there encountered the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. Unsettling any neat Cartesian dualisms of selfhood and otherness, singularity and multitude, Hermes enacts a pseudonymous pattern of authorship and subverts the rigid connection between authorial selfhood and composition. Upsetting the usual categories of historicity and linearity, and transcending the conventional denominations of source and singularity, influence and authority, Hermes is by no means a proper authorial source, to be indicated as *this* or *that*, but rather a “nonoriginal origin” expressed only its manifestation in the “other.” Renegotiating the fissure between authorial selfhood and external otherness, or between solitary authorship and multifarious expression, the Hermetic tradition advocates an aesthetic of the *impossible*. Hermes, as the originating source of all writing, is preserved even as he is expressed in the form of multiple and multifarious “others.” Certainly, the coexistence of both aspects is formally a paradox: How can expression emerge out of and refer back to a *nonoriginal* source (i.e. where there is no original)? How can something *become* other and yet *remain* its own authorial self? How can something be one and three at the same time, at once both self and other, one and many?

While the concept of authorship traditionally constitutes a principle of unity in writing, or a construction of the text by one privileged hand, the Hermetic tradition worries questions of “origin” and “authenticity.” Seeking manifestation in the *other* in order to fully realise himself, Hermes
offers a completely unique critical hermeneutics of self and other. Expressing himself in infinite
manifestation and varied expression, Hermes may most accurately be said to transmute himself
between different states of being and varieties of manifestation. Expounding a philosophy in which
the self can become other without conflating or abjuring either, Hermes is a triplicate identity which
emanates out of the one into the many, whilst sustaining both. Transcending opposites, in other
words, Hermes also keeps their differences intact. In this light, it is no longer possible to speak
logically of the borrowing or theft of the words of “others.”

As we shall see, the conundrum of the one and the many is repeated throughout Coleridge’s
writings, but it is by no means the “division amounting even to incoherence” that Perry describes.14
For so inveterate a theoretical philosopher as Coleridge, it is something far more ambitious. The
problem of the one and the many, and the dialectic of selfhood and otherness, subject and object,
are necessarily related. The problem of the one and the many is restated as the problem of
remaining the “same” while becoming “other”, and both together broach the problem of being and
becoming. Singularity is opposed to multiplicity as subject is opposed to object, even as the
constitution of the singular as singular, or self as self, turns out to be multiple or other-dependent.

By refusing to oppose the one to the many, mind to matter, subject to object, consciousness
to thing, Hermes represents most precisely an aesthetic of metamorphosis or transformation. This
metamorphic aesthetic is inspired by the alchemical nature of the Hermetic tradition. Alchemy sets
up a transformative, or indeed metamorphic, relationship between the one and the many, or self and
other. Suspended between states of contradiction and crystallization, the alchemical author is
capable of transmuting the self into an other. He is at once in himself and outside himself at the
same time; that is, at once entirely self and wholly other. As we shall see, Coleridge reconfigures
the alchemical aesthetic as a “mental metamorphosis”, in which a nonoriginal source is expressed
only as it extends itself into the immense infinity of all manifest and variant being; at once
becoming other and remaining the same.

14 Perry, p. 1.
i. "Mental Metamorphosis": The One and the Many from Hermes to Shakespeare

In the Hermetic conundrum of the one and the many, Hermes becomes "other" while remaining entirely "self." As Ficino explains in Theologia Platonica, Hermes is characterised by his ability to "become all things." This is his metamorphic and transformative power. The rational soul of man, Ficino tells us, endeavours to reclaim such Hermetic potential for itself:

In all its acts our soul has been shown to draw on all its strength to procure that first gift of God, the possession of the whole truth and the whole good...it strives to become all things as God is all things...Every man's soul in a way makes trial of all these in itself, although different souls do so in different ways, and thus humankind strives to become all things, since as a genus it lives the lives of all. Mercurius Trismegistus was struck with wonder by this.  

Ficino explains that the human soul, in imitation of Hermes, "strives to become all things". While remaining immeasurably separate and distinct, "Man longs to be everywhere". Striving to unite with each object in the cosmic hierarchy, "the intellect seeks to understand all things and in understanding...it seeks consequently to become all things." "In trying to become all things", continues Ficino, "the intellect tries to become God, in whom all things exist." This desire to "become all things" just as God Himself is all things, through a kind of creative self-manifestation in the world, is traced back to Hermes Trismegistus. Ficino, with great eloquence, elaborates upon this conundrum in a unique double gesture. Explaining the imaginative desire with which man flies upon "twin wings", Ficino writes: "With the first wing it draws all things to itself" and "with the second it draws itself into all things." By a twin movement, one in which "the intellect is united to things by transferring things into itself" and the other "where the will is united by transferring itself into things", the mind of man desires and strives to become all things whilst remaining entirely itself. This unique double gesture, he insists, is the key to the Hermetic aesthetic.

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115 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 241-243.
116 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 243.
117 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 247.
118 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 247-249.
119 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 249.
In 1801, Coleridge copied out a similar series of passages from Giordano Bruno’s *De monade* and *De innumerabili immense*. Bruno was a sixteenth century Italian philosopher and occultist, and was heavily influenced by Ficino.\textsuperscript{120} The longest and most interesting of Coleridge’s translated passages of Bruno’s text reads as follows:

> Thence was man entitled by Trismegistus, ‘the great Miracle,’ inasmuch as he has been made capable of entering into union with God, as if he were himself a divine nature; tries to become all things, even as in God all things are; and in limitless progression of limited States of Being, urges onward to the ultimate aim, even as God is simultaneously infinite, and everywhere ALL!\textsuperscript{121}

Like Ficino, Bruno traces an ambidextrous longing in man back to Hermes Trismegistus. Specifically, the ability to “become all things” is the defining feature of Hermes Trismegistus. By endowing man with the power to know this divine principle *within himself*, Hermes reconciles “all things” under the aegis of the “one” and transcends the formalist categories of subject and object, self and not-self. As the god of all authorship, and as one who bestows upon man the imaginative ability to transcend boundaries of authorship and identity (as one who tries “to become all things, even as in God all things are”), Hermes is truly the poet’s divinity. Associated with the imaginative fluidity between selfhood and otherness, it is little wonder that Hermes becomes the guide for Coleridge’s own unique aesthetics.

For Coleridge, the ability to become something “other” is acquired early on, and is frequently cast as the source of his most creative power: “The first lesson that innocent Childhood affords me”, he writes in his notebooks, “is that it is an instinct of my Nature to pass out of myself, and to exist in the form of others.”\textsuperscript{122} It is also the primary instinct behind aesthetic experience in general: “the Gothic architecture impresses the beholder with a sense of self-annihilation...he becomes, as it were, a part of the work contemplated.”\textsuperscript{123} Of those poets who lack this ability to enter into the experience of an objective other, Coleridge writes: “There are men who can write

\textsuperscript{120} For the most extensive study on Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition see Yates, *Giordano Bruno and Hermetic Tradition*.  
\textsuperscript{122} CN V 6487.  
\textsuperscript{123} LL II 60, italics mine.
most eloquently, and passages of deepest pathos & even Sublimity, on circumstances personal & deeply exciting their own passions; but [they are] not therefore poets.\footnote{124} The title belongs only to those who are able "to send ourselves out of ourselves, to think ourselves into the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly &\textit{strangely different} from our own."\footnote{125}

The ability to become something "other" informs the principal matter of Coleridge's speculation on authorship and creativity. It emerges as the governing image behind his Shakespearean criticism and is a substantial feature of the religious and philosophical inquiries of the \textit{Biographia} period. In the literary lectures, Coleridge specifies that Shakespeare's imaginative power follows from his \textit{Hermetic} potential. By the power of his imagination, writes Coleridge, Shakespeare performs a transformative ideal whereby he is able to "become that upon which he meditates" or, more precisely, to \textit{"become by power of Imagination another Thing."}\footnote{126} He is "the one Proteus of the fire and the flood", explains Coleridge, he "now flowed, a river; now raged, a fire; now roared, a lion—he assumed all changes...& assumed the character."\footnote{127} Like Hermes, Shakespeare embodies what Lucy Newlyn calls the "aesthetics of indeterminacy and questionable shape."\footnote{128} He has the ability to enter imaginatively into whatever he contemplates, to identify with it, and to acquire a shared realisation of its character and experience. Having only to think of a thing in order to become it, Shakespeare sustains the imaginative potentiality of \textit{all} things within himself and supports the Hermetic burden.

Traditionally, Coleridge's discussion of Shakespeare's protean potential is understood as one half of his dualist construction of imaginative ability; particularly, as it is posited against his formulation of the Miltonic ego. Nicola Trott, for instance, notes that Coleridge expounds upon two "\textit{contrary} types of mind, constituting \textit{opposed} poetic 'worlds'....The poets [Shakespeare and

\footnotesize{\footnote{124} LL 1 69, \textit{italics mine}.} 
\footnotesize{\footnote{125} CL II 810, \textit{italics mine}. This is the domain solely of Shakespeare, explains Coleridge in this letter to William Sotheby dated 13 July 1802.} 
\footnotesize{\footnote{126} LL I 69, 80-1, \textit{italics mine}.} 
\footnotesize{\footnote{127} BL II 27; LL I 225.} 
Milton] are exemplary of two antithetical, conceptions of divinity, between the rival claims of which Coleridge spent much of his intellectual life arbitrating.\footnote{Nicola Trott, ‘Milton and the Romantics’ in A Companion to Romanticism, ed. by Duncan Wu (London: Blackwell publishers, 1999), pp. 520-534, p. 528.} While Shakespeare is “self-effacingly immersed in the forms of his creation”, she asserts, “Milton, conversely, stands transcendently proud of his work, yet with his identity stamped on every line”.\footnote{Trott, p. 528.} As the proponent of pure objectivity, Shakespeare is thought to engage in a purely objectivist self-elimination, or a movement out of the self at the expense of himself. He assumes all forms of human character and passion in perfect abstraction from himself, and thus redeems himself from the egocentric subjectivism of Milton. Positing Shakespeare as the maxim of the protean elimination of the self in favour of the ‘other’, Trott perpetuates the conventional formalist distinctions between selfhood and otherness: “Coleridge’s distinction between the two ‘gods’ of English poetry”, she writes, is “the common currency of Romantic criticism…Shakespeare is allied with the ‘objective’ and a realist aesthetic, Milton with the ‘subjective’ and idealist.”\footnote{Trott, p. 528.} This critical mythology of the distinction of geniuses proves, once again, the unrelenting hold of our Cartesian heritage. The clear delineation of Coleridge’s mind and aesthetic, between Shakespeare’s self-annihilation and Milton’s egotistical solipsism, between mimetic repetition and self-directed idealism, is our constant bias in Coleridge studies and is, once more, that which we must attempt to remedy here.

Shakespeare is no mere proponent of a protean aesthetic mutually opposed to Miltonic authorship. He is, more accurately, the incarnation of a much more intricate and complicated Hermetic aesthetic. To insist upon the distinction between Miltonic and Shakespearean authorship is to perpetuate a divisive misnomer. What Shakespeare affords, instead, is an intricately defined and precise conundrum. While Shakespeare somehow manages to be entirely integrative and, like Proteus, to yield himself entirely to the “other” and become that upon which he meditates, Coleridge stresses that this is by no means a self-cancelling transaction. The author remains one of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnotesize \textsuperscript{129} Nicola Trott, ‘Milton and the Romantics’ in A Companion to Romanticism, ed. by Duncan Wu (London: Blackwell publishers, 1999), pp. 520-534, p. 528.
  \item \footnotesize \textsuperscript{130} Trott, p. 528.
  \item \footnotesize \textsuperscript{131} Trott, p. 528.
\end{itemize}
a kind, perfectly unborrowed and entirely his own "self." Shakespeare is no Keatsian automaton of sympathetic imagination or object-directed negative capability. Instead, he is at once absorbed and rapt in his art; dissolving himself into all things, he nevertheless still retains his ordinary self-consciousness and awareness. As Coleridge explains, he becomes like Proteus "another Thing … yet still the God felt to be there." While he is transformed into all things, he is by no means entirely self-forgetful: "Shakespeare becomes all things, yet forever remaining himself." This ability to become at once something other and stay oneself is certainly puzzling. While Coleridge is not the first to employ the image of Proteus in his discussion of Shakespeare, this unique double gesture of the poetic ability to remain himself while also becoming an other is precisely Hermetic. "Therefore it was," writes Coleridge, "that in all the great characters, it was still Shakespeare." Under the multitude of resemblances that Shakespeare assumes, he retains always the character of himself. Able to enter into an external "other", or to transform and correspond to an object essentially separate from himself, Shakespeare undergoes no removal from himself, being somehow already one and the same with his object. Alluding back to Hermes' own ambiguous origins, Coleridge suggests that Shakespeare is at once "all Shakespeare and nothing Shakespeare." Characterless and yet the source of all other characters, he is at once both subject and object, that which is perceiving and that which is being perceived, and it is in this uniquely paradoxical space that Shakespeare enacts the Hermetic aesthetic.

The double gesture is an important, if confusing, point. Coleridge further develops the idea in the following simple yet densely packed formulation:

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132 The role of the sympathetic imagination and negative capability in eighteenth-century critical theory is well trodden material. For more on the sympathetic imagination see Walter Jackson Bate, 'The Sympathetic Imagination in eighteenth-century Criticism', English Literary History, 12 (1945), pp. 144-164. See also Engell, pp. 143-157. According to Engell, the power of sympathy is "a major theme for English Romanticism," and is especially important for Coleridge. Wordsworth, Hazlitt and Keats, "all of whom share its legacy". Once again, however, I would suggest that Engell is only half-right. Coleridge may indeed be among the inheritors of the sympathetic tradition of thought, but he by no means promotes sympathy at the expense of the personality and selfhood of the poet himself. His position is more intricately complex and more expressly Hermetic.

133 LL 169, italics mine.

134 BL 1128.

135 LL 1230.

136 CN II 2086.
Characterless because characteristic – the Poet lost in his Portraits – \( \neq \) the Poet as a mere ventriloquist – wonderful union of Both in Shakespeare.\(^{137}\)

While the poet “lost in his portraits” is one who surrenders entirely to the form of the “other” and is thereby self-negating, the ventriloquistic poet, on the other hand, is he who is always entirely his own “self” and only seems to become an “other.” These two accounts of imaginative prowess, suggests Coleridge, in his use of \( \neq \), are mutually contradictory. The one involves complete self-surrender to the “other” in a kind of sympathetic or negative capability, while the second involves a cunning manipulation of all objects under the workings of the “self”, thereby retaining a sense of egocentric authorship. In between the two possibilities, however, Coleridge posits a unique suspension of the two in Shakespeare. This “wonderful union”, as he terms it, is the ability to encompass the “other” while remaining entirely “oneself.” The epithet “Characterless because characteristic” demonstrates the paradox inherent in Coleridge’s aesthetic formulation and places us squarely in the Hermetic tradition. Pushed to its paradoxical conclusion, the imaginative union and interdependence of “self” and “other” renders the very terms of either an object-directed or a ventriloquist aesthetic invalid. Somewhere between quietist self-annihilation and radical subjectivism, Coleridge’s Shakespearean criticism enacts a very specific and baffling Hermetic paradox. Authorial transmutation is not a simple going out of one self in order to enter into an “other” but, rather, a transmutation into an “other” whilst still remaining “oneself.”

The idea that an author can somehow be drawn to and resemble others, without being swallowed up in them or losing his singularity, is an ingenious ploy, to say nothing of its logical impossibility. Coleridge requires a conception of authorship which not only overcomes the dualism between the subject and object, but can still account for the differences between them. In his discussion of Shakespeare, Coleridge explains the paradox by suggesting that the poet not only becomes the other, but that the other whose form he assumes is in fact self-generated: “What is the Lear, the Othello, but a divine dream. All Shakespeare and nothing Shakespeare”, he writes, “…we

\(^{137}\) LL 1 138.
become that which we understandably behold and hear, having, how much God perhaps only knows, created part even of the Form."¹³⁸ That the poet “create[s] part even of the Form” of what he “becomes” and “beholds” suggests that, rightly defined, the imagination allows the writer to enact a transmutation within himself. Shakespeare, like Hermes, is a nonoriginal origin who at once creates himself in the image of an other and is also the origin of that other. The Hermetic author, we might say, undergoes the very transformation he enacts and becomes the object of his own gaze, at once entirely other and wholly within.

Expounding upon the mystery of Shakespeare’s imaginative potential as late as 1834, Coleridge refers to it as a “mental metamorphosis.” He states:

The sympathy of the poet with the subjects of his poetry is particularly remarkable in Shakspeare and Chaucer; but what the first effects by a strong act of imagination and mental metamorphosis, the last does without any effort, merely by the inborn kindly joyousness of his nature. How well we seem to know Chaucer! How absolutely nothing do we know of Shakspeare!¹³⁹

That it is a mental metamorphosis suggests that the transmutation takes place within the author himself, and that we know “absolutely nothing” of Shakespeare is due to the fact that we only know him by the forms of various others by which he is manifest to us. At once original and derivative or, more accurately, original by virtue of being derivative, Shakespeare is the heir apparent of Hermes Trismegistus. Engaged in “a strong act of imagination and mental metamorphosis,” Shakespeare, like Hermes, is the manifestation of a nonoriginal origin in the form of multifarious “others” whilst yet remaining entirely him”self.” The Hermetic analogue between authorial metamorphosis and alchemy points to the problem of the identification of the percipient (subject) with the perceived (object) and begs once more the question: How can something transform into another thing and yet still remain oneself? More intriguingly, how can something be all things and yet no-thing at the same time? How can an author be at once infinitely various and yet forever the same? Able to transmute himself in between selfhood and otherness, Shakespeare enacts and

¹³⁸ CN II 2086.
counterbalances the unique twofold gesture of Hermetic authorship. Simply put, Coleridge endows Shakespeare with the ability to enact the Hermetic paradox. Recalling the Hermetic tradition and performing the imaginative propensity to become various things under one form, the phenomenology of Shakespeare’s authorship is essentially one with the phenomenology of transformation and artifice. As we shall see, authorship is alchemy.

ii. Alchemy: Rhetorical Subventions

Alchemy runs like a leitmotif throughout Coleridge’s aesthetics. Negotiating the nomenclature of alchemy with his definition of the imagination in the Biographia, Coleridge expounds upon “that synthetic and magical power” which “diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each.” Further, the imagination is a “modifying,” “shaping spirit”, “co-adunative,” and “fusive”, that shapes or “forms into one.”¹⁴⁰ Six years prior to the publication of the Biographia, Coleridge likewise records in his notebook that the “poetic Imagination” is a “fusing power, that fixing unfixes & while it melts & bedims the Image, still leaves in the Soul its living meaning.”¹⁴¹

While there have been some attempts to engage with alchemy in Coleridge criticism, it is almost exclusively employed as a merely allegorical or unselfconscious metaphor for Coleridge’s aesthetic, if plagiaristic, process. For instance, Coleridge’s genius is frequently characterised in terms of its uniquely “synthesizing” ability. His work is described by Engell and Bate as a “mingled” achievement or even a “chemical compound” of text.¹⁴² Variously, Patricia Adair, in her book The Waking Dream, characterises the various undigested and unattributed borrowings in Coleridge’s writing as “base metal until touched to gold by the poetic alchemy.”¹⁴³ The editors of the Biographia employ a similar alchemical analogy for Coleridge’s plagiarisms, noting that his

¹⁴⁰ BL 11 16; BL 1. 168 and n.2.
¹⁴¹ CN III 4066.
¹⁴² BL 1 exx.
writing “was a transfusive process through which he could feel that he had earned the right to consider ideas ‘my own’” and, as Engell explains, while other thinkers “wrote pages on proper and philosophic definition,” Coleridge merely “distills, connects and adds to the background.”144 However, of all the critical endeavours to broach the significance of alchemy upon Coleridge’s understanding of authorship and creativity, it is perhaps John Livingston Lowes who forwards the most memorable chemical analogue for the synthetic workings of Coleridge’s mind. He writes:

One after another vivid bits from what he read dropped into [a] deep well. And there, below the level of conscious mental processes, they set up their obscure and powerful reactions…Facts which sank at intervals and out of conscious recollection drew together beneath the surface through almost chemical affinities of common elements…and there the fragments which sank incessantly below the surface fuse and assimilate and coalesce.145

Describing the chemical process by which Coleridge’s mind reacts with an “inert repository of source materials”, Lowes offers it as a basic image to justify further source-hunting. Coleridge’s poetics, he writes, are the product of “one of the most extraordinary memories of which there is record, stored with the spoils of an omnivorous reading, and endowed in to the bargain with an almost uncanny power of association.”146 Notably, by taking the matter no further than mere metaphorical convention, Lowes brushes aside the deeper ontological significance of alchemy and overlooks Coleridge’s longstanding fascination with its arcana. In fact, Lowes dismisses entirely Coleridge’s interest in the important volume mentioned to Thelwall in 1796, labelling the works of Iamblichus, Proclus, Psellus, and Hermes Trismegistus as a “vade mecum of Neoplatonic daemonology.”147 He also flippantly classes the study of Hermes as “one of Coleridge’s inveterate preoccupations” and “one of [his] strangest tendencies.”148 Not fully alive to the aesthetic potential of alchemical imagery, Lowes employs it as a passing fanciful construct with which to illustrate Coleridge’s synthesizing faculty rather than the informing impulse behind it. Focusing on the associative power of his memory alone, Lowes reduces Coleridge to a merely mimetic author who

144 BL cxxxi; Engell, p. 328, *italics mine*.
145 Lowes, p. 58, *italics mine*.
146 Lowes, p. 43.
147 Lowes, p. 234.
takes his imagery from a patchwork combination of travel books, accounts of voyages, natural histories and half-remembered allusions, and removes Coleridge entirely from his discussion: "Coleridge as Coleridge, be it said at once, is of secondary moment to our purpose; it is the significant process, not the man, which constitutes our theme."\(^{149}\) Overlooking the full weight of the alchemical process and its transformative potential upon the poet himself, Lowes satisfies the critical Cartesian impetus for source hunting and employs the language of alchemy to minimal effect.\(^{150}\)

The merely mediating and synthesizing role of metaphorical alchemy upon the author’s mind is treated similarly in an analysis by T. S. Eliot, contemporary of I. A. Richards, in a publication just seven years before Lowes’ *Road to Xanadu*. Drawing upon chemistry as the most effective analogy for the workings of the poetic mind, Eliot writes:

> Consider...the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide...When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.\(^{151}\)

This passage from Eliot’s essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, seems to constitute a rebuke to the insistence on originality at the expense of influence. However, Eliot’s failure to embrace the full transformative metaphor he employs leads him to place undue emphasis on restoring the dignity of tradition alone. The mind of the mature poet, writes Eliot, is defined not by any valuation of precise personality but rather by its being a finely perfected *medium*, or chemical *catalyst*, by virtue

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\(^{149}\) Lowes, p. 4.

\(^{150}\) Recently, presenting a similarly mechanistic view of chemical workings in the poetic process, Michel Chaouli in *The Laboratory of Poetry* provides a materialist understanding of the chemical tradition in Schegel’s development and practice of a form of “chemical combinatorics” in his writings. For Chaouli, letters, morphemes, words, and phrases may be understood as elements subject to chemically “dividing and mixing forces.” See Michel Chaouli, *Laboratory of Poetry: Chemistry and Poetics in the Work of Friedrich Schlegel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 2, 4. Chaouli, like Lowes, maintains a materialist version of alchemy, where prefixes, suffixes and morphemes are treated as elements in a kind of verbal chemistry, what Schlegel refers to as the *ars combinatoria*.

of which varied source elements enter into new combinations. The combinations take place in the mind of the author, he suggests, but the author himself is left unaffected: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion” and, again, “it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”  

Eliot, like Lowes, purchases his emphasis on the alchemical tradition at the expense of the poet himself and sacrifices the full potential of the metaphor whose recognition he seeks to sustain. Emphasising the alchemical and synthesising power of the mind to unite all other sources at the expense of its own originality, Eliot follows tradition by erring on the side of other-influences and source-hunting: “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice,” concludes Eliot, “a continual extinction of personality.”

While this rhetorical and synthetic aspect of Coleridge’s alchemy has indeed received attention, I would suggest that it is attention of a kind that has distorted importance. It is almost exclusively employed as an allegorical or apologetic metaphor for his plagiarism. Such analysis provides further justification for source-study and leads once more to the matter of Coleridge’s sources unduly preoccupying his readers. Insistent upon the importance of alchemy as a merely chemical allegory for the fusion of “other” sources in his work, critics tend to forget the metamorphic potential of alchemy upon the author himself. As such, I would suggest that the critical potential of alchemy has not yet met with its fullest expression. It seems to me that alchemical rhetoric goes to the very heart of understanding Coleridge’s epistemology of selfhood and otherness. Bearing no mere ornamental affinity to his system of aesthetics, alchemy indicates the fullest critical development of Coleridge’s thought on the nature of the authorial mind.

### iii. Coleridge and Alchemy: Beyond Otherness

At first glance, Coleridge’s notion of alchemy appears to exist on two separate planes. On the one hand, in his early discussion with friend and chemist Humphry Davy, Coleridge elaborates

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152 Eliot, p. 34.
153 Eliot, p. 28.
upon alchemists who earn the title of fraudsters, shams and tricksters, and against whom Ben Jonson rightfully issues warning in his play, *The Alchemist*. On the other, Coleridge posits the “true alchemical philosophers”, or great “speculative alchemists”, whose “industry was unceasing, their hopes glorious, and their discoveries eminently useful.”

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Coleridge’s postulation on the difference between alchemical charlatans on the one hand and ‘true alchemical philosophers’ on the other is, as with most binary configurations in Coleridge’s thought, hardly sustainable. These two kinds of alchemists are intricately connected in Coleridge’s speculations and deserve to be treated alongside one another. In a truly Hermetic vein, it is more accurate to suggest that for Coleridge, as for Cudworth, what is in practice a literal fraud can nevertheless convey a grander, more philosophical, truth. As we shall see, in alchemy, where there is evidence of a physical fraud there is nevertheless also the promise of a metaphysical truth.

In a literary lecture delivered in 1818, and recorded by J. H. Green, Coleridge concedes that while in practice alchemy is often nothing more than the tinting of metals or an attempt to give less valuable metals the appearance of those that are more precious, the counterfeit presentations of metals and minerals hold undeniable insight into the mysteries of philosophy and epistemology. He asserts:

> [I]t is probably unjust to accuse the alchemists general of dabbling with attempts at magic in the common sense of the term...The alchemists were, no doubt, often considered as dealers in art magic, and many of them were not unwilling that such a belief should be prevalent; and the more earnest among them evidently looked at their association of substances, fumigations, and other chemical operations as merely ceremonial, and seem, therefore, to have had a deeper meaning, that of evoking a latent power.\(^{155}\)

Reconciling truth with falsity and honesty with chicanery, claims Coleridge, the alchemists seek the transmutation of base metals into gold as only part of their quest. There is also a latent philosophical and ontological purpose to their art. Confounding fraudulent form with intellectual

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\(^{155}\) LL II 211, *italics mine.*
and philosophical endeavour, the alchemists are “not without a ground of Truth.” As Coleridge specifies in a passage from The Friend, the alchemical charlatans “whose gold-tincture, would enrich them without toil or economy” are redeemed by the “alchemical philosophers” who unite manifest fraud with philosophical value.

Coleridge returns to the subject of alchemy in 1825. In a marginal note to Thomas Fuller’s Life of Paracelsus, Coleridge notes:

N.b. The Potential...the ground of the Prophetic, directed the first Thinkers (= Mystae) to the metallic bodies, as the Key of all natural Science. The then Actual blended with this instinct all the fancies, and fond desires, and false perspective, of the Childhood of Intellect. The essence was truth, the form was folly: and this is the definition of Alchemy.

Aligning the earliest metaphysical thinkers in the infancy of their intellectual development with the alchemists, Coleridge suggests that they were at once fraudulent impostors and metaphysical speculators, propounding an entirely unique metaphysics albeit intermingled with some elements of fiction and fancy. Writing of alchemy that: “The essence was truth, the form was folly: and this is the definition of Alchemy,” Coleridge betrays the wonderful complexity of his thought. Able to sustain paradoxes and contradictions where our modernist minds resist them, Coleridge reminds us of the inadequacy and unfairness of reducing his aesthetics to neat dualism. This passage is one of Coleridge’s most sustained statements on alchemy and is of such cardinal importance to his transformative and paradoxical aesthetics that it is well worth quoting in its entirety:

The Potential (Logos Theanthropos), the ground of the Prophetic, directed the first Thinkers (= Mystae) to the metallic bodies, as the Key of all natural Science. The then Actual blended with this instinct all the fancies, and fond desires, and false perspective, of the Childhood of Intellect. The essence was truth, the form was folly: and this is the definition of Alchemy. – Nevertheless, the very terms bear witness to the veracity of the original Instinct/The World of Sensible Experience cannot be more luminously divided than into the modifying powers, to allon* – that which differences, makes this other than that: and the met’ allon*, that which is beyond or deeper than the modifications. Metallon is strictly ‘the Base of the Mode;’ and such have the Metals been determined to be by modern Chemistry. – And what are now the great problems of Chemistry? The difference of the

156 CM II 825.
157 The Friend, 1, 57.
158 CM II 824-5, italics in original.
Metals themselves, their origin, the causes of their locations, of their co-existence in the same ore...

[*translated in footnotes as ‘the other’ and ‘beyond other’].

Considering the “veracity of the original Instinct” that motivated the alchemists, Coleridge insists that a historical and formalist fraud can nevertheless hold out the promise of a poetic truth. Specifically, he goes on to detail a metallurgical tradition in which it is possible to go beyond (“meta”) “allon” (“that which differences, makes this other than that”). There is a “world of Sensible Experience”, explains Coleridge, which can be “divided […] into] the modifying powers, [of] allon – that which differences, makes this other than that: and the met’ allon, that which is beyond or deeper than the modifications.” Metallon is strictly “the Base of the Mode.” In metallurgical terms, then, the only unfailing way to go beyond an autonomous partial “other” is to become the other without conflating it with the self; that is, to retain the concept of “otherness” and “beyond otherness” at the same time. Coleridge develops the idea more closely in his annotations on the musings of the German naturalist, Lorenz Oken, dated between 1820 and 1825:

Theoretically and philosophically there are but two Elements, <or primary Essences, viz.>…Therefore it would be expedient to enact the terms, in the manner of the Old Alchemists – and the first might be called allon, the other Met’allon, or the Alléity and the Metalléity. – But even so, the word, Elements or Elementary Matters, is defective & partial – for the necessary co-existence of both by virtue of the Oneness of the Power, of which these are two polar forms or forces, the former will always sustain the dynamic Function, will appear as an ACT, and the latter will be understood as the Material factor – i.e. the Metal<lon> will be the Base, and the Allon the Act or Active Property.

Explaining that there are two principal, if paradoxical, forces in alchemy, Coleridge defines these as Metalléity (that which is beyond otherness) and Alléity (otherness). Where one is the “Base” (Metalléity), the other is the “dynamic Function” and appears as an “ACT” (Alléity). Having made the distinction, Coleridge immediately qualifies it, asserting that “even so, the word, Elements or Elementary Matters, is defective & partial – for the necessary co-existence of both.”

159 CM II 824-5 and n.8, italics in original.
160 CM II 825, italics mine.
161 CM II 825.
162 CM II 825.
163 CM III 1024-1025, italics in original.
upon the conundrum, Coleridge explains that the “Allon, the Act or Active Property” is the necessary enactment of the Metallon or “Base.” Put differently, the two forces are but the necessary fulfilment of each other. Seeking manifestation of the Metallon in the world of visible and expressible matter, the Allon is but the performance of the underlying Base. In other words, the basic “Metalléity” (or “beyond otherness”) must be expressed as other (“Alléity”) in order to be said to go beyond otherness altogether. In alchemical terms, these two activities together, in paradoxical if not impossible union, define alchemy. Striving for the transcension of categories of otherness by a unique twofold gesture in which one not only becomes other, but also remains beyond otherness, this bemusing scenario is the key to understanding the Hermetic art of alchemy and Coleridge’s conception of authorship, and it will become clearer as we progress.

For now, what is important to recognise here is that Coleridge, interested in the philosophic and aesthetic implications of this great art, reinstates the authorial and imaginative implications of transmutation and metamorphosis. Going beyond the choice of either a subjective or an objective approach to philosophical speculation, alchemy is not only a process of self-other mutability, but the practice of self-other transmutability; that is, the ability to go beyond the distinctions of selfhood and otherness altogether without conflating them, that is, while keeping their differences intact. The alchemical author, in other words, is one who is able to become entirely other, and yet remain what he has been all along, self-same. This is, as we have seen, the defining mystery of Hermes Trismegistus and the guiding aesthetic of Coleridge’s own configuration of Shakespearean authorship. It is also, as it perhaps goes without saying, a model of complete artifice and impossibility if we attempt to understand it in the Cartesian light. Hermetic authorship, simply put, partakes of an aesthetic of going beyond otherness. Applying the methodology of alchemy to the authorial mind, Coleridge demands an entirely new model of analysis. Coming to this new model of analysis requires, of course, a translation of alchemical terms into imaginative ones as well as a rethinking of our conventional subject-object epistemology. The author in this account is revealed to be a tenuous presence; a fluidity floating ambiguously between a completely private inner realm
and the exposed realm of the other. As we shall see, by appropriating the spurious practice of physical alchemy and reconfiguring it as a psychological and aesthetic analogue for the authorial mind, Coleridge suggests something centrally important about his epistemology and his claim to authorship. Going beyond mere rhetorical subvention, Coleridge employs the alchemical aesthetic as a deliberate expression of the art of artifice itself.
Chapter Four:
Chrysopoetics: Alchemy and Self-Exposition

Each thing, that lives, has its moment of self-exposition.

Coleridge, *Lectures on Literature*, 1818.\(^{163}\)

Employing the Hermetic model for his conception of authorship, Coleridge suggests that there is an aesthetic potential in the transformative ability “to become all things.” The value of a shape-shifting writer who can speak in the voice of another and yet remain entirely himself is as central to the question of authorship for Coleridge as it is for the Hermeticists. Hovering between transitive and intransitive identities, the author attains imaginative self-expression only by means of a projected “other.” Shifting between a regard for autonomy within the “self” and representation in the “other” without, the author calls into question the very act of writing itself and makes explicit the metamorphic nature of all authorship.

The aims of alchemy have been enumerated throughout its enigmatic history as the transformation of base metals into gold; the extraction of the fine from the coarse; the redemption of spirit from matter; the discovery of the secrets of matter and hence the mysteries of creation; and the perfection of the human soul. Throughout alchemical literature, alchemy provides both practical skills and a myth about creative capacity. The primary question in alchemy, as it must be in any attempt to understand a Hermetic aesthetic founded upon it, is how is matter created and how is it transmutable into something *other* than what it is? Indeed, how is it possible to go beyond *otherness*? As we have seen, this is a particularly fitting account of Coleridge’s own creative endeavour and may be understood as the underlying narrative strategy behind a metamorphic or transformative aesthetic.

\(^{163}\) LL II 223, italics in original.
In alchemical discourse, one way out of the conflict of the one and the many, or of selfhood and otherness, is the doctrine that ultimately all the infinite variety of visible matter has its origin in the same undifferentiated source. In other words, underlying the infinite variety of different or “othered” forms in which matter presents itself is the fundamental indifference of all things. This idea relies upon the ancient Greek doctrine of the four elements. For the alchemists, four prima materia exist in intimate association, and changes and transformations in visible bodies are brought about by changes in the configuration and arrangement of this elemental mixture. By changing the proportions of this primordial mixture, matter itself is interconvertible. As we shall see, the attempt to “make gold” represents the desire to express or to extrapolate this previously hidden and undifferentiated potentia (often represented as gold) in its purest form in manifest matter. It is, most accurately, a per-formative gesture. In Hermetic terms, what it describes is the self-expression of the indifferenced “nonoriginal” source in the form or space of something other that itself. Put differently, the alchemical narrative describes the opening up of a transformative space in which the originating self writes itself into existence.

i. The Alchemical Compass: The Hieroglyph of Interconvertibility

Alchemical discourse is filled with all sorts of strange metaphors and obscure images which provide illumination into the way that matter is thought to develop and transform. Gold, considered the most ‘mature’ metal while all other metals are immature and unrefined versions of it, is believed to symbolise the highest destiny of the natural world. Alchemy, then, is the knowledge that helps metals reach their ultimate perfection. Through mining raw ores and submitting them to the furnace and the anvil, the alchemists believed themselves to be able to expedite the processes of nature and to extract the gold lying latent, although not yet expressed, within it.

Alchemical practice was largely informed by established Greek, specifically Aristotelian, thought. According to the scholar of the exoteric alchemical tradition, E. J. Holmyard, Aristotle believed that the world was comprised of prime matter that only had potential existence. To
actually manifest itself, this potential and all-originating matter had to be impressed by “form” or shape that gave a body its specific properties. In the Aristotelian cosmology, form gives rise to the “four elements” and, from the standpoint of transmutation, the alchemists locate the origin of all matter in these essential informing prima materia. In alchemy, the invisible structures lying behind the visible bodies of the world are designated as fire, air, water, and earth. According to Aristotle, each of these elements is further characterised by the polar “qualities” of being either hot or cold, and wet or dry. Each element has one of these polar qualities. Fire, for instance, is hot and dry, while water is cold and fluid. If one can combine them in such a way that it results in the elimination of the dry and cold qualities, one would have an element that is hot and fluid, namely air. Similarly, earth can be changed to water if its characteristic “dryness” is replaced by “wetness” and “coldness” remains a constant; and air can become fire if “dryness” replaces and predominates over “wetness.” That is, by alternating the proportion and arrangement of the underlying qualities of matter, alchemists are able to transform one substance into another. Since all visible matter in the cosmos is composed of a different combination of polar qualities of heat, dryness, coldness and moisture, transmutation occurs by the simple rearrangement and repositioning of these underlying qualities. As Holmyard explains: “If lead and gold both consist of fire, air, water and earth, why may not the full and common metal have the proportions for the elements adjusted to those of the shining, precious one?”

Coleridge encountered Aristotle’s views on alchemy in Cudworth’s True System. As Cudworth explains, the generation and creation of matter is “nothing but mixture and separation or, as Aristotle expresses it, concretion and secretion of parts, together with change of figure and order.” That manifest creation is but the variable “concretion and secretion” of an otherwise indifferent or formless source, suggests that by rearranging and purifying the proportion of these underlying elements, matter can be transmuted from one form into another. This concept of

alchemical transmutation runs squarely against the idea of a coherent, indivisible selfhood separate from “others.” Here, there is no singular, stable and unchanging identity amidst all the vicissitudes of life. Rather, all manifest matter is but the expression of a perpetual, yet ever-changeable, 
indifference. From earliest times onward, alchemical authors describe the transmutation of the elements as a rotation about a circle or wheel in which a variety of informing qualities are expressed and impressed upon matter. This alchemical cosmology figures forth in alchemical texts in the form of a philosophical circle or quaternion. The compass structure runs in a perpetual ever-changing circle around a fixed point, representing the eternal interconvertibility of all matter.

Works such as Petrus Bonus’ *Pretiosa margarita novella* (1335) for instance, represent the backbone of Medieval and Renaissance alchemy. Bonus’ presentation of the four elements along a compass configuration is characteristic of the compass diagram as it is spun out by various Hermetic thinkers throughout the ages (see Figure 1). Along the bottom edge of Bonus’ diagram, are depicted various alchemical vessels used to enact transmutation and, above, we see the symbols used to denote the four elements and their relationship to each other. The complexity of the alchemical system of conversion is captured as a quaternion. Specifically, Bonus represents the four *prima materia* along two polar lines, or as a cross which joins four cardinal points. Water, air, fire, and earth reside at each pole and together constitute the prime matter out of which all variant manifestations arise. Accurately stated, fire, air, water and earth, *come to be* out of the one undifferentiated informing source, or “quintessence”, which sits at the intersection of the four cardinal points. This informing substrate, we might say, exists only *potentially* until it is resolved and expressed in the infinite variety of visible matter. Representing all sorts of pairs of opposites arising out of this one informing quintessence, the *prima materia* may be extended to a whole host of abstract and hypothetical principles which can be understood, at least with some retrospection, as a symbolic or philosophical application of alchemy. For instance, throughout alchemical discourse the basic alchemical pairs (fire and water, earth and air; hot and cold; wet and dry) have been extended to various other oppositional mythologies, ranging from feminine and masculine, light and
dark, heavy and light, fixed and volatile, passive and active, solar and lunar, and sulphur and mercury. Regardless of which polarity is identified, the important point is that for the alchemists manifest creation is the differentiated representation of an underlying, or quintessential, indifference. It is the “expression” of undifferentiated potential made manifest and given form in visible nature. By arranging and positioning the basic underlying elements along a circular configuration, the alchemists afford a creative emblem in which matter not only retains the informing potential within it, but manifests itself in various different transformations across the visible plane. The circular structure thus affords the possibility of the transcension of the principles of unity and multeity, selfhood and otherness, in alchemy. The all-informing point at the centre of the compass, with the manifest variety of differentiated creation expressed all around it, is captured in the symbol of the theta or ☪ which is also, notably, the alchemical hieroglyph for “gold”.

It is likely that one of the hieroglyphic or compass representations of the alchemical cosmology with which Coleridge was familiar was that of the English astrologer and mystic, Robert Fludd. Coleridge owned a copy of Fludd’s Philosophia Moysaica, in which Fludd completely absorbs Ficino’s commentaries and gives his own interpretation of the Christian Hermetic tradition which regards Hermes Trismegistus in agreement with Moses.\footnote{Ralph J. Coffman, Coleridge’s Library: a bibliography of books owned and read by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), pp. 80-1.} What is most important for our purposes here is that Fludd’s version of the mystical compass, particularly as it is diagrammed in his Utriusque cosmi–historia, sustains the full Renaissance attitude to Hermes Trismegistus while also recalling the mystical compass of alchemy. In Fludd’s account, the cosmological compass has a constant undifferentiated center point from which, or out of which, differentiation and multiplicity emerges, or is expressed. While the compass itself is a mathematical and geometrical device, its meaning according to Fludd is entirely Hermetic (see Figure 2). In Fludd’s illustration, the stabilizing leg of the compass, affixed firmly upon the “centrum” point, reads Pes seu crus fixium in variabileque (“A foot or leg fixed and invariable”), while the moving leg bears the inscription Pes
circulum seu mundum Delineans ("A foot drawing a circle or world"). According to Fludd, one leg of the compass remains immutable and immeasurably indistinct while the other encircles the vast infinitude of manifest creation, "drawing a circle or world." This twin gesture of alternating between centrifugal and centripetal impulses, adhering to and conforming to the center whilst moving out and away from it, is essential to the Hermetic conundrum of being at once in various manifestations and yet remaining uniquely undifferentiated and indistinct. Capable of becoming all things and yet remaining entirely selfsame, this figure illustrates the informing paradox of the Hermetic and alchemical aesthetic. More specifically, the account of creation along a mystical compass, in which the informing center always exists absolutely while the elements move out of it into a variable circle, describes a process of 'self-othering.' In the compass, the central point is communicated and expressed in an infinite number of ways while yet always remaining itself same and undifferentiated. The compass allows for a situation in which all variety converges around a fixed unity; such that what can be changed in substance can also remain unchanged in essence. As we shall see when we turn to examine more closely the specific Hermetic cosmologies of Hermes, Plato, Ficino, and Cudworth, this process is understood as that in which "the [center] always exists absolutely", while the elements necessarily move through it and out of it freely "into a variable circle." It is certainly no coincidence that this theta or compass figuration, the alchemical hieroglyph for gold itself, calls to mind the twin Hermetic aesthetic of becoming "other" whilst going "beyond otherness" altogether.

The hieroglyphic theta reappears throughout alchemy. In its archaic form, it is variously depicted either as a cross within a circle (இ or ὑ) or as a line or point within a circle (ை or ய). Such representations are also scattered throughout Coleridge's writings and interpolations. At one point, Coleridge marries the quaternion structure to biblical exegesis, placing Ham, Japhet, and Shem, the sons of Noah, along various points of the compass. Elsewhere, he posits the poles as

167 The mystical compass from Robert Fludd. Utriusque cosmi-historia, 2 vols (Antwerp, 1564) II. 28; also cited by Yates, p. 443.
168 Ficino. Theologia Platonica, II. 57, 51.
representing oxygen and chlorine and, in the next breath, crosses these out and reconfigures them as the coordinates for the mythological figures of Phaeton and Apollo. Coleridge also variously represents the cardinal points of the quaternion figure as positive and negative electricity, and positive and negative magnetism; coherence, incoherence, expansion, and attraction; and carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen (see Figures 3 and 4). I will consider some of these configurations in more detail when I turn to look at Coleridge’s reception of Naturphilosophie in chapter six. For now, however, it is enough to note Coleridge’s familiarity with, and basic understanding of, the interconvertibility of the hieroglyphic compass.

In a notebook entry, dated May 1808, Coleridge provides one of the most imaginative assessments of the transmutability of elements and their interconvertibility along a compass structure. Calling for the revival of an alchemical system of transformation, Coleridge suggests that it is important not only for its implications as a myth of creative capacity, but for its linguistic, expressive, and philosophical implications for human consciousness:

I am persuaded that the chymical technology, as far as it was borrowed from Life & Intelligence, half-metaphorically, half mystically, may be brought back again…to the use of psychology in many instances — & above all, in the philosophy of Language — which ought to be experimental & analytic of the elements of meaning, their double, triple & quadruple combinations,—of simple aggregation, or of composition by balance of opposition.

Thus Innocence is distinguished from Virtue & vice versa—In both there is a positive, but in each opposite. A Decomposition must take place in the first instance, & then a new Composition, in order for Innocence to become Virtue. It loses a positive—& then the base attracts another different positive, by the higher affinity of the <same> Base under a different Temperature for the Latter.

In this passage, Coleridge specifies that the transmutation of base elements into higher ones can take place within consciousness, such as the decomposition of “Innocence” and its recomposition at a higher level as “Virtue.” Since manifest creation contains within it all the other constitutive elements of creation as well, “by the higher affinity of the <same> Base”, it is simply by means of a

169 CM V 352; CN IV 5090.
170 CN III 3312.
separation and rearrangement of an inner unity that the “one” can become manifest as something “other.” Assimilating this notion to the hieroglyphic theta, Coleridge suggests that distinctions in such qualities as “Virtue” and “Innocence” are assimilable to either positive or negative poles along a compass. Changes in meaning, he explains, are simply changes in the relation of positive and negative poles:

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P. = \text{positive}, \ N. = \text{negative}, \ <= \text{equal to} \neq \text{contradistinguished from} > P. \ \text{Innocent} \neq N. \ \text{Blameless}, \ \text{guilt[less], of unblemished character} \ldots \text{Thus Innocence as distinguished from Virtue, & vice-versa.}
\]

While the configuration is rather cryptic, Coleridge’s meaning is entirely alchemical. The process of separating positive and negative poles of meaning for new composition simply describes the alchemical scheme of dissolution for “re-composition” of one thing as something “other.” As Coleridge puts it: “A Decomposition must take place in the first instance, & then a new Composition, in order for Innocence to become Virtue. It loses a positive—& then the base attracts another different positive.” 172 Manifest difference, in other words, is simply a variation in the proportion and arrangement of an underlying indifference.

**ii. Boerhaave: The Origins of Alchemy and Decipherable Notions**

Coleridge’s most obvious exposure to the alchemical process came in the form of Herman Boerhaave’s lectures on chemistry, published in 1727 in a collection under the heading *A New Method of Chemistry*. Coleridge consulted this edition in 1818. Boerhaave, a Dutch physician who lived from 1668 to 1738, is often celebrated as the first great rational chemist. A careful empiricist, Boerhaave is fully immersed in Newtonian philosophy, experimentalism, and science, and draws his greatest acclaim as one of the foremost pre-Lavoisier chemists. While he is clearly an exemplary scientist, and in many respects a hard headed mechanist, his work also evinces an underlying belief in alchemical transmutation. In his collection of lectures, Boerhaave makes it.

171 CN III 3312.
172 CN III 3312.
clear that he is well versed in Hermetic lore and even goes so far as to set out the principles of his
discipline as a synthesis of the work of the alchemists: “Metals”, he writes, “appear transmutable
into one another.”

Boerhaave’s text places great emphasis on the “origins” of chemistry: “A history of this
kind, tho’ not absolutely necessary to the knowledge of chemistry”, he stresses, is nevertheless
worth examining, “as nothing uses to be more interesting to an artist, than to know the rise and fate
of his art.” What is important for our purposes here is that Boerhaave traces the origins of
modern chemistry straight back to Hermetic alchemy. “On the subject of where chemistry was first
invented”, writes Boerhaave, “we have received divers curious things on the subject, which shew a
wonderful harmony between the Mosaic and Egyptian Annals.” “By what can be gather’d from
history,” he asserts, “it appears pretty clear that the art of chemistry was first found and cultivated in
Egypt”, and that the Greeks “held Hermes the inventor of chemistry.”

Musing upon the obscure Hermetic pre-history of ancient alchemy, Boerhaave writes:

In Exodus cap. XXXII we read that Moses, upon his coming down from mount Sinai, found
a golden calf, which the Hebrews had been worshipping; and that he reduced it into a
powder, mix’d it with water, and gave it the people to drink. Chemistry then must have
been understood by Moses, and in perfection too; for ’tis certain, there are but very few
among the chymists at this day, deep enough in the Metallurgia to do the like. Now Moses,
we are told, Acts 7, was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians; which, if it be no
direct and formal proof of chemistry’s being practiced at that time in Egypt, yet is it of
more weight, and concludes more than any other consideration all history affords.

It is of course one of the great ironies of Boerhaave’s lectures that he places so much emphasis on
the “origins” of chemistry only to assert a mistaken lineage and to appoint Hermes as its “inventor”.

While Boerhaave is a rational empirical scientist writing well after the discoveries of Casaubon, and
while he is fully aware “that [the work] lately published in Italy under the name of Hermes
Trismegistus [is] a manifest forgery”, he nevertheless upholds a pre-Casaubon lineage for

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173 Herman Boerhaave. A New Method of Chemistry, transl. by P. Shaw and E. Chambers (London: printed for J. Osborn
and T. Longman at the Ship in Paternoster-Roe, 1727), p. 103.
174 Boerhaave, v. italics mine.
175 Boerhaave, p. 7-8.
176 Boerhaave, pp. 7-8.
Hermes. Configuring Hermes as the father and founder of alchemy, Boerhaave claims that he then passes his wisdom on to Moses who, in the Exodus, performs miracles of alchemical transmutation.

With his highly questionable account of the origins of chemistry, Boerhaave returns us to the central difficulty with which we began this study – what precisely is an “original” and just how important is it? In the same gesture with which he cites the importance of tracing the “rise and fate” of one’s art, he pulls the carpet out from underneath our feet and situates the beginnings of chemistry in nothing but fraud and imposture. Straddling the median between logical positivism and historical fraud, Boerhaave posits once more the idea that what originates in literal or historical impossibility can nevertheless hold poetic or aesthetic truth. Striking particular resonance with our own critical attempts to trace the “origins” of Coleridge’s authorship, Boerhaave suggests that while alchemy advocates the impossible and advocates it via a fiction, it nevertheless bears chemical relevance. The Hermetic project, once again, demands a unique interpretive aesthetics; one that does not require a choice between authenticity and artifice, truth and fiction, art and science, but one that is able to embrace the authenticity of artifice itself.

Boerhaave, like Cudworth before him, suggests that truth can reveal itself through artifice. In other words, what is true can nevertheless be artificially expressed, and evidence of forgery does not necessarily invalidate the truth of an idea. The case of Boerhaave’s interest in the “origins” of chemistry is important for several reasons, not least of which concerns the questionable authorship of his own text. It appears that the 1727 publication of his lectures, the publication that Coleridge consults, is an unauthorised translation of another unauthorised collection put together by Boerhaave’s students and published under his name as if it had been his own production. While Boerhaave eventually disowns the spurious edition and later publishes his own version of the lectures, the point is that his students publish what they faithfully believe to be a clear and accurate,  

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178 Boerhaave, p. 3, *italics mine*. This seems to be a reference to Ficino’s translation which, as we have seen, Casaubon discredits as a forgery.
albeit highly alchemical, account of Boerhaave's system. Coleridge, it appears, reads only the 
unauthorised version of Boerhaave's text. It is not known why he did not read the authorised 
translation which would certainly have been available to him, since it was published in a translation 
by Peter Shaw in 1735. Perhaps we might surmise that for Coleridge, as for Boerhaave's students, 
the fraudulent authorship of A New Method did not necessarily ruin the beauty of the Hermetic truth 
it entails. Moreover, it is quite possible that Coleridge simply favoured the undoubtedly more 
alchemical tenor of the unauthorised version. 179

Despite his awareness of the “manifest forgery” of the Hermetic texts, Boerhaave (at least 
as he is represented in the 1727 edition of his lectures) insists upon the appropriation and redirection 
of alchemical and occult practice into experimental science. While “many of the alchemists have 
been deceivers”, he notes, many of them likewise are “visionaries.”180 The basic formulation of 
Boerhaave’s chemistry is an adaptation of alchemical fictions to the science of chemistry. It 
 begins with the assertion that all metals contain latent gold within them. Since all metals are 
created by their varying degree of participation in an informing undifferentiated amount of 
underlying gold, suggests Boerhaave, all metals are transmutable into each other: “Now we don’t 
see why this art should be absolutely pronounced false, the transmutation of metals does not appear 
impossible.”181 In order to explain the process by which the proportion and variation of hidden gold 
leads to the transmutation of the different metals, Boerhaave employs the following hieroglyphic 
scheme:

\[(\odot) \text{Gold is a circle, with a point in its center: now the circle, 'tis notorious, is a symbol of} \]
\[\text{perfection, and simplicity... it comprehends the greatest space under the least superficies;} \]
\[\text{and all the radii drawn from its center to its circumference are equal; properties which} \]
\[\text{correspond very aptly to the sun in the heavens, and to gold on the earth.}182\)

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179 In the analysis that follows, I refer exclusively to the 1727 unauthorized translation with which Coleridge was familiar 
in order to stress not only Coleridge's interpretation and understanding of Boerhaave as a proponent of the Hermetic 
tradition, but also the multiple authorship of Boerhaave's text. When I allude to Boerhaave I am in fact alluding to the 
various student authors of the unauthorized compilation.

180 Boerhaave, p. 43.
181 Boerhaave, p. 215.
182 Boerhaave, p. 56.
The alignment of hieroglyph “gold” with the all-originating alchemical compass has already been noted. Boerhaave is tracing once more the origin of all manifest variety, particularly the origin of all metals, back to this elusive and all-informing source. The “hieroglyphic or caballistic manner of writing…adopted by the chemists”, explains Boerhaave, approximates most closely the manner in which “every metal in the chemical corpus is but a variation of an originary gold” or theta structure that remains within it. By chemically rearranging and repositioning this underlying potentia, suggests Boerhaave, all elements can be transmuted into gold. He elaborates:

\( \hat{\gamma} \) silver is half-gold; or that part of it is gold; only, that part lies hid. Accordingly, its character denotes gold half perfected; for, say they, if you can but turn the gold-part that lies hid in the silver, outwards, your silver will be converted into gold. Thus gold being accounted the most perfect of all metals, silver comes the nearest thereto; consequently 'tis a sort of semi-gold.

\( \hat{\eta} \) Copper, is a circle, with a cross underneath; and denotes that the body or basis is gold, tho’ join’d with some corrosive menstruum…now, all the adept allow copper a noble metal, only debased by a sharp, corrosive, or arsenical poison adhering thereto, which is capable of destroying men; and which taken away, the copper is left gold...

\( \Omega \) Iron, this character likewise denotes gold at the bottom; only its upper part too sharp, volatile, and half corrosive; which being taken away, the iron would become gold...

\( \hat{\alpha} \) Quicksilver evidently shews gold in the middle, or body of it, silver at top, or in the face, and a corrosive at bottom: accordingly all the adepts say of mercury, that it is gold at heart, whence its heaviness; that its outside is silver, whence its white colour: but that there is a pernicious, corrosive sulphur adhering to it, denoted by the cross; that if its brightness, and its corrosive could be taken away, it would remain gold; and that were it perfectly calcined and purified, and its colour changed, it would be gold.\(^{183}\)

By employing the alchemical “hieroglyphics” for the metals, Boerhaave demonstrates that all metals have but gold at their center, and are simply arranged according to different proportions of this underlying all-informing centre. Where quicksilver shows “gold in the middle” of it, iron contains it “at the bottom”, copper has it as its “body”, and silver is already “half gold.” All metals then are but the variant manifestations of the one originating source. Since gold itself, neither entirely present not merely absent, remains “inside” and acts as an exteriority only to interrupt and dislocate itself, we might say that gold is a “nonabsent absence” or, again, a “nonoriginal origin”\(^{183}\) Boerhaave, pp. 57-58.
which the alchemical process attempts to make manifest. Put differently, since all metals are but gold at their centre, and are manifest as other by the simple rearrangement and repositioning of this elemental gold at their core, we might say that the “other” in chemical terms, at least in alchemical hieroglyphics, is really nothing but an “ex-pression” (“pressing out”) of an underlying and undifferentiated (or not-yet-differentiated) “center.” Gold-making, in this light, is the attempt to purify or extract an inherent, underlying, latent source into the manifest plane. It is, simply put, the quest for origination itself.

All metals, writes Boerhaave, are essentially gold within. “Gold already exists within each mass of lead” and only requires an extraction or expression for it to come into its own as an independent separate entity:

Now ‘tis certain there is gold in every mass of lead: had we then a body which would so agitate all the parts of lead, as to burn every thing out but mercury and gold; and had we some fixing sulphur to coagulate the matter remaining would not it be gold? Why then should the alchemists be so derided? ‘Tis from a mere ignorance of their nature and philosophy of metals...Where is the impossibility?184

That Boerhaave’s lectures confirm in scientific speculation what Coleridge had encountered in his more Hermetic musings, must have left little doubt in Coleridge’s mind of the benefit of pursuing the art of alchemy. Certainly, in a marginal scrawl to Boerhaave’s text, Coleridge notes: “the Alchemists may perhaps be decypherable into intelligible notions.”185

For the alchemists, it would seem that the universe is a plenum of activity, stemming from the original dispersal of primal matter out of the center into the periphery which spreads outwards into the entire cosmos. In other words, all life is united by the ground of being (the undifferentiated and immanifest center) being moved out into the manifest world. Matter progresses out from the immanifest “one” into the manifest variety and plurality of the “many.” Latent potentia (or quintessential gold) is expressed or extracted out and made actual in the world. Hence all visible matter is the result of a dynamic process; every manifestation in nature is a living symbol of the

184 Boerhaave, p. 217, italics mine.
185 CM I 547.
primordial indifference of the informing source which does but vary and renew its form, being perpetually clothed and re-clothed as something other. Essentially, alchemy affords a view of matter that overcomes the dualism between the selfhood and otherness while still accounting for the differences between them. Rather than emerging out of a homogenous and monolithic singularity, it posits different degrees of organisation and development out of an undifferentiated, nonoriginal and yet all-originating, source. Since all life is united by the ground of being and the multiple expression of it, the conundrum of the “one” appearing in the form of the “many” repeatedly absorbs the alchemist’s attention. Put differently, the quest to “express” gold is the quest to extract, or to make manifest, that which is essentially beyond manifestation and prior to all ontological division.

The hieroglyphic theta is a fitting image of this complex scheme. The Hermetic hieroglyphic of gold is at once wholly self contained and infinitely variable. To understand the indifference point at the heart of the compass, as well as the manifest variety that proceeds from it, is to understand the epistemological conundrum of selfhood and otherness. The centre point of the circle is the undifferentiated source out of which all matter comes. Effectively, creation is the manifestation of the original undifferentiated centre in the form of something manifest. In other words, creation is a separative expression of the source as something ‘other’ than what it is. This is the inherent artifice of the imaginative capacity that seeks to be at once “all things” and yet remain entirely “self-same.”

In 1818, Coleridge makes a notebook entry which is relevant here. Largely adapted and condensed from a description of the founders of alchemy in Boerhaave’s unauthorised lectures, Coleridge provides an extensive passage that runs from Paracelsus to the Pythagoreans as partakers in the “purification of metals.” Betraying the spirit of comparison between alchemy and aesthetics more precisely, Coleridge alludes to the “founders of alchemy” as “Chrysopoets who.

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186 CN III 4414.
among other things, made gold out of Mercury." 187 The term "Chrysopoets" is derived from the Greek "chrysos" (gold), and "poiein" (to create), and suggests that Coleridge is fully aware of the creative and imaginative implications of the gold-making process. Following Boerhaave, Coleridge writes:

Another very antient Greek denomination [for Chemia] is poetice ... i.e., Poesy or poetry; which we learn from Zozimus, who adds (without offence we hope to the poets) that the artists themselves were call'd ... poets, q.d. makers. It was also call'd Chrysopoiesis ... and the artists ... q.d. gold-makers. 188

Aligning the alchemists with the poets, Coleridge suggests that alchemy is not only a quintessentially Hermetic art, but a poetic one. To seek a formula for transmuting base metals into gold is to seek the origins of origination itself. More accurately, to seek to "express" an undifferentiated source in the differentiated counters of the manifest world is to seek to extrapolate the mystery of "poiesis" and "creativity" itself.

As we have seen, then, since the alchemists could not speak adequately about the nature of originality without examining entirely the question of origination itself, the Hermetic tradition at the simplest level deals with the problem of origins: Where does the world come from? What is the nature of the absolute? Who or what is the true "author" of the visible world we see around us? The Hermetic tradition is essentially, as Ficino puts it, a conjecture on "the origin of the world's generation" 189 Since all things are but a variation of an underlying latent gold, alchemy or "gold-making" may be understood as the quest to "express" one's origins. The quest for gold, in other words, may be reinterpreted as the attempt to bring formlessness into form, idea into expression, or potentiality into manifest being. It is, simply put, the quest for authorship itself.

Since in the alchemical account of origination and creativity the undifferentiated source has only potential existence until it is impressed with form, we are once again dealing with an aesthetic of necessary artifice. Since gold represents a pre-existent potentia or "ab"solute (that which is

187 CN III 4414.
188 CN III 4414.
189 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 83.
The attempt to make it manifest is the attempt to do the impossible; it is, in other words, the attempt to give differential coordinates to that which is essentially undifferentiated. While the original and originating source is the undifferentiated prima materia or massa confusa, to originate or create from it is to make it manifest in the corporeal plane. Since the informing quintessence or source escapes any differentiation at all, and so is an absolute “indifference”, creativity is the transformation of an absolute that lacks defined ontological correlatives into one that has them; formlessness must take on form and the immanifest must be made manifest. Simply put, the prima materia only comes to be by becoming that which it is not. To create, we might say, is to enact the absolute originating source in the form of something other than what it essentially is.

The nature of creativity, then, is a voluntary artifice of generation and origination. In the nomenclature of the hieroglyphic compass, we might say that the expression of a nonoriginal origin, or absolute centre, proves to be the separative projection of an undifferentiated centre into the alterity of corporeality, meaning, and determination. Since the center point represents the potentia of all matter (not the things that are there but those that are only potentially there), to express the centre is to define, delimit and “perform” it in the other. The centre necessarily radiates to the circumference in the form of something other, and self-expression occurs in the space beyond the originating source. The theta, we might say, is the symbol of an erupting “self” that only comes to be when it is expressed as something other than itself. In the Hermetic cosmology, any notion of a privileged creative faculty that in itself grounds and expresses itself is incoherent and deservedly abandoned.

Alchemy then, at the philosophical and epistemological level, is most appropriately understood as a narrative performance. It is the attempt to express or to extrapolate a previously hidden potentia (represented as undifferentiated gold) in the form of visible matter in the manifest world. In other words, alchemy describes the narrative process of bringing formlessness to form, or latent potentia to manifest being. The alchemical narrative describes the opening up a
transformative space in which one can write the self into existence in the form of the other. Put differently, in alchemical and Hermetic terms, the authorial or creative “self” (the nonoriginal origin, or “gold”) is only that which it is in the process of becoming in the form of something else.

Since the attempt to make gold necessarily means to give ontological coordinates and form to that which has none, or to make manifest in the other that which is beyond all otherness, it may be understood as a particularly fine analogue for the aesthetic or authorial process whereby an author tries to transform, refine, and perfect his thought into syntax, his ideas into art, the immanifast into tangible meaning, and the incommunicable into language. Understood in this way, gold-making, or Chrysopoetics, is a particularly fitting account of the paradox of creative authorship. Alchemy is as much an informing aesthetic of authorship as it is a metallurgical practice and, as we shall see, its deceptively simple formulation exerts a long and profound influence upon Coleridge’s own Hermetic conception of authorial creativity.

iii. Gold-Making as God-Making: Alchemy as Hermetic Authorship

The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other.

Jacques Derrida, Che cos’è la poesia?190

Alchemy, I am suggesting, may be formulated as an aesthetic or authorial imperative. Specifically, the transformative or metamorphic poetics represented by Hermes Trismegistus are a kind of “Chrysopoetics.” As we have seen, Chrysopoetics provides illuminating insight into the paradoxical and necessarily other-dependent nature of self-expression. In the undifferentiated source out of which all matter emerges, all things are present only in potentia. They are fulfilled only in their expression in the manifest world, acquired by the projection of the self in the form of an “other.” This is the performative activity of Hermetic creation. The “other”, in essence, is the

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expression by which an underlying indifference comes to know itself. Notably, this conundrum of self-expression in the form of something else is not only the guiding paradox of alchemical creation and generation, it is also the informing narrative strategy behind Hermes’ own vicarious and incarnational system of authorship.

The aim of alchemical philosophy is to attempt to express the inexpressible; to make manifest the unconditioned and absolute source of all metals, the all-informing pure gold. This is, importantly, also a narrative and authorial problem; one in which the author attempts to create or to “express” that which cannot be expressed, namely his own undifferentiated originating “self.” As the Hermetic cosmology suggests, it is only when it is manifest in the form of an “other” that the all-informing undifferentiated source becomes intellectually coherent and ontologically defined. Put differently, it is only when it is differentially categorised in temporality and form that the originating indifference arrives at an awareness of its own “selfhood.” Paradoxically then, the apparently unified autonomous “self” to which we have access is but the varied manifestation of itself in the form of something else. This account of creativity goes some way in explaining the transformative process by which Hermes himself passes through the alembic of other voices in order to find expression in the artificially conceived writings of the Corpus Hermeticum. Hermes, as the “nonoriginal origin” of all narrative expression, performs his own philosophy. Indeed, as Coleridge would have recognised in Boerhaave’s New Method, alchemy is also variously termed “Hermechemia”, as though its strategy of transformative creativity and interconvertibility describes not only a process of gold-making, but of God-[or Hermes]-making as well.\(^\text{191}\) In the artifice of Hermetic authorship, that is, in the other-determined narrative gesture enacted by several pseudonymous writers, Hermes himself is a Chrysopoetic or performative model of creativity.

As we have seen, Hermeticism is a tradition of interpretation and hermeneutics, and what it interprets is the central originating origin (or nonoriginal origin) at the root of all manifest expression. Adopting a unique stance towards the precursor source or “original” — namely, that the

\(^{191}\) Boerhaave, p. 8.
origin can only be known in its expression in the other – the Chrysopoetic aesthetic applies as much to gold-making as it does to Hermetic God-making or author-making. In alchemy, as in authorship, origination is the process by which an undifferentiated centre is made manifest in the form or syntax of an other in order to know itself as self. Just as alchemy is the attempt to bring latent gold into manifest being, Hermetic authorship is the attempt to express the authorial Hermes in a multiplicity of varied or “othered” voices. He becomes self only by being expressed in the form of multifarious “others.” This self-othering model of creativity converts absence into presence, potentiality into actuality, formlessness into form, and namelessness into name. Authorship, essentially, is a form of alchemy. The nonoriginal source, or originary “self”, is more accurately a “not-self” that is signified as self at precisely the moment in which it enters into the form of an “other.”

The problem of Hermetic philosophy, then, be it in the expression of gold or of Hermes himself, is to find a ground for the expression of the undifferentiated and absolute. Advocating an impossible aesthetic, it is attained only in the artifice of the other. The alchemical tradition essentially conveys an author-making poetics. The Hermetic view of authorship is bound up with a specific interpretation of authorship and originality. To express Hermes through pseudonymous or vicarious authorship is to attempt to discover or uncover a hidden origin or notion of authorship which escapes the usual order of language and authority. Writing himself into existence in the creative space between beyond otherness (metallëity) and otherness (allëity), Hermetic authorship occurs at precisely that moment at which being enters becoming; intention becomes expression; meaning becomes articulation; and thought enters into language.

Positioning authorship and originality at the precise moment of imaginative transformation in the other, the alchemical account of self-expression overrides the usual self-other distinctions of plagiarism, authority, and authenticity. It should perhaps be clear by now that my intention here is not to approach alchemy in Coleridge’s work from a thematic perspective, and even less to enter
into a history of it in literature. Instead, I am interested in alchemy as a particular strategy of “origination” and “authorship” that seeks to bring about an entirely new configuration of self-expression in the other, and enacts a unique dual process in which one can become other whilst yet remaining entirely self. It is in this vein that the alchemical hermeneutic provides the greatest insight into Coleridge’s conception of authorship and his own attempt at self-expression through a series of “plagiarised” others.

In the Hermetic configuration of the nonoriginal origin as the source of all expression, the authorial “self” is but an amorphous and fluctuating fiction that operates only in the lacuna between originating source and expressive other, thereby transcending such oppositions whilst keeping them intact. Since the nonoriginal origin is forever indeterminate, it can only manifest itself by endlessly recreating itself in the other. Alchemical authorship, like transformative creation and generation, proceeds as the amorphous and undifferentiated source is brought into manifest expression, or as preontological inexistence is brought to ontologically determined existence. It is a process of self-inventive becoming by self-othering.

This perpetual manifestation of creative self-invention in the other disrupts the Cartesian focus on a fixed, totalising metaphysics of selfhood. The Chrysopoetic cosmos, by contrast, is not that of singular being, but of change and becoming. Beyond Cartesian constraints, the alchemical self is open to never-ending expression in the other. This interpretive and creative freedom – with its emphasis on self-representation as other – is the hallmark of alchemical authorship. By invoking the Chrysopoetic, rather than Cartesian, strategy we may begin to understand the necessary artifice of all attempts at self-expression.

192 It is worth reiterating that I am not concerned here to present a history of reactions to alchemy throughout literary history. My sole focus is upon Coleridge’s familiarity with and understanding of the alchemical tradition and his appropriation of its notions into his theory of the creative imagination. For more on the general treatment of alchemy in literature throughout history see: Stanton J. Linden, Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration (University Press of Kentucky, 1996); Frances Yates, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, (London: Routledge, 1991); B. J. Gibbons, Spirituality and the Occult from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 2001); and David Glenn Kropf, Authorship as Alchemy: Subversive writing in Pushkin, Scott and Hoffmann (California: Stanford University Press, 1994). While little has been written on the reception of alchemy in the romantic age, two relevant studies are: Anya Taylor, Magic and English Romanticism (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), and a rather more general chapter on romantic esotericism in Antoine Faivre, Access to Western Esotericism (New York: SUNY press, 1994), pp. 82-90.
PART TWO: CHRYSOPOETIC COSMOLOGIES: FROM HERMES TO SCHELLING
Chapter Five:
Alchemy as Authorship: Gold-Making as God-Making in the Cosmologies of Hermes, Plato, Ficino, and Cudworth

It is difficult to conceive God, but impossible to express him.
Cudworth, True System, 333.

For I maintain that things begotten come to be by the agency of another.
Corpus Hermeticum, 55

Before I turn to look at Coleridge’s own Chrysopoetic formulation of authorship and the creative imagination, I must explore the intellectual trajectory that relates him to the Hermetic tradition. Specifically, my focus in this section is on the Hermetic cosmologies that Coleridge encounters in the Corpus Hermeticum, Plato’s Timaeus, Ficino’s Theologia Platonica, and Cudworth’s True Intellectual System. As we have seen, the Hermetic myth of creative capacity is bound up with a specific interpretation of authorship and originality. To “ex-press” the mystery of a nonoriginal origin (i.e. Gold / God) is to attempt to make known or to make manifest that which is previously undifferentiated and immanifest. In the compass configuration, the expression of a nonoriginal origin, or originary absolute, is developed along a peripheral radius out of an undifferentiated centre into the realm of an other. Simply put, to define the centre is necessarily to express it in the other; to know the self is to manifest it as other. Tracing the development of the “self” in the compass hieroglyphic with infinitely radiating radii out of a pre-existent potentia, the Hermetic tradition expounds an aesthetic in which the originating source becomes entirely other and yet remains wholly within. This creative pattern, in which an originating source becomes “other” in order to become more fully “self”, and in which gold-making is equated with the making (“poiesis”) of an authorial godhead (god-making), is sustained throughout cosmological accounts of creation in the texts of Plato, Ficino, and Cudworth, all of whom were well versed in Hermetic lore.
i. The Corpus Hermeticum

While the Corpus Hermeticum does not explicitly take up alchemy, much of the tradition of Western alchemy is assembled from the writing belonging to this group. While it remains uncertain whether or not Coleridge read the Hermetica in its entirety, he undoubtedly met its wisdom fragmentarily in the works of Plato, Ficino, and Cudworth. Although the Hermetica is chronologically later than Plato's Timaeus, it comes first in the mistaken genealogies of Ficino who believed it to have influenced Plato. In order to bear witness to the thread of Hermetic thought that runs throughout the Corpus and the Timaeus alike, particularly as Ficino, Cudworth, and Coleridge understood it, I have expounded upon the Corpus here first.

In most of the Pimander and Asclepius, a teacher, typically Hermes, instructs a pupil, often his son Tat, about the nature of man, the world, and God. Notably, Hermes refers to the absolute or amorphous chaos from which all matter arises as a "mixing bowl": "This, Tat, is the way to learn about mind, to resolve perplexities in divinity and to understand god. For the mixing bowl is divine." 193 Hermes explains, it has "neither shape nor outline", it is as all things, and yet "is not mixed with anything." 194 The precise nature of this mixing bowl is worth considering. As an unmixed informing space, the mixing bowl is that from which all things emerge and yet in itself contains nothing. Hermes variously refers to this undifferentiated space as a "preprinciple", "unspeakable", "unsayable", and "unbegotten." 195 Existence, in this view, is an extension out of this unmanifest preprinciple, or divine source, into the form of manifest matter. "In [the] creation of the cosmos," Hermes explains, the demiurge composes matter by an extension of Himself, "i.e. so as to be an object of thought for himself." 196 Elaborating upon the creative conundrum, Hermes explains the nature of the originating godhead as follows:

[H]e is himself the things that are and those that are not...This is the god invisible and entirely visible. This god is bodiless and many-bodied; or rather, he is all-bodied.

There is nothing that he is not, for he also is all that is, and this is why he has all names, because they are of one father, and this is why he has no name, because he is father of them all.\(^{197}\)

Since God is in reality the first of all entities, the "eternal, unbegotten, craftsman of the whole of existence", the generation of the cosmos is the process of making God manifest in the world.\(^{198}\)

God-making, in other words, is the extraction of an inexpressible originating source and bringing namelessness to name, formlessness into form. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that what Hermes is describing is in fact alchemy clothed in philosophical metaphor. Elaborating upon the creation of all matter out of an original undifferentiated source, Hermes explains: "the whole might seem to be one and all might seem to be from one. The elements by which the whole of matter has been formed, then, are four: fire, water, earth, air."\(^{199}\) More specifically, it is "neither tangible nor visible, nor measurable, nor dimensional, nor like any other body;" he continues, "it is not fire nor water nor air nor spirit, yet all things come from it."\(^{200}\) It is a key Hermetic principle that the originating pre-principle, or massa confusa, exists only in potential until it is made manifest in language and visible form. Out of the undifferentiated elemental abyss, in which the elements are not yet "fire nor water nor air nor spirit", comes forth all living matter.

Hermes goes on to specify that the movement out of the unbegotten abyss into manifest matter occurs along a circular, or compass, image. He explains:

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\text{[A]ll motion is moved in immobility and by immobility. And it so happens that the motion of the cosmos and of every living thing made of matter is produced not by things outside the body but by those within it acting upon the outside.}^{201}\]

That matter comes to be, not by things outside the body, but by those that are within it "acting upon the outside" is the artifice of the Chrysopoetic compass in which coming "to be" is a case of "expressing" the undifferentiated source out of itself into the form of something other along a radiating periphery. Specifically, Hermes explains how in the originary deep there is boundless darkness, all

\(^{197}\) Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, p. 20.
\(^{198}\) Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, p. 25.
\(^{199}\) Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, p. 68.
\(^{200}\) Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, p. 15.
\(^{201}\) Copenhagen, *Hermetica*, p. 10, italics mine.
existing by divine power in chaos. Out of this undifferentiated amorphous abyss, he writes, “a holy light [i]s sent forth, and the elements solidified out of liquid essence...The periphery rotate[s] in the air, carried in a circular course by divine spirit.”

The all-encompassing preprinciple or “mixing bowl” which envelops all creation is at first without form. Hermes refers to this undifferentiated origin as a “whole wholly enclosing itself, free of all body, unerring, unaffected, untouched, at rest in itself, capable of containing all things, and preserving all that exists.”

However, this formless incorporeal source, absolute and undifferentiated, must take on formal manifestation through a series of expansions out of its informing point. Out of the informing abyss, writes Hermes, “its rays” emerge and are projected and separated out for manifestation in the world of form and finitude.

Hermes’ account is a reiteration of the theta hieroglyph in which an infinity of differently proportioned lines radiate out of an all-informing centre. “The beginning of all things”, he asserts, is the “show[ing] of them forth.”

Emerging out of the unmixed mixing bowl, creation is the fulfilment of the immanifest in the world of the manifest. While the incorporeal absolute is unbounded, it must be made corporeal and incarnate in the manifest world; that is, it must be re-presented under the strictures of embodiment in order to know itself as self. Hermes explains: “All things are in the godhead but not as lying in a place (for place is also body).”

That which pre-exists only in potentia, in other words, must be made actual in the manifest world. Paradoxically, coming to be in the manifest world is the process of unbecoming, or of entering into the form of something else: “For I maintain”, continues Hermes, “that things begotten come to be by the agency of another.”

There is no coming to be, he stresses, without self-manifestation or self-expression in the other: “it is

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203 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 11.
204 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 11.
206 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 41.
207 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 55.
impossible for all coming-to-be to come to be of its own; coming-to-be necessarily comes to be of another. 208

Essentially, then, shapelessness in the absolute must be made manifest in measurable and quantifiable shape in the visible world. In other words, the mixing bowl, an empty space yet full of all the potential manifest reality of the world, must take on spatial dimension in the world. Creativity proceeds only by taking on the manifest qualities of something other than what it is; the invisible must be made visible, the immanifest manifest, and the incorporeal made known in the corporeal. Hermes writes:

If you assume a place apart from that of which it is the place, it would seem to be an empty place, which, I believe cannot exist in the world. If nothing is void, it is also evidence that nothing is place as such, except as you add visible marks to it – length, breadth, height. 209

Nothing comes to be, affirms Hermes, unless it is extracted out an indifferenced void and given tangible localisation in such manifest markers as “length, breadth and height.” In the nomenclature of the theta, we might say that that which is immeasurable and infinite in the essential all-informing center of creation can only be manifest in measurable, quantifiable units projected along the periphery as other. This is the necessary artifice of Hermetic creativity.

“Necessity and order”, explains Hermes, are the rules which govern the manifest world and provide structure to the eternal by a kind of “compulsion.” 210 In its attempt to present the structure of things by arrangement and necessity, manifestation ends up destroying the very thing it seeks to represent. Embracing the conundrum and necessary insincerity of the Hermetic cosmology, Hermes suggests that the conundrum of self-expression in the form of something else may only be resolved in the imaginative aesthetic of the one and the many. Manifest existence emerges out of the centre point in various guises and yet remains at the center entirely same and undifferentiated. Expression or creation is the movement out of an innermost indifference into difference, suggests Hermes, and

208 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 56.
209 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 88.
210 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 91.
the cosmos is therefore “the only thing that is full of motion and also stationary.” In other words, “the entire cosmos is free from change, but its parts are all subject to change.” The originary self projects itself as other in order to know itself as self. This paradox of generation and creation is the defining aegis of the imagination, confirms Hermes, for “coming to be is nothing but imagination.”

ii. Plato’s Timaeus

Despite the fact that Plato authors no dialogues that deal with alchemy as such, he is perhaps the one to whom more spurious alchemical works are attributed than any other ancient source except Hermes Trismegistus. His name is frequently cited by later writers as a revered alchemical authority. As we have seen, Plato’s ideas are combined with and expanded by later Neoplatonists and are essential to the Hermetic edifice. Plato’s Timaeus is the story of divine craftsmanship. Comprising a detailed account of the creation of the cosmos and everything in it, it is Plato’s most complete cosmology. Timaeus himself is a Pythagorean philosopher, and his discussion of the four element theory and the elemental circle of interconvertibility betray a heavy Hermetic bias. While there are no known annotated copies of Plato or Plotinus in Coleridge’s collection, a notebook entry of November 1803 indicates that he was reading Plotinus at this time, and in a letter to Sotheby in September 1802, he declares that “last winter I read the Parmenides and Timaeus with great care.”

Timaeus confronts the Hermetic conundrum from the beginning. The dialogue begins with the question: “What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is?” Seeking to resolve the question, Timaeus embarks upon the Hermetic quest to understand the originary conundrum of the one and the many. He begins by denominating

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211 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 47, italics mine.
212 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 47.
213 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 18.
215 CN I 1678; CL II 866.
the four elements out of which the universe is created as air, fire, water, and earth. The four elements, by their manifold combinations, he stresses, make up the entire material universe, and the process is explained by the movement of a circle upon its own axis:

Now the creation took up the whole of each of the four elements, for the creator compounded the world out of all the fire and all the water and all the air and all the earth, leaving no part of them nor any power of them outside... Wherefore he made the world in the form of a globe, round as from a lathe, having its extremes in every direction equidistant from the center, the most perfect and the most like itself of all figures.  

This spherical form, continues Timaeus, is set moving "in the same manner and on the same spot, within his own limits revolving in a circle." On the interconvertibility of the four elements, he notes:

In the first place, we see that what we just now called water, by condensation, I suppose, becomes stone and earth, and this same element, when melted and dispersed, passes into vapour and air. Air, again, when inflamed, becomes fire; and again fire, when condensed and extinguished, passes once more into the form of air, and once more, air, when collected and condensed, produces cloud and mist; and from these, when still more compressed, comes flowing water, and from water comes earth and stones once more; and thus generation appears to be transmitted from one to the other in a circle.

Timaeus sustains the alchemical account of the rotation of the elements along a circle or wheel in which various forms are impressed upon a primordial indifference. Struggling to identify this originary indifference as a kind of placeless place from which everything that is derives, Timaeus deploys a number of allusive metaphors – nurse, mother, base, space, sieve, receptacle and womb – and finally resolves upon a characterless and unnameable pre-existence, which he terms the khora. He writes:

[It is a] receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming and change... anything that is to receive in itself every kind of character must be devoid of all character... Therefore we must not call the mother and receptacle of visible and sensible things... but we shall not be wrong if we describe it as invisible and formless, all embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp.

217 Plato, Timaeus, 34a in Collected Dialogues, p. 1164.
218 Plato, Timaeus, 49c in Collected Dialogues, p. 1176.
This "receptacle", albeit devoid of all character, is not mere neutralisation however. It is, more precisely, a kind of pregnant pause, a state of tension produced by the indifference of all things within it – not simply a balancing of opposing forces in one place, but a pre-existent indifference in which no differentiation yet exists; that is, it is a place in which the potential for all differentiation is sustained. Timaeus' khora has its counterpart in the nonoriginal origin, or "mixing bowl", of the Corpus Hermeticum. As the "mother and receptacle of all created visible...things," it is the abysmal silence out of which all manifest expression comes. The khora, a deliberately untranslatable term, is at once "devoid of all character", and yet is able to generate all character from out of itself. It is most accurately construed as a kind of "empty nothing" that yet contains "everything" in it potentially. Comprising within it all things in potentia, it is itself indifferent, inexpressible, and inexistent. As Timaeus explains: it is "is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in." Consolidating the Hermetic nature of this preformed, prelinguistic source, Timaeus announces that the khora is a "mixing bowl" which is used by the Demiurge to "blend and mix the soul of the universe." The allocation, of course, prefigures the account in the Hermetica. As in the Hermetica, Timaeus' mixing bowl is a matrix-receptacle of all pre-determined, potential, forms. Containing within it the potential contents of all manifest consciousness, it is not yet experienced or expressed in separative categories of normative space, time, and location. As a prelinguistic and undifferentiated space prior to the confines of manifest existence, it is little wonder that Timaeus finds it so difficult to talk about.

As the matrix-receptacle of all determinate forms, the khora precedes and eludes the very contours of the precise ontological coordinates that it affords. A kind of pure permeability, infinitely transformable, and inherently open to the specificities of whatever concrete it brings into existence, the khora is an open site of indifferenced potential. As pure potentiality, it has the


220 Plato, Timaeus, 52a in Collected Dialogues, p. 1179.
221 Plato, Timaeus, 41d, in Complete Works, p. 1245.
capacity to take on and to bring into existence any other kind of being. Representing the creative potential of originary pre-existence, the khora enables passage, translation and commensurability between everything that is given to us in division. It is, in other words, the “space” through which originary, atemporal, and spaceless pre-existence becomes incorporated into temporal and spatial matter.

Since the khora is the all-originating and yet nonoriginal source of all expression, Timaeus specifies that the prima materia from which all manifest matter arises (namely fire, earth, air, and water) cannot honestly and accurately be said to exist in the khora. More precisely, they may only be said to pre-exist in potentia in the khora. It is only when they take on manifest form in the world that they may be said formally to exist. They must, in other words, be “imaged” and “embodied” in dynamic and manifest reality in order to be said to exist. Timaeus explains: “Now that which comes to be must have bodily form, and be both visible and tangible.” The expression of the originary source in the cosmos is the result of its being situated in manifest space and delimited form. Simply put, it cannot properly be said to exist until it takes on the form of something other than what it essentially is. The presence of water, for instance, is due to a qualitative change in the undifferentiated absolute, in which amorphous potentia is impressed with the form of water. As Timaeus explains:

> We may truly say that fire is that part of her nature which from time to time is inflamed, and water that which is moistened, and that the mother substance becomes earth and air, in so far as she receives the impressions of them.

Once again, in Timaeus’ cosmology, reality is best understood as a kind of performance or “coming to be” out of a greater and entirely undifferentiated source. As Timaeus puts it: “What are the most perfect bodies that can be constructed, four in number, unlike one another, but such that some can be generated out of another by resolution? If we can hit on this, we have the truth about

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coming-into-being." Since all manifest creation pre-exists in this *khora*, it is a space which can never be grasped directly, but can only be ascertained in the moment of creative withdrawal *from* it, as manifest reality is birthed *out* of it and given *form*. This account of creation clearly subverts the whole logic of selfhood and being. Since the informing source of all things is radically indeterminate and formless, it is formally determined only if it enters into the order of property and propriety to receive the properties and formal determinations that first make the cosmos possible. The *khora* or mixing bowl, then, hovers on the very edge of nothingness, never showing itself *as itself*, but only in conjunction with the presence of elemental bodies; as a trace of “something” which can never itself be made present without being made *other* than itself.

Creation proceeds by the “ex-pression” of the prelinguistic source in the form of something *other* that what it is. This is the Hermetic conundrum of “coming-into-being.” Timaeus specifies that the *khora* is “without proportion and measure.” While the original pre-exists in indifference, the first thing that manifest consciousness requires is that the Demiurge “give them their distinctive shapes.” Taking on the form of the “four kinds of stuff out of which the body has been constructed – earth, fire, water, and air – it may happen that some of these unnaturally increase themselves at the expense of the others. Or they may switch regions, each leaving its own and moving into another’s region.” Matter must take on a shape although it originates in complete shapelessness. Passing into its other, then, the originary source *opposes* itself in order to become itself. We are confronting here once more the paradox of becoming other and remaining the same. Since all matter is really a combined repositioning of an original indiffERENCE, Timaeus concedes that we can never know that anything really *is*. Since matter is but the manifesting a certain variation of itself in different proportion and degree, “how can anyone have the assurance to assert

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225 Žižek, p. 55.
226 Plato, *Timaeus*, 53a in *Collected Dialogues*, p. 1179
positively that any of them, whatever it may be, is one thing rather than another? No one can...”

“How can we know if anything really is?” he repeats, “One can’t... In order to elaborate more closely upon this creative conundrum, Timaeus employs the example of gold forged into different shapes:

Suppose you were moulding gold into every shape there is, going on non-stop remoulding one shape into the next. If someone then were to point at one of them and ask you, ‘What is it?’ your safest answer by far, with respect to truth, would be to say, ‘gold’ but never ‘triangle’ or any of the other shapes that come to be in the gold, as though it is these, because they change even while you’re making the statement...This [answer] has a degree of safety.

The truth of what something is, concludes Timaeus, must refer to the undifferentiated pre-existent state before solidification into another form takes place. And yet, paradoxically, this undifferentiated state remains unknown until it takes on particular form. In Timaeus’ example, without the superimposed forged shape, gold itself remains undifferentiated and unknown to us, but in its manifestation and arrangement, it takes on merely a separative trace of its former all-encompassing pre-existence; at once losing itself and becoming itself. Only in expressing itself as other does the self come to know itself as self. “So it was”, as Socrates asserts in Theaetetus, “only the poor man’s dream of gold that we had when we thought we had got the truest account of knowledge.”

To believe that we have true knowledge is to have merely the incarnation and revivification of internal “gold” mortified into a thousand shapes. Timaeus continues:

And the same argument applies to the universal nature which receives all bodies – that must be always called the same, for, inasmuch as she always receives all things, she never departs at all from her own nature and never, in any way or at any time, assumes a form like that of any of the things which enter into her; she is the natural recipient of all impressions, and is stirred and informed by them, and appears different from time to time by reason of them.

It is no coincidence that Timaeus invokes the example of “gold” in order to elaborate more closely upon the creative conundrum. Addressing more precisely the problematic nature of creation, Plato

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229 Plato, Timaeus, 50 in Complete Works, p. 1252, italics mine.
230 Plato, Timaeus, 49c-d, Complete Works, p. 1242.
231 Plato, Timaeus, 50b, in Complete Works, p. 1253, italics in original.
232 Plato, Theaetetus, 208c, in Complete Works, p. 231.
233 Plato, Timaeus, 50b-c, in Collected Dialogues, p. 1177.
nominates the divine source of all creation as “the artificer and father of the universe” and again, “the composing artificer.” Creativity proceeds via illegitimacy, explains Timaeus, and language in particular progresses by the necessary birth of a “certain bastard reasoning” which implies the necessary transgressions of “legitimate” discourse. Once more, creativity promotes an aesthetic artifice which brings formlessness to form, and gives impression and expression to that which lies beyond it. The unfathomable inscrutable abyss is at once prior to, and yet necessarily coexistent with, all creation. At once entirely other and wholly self, the nonoriginal origin becomes by unbecoming. Paradoxically then, the khora is a pre-existent state of privation or subtraction that projects its essential absence into coordinates of being and existence. As life’s source, it also initiates life’s end, and so is an effective prolepsis. The start of life is also its reversal since it is the nature of everything born to betray its origin.

iii. Ficino’s Theologia Platonica

As aforementioned, Coleridge celebrates Marsilio Ficino in the Biographia as the “illustrious Florentine” who inspires much of his own thinking concerning the Hermetic tradition and Plato’s part in it. Believing that the alchemical cosmology of Timaeus is inherited by a line of prisca theologia extending back through history, Ficino’s account of Plato’s cosmology is necessarily alchemical in tone. Certainly, Coleridge would not have failed to recognise the Hermetic trajectory out of which the Theologia is written.

“In imitation of Moses,” Ficino begins, “Timaeus says that in the beginning God created the fiery heavens and the earth as the two principal parts of the world; and that, in order to bind these two to one another more fittingly, He next inserted air and water.” For Ficino, as for Plato and Hermes before him, generation is the productive principle of every form of life in the cosmos

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234 Plato, Timaeus, 40b-41a in Collected Dialogues, pp. 1169-70.
235 Plato, Timaeus, 52b in Complete Works, p. 1255.
236 BL 1 144.
237 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, V, 279.
and is best represented along a compass formation in which the central point is an undifferentiated center out of which all things emerge, and the radii are the various manifestations of that center point. Ficino writes:

> The point which is the center of the circle and does not belong to any particular radius is found in a way in all the radii that are drawn from the center to the circumference. And although no point imprinted on the circumference regards the whole circle equally, yet the center, which properly is not attached to any circumference does regard the whole circle equally. 238

Creation is represented by a circular motion passing from potentia into act. Pure potentiality, or the center of the circle, Ficino notes, is itself “without form and yet capable of taking on all forms.” 239 “Being itself, considered absolutely, is unmeasurable because it can be communicated to an infinite number of things and be thought about in innumerable ways.” 240 What we call prime matter, explains Ficino, “is subject to the forms of elements and bodies, taking on one form after another by a natural power, but not possessing any form of its own nature.” 241 Once again, the idea is that the nameless name, or nonoriginal origin has no ontological coordinates until it is manifest in the form of something else. “Every single thing proceeds towards existence,” asserts Ficino, “in that it acquires a particular form.” 242

The godhead, explains Ficino, is absolute Being itself, uncircumscribed by any limits insofar as it exists as the totally infinite. It is the measureless root that is the container and begetter of all things having a particular being. It is “the proximate maker [auctor, or author] of all generation and motion.” 243 Seeking expression, the absolute seeks manifestation in the external world. A striving and a longing arises in the undifferentiated soul, in which it longs for manifestation and shape in a changeable body. This desire for expression, Ficino explains, is necessarily the desire for the manifestation of an all-originating source in the corporeal plane, as something other than what it is. “The unmoving center,” writes Ficino, invoking the hieroglyphic

238 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 239.
239 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 19.
240 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 115.
241 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 19.
242 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 43, italics mine.
243 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, V, 41, italics mine.
theta, manifests itself “in the world’s circumference.” Explaining that generation occurs by emerging out of the central godhead and moving out towards the periphery, Ficino maintains that “because He is the Center, He is the sum of all things...He brings forth from his own bosom the universe of things which are collectively mingled in that mean.” So where the originating source itself remains unchanging and unmingled, undissolved and unmixed with anything, the world is created out of it, at a distance from it along a circumference, and is mingled with corporeality. This is, once more, the creative requirement of becoming other in order to express oneself. Expanding upon the nature of matter itself, Ficino writes:

Using the example of a lion, Ficino states that while it is fair to say that, in essence, its pure absolute being simultaneously is and is not a lion, it is only when it is “determined” as a lion that it may be said to enter into existence and manifest creation and, in so doing, to “become” a lion. The paradox of manifest existence, then, is that in “becoming” itself, it becomes what it essentially is not. Recalling the language of the Hermetica, this account of creation is decidedly alchemical. Since absolute essence is the prima materia in potentia, suggests Ficino, the absolute is at once all the things that are and that yet are not. In the originary absolute, there dwells the “potentiality for both existence and non-existence, because it is indifferent to both.” The paradox, Ficino elaborates, is that in coming to be, it still remains what it has always been in latent pre-existence: “that same potentiality, indifferent to either possibility, still remain[s] in the prime matter.”

Becoming at once something other and yet remaining entirely same, Ficino’s example encapsulates

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244 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 103.
245 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 71-3, italics mine.
246 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 71
247 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 73.
the Hermetic mystery of the one and the many. While the undifferentiated absolute remains “completely indissoluble” and “unmixed...contain[ing] within itself the one thing and the other”, the body must become other than what it is in order to enter into existence. Creation, put differently, is the transfiguration of the self as other; a separating out of that which is essentially undifferentiated within. This movement, Ficino concludes, “seems to be completely necessary in the world’s order.”

Body, therefore, must be “bounded by space or circumscribed by temporal limits.” Specifically, he explains that while essence itself is “indivisible”, “it suffers division in the extension of the body” and “division always proceeds from the one into the many.” The indivisible and indifferenced must be divided and made manifest in the realm of difference. In the nomenclature of the compass, Ficino explains: “there [in the centre] it attains identity, so to speak, and rest, and here [in the circumference] it submits in turn to otherness and to motion.” Put differently, the absolute out of which all things are generated is “unity” while “knowledge is duality”, and sense is “quaternity because it seems to be chiefly concerned with objects compounded from the four elements.” It is the paradox of existence and manifestation, asserts Ficino, that while “it reveals otherness in identity [, i]t seems to preserve identity in otherness.” In other words, it “allows identity to be overruled now by otherness.” Put simply, Ficino is pointing out that what pre-exists in indifference must “emerge as estranged from and opposed to it.” The world is constructed in the expression of “things limitless” in “things limiting”, he explains, as the mind “conceptually separates” that which is essentially inseparable. This inherent conundrum of creation leads Ficino to assert the following argument: “All qualities exist as forms in another, and

244 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 17, 79, italics mine.
245 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 241.
246 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 343.
247 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 27.
248 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 341.
249 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 25.
250 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 27.
251 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 19.
252 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 21.
253 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, VI, 27.
so, whenever they produce forms, they produce them in another." Undifferentiated matter, he continues, must take on dimension and quality from another:

Since the spheres in their continuous motion, departing continuously from their present habitual condition, find no rest in themselves, they receive their existence and their motion from another.... All manifest matter is born from undifferentiated unity and seeks distinctive shape by appropriate time and arrangement along the most direct route.

Specifying the necessary delimitations by which "manifest matter is born from undifferentiated unity", Ficino goes on to write that "every body by its very nature is extended in length, breadth, and depth." Recalling the terminology of the Hermetica, Ficino elaborates upon the epistemological artifice involved in this extension of the self out of itself: the absolute "at the moment of its birth is scattered through the breadth and depths of matter [and] plunged, one might say, in the stream of Lethe... For Life consists in one indivisible power [and] death occurs through division and dissolution." All manifest creation, in other words, arises out of an undifferentiated origin and meets its own destruction. The absolute, while it "has no dimension assigned to it", must be actualised in "dimension, space, location" in order to be known in creation. Expressing itself as something other in order to know itself as self, the moment of self-becoming is precisely the moment of unbecoming. At the moment of creation, Ficino explains, the indissoluble is dissolved and the unchangeable is made manifest in change, all by virtue of a voluntary artifice. Invoking the vocabulary of the theta, Ficino explains the twin paradox as follows:

The divine mind joined to the body occupies the mean between mind and body. If it were only attached to mind, it would not give life to body. If it were only attached to body, it would understand nothing. Therefore it must be attached to mind and body together, as a line that simultaneously touches both center and circumference.

Capable of being at once entirely itself and wholly other, Ficino describes the workings of creation and generation in the transformative interspace between otherness and beyond otherness; at once transcending their formal divisions whilst keeping them intact:

257 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 197.
258 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 197, 203.
259 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, II, 147.
260 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 43-5.
261 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 49.
Just as the soul revolves continuously around God as its center, so the body which is drawn along by it always revolves around the soul as its center...But heaven remains stationary on the same axis, because soul...revolv[es] within us continually.262

At once capable of being all things and yet no-thing, a measurably indistinct unity and yet a manifest multeity, the Hermetic cosmology accounts for the twin, if paradoxical, art(ifice) of creation.

iv. Cudworth's True Intellectual System of the Universe

Cudworth’s System, which we know Coleridge read in 1795 and again in 1796, is a syncretic attempt to unite the various Hermetic and theological voices which precede it and, in so doing, to confute atheism. Specifically, Cudworth’s System proposes one theological continuum handed down from the Egyptian Pimander to the Orphic Cabala, from the Pythagorean doctrines to the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, and from the scriptures of Christianity to the “whimseys” of contemporary atomic physiology.263

Beginning by inquiring after the invisible structures that underlie visible bodies, Cudworth points to the theory of the one cause, the primum mobile or prima materia, which sets the cosmos into harmonic motion. “The first elements, fire, water, air and earth,” writes Cudworth, “only fortuitously moved and mingled together...generate matter.”264 This deceptively simple system, he suggests, accounts for all the transmutations in the material world. Recapitulating Hermetic and alchemical accounts of transmutability, Cudworth writes:

As for example, when ever a candle is but lighted or kindled into a flame ...when water is but congealed at any time into snow, hail or ice, when it is again dissolved, when wax is by liquefactions made soft and transparent, and changed to most of our senses; when that same kind of nourishment taken in by animals is turned into blood, milk, flesh, bones, nerves, and all the other similar parts; when that which was in the form of bright flame, appears in the form of dark smoke; and that which was in the form of vapour, in the form of rain or water, or the like; I must say, that in all these mutations of bodies...all these feats were done, either by the concretion and secretion of actually inexistente parts, or else by the different modifications of the same pre-existent matter, or the insensible parts thereof.265

262 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, 1, 313.
263 Cudworth, p. 411.
264 Cudworth, p. 110.
265 Cudworth, pp. 32-3, italics mine.
Recalling the mixing bowl and Plato’s *khora*, Cudworth suggests that by the modification and rearrangement of what was previously “pre-existent” and “insensible”, the manifest diversity of the world is generated and rendered interconvertible. “Wherefore the ancients apprehended,” he continues, that “in the generation of inanimate bodies there is no real entity acquired from the substance of the thing itself, but only a peculiar *modification* of it […] When water is turn’d into vapour, candle into flame, flame into smoke, grass into milk, blood and bones, there is no miraculous production… but *only a different disposition and modification of pre-existent matter.*”

Since all manifest matter arises out of the same essential *prima materia*, suggests Cudworth, the denotation of something as either *this or that* is but the assertion of what is most predominant in the mixture by reason of its arrangement and modification. Matter is always substantially, or essentially, the *same*; only “Proteanly transformed into *different shapes*” with “the substance being really the same, both before and after.”

What Cudworth is describing here is once more the Hermetic mystery of the one and the many, or the conundrum of becoming “other” whilst remaining the “same.” This idea, Cudworth attests, goes back to Pythagoras and to Plato’s *Timaeus*, and even has cabalistic connotations:

> [S]o that the whole system of the created universe, consisting of body, and particular incorporeal substances or souls, in the successive generations and corruptions, or deaths of men and other animals, was according to them, really nothing else but one and the same thing perpetually anagrammatized or but like many different syllables and words variously and successively composed of the same pre-existent elements or letters.

Expounding upon the nature of the absolute originary source, Cudworth notes: “the question now is what is this *incorruptible, self-originated and self-existent* thing, which is the cause of all other things that are made?” The answer, he asserts, is that the “first principle and original of all things should be that, *which is most perfect.*” As the all-originating pre-principle that is the cause of all other things, he explains, it must be a whole and entire power such “as hath no allay and mixture of….”

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266 Cudworth, p. 36, *italics mine.*
267 Cudworth, p. 36, *italics mine.*
268 Cudworth, p. 39.
269 Cudworth, p. 194, *italics in original.*
270 Cudworth, p. 194, *italics mine.*
impotency, nor any effect of power mingled with it.” The alchemical allusion here is worth noting. Beginning with the idea that this “infinite understanding and knowledge is nothing else but perfect knowledge, that which hath no defect or mixture of ignorance with it”, Cudworth goes on to evoke expressly alchemical terminology. The originary absolute, he writes, is “a confused mixture”, that which is “without alloy” (otherness) and “unmingled with anything.” What else can this be but a description of unalloyed and unmixed pure “gold”, the manifestation and expression of which is the goal of alchemy and Hermetic authorship?

Accounting for the creation of the world as the expression of this pure source out into the world, Cudworth goes on to describe the nonoriginal, pre-existent origin as the “womb of God” in which He containeth all things “within himself, “ and in which he “hides them and conceals them in himself.” The “one unmade self-existent Deity”, explains Cudworth, is “the original of all.”

Recalling the Hermetica, Cudworth expounds upon the conundrum of the “origin” in more detail. The absolute source, he notes, is pre-existence in potentia, albeit not yet existent: “For inasmuch as all things exist in the Creator before they are made, He may be said to be all things”, and yet matter cannot “properly then be said to exist before it is made.” There arises within the originary source, explains Cudworth, a power of changing itself, the necessity of something self-moving and self-active which desires to know itself: “this is the first cause of all local motion in bodies.” The creation of the world by the originary source, in other words, is also the creation of the originary source itself. Cudworth explains: “You may consider God in the same manner, as containing the whole world within himself, as his own conceptions and cogitations...All things are parts of God, but if all things be parts of God, then God is all things; wherefore he making all things, doth, as it were, making himself.” Once more, Cudworth employs the hieroglyphic theta to illustrate the conundrum of god-making as gold-making:

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271 Cudworth, p. 200.
272 Cudworth, p. 507.
273 Cudworth, p. 303.
274 Cudworth, p. 346.
275 Cudworth, p. 349, italics mine.
First the center of the universe, in the next place, Mind, or Intellect to be the immoveable circle, or distance; and lastly, that which turns round, or the whole moveable circumference...These three Hypostases therefore...all concurring to make up one Divinity just as the center, immoveable distance, and moveable circumference, concurrently make up one sphere.276

Just in the same manner as the centre, immovable distance, and moveable circumference of a sphere or globe “are all essentially one sphere”, explains Cudworth, so too do all of these concur together to make up one divinity.277 The threefold nature of God coming to be in the world is a restatement of the Hermetic doctrine of the triplicate incarnation of the divine in the world, or of the emergence of the godhead in manifest expression. What is immovable, incorporeal, and immutable, suggests Cudworth, must necessarily be made self-existent in the corporeal world in order to be known in the world. Put differently, in order for the “the intelligible and first principle of all” to be understood by finite and determined consciousness, it must be explained “in finite terms.” Cudworth elaborates:

That which is to all things the cause of measure, bond and determination, ought rather to be described by measure and finitude than infinity; as also that which is every way perfect, and hath attained its own end, or rather is the end of all things must needs be of a determinate nature and attain its term or measure.278

What Cudworth is stressing here is that the immutable and inexhaustible perfection of the absolute, or the limitless, boundless, and undifferentiated source of all things, must paradoxically be unmade in order to be made manifest in the world. Since the absolute produces the world “out of” itself, or out “from the deity”, creation is at once the degeneration and manifestation of the absolute.279

Reinstating the nomenclature of the compass, Cudworth explains the process as follows:

Therefore, that this one thing in us, that sensibly perceives all things may be resembled to the centre of a circle, and the several senses to lines drawn from the circumference, which all meet in that one centre...Wherefore there is that within us which is unextended and indivisible [and yet...] then must it be divided...so that one part of the soul must perceive one part of the object, and another, another...just as if I should have the sense of one thing, and you of another. Whereas it is plain by our internal sense, that it is one and the self-same thing in us, which perceives both the parts and the whole.280

276 Cudworth, p. 591.
277 Cudworth, p. 591.
278 Cudworth, p. 389.
279 Cudworth, p. 358.
280 Cudworth, pp. 824-5.
While the subject and object, perceiver and perceived, are all undifferentiated in the informing absolute from which all matter springs, explains Cudworth, manifest consciousness is unable to conceptualise or to understand this indifference in any other way than by the separation of this inseparable unity, or by the projection of the undifferentiated 'I' "as if I should have the sense of one thing, and you of another." Put differently, while the nature of the nonoriginal originating source (centre) is the absolute indifference of all things, we only “apprehend [it] as separated and abstracted from the same” along a fictitious and separatively projected “other” (circumference). 281 This manifest fiction and insincerity of creativity is once again the key to the Hermetic art of artifice.

Since the expression of the absolute is also its corruption, all manifest expression, asserts Cudworth, is but "the echo of an original voice." 282 Self-expression, in other words, is necessarily the repetition of the self in the language of otherness, or in the voice of another. This is, essentially, a restatement of the incarnational poetics that occupy the Hermetica from its very inception of the concept of Hermetic “authorship” and “origination.” Precisely, authorship is a kind of alchemy in which, as Cudworth points out, “whatsoever is moved” in the world “is moved by another.” 283 Once more, authorship comes up against the inherently other-derivative complications of self-expression.

As it should be clear by now, Cudworth’s account of generation and creation follows a similar pattern as the Hermetica, Timaeus, and the Theologia Platonica. All generation and creation, explains Cudworth, occurs by the manifestation of the absolute in the form of something other than what it is. Specifically, the circumference is the point at which the soul receives what is indivisible and “lodges it in that which is divisible” 284 “Absolute nonentities”, Cudworth stresses, must be “extended into three divisions of length, breadth, and profundity, and measurable by solid

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281 Cudworth, p. 825.
282 Cudworth, p. 581, italics mine.
283 Cudworth, p. 842, italics mine.
284 Cudworth, p. 827, italics mine.
measures.”

Because “all observable verities in us” must of necessity “be long, broad, and thick, and either spherically, or angularly figurate”, the indivisible and immeasurable must be extended into manifest division and given formal contours by which it can be known to consciousness. Hinting at the necessary artifice involved in manifest creation, Cudworth remarks that “self-unity “ is “wholly scattered out from itself into distance, and dispersed into infinite multiplicity, which is coextended with it.”

“The action of an extended thing,” he writes, “is nothing but a motion, change of distance, or translation from place to place, a mere outside and superficial thing... mere outside or outwardness.” In other words, the undifferentiated and immanifest source must paradoxically legitimate itself in the artifice of manifest otherness and exteriority. “The act of cogitative beings,” explains Cudworth, “is to extend in length, breadth or thickness the internal into a mere outside thing...something incorporeal [into] something corporeal, an unextended inside [to] an extended outside, by means whereof it is determined to be here and there, and capable of moving locally, or changing place.”

Seeking a body to “localize motions”, concludes Cudworth, manifest reality is but a fiction that “counterfeits infinity.”

Stressing the undifferentiated nature of the originary absolute, prior to its separative manifestation in ontological coordinates such as length, breadth, and depth, Cudworth writes:

[W]hatsoever is extended into longitude, latitude and profundity, is body...but besides body, or extended substance, there [is] another substance incorporeal... before the longitude, and latitude, and profundity of bodies.

Following the pattern established by the Hermetic writers before him, Cudworth suggests that authorship occurs in the lacuna between the substance incorporeal and the corporeal, or between infinity and finite manifestation, substance and body, art and artifice, undifferentiated selfhood and projected otherness. Seeking self-expression in the corporeality of the other, the Hermetic creator is

285 Cudworth, p. 828.
286 Cudworth, p. 830, italics mine.
287 Cudworth, pp. 830-1, italics mine.
288 Cudworth, p. 832, italics in original.
289 Cudworth, p. 647, italics mine.
290 Cudworth, p. 771, italics mine. Coleridge later adopts this phrase for himself, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter seven.
caught between the impossibility of expressing the self in one's own voice and the necessary insincerity of self-expression in the form of a delimited other, in length, breadth, and space. The creation of the cosmos by the divine godhead becomes an analogue for artistic creativity in which questions of authorship and originality are subsumed under the nonoriginal origin which informs all things. Since “all things are generated and flow, and none of them firmly is,” writes Cudworth, “there is only one thing, which remaineth; namely that, out of which all the others are made, by the transformation thereof.”291 The originary source, once more, is only that which it is in the process of becoming in the form of something other.

Cudworth’s cosmology, then, returns us to the same Hermetic questions with which we have been grappling since we first encountered the problematic “origins” of Hermes Trismegistus: How can all creation and expression result from a nonoriginal originating indifference? How can manifest reality proceed in infinitely radiating radii out of a pre-existent or in-existent no-thing which precedes reality? How indeed can all things be one and yet everything retain a distinct being uniquely its own? The answer lies in the aesthetic of artifice and the necessary insincerity of manifest creation. Identity and selfhood in the Hermetic tradition are but the result of a fraudulent manifestation of inexistence into existence, or indifference into difference. That which is by nature indifferent must be “ex-pressed” in a fraudulent gesture away from itself in order to come to know itself.

The point to be made here is that throughout the Hermetic tradition, spanning from the varied books of the Hermetica to Plato’s Timaeus, Ficino’s Theologia, and Cudworth’s True System, alchemy is a narrative methodology and form of authorship as much as it is a metallurgical art. The authorial counterfeit by which the pseudonymous authors engage in the process of Hermes- or God-making in the Hermetica, is one with the alchemical account of gold-making. Suspended between notions of the eternal and the time-bound, the immeasurably indistinct and the measurably definitive, the Hermetic cosmos comes into being by the necessary artifice of taking on

291 Cudworth, p. 754.
the form of something other than what it is, just as Hermetic authorship performs Hermes in the voice of authors other than himself. The alchemical quest is defined by the desire to bring the “author of majesty” or “artificer of nature” into authorial credibility; to bring namelessness to name; a nonoriginal origin to origination; potentiality to actuality; and absence into presence. Recalling Coleridge’s account of the metamorphic author, “Characteristic because Characterless”, the Hermetic cosmology illustrates a performative gesture in which the originary self expresses itself only by the necessary artifice of becoming other-than-itself.
Chapter Six:  
Alchemical Misprisions: Coleridge and Contemporary Science  
from Chemistry to Naturphilosophie

To the alchemists we are indebted for chemistry as it now exists, a wonderful science I may  
call it, for it has transmuted into reality all the dreams of polytheism; and it would be  
difficult to find in the Arabian Nights anything more wonderful than chemistry has  
presented.

Coleridge, Lectures on the History of Philosophy. 292

Apart from the scattered evidence of the Hermetica, Plato’s Timaeus, Ficino’s Theologia  
and Cudworth’s True System, the most extensive evidence of Coleridge’s exposure to the Hermetic  
cosmology is found in a rather unlikely place; particularly, in his reception of the sciences and the  
Naturphilosophie of his day. It seems that the magical and intricate world of alchemy represented  
by Ficino, Plato, and Cudworth did not for Coleridge meet its demise with the advances of  
systematic and rigorous sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead, Coleridge is  
particularly keen to unite the discoveries of contemporary science with the Hermetic tradition with  
which he is long familiar. Unconstrained by the limitations imposed by the usual disciplinary  
boundaries, Coleridge expounds a cosmology in which chemistry is reconcilable with alchemy,  
physics with art, and science with fraud. Indeed, while perhaps not obviously Hermetic in their  
own right, the discoveries of Humphry Davy, Friedrich Schelling, and Heinrich Steffens are  
interpreted by Coleridge as innovative adaptations of longstanding alchemical and Hermetic  
themes.

Ever since the immortal Haydon dinner, science and poetry have tended to be relegated to  
opposite sides of the proverbial fence. Even today, the argument is often made that Coleridge has  
little insight into the incompatibility of these different trends of thought. Moreover, because  
alchemical attitudes differ so radically from the modern scientific methods which have, with such  

292 LHP I 396.
apparent success, superseded them, it is not uncommon to look with suspicion upon anyone who
thinks that science could possibly benefit from, or indeed be based upon, the seemingly irrational
models of alchemical thinking. 293 Certainly, for twentieth century readers who have come to see
scientific reductionism as the dominant strain and sign of intellectual rigor, it is disconcerting to
think of any mode of science as perfectly compatible with the ancient theoretical musings of the
alchemists. McFarland makes much of the distance between Coleridge’s view of nature and that of
the chemical scientists and Naturphilosophen. In his Prolegomena to the Opus Maximum,
McFarland declares that Coleridge has no business looking into science, to which he “devotes a
rather dismaying amount of his time.” He then goes on to critique “the sections on the science of
nature” as clearly the “weakest and most time-bound aspect of Coleridge’s endeavour.”294 More
precisely, in Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition, McFarland specifies that: “Not only does
Coleridge seem to think that drawing a circle quartered by axes, or making thesis-antithesis-
synthesis play with the conceptions of galvanism, light, gravity, and so forth, constitutes
permissible scientific method, but...he renders opinions on subjects where he has no right to speak
at all.”295 Focusing on Coleridge’s “lack of formal scientific training”, McFarland simply dismisses
those who would “overestimate the validity of Coleridge’s scientific lucubrations.”296

It is, of course, perhaps one of the ironies of Coleridge studies that where he copies
faithfully from others, we accuse him of plagiarism but where he is expounding his own version of
an idea, deviating from and expanding it in his own way, we accuse him of misunderstanding the
original and rendering opinions on “subjects where he has no right to speak at all.” Throughout,
Coleridge’s Hermeticism remains ignored. While I am certainly not equal to the task of assessing
the accuracy of Coleridge’s scientific knowledge, and I do not claim to be able to understand the

293 This view has recently begun to be contested in works such as: Bruce T. Moran, Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy,
Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Trevor Levere, Transforming
Matter: A History of Chemistry from Alchemy to the Buckminsterfull (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and
William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, Alchemy Tried in the Fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the Fate of Helmontian
Chemistry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
294 OM cxxxi, clxxxiv.
295 McFarland, Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition, p. 323; also cited in OM cxxxi.
296 OM lxxx n.194.
full intricacies of Davy’s chemistry or of Steffens’ system of nature, I employ it here only to point out the undeniable correspondence that Coleridge sees in it with the alchemical accounts of ancient Hermetic philosophy. It seems to me that what is important is Coleridge’s impression, rather than the accuracy, of the permeability of modern science with his more metaphysical and alchemical musings. While Coleridge’s mingling of empirical evidence with false speculation may readily be criticised, it indicates his deep conviction that the chemical nomenclature of modern science carries latent alchemical meaning. As we shall see, Coleridge repeatedly finds confirmation of alchemical transmutation hinted at by experimental science. His understanding of contemporary chemistry and Naturphilosophie, in other words, is never intended to be scientific, but is best understood with a particular eye towards alchemy. What is important to note is that Coleridge is not aiming at scientific or historical accuracy, but Hermetic meaning.

Thus, while it may be tempting to emphasise the dichotomy between the empirical scientist and what Trevor Levere calls “the romantic spectator of science philosophizing in Platonic fashion”, I would suggest that in reading Coleridge we attempt to appreciate his negotiation of scientific nomenclature with the Hermetic tradition.297 Certainly, Coleridge’s interests in the traditions of ancient philosophy persist in one form or another throughout his life. To suppose that he put aside one school of thought (Neoplatonism or Hermeticism) because he adopted the language of another (German metaphysics or Naturphilosophie) is to set up a model of intellectual progress that is irrelevant to a man who would go on to say that astrology is “the last achievement of astronomy”, even as alchemy is “the theoretic end of chemistry...upon which all can become each and each all.”298

For Coleridge, the vocabulary of science “transmute[s] into reality” the dreams of the ancients.299 Convinced that no empirical theory could destroy the persuasiveness of his

298 TT I 269.
299 LHP I 396.
metaphysical and Hermetic convictions, Coleridge refers to the alchemists as “the true Founders of Chemistry.” Since Coleridge is under no obligation to produce a “correct science”, he readily reworks the ideas and themes of ancient philosophy into the vocabulary of contemporary science. Reading selectively and extrapolating evidence to sustain the alchemical design of his philosophy, Coleridge’s understanding of science is always guided by its Hermetic potential. While he is undoubtedly intrigued by modern chemistry, I would suggest that Coleridge’s final destination is always alchemical.

i. The Case of Humphry Davy: Contemporary Chemistry and Alchemical Promise

As far as words go, I have become a formidable chemist.

Coleridge, Letter to Davy, 1801

In England at the end of the eighteenth century, at least among the intellectual establishment, alchemical philosophies were generally in disrepute. The developments of some two centuries in science, epistemology, and psychology had produced a very different image of reality than the transformative aesthetics of the alchemists. As Ian Wylie notes, the universe bequeathed by the mechanical philosophies of Newton and Locke was a universe of discrete minds with little or no tolerance for the mystical musings of the alchemists. The advent of mechanical philosophies in the seventeenth century is usually supposed to have sounded the death knell of alchemy. Certainly, the last vestiges of ancient alchemy seem to disappear altogether with the establishment of modern chemistry by Antoine Laurent Lavoisier in April 1789. Published just four months before the political revolution, Lavoisier’s Traité Elementaire de Chimie denounces alchemy as a pseudoscience and, in a letter to the Jacobin leaders of the French Revolution in 1793, Joseph

300 LHP p. 96
301 CL II 727, italics in original.
Priestley writes: “with respect to philosophy, and especially chemistry...the age of mystery and
deception...is now over, and rational and useful science has taken the place of solemn pretensions,
absurd systems, and idle tricks.” 303

Despite the general disparagement of alchemy, however, the rift between alchemy and
modern science, or between “useful science” and solemn “tricks”, is never so rigid for Coleridge.
Evidence of Coleridge’s belief in the fluidity between ancient alchemy and contemporary science is
solidified particularly in the example of his early hopes for Humphry Davy. Coleridge met Davy in
1799. He took to Davy with immense enthusiasm from the start, engaging with him in regular
correspondence and frequently attending his chemical lectures at the Royal Institution. An
electrochemist and discoverer of nitrous oxide, “Davy in his Laboratory”, proclaims Coleridge, “is
probably doing more for the Science of Mind, than all the Metaphysicians have done from Aristotle
to Hartley inclusive.” 304 Expressing his enthusiasm in a letter to Davy in February 1801, Coleridge
proposes a scheme in which William Calvert will build a house, along with a “little laboratory”,
where Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Davy might commence their chemical studies. Coleridge
reports excitedly: “You know how long, how ardently I have wished to initiate myself in Chemical
science.” 305

Davy was, in 1801, appointed as a lecturer in chemistry at the Royal Institution, and the
results of his work during the first few years were set forth in a series of papers beginning with the
Bakerian Lecture of 1806. If we examine Davy’s ideas at the most elementary level, it is certainly
easy to understand Coleridge’s excitement. The researches of “modern chemistry”, announces
Davy, seek to “demonstrate that all natural bodies consist of different arrangements...of a few
simple parts.” 306 Such empirical endeavours undoubtedly proved to Coleridge the durability of the

304 CM I 566.
305 CL II 378.
alchemical and Hermetic principle of the transmutability of all things. Indeed, early on, Davy holds out the promise that:

...the number of elements will be diminished: and that the arrangements of a very simple nature will explain those phenomena which are now referred to as complicated and diversified agents...Nature infinitely complicated in the minute details of her operations when well investigated is always found wonderfully simple in the grand mechanism of her works...The uniformity of the succession of events in our globe, the constant decay, and constant renovation of the forms of things – the infinite mutations of the parts of matter – the conservation of the order of the whole demonstrates at once unity of design and unity of power.\textsuperscript{307}

Employing these foundations to explain the infinite diversity of creation, Davy proposes not only the simple foundations of the rich economy of nature, but also the key to how the one can be many, how unity can coexist with multeity, and how things might become other and yet remain entirely the same.

Coleridge’s particular enthusiasm for chemistry lies in Davy’s suggestion that the differences between apparently distinct substances and material forms might be accounted for by the differences in the arrangement of inherent, underlying electrical properties. For instance, Davy surmises that: “matter of the same kind, possessed of different electrical powers, may exhibit different chemical forms.”\textsuperscript{308} In other words, all the various substances of the earth, acted upon by differences in varying electrical powers, undergo perpetual changes and provide an astonishing array of different life forms. Nature in all its complexity, suggests Davy, consists of the different arrangement of a few simple underlying parts: different elements, differently combined, “yield compounds with different properties in which the same elements can exist in different physical forms with differing chemical activities.”\textsuperscript{309} That the chemical metamorphosis of a few underlying constants can result in the same substances appearing in different forms, provides for Coleridge scientific corroboration of the Hermetic notion of perpetual change and underlying constancy.

Indeed, as Coleridge boldly, albeit perhaps too overzealously, asserts: Davy “has proved too, that...

\textsuperscript{308} Davy, Works, V, 137, italics mine.
\textsuperscript{309} Davy, Works, V, 137.
all ponderable compounds may be decomposed, & presented simple – & recomposed thro’ an infinity of new combinations. For Coleridge, Davy’s explanation of the genesis of the chemical world in terms of its development from primary elements is a restatement and substantiation of the alchemical and Hermetic position. Intent on discovering the basic indecomposable elements which are the informing structure behind all things, Davy’s chemical researches are for Coleridge the vindication of the alchemist’s dream of transmutation.

Hoping to secure from chemistry the alchemical wish for unity and diversity, and believing that, in time, Davy would demonstrate that all substances were in reality constituted by certain elementary forces that could themselves be resolved into a single undifferentiated or quintessential force, Coleridge envisions Davy’s chemistry as the perfect place to confront the challenges of “self subsistence, yet interdependence…difference yet identity.” Particularly, Davy’s reconciliation of distinctity with unity promises to be the scientific authentication of Coleridge’s longstanding Hermetic vision. Certainly, Davy does much over the next few years to solidify for Coleridge the alchemical tradition in which he is already operating. As Coleridge notes, Davy’s evidence of the power of transmutation between things is but a rearticulation of the alchemical quest:

The germinal power of the Plant transmutes the fixed air and the elementary Base of Water into Grass or Leaves; and on these the Organific Principle in the Ox or the Elephant exercises an Alchemy still more stupendous. As the unseen Agency weaves its magic eddies, the foliage becomes indifferently the Bone and its Marrow, the pulpy Brain, or the solid Ivory. That what you see is blood, is flesh, is itself the work, or shall I say, the translucent, of the invisible Energy, which soon surrenders or abandons them to inferior Powers, (for there is no pause nor chasm in the activities of nature) which repeat a similar metamorphosis according to their kind: – These are not fancies, conjectures, or even hypotheses, but facts; to deny which is impossible, not to reflect on which is ignominious.

The very substance of the earth, writes Coleridge, is acted on by air and moisture and undergoes perpetual change and provides nourishment for an astonishing diversity of plant life which, in turn, supports the full range of animal life. This passage closely resembles Davy’s findings concerning

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110 CL III.38.
111 For more on Coleridge’s (mis)understanding of Davy see Levere, Poetry Realized in Nature, pp. 179-185.
112 CL IV 761.
the decay and resolution of organic aggregates in different forms. As Davy reports in *Elements of Chemical Philosophy*: "the same elementary substances, differently arranged, are contained in the inert soil, or bloom and emit fragrance in the flower, or become in animals the active organs of intelligence." However, it is worth noting that despite Coleridge's possible allusion to Davy in this passage, the idea of chemical metamorphosis as an "Alchemy still more stupendous" is entirely Coleridge's own. Translating Davy's discoveries into his own alchemical nomenclature, Coleridge describes how all parts of nature are evolved from a quintessential "invisible energy", or "the invisible central power", in which a substance is neither accurately this or that, but an indifference of the two. Employing *alchemical* vocabulary to describe the transmutations evinced by modern *science*, Coleridge illustrates at once the sheer scope of chemistry's ambition to account for the life of nature, as well as his own overriding concern for its essentially *alchemical* implications. In fact, while this passage may have been inspired by Davy, it is possible that Coleridge's particular reference to the *alchemical* transmutation of foliage or grass is a reiteration of what he had read in Cudworth years earlier:

> In the generation of inanimate bodies there is no real entity acquired from the substance of the thing itself, but only a peculiar modification of it [...]. When water is turn'd into vapour, candle into flame, flame into smoke, *grass into milk, blood and bones*, there is no more miraculous production... but only a different disposition and modification of pre-existing matter.

What I am suggesting here is that while Coleridge undoubtedly admires Davy's method and research, he admires it above all for its *echo* of the Hermetic and alchemical tradition with which he is long familiar.

For Coleridge, Davy's chemistry provides a fertile soil in which the seeds of his Hermeticism might grow. Where Davy is unique is in his provision of the authority of a reputable scientist backed by experiment. However, as Levere points out, Coleridge's understanding of Davy's science is often more overzealous than accurate: "Coleridge's selection of chemical

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315 AR 398.
316 Cudworth, p. 36, *italics mine*. 
evidence of transmutation appears so far to have been based on a truly stratigraphical succession of errors." According to Levere, Coleridge interprets controversial and even paradoxical results as favouring the kind of alchemical dynamism of which he is already convinced. The result is that, upon reading Davy, Coleridge understands figures “incorrectly” and indicates “transmutations” where none exist. Indeed, upon closer examination, it becomes clear just how truly dissimilar in outlook Coleridge and Davy actually are. Both Davy and Coleridge have their own intimations and ideas about the true relationship between science and metaphysics. Where Coleridge describes Shakespeare’s writings as “nature idealized into poetry” and Davy’s chemistry as “poetry realized in nature”, Davy retorts that “nature has no archetype in the human mind.” Where Coleridge compares great poetry with great natural philosophy, Davy does not return the sentiment, noting: “How different is the idea of life in a physiologist and a poet!” Hitting at the very heart of Coleridge’s own cogently developed philosophical position, Davy’s words incite us to wonder whether their views really could have been any more different?

Davy the poet and Davy the chemist are not always the coherent whole that Coleridge envisions. As early as 1799, Davy writes a letter to his mother along with some copies of his poem recently been published by Southey in the second volume of the Annual Anthology. In the letter, Davy goes to great lengths to reassure his mother that he is, indeed, no poet: “Do not suppose I am turned poet. Philosophy, Chemistry & medicine are my profession.” For Coleridge, on the other hand, Davy holds out the promise of the “dawn of science on the art of chemistry.” For Coleridge, what is important is not so much the accuracy of the science itself, but the usefulness and applicability he sees in it for poetics. Writing to Davy, Coleridge remarks that chemistry is best when it is poetical:

319 The Friend, I, 471; Davy, Works, VIII, 347.
320 Davy, Works, I, 119.
[Chemistry] unites the opposite advantages of immaterializing mind without destroying definiteness of ideas — nay even while it gives clearness to them — and is poetics! — ... the Poet is the Greatest possible character. 322

Exploring the true disparateness of their views in Young Humphry Davy: the Making of an Experimental Chemist, June Fullmer points out that in the first years he knew Davy, Coleridge enters more easily into Davy’s metaphysics than Davy does his because Coleridge’s enthusiasm has more to do with his hopes for Davy than it does with Davy’s chemical philosophy itself. 323 That Coleridge’s hopes for Davy override the facts of Davy’s actual discoveries in the laboratory is evinced in Coleridge’s assertion to Davy that: “I fear that I am more delighted at your having discovered a Fact, than at that Fact’s having been discovered.” 324

By 1810, Davy was increasingly engaged in the business begun by Lavoisier of charting and expanding ever increasing numbers of new elements. In 1798, Lavoisier listed thirty-three “simple substances”, while Davy, who eliminated some supposed elements from Lavoisier’s list, soon discovered other new ones and, in 1813, informed the readers of his Elements of Agricultural Chemistry that there were now forty-seven known “bodies incapable of decomposition.” 325 With this steady increase in the number of new elements, Coleridge could no longer sustain his hopes for Davy against the fact of Davy’s actual discoveries. The repeated discovery of more elements went against Coleridge’s essentially Hermetic persuasion that nature is fundamentally simple and comprised of a few basic elements. Swept up in the continuous stream of newly discovered elements, Davy asserts that these fundamental bodies may be divided even further if some more powerful method of analysis is invented. Parting ways with Coleridge, Davy rejects the idea that a few simple elementary principles, particularly those denoted in alchemy, might alone account for the vast diversity of the world. His rejection of alchemy is explicit:

That the forms of natural bodies may depend upon different arrangements of the same particles of matter has been a favorite hypothesis advanced in the earliest era of physical

322 CL I 557, italics mine.
324 CL II 735, italics in original.
325 Davy, Works, VII, 181.
research, and often supported by the reasonings of the ablest philosophers. This sublime chemical speculation sanctioned by the authority of Hooke, Newton, and Boscovich, must not be confounded with the ideas advanced by the alchemists concerning the convertibility of the elements into one another. The possible transmutation of metals has generally been reasoned upon, not as a philosophical research, but as an empirical process. 326

Acknowledging that the ideas which are the cornerstone of chemical philosophy have been around for ages, Davy nevertheless urges his readers not to confuse the “empirical process” of modern chemistry with merely “philosophical research.” Alluding to alchemy as an “art without principles, the beginning of which was deceit, the progress delusion, and the end poverty”, Davy’s verdict against alchemy goes a long way in implying how wide the gap really is between Coleridge and Davy. 327

Despite Coleridge’s enthusiasm for Davy’s findings, and despite Davy’s repeated claim that the complexity of nature might be accounted for by an ultimately simple system based on the reduction of all complex matter to a few basic elemental principles, the repeated discovery of new elements did little to sustain Coleridge’s initial hopes. Where, for a decade, Coleridge praises Davy as a philosophical chemist and believes in the promise of the reduction of all matter to a basic compound of a few simple elements, the direction of his research leads Coleridge in 1812 to accuse Davy of recourse to “atomism”. 328 Coleridge, it would seem, always reads Davy’s findings with a very acute and parsimonious eye to his own alchemical ends. In 1823, looking back upon his early encounters with Davy, Coleridge pays him this tribute:

[He was] the Father and Founder of philosophic Alchemy, the Man who born a Poet first converted Poetry into Science and realised what few men possessed Genius enough to fancy. 329

Lauding Davy as “the Father and Founder of Philosophic Alchemy”, Coleridge praises him as a man of science who “converts” the mystical musings of alchemy into scientific intelligibility. Being especially close to Coleridge in the years before his apparent recourse to “atomism”, Davy

326 Davy, Works, IV, 279. italics mine.
327 Davy, Works, IV, 279.
328 CM 1572.
329 CL V 309. italics mine.
unquestionably exercises one of the most immediate influences upon the direction of Coleridge’s thought, but it is important that it is only as the father and founder of a "philosophic Alchemy" that Davy achieves the highest degree of Coleridgean praise. In the end, alchemy is of more primary importance to Coleridge than to Davy. Seeking in Davy the vindication of alchemy in the nomenclature of modern science and the empirical confirmation of a long-established philosophical and metaphysical discipline, Coleridge’s ultimate disappointment with Davy is telling. The accusation of Davy’s recourse to atomism is well known and often cited. Less well known, however, and perhaps even more revealing, is Coleridge’s lamentation in his notebooks that Davy has, finally, corrupted the alchemical and Hermetic potential of his science. Coleridge proclaims: "You have combined arsenic with your gold, Sir Humphry!"330 Such a precise statement of Coleridge’s disappointment with Davy casts little doubt upon his interpretive desire all along to read in Davy’s system and terminology his own decidedly alchemical and Hermetic persuasions.

ii. Naturphilosophie: Schelling, Steffens, and the Compass of Nature

The concerns of alchemy and Hermeticism eventually outweigh Coleridge’s enthusiasm for Davy, and he soon turns his attention to the discoveries of another system of natural philosophy developing in Germany. The observation that chemistry develops out of alchemy is a commonplace that Coleridge often repeats and it is along these same lines that he goes so far as to link “the modern German Naturphilosophie” with the ancient art.331 As we shall see, while there can be little doubt of the importance of German thought upon Coleridge’s development, it is questionable just how much it provides him with a fundamentally “original” position on the world. Upon closer examination, it seems that what is involved is not so much a new vision of the world as a reconfiguration and expression of much older, indeed Hermetic, principles under a new vocabulary. Indeed, as the French esoteric scholar Antoine Faivre notes, Naturphilosophie is but “Hermeticism

330 CN III 4221.
331 LL II 211.
decked out in a philosophical frock coat."\footnote{332 Faivre, p. 83} While "not all Naturphilosophen could be labelled esotericists," he confesses, "the epithet could be applied to Schelling who was...the most famous representative of this current." "The relationship [of Schellingian Naturphilosophie] to alchemy", insists Faivre, "is obvious."\footnote{333 Faivre, p. 83}

*Naturphilosophie*, broadly speaking, takes a form that relates directly to Hermeticism. Offering a polymorphic view of the world, it is a systematic attempt to grasp the whole of nature as animated by dynamic polarities. Like alchemy, of which it may be understood as an updated version, early nineteenth-century Naturphilosophie sees the physical world in correspondence with an all-informing absolute source from which it comes. For the Naturphilosophen, natural life is a continuously varying flux of the constant polar forces out of which every facet of nature alike expresses and realises itself in the manifest world. As such, it mimics the Hermetic conceptualisation of nature and manifest creation. Simply put, in the system of Naturphilosophie, as in Hermeticism, nature is essentially a kind of self-exposition.

Early on, in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling posits a region where the separation of subject and object "does not yet exist, where inner and outer worlds are conceived as interfused."\footnote{334 Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, p. 74, italics mine.} In 1802, Schelling expands upon this concept of the absolute as "the identity of identity and opposition."\footnote{335 F. W. J. Schelling, *Bruno, or, on the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things*, ed. by Michael G. Vater (New York: SUNY press, 1984), p. 136, italics mine.} Later, he employs the term "Indifferenz" to refer to this absence of all difference, or "nondifference."\footnote{336 In his 1809 *Essay on Human Freedom*, the term becomes prominent. See Schelling, *Bruno*, 101 n. 27.} As Coleridge rephrases Schelling’s position, "all nature begins in polarity and duality but the poles imply a null punct or point which being both is neither, and neither only because it is the Identity of both."\footnote{337 CL IV 771, italics mine.} Of course, it hardly needs mention that the coexistence of both identity and opposition, formally a paradox, recalls what we have already learned of Plato’s *khora*, the unmixed mixing bowl of Hermeticism, and Cudworth’s principle of

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\item \footnote{332 Faivre, p. 83}
\item \footnote{333 Faivre, p. 83}
\item \footnote{334 Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, p. 74, italics mine.}
\item \footnote{336 In his 1809 *Essay on Human Freedom*, the term becomes prominent. See Schelling, *Bruno*, 101 n. 27.}
\item \footnote{337 CL IV 771, italics mine.}
\end{itemize}
“pre-existence.” The absolute identity of “identity and non-identity” is, essentially, the nonoriginal origin of the Hermetic tradition.

At first glance, the creative effort in Naturphilosophie is fraught with paradox. The origin of all natural matter depends, ultimately, upon the plausibility of an absolute indifference, that is, upon ultimate nondifference or originary indifference. Raimonda Modiano helpfully characterises Schelling’s philosophy as follows and, in so doing, approaches most closely what Coleridge himself must have understood by the notion of a self-positing, self-creating, Nature:

In the process of self-knowledge, the Absolute objectifies itself in particular things, forming the world of nature, then perceives itself as pure subjectivity and as the source of all production, and finally comes to recognize its essence as the identity between the subjective and the objective, self and nature. The Absolute thus expands itself into finite objects only to gather back into the infinite. Nature is the form by means of which the Absolute acquires ‘outness’ and knows itself through another.338

As Modiano explains, nature becomes intelligible only to the extent that it “knows itself through another.” The absolute achieves consciousness of itself through knowledge of its own objectification in nature. Put differently, nature becomes intelligible and approaches the life of reason only as an activity by means of which it becomes an object to itself. It is precisely in this movement of becoming an other to itself (i.e. becoming an object to itself), that we hear echoes of the Hermetica.

Certainly, the Naturphilosophen, not unlike the alchemists, are animated by the hope that their research might lead to knowledge about the essence of natural processes and of life as a whole. Labouring to explain how all of the phenomena of nature are organically related, stemming from a common source which is yet to be identified, the Naturphilosophen propose a dynamic theory in which the manifestations of given phenomena in the world are but the result of an underlying web of polar forces from which they originate, operating in distinct modes through matter and spirit. All matter in the physical world is the result of this dynamic process. Matter, in other words, is a continuous activity sustained by the polar forces from which it originates. This dynamic philosophy

is developed most effectively by Schelling who shows that nature is itself an infinite process retaining its original polarity in the absolute act of self-consciousness.\textsuperscript{339} For Schelling, all processes of the phenomenal world are merely the manifestation of an original structure of activities in the absolute. These processes always operate according to a law of polarity from which activity is generated and the pure productivity of nature, which is the basis of its permanence, is neither divorced from, nor lost in, determinate objects since all parts of nature form one single and undivided whole. The alchemical strain is clear, contending that the cosmos emerges from an original mass of matter, or the same original polarity of nature variously and continually perpetuated in the visible world, Naturphilosophie expounds the Hermetic conundrum of separative self-knowledge in the other. As it is explained in the vocabulary of the Naturphilosophen, "the absolute will or Abyss" seeks self-realisation or "Personēity" by the "Begetting of the Identity in the Alterity."\textsuperscript{340}

Alongside Schelling, Coleridge holds Steffens in high regard among the Naturphilosophen. A close follower and great admirer of Schelling, Steffens applies the principles of Schelling’s dynamic philosophy to a wide range of geological phenomena and places it along a compass configuration. Following Schelling’s notion that each power of nature by definition involves an opposite, Steffens offers an illustration of this basic pattern of interactive powers. He represents the interaction between space and time by means of a sphere crossed by horizontal and vertical lines that meet in the center. The vertical line, represented by space, is "the line of being" through which the universal is actualised in particulars. The horizontal line, represented by time, is the "line of becoming" through which the particular is placed under the power of the universal. The line of being, explains Steffens, corresponds to the dimension of length, while the line of becoming constitutes the dimension of breadth. The absolute lies in the centre of the circle viewed in its entirety of functions. It is, in other words, at once the identity and difference of time and space.

\textsuperscript{339} For the following exposition on Schelling’s Naturphilosophie, I am heavily indebted to Modiano’s account in Coleridge and the Concept of Nature, especially in Part IV on "Coleridge’s System of Naturphilosophie", pp. 138-186. \textsuperscript{340} CN IV 5256, italics mine.
being and becoming, length and breadth. It is, essentially, "the indifference of all dimensions", Steffens explains, and may be designated as "depth." 341

The circle crossed by two opposite lines becomes Steffens' primary paradigm for his system of nature. Identifying the line of being and of becoming with various powers and phenomena of nature, Steffens encompasses not only space and time, but also gravity and light, magnetism and electricity, and the chemical processes of oxidation and reduction in the "compass of nature." 342 The north-south polarity, for instance, is designated as operating under the power of gravity, and the west-east polarity under the power of light. Light and gravitation, in Steffens' cosmology, yield "heat" as their indifference, and out of the different combination, arrangement, and predominance of each of these powers comes the infinite variation of manifest physical existence. Steffens' compass of nature also variously identifies the polar forces of north-south with magnetism, and west-east with electricity and, again, the polar constructions of electricity and magnetism along the varied points of the compass account for the infinite variety of the manifest world. Simply put, every phenomenon of nature is a product of this basic quadruplicity of nature, with the cardinal points designated variously as North, South, East and West: Carbon, Nitrogen, Oxygen and Hydrogen; Positive and Negative Electricity, and Positive and Negative Magnetism, and so on. As Modiano summarises, each of these powers represents various modes of assimilation between the infinite and the finite, and "each contains an inherent duplicity within itself." 343

Maintaining the conception of the absolute as a completely undifferentiated identity of subject and object, being and form, Steffens asserts that there is in the absolute "no opposition" between inner and outer, particular and universal, being and becoming. 344 The distinction between subject and object emerges only during a particular phase of the eternal act of self-consciousness or self-exposition in which the absolute, in order to know itself, takes on two separate identities.

342 Steffens, Grundzüge, p. 38: CM V 355; see also CN III 4226n when the "Compass of Nature" first appears in Coleridge's notebook.
343 Modiano, p. 162.
appearing as “the eternal body, or the physical universe, or nature” at one end and as “eternal spirit or history” at the opposite end.\textsuperscript{345} The terms “nature”, “consciousness”, and “history” merely designate different proportions in which the subjective and objective components of the absolute achieve dominance over one another along dimensions of length or breadth, space and time. From the standpoint of absolute knowledge, they are identical halves of one and the same sphere. So nature’s grammar consists of four entities that generate an infinitude of permutations and, in each cycle, the full quadruplicity of nature completes its quest for self-knowledge. As Modiano notes, alluding rather unselfconsciously to the alchemical configuration at the heart of the compass of nature: “the vast annals of the earth are contained in four hieroglyphics that hold the secret of the eternal life of each finite being.”\textsuperscript{346}

As in alchemy, the generative process in Naturphilosophie simultaneously embraces the undifferentiated poles of the originating source while it is differentiated by the predominance of particular phenomena in the manifest world. Coleridge undoubtedly sees in Steffens’ compass a reconfiguration of the alchemical hieroglyph. He has a “still more Orphic mind” than Schelling, writes Coleridge.\textsuperscript{347} This praise of Steffens is worth noting. That Steffens has an “Orphic” mind suggests that he holds for Coleridge the promise of a recovery of the earliest principles of the Hermetic tradition. Similarly, in a note written between 1820 and 1821, Coleridge affirms: “in the several works of Heinrich Steffens, especially in his Betryrage zur inner Naturgeschichte der Erde, the Spirit within me bears witness to the same Spirit in him.” He continues: “Steffens seems to me the clearest and most simple, and breathes most the spirit of the old Ionic School, the genial Spirit of Anaximander and Parmenides.”\textsuperscript{348} Coleridge’s interest in Steffens undeniably corresponds to his interest in a much older tradition of thought.

\textsuperscript{345} Steffens, Grundziege, p. 17; CM V 354.
\textsuperscript{346} Modiano, p. 179, italics mine.
\textsuperscript{347} OM 340.
\textsuperscript{348} CN IV 4776.
For Coleridge, there is an ancient lineage behind Steffens' compass configuration. The use of the compass of nature to explain chemical combination and interchangeability certainly is a rediscovery of a circular universe of change that the alchemists had known long before. Notably, he remarks that while the polar axes of "being" and "becoming" are identified with Schelling's dimensions of "length" and "breadth" respectively, and the central intersecting point or "Indifferenzpunkt" with the measurement of "depth", these concepts are better indicated in the writings of "several of the elder Logicians" who "instead of the terms Length, Breadth and Depth use the far better terms, Linea, Superficies, Corpus."\(^{349}\) That "elder Logicians" surpass the scientific constructions of "Length, Breadth and Depth" indicates that Coleridge is undoubtedly reading a much more ancient tradition of thought into the writings of the Naturphilosophen. The editorial note to this entry points out that the "elder Logicians" to whom Coleridge refers "have not been identified."\(^{350}\) However, it is impossible not to recall the Hermetic tradition here. In the *Hermetica*, as we have seen, manifestation in corporeal form proceeds out of an unmixed "mixing bowl" or *khora* into the separate and measurable components of "Length, breadth and height."\(^{351}\) Similarly, Cudworth writes that "we seek manifestation out of the compass into plane of length, depth, breadth", and that "whatsoever is extended into longitude, latitude and profundity, is body."\(^{352}\) Given the Hermetic configuration of the hieroglyphic theta and the remarkable similarity of these passages with the vocabulary of the Naturphilosophen, it seems to me little wonder that Coleridge maintains that the ideas of length, breadth, and depth are familiar to him from the "elder logicians."

"These simple ideas of time, space, and motion; of length breadth and depth, are not only the simplest and universal," writes Coleridge, "but the necessary symbols of all philosophic construction." Accordingly, "we shall recognize the same forms under other names...even till they

\(^{349}\) CM III 139, *italics mine.*

\(^{350}\) CM III 139 n. 10

\(^{351}\) Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, p. 88.

\(^{352}\) Cudworth, *True System*, p. 771.
pass into outward phenomena. As Coleridge puts it so succinctly in the *Biographia*, many of the principles of the later logicians are first “authorized by our elder theologians and metaphysicians.”

It is often noted that Coleridge retains many features of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* in his own system of nature, particular as evinced by his plagiarisms of Schelling. Modiano, for instance points out that for many years Coleridge was unable to devise a more systematic or better shaped outline for natural philosophy than what he found in Steffens. However, as McFarland points out, while Coleridge certainly appropriates from Schelling and Steffens, he by no means “gets it right.” Indeed, the differences between Coleridge’s views and those of Schelling and Steffens are worth noting. Unlike McFarland, however, I turn to the differences between Coleridge’s and Schelling’s systems here, not to stress Coleridge’s inaccuracy in interpreting the science of his day, but to point out his underlying conviction that science is not only a “reticulation” of his metaphysical and Hermetic persuasions, but that his alchemical musings in fact go beyond the more unfortunate limitations of the *Naturphilosophen*.

Schelling, for instance, demonstrates the *identity* of the ideal and the real, subject and object, based on a belief in the sameness of *essence*. Specifically, he maintains that the absolute is a pure *identity* of subjectivity and objectivity. In the process of self-knowledge, the absolute objectifies itself in particular things, forming the world of nature, and then perceives itself as pure subjectivity and as the source of all production, finally coming to recognise its essence as the *identity* between the subjective and the objective, self and nature. The absolute thus expands itself into finite objects only to refer the finite back into the infinite. Nature is thus the form by

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354 BL 1 289.
355 Modiano, p. 172.
356 The term “reticulation” is stressed by McFarland in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* cited above. He observes that “the urge to system is a reflection, in the special realm of philosophy, of a universal concern, the need to harmonize, to tie things together – what we may call the need for reticulation.” Specifically, it characterises “the pervasive longing of the Romantics for an absent reality” (p.xxxix).
357 F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (Landshut 1803), p. 60; see also CM IV 391; Modiano, p. 162.
means of which the absolute acquires “outness” and knows itself in an “other.” Nature is therefore, for the Naturphilosophen, both real and ideal. It is at once an order of particular objects outside the absolute and “the very act of absolute knowledge” itself; the former being the unproblematic representation of the latter on the corporeal plane. This unproblematic translation of the absolute source into nature lends an anthropomorphic tone to the system. As Steffens writes: “The spirit embraces nature, as the lover embraces his beloved; it gives itself to the other, it finds itself in her.”

Supplying empirical evidence of the vital power at work in the world, a single force as the cause of all life in nature and the abiding unity of the cosmos, Naturphilosophie seems unquestionably Hermetic. However, upon closer examination of the ideal system of natural philosophy, it soon becomes clear that the real and ideal, the subject and the object, are unfailingly absorbed into each other. Nature, Schelling tells us, is neither an ideal essence exclusively, nor a multitude of outer products, it is “the absolute identity of both.” This unproblematic transfusion and equation of the absolute self with its manifest ‘other’ ultimately equates the originating source or godhead with its creation, and results in implicit pantheism. Identifying the absolute source with its creation, the system of Naturphilosophie problematically conflates the originating source with its manifestation in the world and collapses the more precise and intricate conundrum of Hermetic artifice.

Coleridge is never entirely comfortable with the theory of self-organizing nature as it is championed by the Naturphilosophen. He fully recognises the pantheistic bias of the system. In the Grundzüge, Steffens writes that the absolute, regarded as the “indifference of all dimensions”, is the “same” as matter. Likewise, Schelling notes that “the inexplicable Indifference becomes God, a living Person, by his manifestation in the Universe.” Coleridge objects to such ideas as

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358 Steffens, Grundzüge, p. xxi; cited in Modiano, p. 167.
359 Schelling, System of Transcendental Idealism, p. 17, italics mine.
360 Steffens, Grundzüge, 23; see CM V 354.
361 Cited by Coleridge in CM III 82.
“blasphemy.” By conflating godhead with his manifestation in the world, the Naturphilosophen forward a view of origination that Coleridge does not accept. Advocating the oneness of nature and the absolute, Schelling inevitably slips into pantheistic thought, making God “a part of the universe, nay, a product of the same.” Presenting nature as the actualisation or self-revelation of God, Schelling presents the world as a reflexive representation of God, through which God beholds Himself in his own image, having no other object but Himself. By making nature continuous with the creative work of the divine intelligence, Schelling comes dangerously close to eliminating God altogether. While Coleridge has a deep sense of God’s immanence, he, unlike Schelling, never abandons a belief in the ultimate transcendence of the Divine Being. For Coleridge, as we have seen, the nonoriginating source of all things is transcendent as well as immanent in his creation; both prior to and implicated in it; at once “other” as well as entirely “self.” This is the Hermetic paradox of unity and multeity, and the informing alchemical aesthetic of becoming other whilst remaining entirely self-same. Coleridge’s Hermeticism conveys a completely different, if entirely impossible and paradoxical, hermeneutic of going beyond otherness altogether; one in which differences are transcended without conflation; that is, whilst retaining all distinctions intact.

To restate the problem in the nomenclature of the compass, we might say that Schelling’s system embraces and conflates both the centre and the periphery as equal and commensurate. In so doing, he ends by annihilating the distance between subject and object, ideal and real, self and other, by collapsing their distinctions into each other. Where the materialist or idealist thinkers may be said to side on either one side or the other, Schelling’s system is an annihilation of their difference altogether. Where object-based materialist and subject-based idealism may be said to deny the validity of either the subjective realm or the objective realm respectively, Schelling’s philosophy violates both the self-sufficiency of the “I am” and the reality of the “it is”, and is therefore inadequate in the insight it affords into Coleridge’s own unique epistemology. As I have

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362 OM 243
363 CL IV 874, italics mine.
been suggesting, what Coleridge seeks is an entirely different aesthetic; one which operates in the gap or lacuna in between the subject and object, ideal and real, without conflating their differences. In the vocabulary of the theta, we might say that it maintains the differences of the center and the periphery intact, whilst also surpassing their particular boundaries and limitations – becoming other and yet remaining the same – that is, going beyond otherness altogether. Whereas in Naturphilosophie, the real and ideal, object and subject, are all ultimately absorbed into each other, for Coleridge there is a lacuna between the nonoriginal origin and the manifest fiction that originates in human consciousness. Absolute indifference engages in self-exposition not by closing the space, but by operating in the space between art and artifice, intention and manifestation, selfhood and otherness. Coleridge is seeking a hermeneutic, not so much of the union of opposites, but of their transcension. He is seeking, we might say, an art of inbetween-ness.

Employing the compass configuration, Modiano explains the Naturphilosophe position as follows: “should the world of nature be represented as a vast circle, all of its phenomena would become points on the periphery connected with a central generative force.” In this view, it is absurd to determine which of these phenomena are “higher” or “lower” according to some hierarchical standards since every phenomenon is an indispensible part of the whole and equal to all others, just as every point of a circle is equidistant from the centre. This unproblematic conflation of self and other, ideal and real, absolute origin and dissoluble corporeality, is problematic for Coleridge since it ends up confusing the originating source with creation itself. Coleridge explains that Schelling’s system joins natural and transcendental philosophy to such an extent that “like a Candle placed horizontally and lit and both ends…it will appear to the Learner…that one and the same Thing is called I, or Intelligence, or our Intellect at one end, and Nature at the other. If he begins at [Nature], [Intelligence] is the Effect: if at [Intelligence], [Intelligence] is the Cause” and Nature the effect.  

364 Modiano, p. 145.
365 CM IV 375.
conclusion is that between centre and periphery, or between the originating centre and various points of the circumference, the difference is merely relational. To cite Lorenz Oken, another Naturphilosophe who builds upon the work of Schelling: “The periphery is the centre itself, placed everywhere.”366 The point is that the system works to abolish the difference and to simply conflate what Coleridge recognises and upholds as their undeniable and paradoxical contradistinction.

According to Modiano, “Coleridge detect[s] quite rightly a certain shallowness of method in Schelling evident in the facility with which Schelling applie[s] the same conceptual schema to natural science and transcendental philosophy without any significant adaptations.”367 The result, she concludes, is that Coleridge, disturbed by the fallacy of the conflation of nature with the absolute, reverts back to the Christian notion of a transcendent, personal God. Coleridge “firmly ground[s] himself in the theistic doctrine of the Trinity”, writes Modiano, as a corrective to the pantheism he detects in Naturphilosophie.368 Apprehensive of the pantheistic implications of Naturphilosophie, Coleridge strives for a hermeneutic in which a dynamic conception of nature’s polar activity and intrinsic unity can be maintained side by side with the belief in a transcendent and separate Godhead. Following Modiano, it has become commonplace to assert Coleridge’s eventual resolution and return to orthodox Trinitarianism. However, as we shall see, I suggest that we may consider it, more accurately, as a negotiation of the principles of Naturphilosophie with the Hermetic principles of incarnational or vicarious poetics (namely, Chrysopoetics) with which Coleridge had been engaged since his earliest readings.

Between the Naturphilosophen’s inability to sustain hierarchical distinctions in various orders of being and Coleridge’s unwillingness to sacrifice such distinctions for the sake of the ideal of undifferentiated unity, there is the Hermetic view. As we have seen, Hermeticism is remarkably adept in its ability to sustain paradoxes and to inhabit the interspace typically abolished by our
conventional Cartesian constraints. Hermeticism is a middle position because it affirms at once
both the separative priority of the nonoriginal origin over the world and its implication in it.
Capable of upholding an originary godhead that is at once metaphysically distinct from the world
and yet implicated in it, the Hermetic tradition wrestles with the conundrum of the one and the
many, and of becoming other while remaining the same. For Coleridge, as for the Hermeticists, the
relationship between the absolute and the finite world can only be established by ensuring the
preservation of a distinct, though not divisive, boundary between the two realms of being. Going
"beyond otherness" necessitates the transcension of dualism without the conflation of its parts, that
is, by keeping "otherness" intact. For instance, in the nomenclature of the theta, we might say that
the periphery is certainly denominated and determined by the centre, but the two are in no way to be
equated with each other. One denotes true being, while the other is mere becoming by virtue of
taking on the guise of an external being of something else. In Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic
thought this distinction is strictly maintained and upheld. Moreover, since Coleridge does not deny
the hierarchical priority of the source over the created world, it is important to adhere to a strict
distinction between the quintessential nonoriginal origin and the necessary artifice of those forms of
life that consummate its point of achievement in the corporeal realm. Specifically, the Hermeticists
have this advantage over Schelling; they see the paradox inherent in the idea of generation and
recognise the necessary fiction of the entire process. Denoting the godhead as a divine "artificer",
the Hermeticists are acutely aware of the irony of false duality necessitated by original unity.

Where the Naturphilosophen suggest that all visible matter is part of a dynamic system of
nature that is activated by polar powers that originate from a common source, the alchemists are too
fully and unrelentingly aware of manifest creation's secondary relationship to the originating source
from whence it comes. The nature of creation, in the Hermetic cosmography, is but an attempt at
the re-creation and re-presentation in the world of the primary act of the originating creator Himself.
As a secondary function of the nonoriginal origin, manifest creation is a constant betrayal, failure,
forgery, and deceit of the originating source. Regarding creation as the necessary fiction of
consciousness, the Hermeticists do not conflate the godhead with his creation. Embracing the inherent paradox involved in the Chrysopoetic aesthetic, the Hermetic tradition sustains an undifferentiated nonoriginal origin while acknowledging the necessary fiction of all manifest and "othered" creation. Ironically, and as we shall see in more detail in chapter seven, this awareness of the necessary insincerity of creation, and of the aesthetic necessity of artifice, is the Hermetic tradition's most salvific feature.

For now, what is important to note is that while Coleridge does not fail to appreciate Schelling’s role in the development of dynamic science, Schelling’s most important contribution is as a reviver in the nomenclature of modern science the views that are already known to Hermeticism. As Coleridge puts it, Schelling is most influential in "the revival and more extensive application of the Law of Polarity", which is essentially, "no other than the system of Pythagoras and of Plato revived and purified from impure mixtures." That Schelling revives an older tradition from its impure mixtures is unquestionably a reference to the alignment of the Hermetic questions of origin and originality with the perhaps less obviously ennobling quest for the transmutation of base metals into gold. Once again, it appears that Coleridge’s interest in the science of his day is more important for what it suggests about his alchemical, rather than scientific, persuasions.

In one particularly noteworthy instance of the Hermetic vein in which Coleridge understands the Naturphilosophen, Coleridge questions Steffens’ alignment of the noble metals – platinum, mercury, gold, and silver, respectively – at the north, south, east, and west points of the compass of nature. Steffens, following Schelling’s article on the noble metals, ‘Die vier edlen Metalle’, in Neue Zeitschrift für speculativ Physik written in 1802, places the metals along the perimeter of a circle ranked on the north-south or east-west axes according to their relative
properties.\textsuperscript{370} Betraying his Hermetic bias, Coleridge asserts that Steffens' placement of gold along the south-easterly pole should be reformulated to show gold at the center. Providing the following diagram, Coleridge adapts Steffens' compass to his own alchemical doctrine:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{compass.png}
\end{center}

Here the North and South represent the N negative, the S positive Magnetism, or the dynamic Carbon and Nitrogen: the East and West negative and positive Electricity or the dynamic Oxygen and Hydrogen. Draw a circle round the four points and the mid point will have a two-fold significance; first, it will represent centrality, or the point of indifference, relatively to the line NS, or the Magnetic Axis: and $\bullet$ is = Gold: secondly, $\bullet$ will stand for the Indifference of the Superficies, represented by the supposed hemispherical Line, EW.\textsuperscript{371}

While Coleridge is employing the vocabulary of magnetism and electricity, and carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen in order to expound upon the nature of the compass, he specifies that the point at which the two axes of the compass unite in the centre of the quadrant is “gold”, or the “indifference of the Superficies.” Notably, while the formulation is taken from the Naturphilosophen, Coleridge’s meaning is unmistakably Hermetic. At another point, Coleridge again realigns the center of Steffens’ compass, or Schelling’s Indifferenzpunkt, with the intersection of “gravity, ductility, and hardness, which, wherever they are found,” he insists, “constitute gold.”\textsuperscript{372} Coleridge’s placement of gold at the centre of the compass is not warranted by anything he reads in Schelling or Steffens. While those who are bound to the rigors of logical scientific analysis might dismiss Coleridge’s alignment as a mere misnomer, it seems to me that Coleridge’s configuration hearkens back most clearly to his Hermetic persuasions. Making “gold” the centre of the compass of nature, Coleridge returns us to the Hermetic postulate in which gold is the informing

\textsuperscript{371} CM V 265, italics mine. For more on Coleridge’s reconfiguration of the compass of nature see the diagram presented in the frontispiece of his Shorter Works and Fragments; SW&F I 1602; and CN III 4433.
\textsuperscript{372} SW&F I 515, italics in original.
substance “of which all the metals are but modifications.” Placing gold at the heart of all matter, Coleridge betrays his reading of Naturphilosophie as anachronistic and scientifically inaccurate, but nevertheless entirely alchemical.

Coleridge’s gradual disappointment with the Naturphilosophen reveals perhaps most clearly the true intellectual strain by which he is guided. As in the case of his disappointment with Davy, Coleridge’s criticism of Steffens and Schelling has not so much to do with their science but with their failure to approximate better the Hermetic philosophy Coleridge hoped to find in them. Coleridge writes of Steffens: “It is to be regretted, that Steffens does not explain himself at least more determinately...How much more simple is the brief Mosaic account...Had Steffens directed his attention to this scheme, he would have found strong Confirmation of his Hypothesis.”

And again: “Moses is a better Teacher.” Coleridge’s critique is remarkable. By contending that Steffens’ use of chemical lore to construct a dynamic philosophy pales in comparison to the “Mosaic” account, Coleridge makes a direct allusion to the Hermetica which traces its insights directly back to Moses or Hermes. That Coleridge’s indebtedness takes him all the way back to Moses suggests that, throughout his readings of the systems of natural philosophy, it is to the Hermeticists that he remains most faithful.

While magic and empiricism, or truth and artifice, make strange bedfellows in our post-Cartesian age, it is not so for Coleridge for whom scientific and spiritual aspects hold unique sympathy. For Coleridge, visionary philosophies do not eschew scientific intelligibility. Throughout his reading, he continually hearkens back to his original preoccupations with ancient metaphysical and alchemical traditions. Seeing the natural sciences of his day as the continuing, self-circling support and explanation for a philosophical aesthetic which has been his concern from the first, Coleridge walks with Schelling only so far as he is able to sustain his Hermetic roots.

373 SW&F 1535.
374 CM V 336, italics mine.
375 CM V 348.
Certainly, in his lectures in 1818, Coleridge clearly elucidates the manner in which the writings of the alchemists prefigure contemporary debates and eventually surpass them:

Sometimes, it seems as if the alchemists wrote like the Pythagoreans on music... It is clear that by sulphur they meant the solar rays or light, and by mercury the principle of ponderability - so that their theory is the same with that of the Heraclitic physics, or the modern German Naturphilosophie, which derives all things from light and gravitation, each being bipolar; gravitation = north and south, or attraction and repulsion; light = east and west, or contraction and dilation; and gold being the tetrad, or interpenetration of both, as water was the dyad of light, and iron the dyad of gravitation.376

Lumping together Alchemy with the “Pythagoreans on Music,” “Heraclitean Physics”, and “the modern German Natur-philosophie”, Coleridge’s Hermetic bias is clear. At another point, Coleridge refers to Steffens’ compass as an “ideal [rather than real] Chemistry”, and confesses his interest in what he calls “wonder-working chemistry” or, a few lines later, “a spiritual alchemy” as distinguished from the concerns of “merely experimental Chemists.”377 Grasped imaginatively, Coleridge’s reading of modern chemistry provides evidence that “Magic & Cosmogy w/ gradually improve into a more rational System of Chemistry.”378 Coleridge’s closing remarks in Steffens’ text are revealing: “Almost every where I recognize the Truths and the Aims that for the last 20 years have been my meat and drink.”379 For Coleridge, the exegesis of Naturphilosophie succeeds where it is ever more pregnant with the rich significance of the mosaic account of genesis and alchemy: “Thus from Magnetism, Electricity, and their productive Synthesis (= constructive Galvanism, or Alchemy)”, writes Coleridge, “God (rendered the Chaos into Cosmos).”380 Rather than reading Coleridge’s science for its misnomers and confabulations, I suggest that we open ourselves to the congruence between his cosmogony and the one in Genesis, or between ancient alchemy and Naturphilosophie. For Coleridge, the Mosaic and Hermetic cosmogony may not only be reconciled with the latest and most recondite discovery and theory of science, it eventually surpasses it.

376 LL 11210: repeated in CN III 4414.
378 SW&F I 126
379 CM V 372
380 CN III 4418. italics mine.
iii. Beyond Naturphilosophie: Boehme’s Hermeticism

Among Coleridge’s readings in the Hermetic tradition, and still more revealing because more fully documented, is the work of the German mystic and theosopher Jacob Boehme. Not only are there numerous references to Boehme in Coleridge’s later notebooks and letters, but the four volumes of Boehme’s Works are among the most heavily annotated of all the marginalia. My concentration on Boehme at this point in the thesis, and no earlier, may be justified not only by Boehme’s position as undoubtedly the most influential occult thinker in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but more importantly by Coleridge’s allusion to him in relation to Schelling, often in the context of praising Boehme above Schelling, and in his suggestion that Boehme’s Hermeticism surpasses the limitations of Schellingian Naturphilosophie where the Naturphilosophen themselves fail.

While Coleridge generally thinks very highly of the Naturphilosophen as far as their physical dynamics are concerned and, while Coleridge recognises Schelling as the immediate spur to the revival of the principles of polarity and undifferentiated unity out of which all things originate, he does not grant him priority. In fact, it is neither Schelling nor Steffens who impresses Coleridge as the greatest exponent of this law. Rather, the honour goes to Boehme. “Schelling,” Coleridge writes to Charles Augustus Tulk in a letter dated 24 November 1818:

...is the Head and Founder of a philosophic Sect, entitled Natur-philosophen, or Philosophers of Nature. He is beyond doubt a Man of Genius, and by the revival and more extensive application of the Law of Polarity (i. e. that every Power manifests itself by opposite Forces) and by the reduction of all Phaenomena to the three forms of Magnetism, Electricity, and constructive Galvanism, or the Powers of Length, Breadth, and Depth, his System is extremely plausible and alluring at first acquaintance. And as far as the attack on the mechanic and corpuscular Philosophy extends, his works possess a permanent value. But as a System, it is little more than Behmenism, translated from visions into Logic and a sort of commanding eloquence. 381

Coleridge envisions Schelling’s Naturphilosophie as a barely rationalised form of “Behmenism.”

On the proximity of Schelling and Boehme, he notes in a marginal gloss to Schelling’s Philosophische Schriften: “How can I explain the strange Silence respecting Jacob Behmen?...the

381 CL IV 883, italics mine.
coincidence in the expressions, illustrations, & even in the mystical obscurities, is too glaring.”

He continues, “Why not have quoted all this from Boehme, as an extract raisonné?” Implying that Schelling’s system resembles remarkably, if not verbatim, the theorisations of Boehme, Coleridge concludes: “I red [sic] the same things [for the first time in Jacob Behmen].”

According to Henry Crabb Robinson, Coleridge concludes as early as 1812 that: “from Schelling he has gained no new ideas, all Schelling has said he having either thought before or found in Jacob Boehmen.”

In another letter to Tulk, dated September 1817, Coleridge makes his claim more explicit. Having explained Schelling’s and Steffens’ cosmology, Coleridge writes:

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 spiritūs, the pause, by interpenetration, of opposite energies—...but this belongs to a higher science—and requires something of a Pythagorean Discipline...—One little presumption of their truth is, that as Wordsworth, Southey, and indeed all my intelligent Friends well know & attest, I had formed it during the study of Plato, and the Scholars of Ammonius, and in later times of Scotus (Joan. Erigena), Giordano Bruno, Behmen [...] long before Schelling had published his first and imperfect view —. If I had met a friend & a Brother in the Desart of Arabia, I could scarcely have been more delighted than I was in finding a fellow-laborer and in the only Country in which a man dare exercise his reason without being thought to have lost his Wits, & be out of his Senses.

Suggesting that the polar dynamic of Naturphilosophie “requires something of a Pythagorean Discipline” by which to understand it, Coleridge traces its roots back to Hermetic philosophy.

Citing the influence of thinkers from Plato through to Bruno and Boehme, Coleridge attests that he has formed his opinions “long before Schelling had published his first and imperfect view”. Indeed, in his lectures on Boehme in his series on the history of philosophy, Coleridge notes: “I scarcely know whether we should have had reason to attribute greater genius even to Plato himself.”

Recalling the Hermetic and alchemical interest in the one and the many, Coleridge asserts that his

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382 CM IV 427.
383 CM IV 432.
384 CM IV 434.
385 Robinson, Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondences, 1. p. 388.
386 CL IV 775, italics in original.
387 LHP II 484.
exposure to Schelling is but as a meeting with a longstanding “friend & a Brother in the Desart of Arabia.” As I have suggested, while Coleridge criticises the Naturphilosophen for their “semi-blasphemies or confusion of God with the World” because their system sweepingly demolishes the distance between the subjective principle (“I am) and the objective principle (“it is”), Coleridge sustains the Pythagorean and Hermetic doctrine precisely for their respect for the doctrine of the one and the many, for not adopting pantheism, and for keeping “the Deity at a distance from his works.” It is worth pointing out here that critic Gian N. G. Orsini is particularly sceptical of Coleridge’s alignment of Schelling’s Naturphilosophie with Boehme or, more generally, with what Orsini refers to as Hermetic “hocus-pocus.” “That ‘system,’ objects Orsini, referring to the system of Pythagoras and Plato out of which Coleridge sees Boehme emerging, “can hardly be said to have historical existence.” Of course, the refutation of alchemical philosophy on historical grounds has already been countered in previous sections and, as it should be clear by now, the ahistoricism of the Hermetic tradition is for Coleridge among its greatest legacies. Indeed, if Coleridge is “hocus-pocusing” Hermeticism into proximity with Naturphilosophen, I would suggest that is precisely his point.

Boehme lived from 1575 to 1624, and he became undoubtedly the most influential Hermetic thinker in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not only in his native Germany, but also in England. Although lacking in classical and formal training, Boehme was by no means unlettered. He read widely in the alchemical, mystical, and religious traditions of his day and was indirectly affected by the Renaissance mysticism of Ficino and Bruno. In Boehme’s first work, Aurora (1612), he both denies and claims expertise in alchemy, showing something akin to Coleridge’s own rather ambiguous relationship with it: “Do not take me for a Chemist,” he writes, “for I write only in the knowledge of the spirit, and not from experience. Though I could here shew

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388 CN II 2249; LHP, I. 80.  
390 Orsini, p. 200; italics mine.  
something else, viz. in how many Days and in what Hours these things must be prepared; for Gold cannot be made in one Day, but a whole Month is requisite for it.\textsuperscript{392} That Boehme distinguishes the spiritual from the experiential knowledge of alchemy establishes the terminology and categories of alchemy that are to become evident throughout his later work. The appropriation of alchemical terminology for its metaphysical significance and interpretative value, rather than its literal accuracy, is part of Boehme’s design and is shaped by his diligent study of the Bible. Coleridge recognises the metaphysical potential of Boehme’s alchemical terminology in his marginalia to the collected edition of Boehme’s works, where he insists that we “make due allowance for the [...] the Alchemistic Metaphors and technical terms, in which Jacob Behmen, whose Scantling of Book-knowledge allows him little choice, had accustomed himself to think.”\textsuperscript{393} Coleridge, like Boehme, recognises the adaptive potential of alchemical terminology to more orthodox metaphysics. In January 1810, some time after he had read and annotated large parts of both Aurora and The Three Principles, Coleridge writes to Lady Beaumont:

I conjecture that being ignorant of Logic & not versed in the Laws of the Imagination, he [Boehme] rendered many Intuitions in his own mind, perhaps of very profound Truths, and, as it were, translated them into such Images and bodily feelings as by accident were co-present with his Intuitions. It is plain, that the words and phaenomena. of certain chemical experiments with Quicksilver, and Sulphur [...] were present to his fancy while he was delving into the possible state of Being prior to Consciousness.\textsuperscript{394}

Since a full exposition on Boehme’s theosophical system is well beyond the scope of the present study, I will attempt here to concentrate on the few salient themes that are of particular relevance to what we have been discussing, and which will eventually resolve and override for Coleridge the fundamental restrictions of Schelling’s Naturphilosophie. Unable to articulate in the vocabulary of the imagination the true nature of “Being prior to Consciousness”, Boehme, explains Coleridge, resorts to chemical imagery and intuition. Recalling what we have seen in the Hermetic tradition, Boehme expounds an incarnational poetics of a self-generating absolute that arises out of a “state of

\textsuperscript{392} Jacob Boehme, The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic theosopher... To which is prefixed, the life of the author. With figures, illustrating his principles, left by the Reverend William Law, ed. by G. Ward and T. Langeake, 4 vols (London, 1764-81), I, p. 228, italics in original.

\textsuperscript{393} CM I 668.

\textsuperscript{394} CL H 1278-9, italics in original.
Being prior to Consciousness" and manifests itself in and through creation – at once entirely self and wholly other.

Boehme understands origination as an active process unfolding within the world.

Groundless eternity, suggests Boehme, seeks self-affirmation. Out of the will of the depths, the originating godhead seeks to give birth to itself. This originating "Ungrund", he terms it, recalls Plato’s khora and the unmixed mixing bowl of the Corpus Hermeticum. It is the state of preontological undifferentiated “no-thingness” that precedes the cycle of self-generation. It is pure potentiality, without contraries, without motion, and devoid of all being and self-awareness. To attain self-knowledge, explains Boehme, the Ungrund must divide itself. It must go out of itself and become an object to itself. Envisioning the universe lying upon what he calls “the wheel of life”, Boehme explains the process of creative self-expression as the rearrangement of varying elements out of this underlying indifference. He writes:

The Cross... displays itself from the Center, touching the Zodiac in its four Cardinal Points, and dividing the whole Circle or Wheel of outward and inward Nature, or of Time and of Eternity, into four equal Parts. For though it is expressed here only in the outmost Superficies of this First Table, it is notwithstanding always to be conceived as if it was really expressed every where through all the foregoing Turnings of this Wheel, both in Time and Eternity, till it has reached the Fire, where it had its Beginning. 395

Boehme envisions an infinity of opposing principles together in a pregnant womb of possibilities. This realm of pregnant potentia is a primordial freedom “without cause” which pre-exists before being and differentiation. There arises in this Ungrund, explains Boehme, an eternal tendency towards self-consciousness. Seeking self-manifestation and expression for self-knowledge, the Ungrund strives toward self-revelation. Boehme allegorises this theory of divine self-manifestation as darkness yearning for light. In its yearning, he writes, “a fire is kindled within the darkness.” 396 Light is the principle of manifestation without any hiddenness; it represents the actualisation of darkness in reality, or the manifestation of the otherwise immanifest in the corporeal plane. With the kindling of fire, also the alchemical agent of change, darkness attains self-revelation: “the

eternal free will has introduced itself into darkness, pain, and source”, writes Boehme, “and so also through the darkness into the fire and light, even into a kingdom of joy; in order that the Nothing might be known in the Something. This sets in motion the circular continuum of creation. As Boehme explains, the “will to self-intuition” in the undifferentiated Ungrund creates the “eternal generation” of the cosmos, or the “moving life.” Paradoxically, then, the Ungrund, or the primordial aspect out of which all things arise, is essentially an eternal nothingness or absence of determination out of which everything is determined. Like the nonoriginal origin in the Hermetic tradition, Boehme’s originating source is a dark inchoate will for self-revelation expressing itself along a circular continuum. It is a strange source, an abyss, which is neither simply an origin nor a ground but a non-ground (Ungrund); that is, a nonoriginal origin that transcends the polarity of grounded being and yet sustains it.

Striving after “something”, the primordial will introduces a duality into the otherwise undifferentiated “nothing.” Through the separation and intersection of darkness and light out of the amorphous absolute there emerges conscious life. What was once a primordial undifferentiated unity now manifests itself in separative existence. On the origination of the world out of this receptacle or “anguishing chamber”, Boehme writes:

[O]ut of the anguishing chamber in the body of this world...the Fruit or Seed generates itself, which is the Water, Fire, Air, and Earth.

Once again, the alchemical formula is unmistakable. Out of the Ungrund, or chamber of preexistence, earth, air, fire, and water separate and emerge into existence. Itself lacking a subject or an object, the Ungrund contracts and separates from itself, and splits into oppositions (see Figure 5). Describing the process in terms of light, Boehme explains in Aurora that light penetrates the darkness and refracts into seven rays, which correspond roughly to the seven qualities of the Deity. Despite the intricacies of his cosmology, Boehme’s point is that the separation of darkness and light

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397 Boehme, Works, III, 120, italics mine.
398 Boehme, Works, III, 30.
399 Boehme, Works, III, 120.
400 Boehme, Works, III, 16.
brings immutable formlessness into variable form. Behind this impressive mystical formulation is the idea that the primordial reality of God is will, and that God succeeds in actualizing his essence or nature only by a complicated process of self-differentiation: “Without Nature there is an eternal Stillness and Rest, viz. the Nothing; and then we understand that an eternal Will arises in the Nothing, to introduce the Nothing into Something, that the Will might find, feel, and behold itself.”

Informing the alchemical elements, earth, fire, water, and air, Boehme denotes seven source spirits as the most basic constituents of all things. They are defined variously as heat, cold, bitter, sweet, sour, salt, and sometimes heat, love, tone or body. Whatever their precise denomination, these “properties”, “qualities”, or “forms” are “contained” potentially within the Ungrund and remain unknown until expressed along the “wheel of life.” Coleridge, in a marginal note to Boehme, elucidates the situation of the Ungrund “not as the confused Commixture of all Distincts, but as the identity of them all, & therefore as the absence by pre- eminent praesence [before presence]...of all distinctions.” This is, more precisely, the state of beyond otherness itself. Ontologically prior to all distinctions, the Ungrund is at once both the absence and the source of all distinctions. Creation, once again, is the process of giving ontological coordinates to that which has none. It is, essentially, the artifice of giving otherness to that which is essentially beyond otherness.

While all of the spirits are “contained” within the Ungrund in potentia, the Ungrund does not achieve self-revelation unless it takes some determinate form; it must be made manifest in corporeality. In Mysterium Magnum, Boehme notes that prior to manifestation in the world, the Ungrund has no name: “in the dark nature he is not called God.” Indeed, the Ungrund, or non-ground, is the very absence of nomenclature altogether. It must exist externally and, in this extension or “projection” of itself as other, the natural world arises. Manifestation or “ex-pression” along the “wheel of anguish”, then, is the incarnation of God. The formation of ontological

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401 Boehme, Works, IV, 12.
402 CM I 562.
categories occurs only in the extension or “projection” out of the “wheel of wheels” (see Figure 6). For Boehme, as for the Hermetic tradition in which he operates, creation is the process of extrapolating into separative existence that which is in essence a primordial, undifferentiated abyss. Uniting implicit theism with the compass of life, Boehme writes that in the body of the world “there exists a cross Birth.” The complex, infinite, and undifferentiated state must be diversely manifest and delimited in and through the particulars of the world. As Boehme explains in the Aurora, “the whole nature, with all the powers which are in nature, also the width, depth, and height, also heaven and earth, and all whatsoever is therein, and all that is above the heavens, is together the body or corporeity of God; and the powers of the stars are the fountain veins in the natural body of God in this world.” The allusion to “width, depth, and height” to describe the incarnation of God in the manifest world, recalls what we have seen in the earlier Hermetic accounts of creation. This is Hermeticism in its classical form; the source must separate and manifest itself according to the configurations of depth, height, width (or “longitude, latitude, and profundity”, as Cudworth terms it). In other words, the undifferentiated source of all creation must “other” itself in order to know itself. In this assessment of the paradox of originality, the crux of the Hermetic conundrum itself, nothing can be known unless it is first “other”ed and made manifest outside itself and yet, in becoming “other”, it moves out of the undifferentiated “self” it seeks to make manifest. This is once more the Hermetic conundrum of becoming other while remaining the same. As Coleridge writes in the margins of Boehme’s text, there is at once a “Unity which cannot be divided” and an impulse towards a multeity “which cannot but be distinguished.”

There is, at first glance, an unquestionable similarity between Boehme’s cosmogony and Schelling’s Naturphilosophie and, like it, Boehme’s philosophy eventually succumbs to a pantheistic strain. However, I would suggest that what is important to realise here is that while Coleridge is quick to rebuke the pantheistic direction of Schelling’s philosophy, he is careful to

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405. CM 1564, italics in original.
defend Boehme against similar charges. This difference in his reception of the two thinkers, it
seems to me, is due to Boehme’s greater proximity with the Hermetic tradition and its appreciation
of the inherent artifice of the creative process. Showing an obvious inclination to favour Boehme
over Schelling, despite his potentially pantheistic strain, Coleridge notes in the Biographia that after
the great German Naturphilosophie exhausts all sorts of recognised treatises upon philosophy, he
finds more “fulness of heart and intellect” in Jacob Behmen. Where Schelling equates God with
his creation, Coleridge insists, Boehme is able to keep him transcendent. “Observe!”, writes
Coleridge in the marginalia to Boehme’s Collected Works, “This contains… the eternal distinction
between the Power or essential Wisdom, as the Ground, of the existence of God, and <God
himself> as the existing God, or the living God.” For Boehme, Coleridge contends, God enters
into the intelligible world while also retaining a transcendent principle that “is peculiar to God.”
While Boehme approaches “perilously near to Pantheism”, he is nevertheless redeemed where
Schelling is not. Coleridge explains: “[Boehme] approaches so perilously near to Pantheism while
yet, his Heart trembling truthward, there was still an unseen presence, a desiderium, a presentation
by a sense of missing of the more glorious Antecedent.” Unlike Schelling, suggests Coleridge,
Boehme senses the dangers of encroaching pantheism and “every now and then he catches a ray
from the Higher.”

Notably, whenever Boehme treads dangerously close to denying God’s authorial superiority
over his creation, Coleridge proposes an alternative meaning for what Boehme has written.
Boehme, for instance, writes: “God himself knows not what He is: For He knows no Beginning of
Himself, also he knows not any Thing that is like Himself, as likewise He knows no End of
himself.” Claiming that God has no knowledge of Himself as Self unless He is delimited in the
“other”, Boehme advocates a Hermetic system of creation but is also unequivocally close to

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406 BL 1 151.
407 CM 1 584-5.
408 CM 1 585.
409 CM 1 600.
410 CM 1 601.
411 Boehme, Works, 1, 230.
annihilating God altogether. Jumping to Boehme’s defence, Coleridge immediately revises his nomenclature and suggests what Boehme really means. He explains:

This is one of those hard offensive sayings, the error and so far the falsity of which consists in the inconvenience and ambiguity of the words rather than in the meaning. Behmen meant only to say that God cannot know himself in his infinite Being as a Subject knows itself by the act of making itself an object for itself: for this is the necessity of a finite limitation and imperfect Being. I AM in that I AM is God’s self-affirmation, and <that> God verily is, is all we can affirm of him; <that,> to which no addition can be made when we speak of the total God. And again:

I conjecture, that Behmen, in this strange picture-language confused with the language of sensations, meant to convey the state of the absolute Self, considered as pure unlimited Activity, anterior (in nature) to its self-consciousness.

Insisting that Boehme’s cosmogony in fact posits Godhead as superior and anterior to His creation, Coleridge attempts to excuse any pantheistic leanings in Boehme’s work, insisting that “strangely as this is expressed, it does really contain the philosophic Truth.” So how, precisely, does Coleridge avoid Boehme’s apparent conflation of Godhead with His creation? How does he, essentially, sustain his conviction that the Hermetic cosmology counters the failures of the pantheistic Naturphilosophie? In Boehme’s account of creation, as we have seen, self-differentiation occurs through the life-producing wheel of birth, resulting in the generation of visible nature. The continuity in the cycle of self-manifestation is provided by contraries which are the means by which the Ungrund differentiates itself and attains self-knowledge. Recalling the Hermetic cosmography, Boehme suggests that the informing Godhead is moved by the desire to reveal Himself to Himself, and that this self-revelation is psychologically impossible without the manifestation of the self as a separative other. Boehme explains:

No thing can be revealed to itself without opposition: For if there is nothing that opposes it, then it always goes out of itself and never returns to itself again. If it does not return into itself, as into that from which it originated, then it knows nothing of its origin.

412 CM 1618.
413 CM 1647.
414 CM 1583, italics mine.
415 Boehme, Works, IV, 8.
In short, the “other” is necessary for self-consciousness. By “othering Himself”, God limits Himself, giving Himself discernible “boundaries.” Although it is not clear that Boehme thinks God exists at all apart from creation, he is acutely aware of the inherent paradox and necessary insincerity involved in this act of creation; namely, in the act of othering oneself in order to know oneself. Boehme’s awareness of the incarnational fiction of the alchemical account of creation far surpasses anything in Schelling. Although he posits a preontological presence that remains unknown until manifest in the “other”, Boehme maintains an ironic attitude towards the other in which the informing Godhead is expressed and re-presented.

That creation proceeds by a gesture of manifest fiction demonstrates Boehme’s awareness of the ironic rather than immediate identification of Godhead with his creation. Boehme, for instance, recognises the inherent paradox of a Divinity who is immutable and yet makes itself manifest in the mutable. The intrinsic drive in the indeterminate Ungrund to differentiate itself, to disclose itself in concrete form, can only progress and unfold in paradoxical contrariety. As Boehme elaborates in The Threefold Life:

For the vast infinite space desireth narrowness and inclosure wherein it may manifest itself, for else in the wide stillness there would be no manifestation; therefore there must be an attraction and inclosing, out of which the manifestation appeareth; and therefore also there must be a contrary will: but if a will must generate, then it must be in somewhat wherein it may form and may generate in that thing; for Nothing is nothing but a stillness without any stirring, where there is neither darkness nor light, neither life nor death.\textsuperscript{416}

Since the pure will to achieve self-consciousness proceeds by an act of separating indifference into difference, the problem of origination and self-realisation is that the Ungrund must itself provide the necessary “contrarium” by which it becomes self.\textsuperscript{417} Separating from undifferentiated pre-existence, God provides the “other” that He will become, and through which He will know himself. In this inherent paradox, we return to the lacuna in which an author or divine artificer is at once himself and entirely other. The paradox of simultaneous selfhood and otherness is sustained in

\textsuperscript{416} Boehme, Works, II, 6, \textit{italics} mine.

\textsuperscript{417} Boehme, Works, II, 6.
Boehme’s Hermetic account, while it is annihilated and collapsed entirely by the *Naturphilosophen*. It is here that the Boehme goes further than Schelling and is unrivalled in his epistemological and aesthetic ability to sustain the conundrum of the one and the many. Embracing the inherent paradox of manifest expression, Boehme suggests renaming the quaternion, or “wheel of life”, as the “quaternion of death.”

Explaining that God projects His creative will to self-revelation by corporealizing Himself, Boehme writes:

> In the non-natural, uncreaturely Godhead there is nothing more than a single will, which is also called the One God, who wants nothing else except to find and grasp himself, to go out of himself, and by means of this *outgoing* to bring *himself* into visibility.\(^{419}\)

What is outgoing and self-generating out of the informing undifferentiated state is an “Out-Birth” of the self as other:

> In the Out-Birth (or Procreation,) in the Speculating (or Beholding,) so that the Essence has generated to the highest Essences, from whence go forth the four Elements of this World, of the third Principle; and the sharp Fiat of God, which stood in the Out-Birth (or Procreation,) has created the *Out-Birth*, out of which the Earth and Stones are proceeded... For when the Fiat kindled the Element in the Out-Birth, then the kindled *Materia* (or Matter) became palpable (or comprehensible,) this was not now fit for Paradise, but it was created outward, (or made external).\(^{420}\)

Accounting for the incarnation of God in the manifest world as a kind of “outgoing”, Boehme recalls the Hermetic theta in which an undifferentiated centre itself moves out into differentiated reality. Acknowledging the inherent artifice of a scheme in which the outbirth of God is the movement out of inexistence into existence, or the separation of indifference into difference, Coleridge follows Boehme in accounting for creation as the “*Quaternio of Death* and thence the necessary commencement of all Life.”\(^{421}\) While the projection *out* is a necessary starting point of existence, in coming *to be* it loses its original undifferentiated unity and is therefore an ironic creation. The undifferentiated abyss, in other words, gives birth by sundering itself. It is creation by destruction; becoming by unbecoming; life progressing by death. At once the starting point of

\(^{418}\) CM 1:579


\(^{421}\) CM 1:579
existence and yet the separation out of the undifferentiated origin from which it comes, the quaternion recalls the Hermetic artifice of origination. As Coleridge notes in the marginalia to Boehme's account of self-manifestation, it is a "self-contradictory Striving, a most horrible Begetting – the center of a circumference striving to be itself circumferential."\textsuperscript{422}

That the source of all creation expresses itself only by withdrawing from itself, and finds itself only by losing itself in its own manifestation in nature, is the hallmark of the Hermetic and alchemical account of creation. In and through its manifestation \textit{as other}, presence carries with it a concomitant absence and self-revelation occurs at precisely the moment of the loss of the originating "self." In Boehme's formulation, the kindling of fire in the darkness of the amorphous \textit{Ungrund} carries with it at once revelation and absence, at once communicating and concealing the very thing is seeks to communicate. At once no longer what it "was", it becomes "other" in order to "know itself" as what it "is." Where Boehme's account succeeds over Schelling's conflation of the "I am" with the "it is" is in his awareness of the necessarily paradoxical \textit{insincerity} of self-exposition, and in his attempt to uphold the divide between the origin and its expression \textit{as other} even as it transcends it.\textsuperscript{423}

Rearticulating the paradox of the alchemical tradition, Boehme suggests that the self-manifesting or self-revealing divine moves towards self-knowledge \textit{by separation}. While the transcendent principle itself is nameless, ungraspable, inexpressible, beyond nature, hidden, and beyond beginning, manifestation in name and nature is necessarily belaboured by \textit{fiction}. Only by becoming what it \textit{is not}, does it become manifest \textit{as itself}. In theosophical terms, as Coleridge later reformulates it: "The Word went forth from God in the power of \textit{Distinction}."\textsuperscript{424} The divine drive towards self-manifestation is a creation \textit{by separation}. Boehme develops this point himself in \textit{Signatura Rerum}. By the art of separation, he writes, the formlessness and indeterminacy of the

\textsuperscript{422} CM 1 646

\textsuperscript{423} Whether or not Schelling does conflate 'I am' with 'it is' is certainly debatable, but I am employing it here to denote Coleridge's understanding of Schelling's \textit{System} as well as both McFarland's and Modiano's understanding of Coleridge.

\textsuperscript{424} OM 377, \textit{italics mine}. 

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divine "nothing" is "out spoken" in the WORD.\footnote{Boehme, Works, IV, 52.} Boehme describes the aesthetic differentiation and separation by which the \textit{Ungrund} moves toward ontological and existential dimensions as "Scheidlichkeit".

It is worth pointing out here that at the beginning of the twentieth century the term \textit{Scheidekunst}, meaning literally "the art of separation", was the German word for analytical chemistry, and the Dutch word \textit{Scheikunde}, deriving from the words for "separation" and for "art" or "skill", still means the whole science of chemistry today. More importantly, it is also at the etymological root of the term "spagyria" which, as Coleridge records in a notebook entry in 1818, is also the ancient term for alchemy, known variously as the "spagyric" art.\footnote{CN III 4414}\footnote{CN III 4414} Compounded from the Greek \textit{span} ("to contrast, separate"), and \textit{ageirein} ("to collect, re-assemble"), spagyria refers precisely to the twin alchemical processes of separating a substance into its essentials, purifying the primary, elemental ingredients, and then recombining them into an exalted, regenerated body.\footnote{Michel Henry, \textit{The Essence of Manifestation}, transl. by Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 108.}

Michel Henry sums up the importance of Scheidlichkeit in Boehme’s cosmology as follows:

> The concept of consciousness is thought by Boehme in its solidarity with the concept of \textit{otherness}...namely in its unity with the ontological process of the internal division of being.\footnote{CN III 4414}

Incarnation or divine creation, in Boehme’s account, is once again a kind of alchemy; Gold-making is, essentially, God-making.

Embracing the alchemical implications of Boehme’s cosmogony, Coleridge praises Boehme most fervently for what his metaphysics suggests about the nature of authorship and of the \textit{human imagination}. As we shall see in the chapter seven, Coleridge grounds his conception of the human imagination in the Hermetic drive towards self-manifestation, which gives rise to the process of separative self-differentiation and to further self-revelation by producing its image in an \textit{other} being. In his conceptualisation of the imagination, Coleridge returns to an alchemical aesthetics of
creativity and authorship. Adapting Boehme’s cosmology to his account of human creativity, Coleridge concedes the possibility of an ironic or necessary fiction in the imagination of man. While God is the unfathomable, inscrutable abyss prior to, transcending, and yet coexisting with His creation, Coleridge suggests that a rift takes place between existence and inexistence, difference and indifference in the finite limitations and imperfect consciousness of man’s imagination.

Boehme’s cosmology, specifies Coleridge, is particularly well suited to account for the nature of human consciousness and creativity. While “I AM in that I AM is God’s self-affirmation, and <that> God verily is, is all we can affirm of him”, the necessary insincerity of the Hermetic cosmology in which “a Subject knows itself by the act of making itself an object for itself” is particularly “the necessity of a finite limitation and imperfect Being.”

Having read and re-read Boehme’s theory, Coleridge concludes: “Behmen has this great advantage over Schelling, that we have only to substitute C (= the creaturely) under the renewing influence of D (= the divine Spirit and Word)...to render his Intuitions true and fruitful in many respects.”

Keeping the words and substituting the meaning, Coleridge ingeniously transforms Schellingian thought, through Boehme, to his own ends. For Coleridge, Boehme’s alchemical system is a formulation to be applied most accurately to human creativity and imagination. The narrative trajectory of the self-manifesting activity, the utterance and projection of the “self” in order to know itself in the “other”, is marked by the Hermetic desire for self-knowledge through an other. Through the creative and separative process of “self-differencing Indifference”, as Coleridge calls it, man “sees” himself into the world.

Conceding the possibility of a certain blind necessity and ironic fiction in the finite imagination, Coleridge promotes a paradoxical art form; where truth is reconciled with fiction, art with artifice, and where self-expression is necessarily acquired at one’s own expense. As we have seen, the Hermetic tradition embraces the artifice involved in creation, the necessary insincerity of

429 CM 1618, *italics mine.*
430 CM 1620.
431 CM 1579, *italics mine.*
all consciousness and of manifest creation. Unlike the Naturphilosophen, the Hermeticists are always keenly aware of their generative limitations, and of the inherent paradox in the attempt to recreate the generative potential of the absolute. Theirs is the quest for self-exposition, never its attainment. As I will expound in more detail in the next chapter, by embracing the art of artifice, the Hermetic aesthetic provides greater insight into Coleridge’s twin theory of imagination. Rather than sacrifice the integrity of either the “I am” (subjective idealism) or the “it is” (objective materialism), Coleridge posits twofold a scheme that allows him to play in the interchange between the two. Negotiating an alchemical, or Chrysopoetic, account of creativity and authorial imagination, Coleridge defies any conventional attempt to understand his playgiarisms. Taking Hermes Trismegistus as his guide, Coleridge remains deeply aware of the deceit and trickery of creative expression, and appropriates it particularly in his understanding of the creative mind of man. Engaging in a uniquely Chrysopoetic aesthetic, Coleridge expounds a poetics of self-othering, forgery, and play.

Before I proceed, however, it seems important to make one final point about Coleridge’s understanding of the Naturphilosophen. As we have seen, where a passage in Schelling and Steffens appears to be a precise echo of Boehme, Coleridge favours the Hermetic account. Boehme, Coleridge insists, goes further than Schelling. While he “often starts a difficulty, which he cannot solve, or solves but very imperfectly”, Boehme’s sincerity is unquestionable.432 Coleridge continues, while “Schelling and his Followers are in the same case as Behmen”, Boehme surpasses their errors, for “Behmen oscillates or rather leaps from Error to the Truth or to the neighbourhood of the Truth, [but] Schelling settles on the Error...Behmen has this great advantage over Schelling.”433 It is no small gesture that Coleridge, by suggesting that Boehme and the Hermeticists go further than Schelling, criticises a major canonical philosopher for failing to meet the standard of a much older philosophy. Exhorting Schelling to be more like Boehme, Coleridge demonstrates

432 CM I 619.
433 CM I 619-620, italics mine.
just how deeply immersed he is in the Hermetic way of thinking, with the terms and distinctions of the *Hermetica* always uppermost in his mind. In the end, Coleridge is eventually disillusioned by the principles of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, for the same reason that he rejects the chemical researches of Humphry Davy – neither go far enough in their approximation of the Hermetic tradition. In the end, Boehme is better than Schelling because he is simply more Hermetic.

Coleridge’s belief in Boehme’s anticipation and ultimate overruling of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* is not entirely unfounded. The case of Schelling’s indebtedness to Boehme has been the subject of much scholarship. Robert F. Brown, for instance, in his book *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809-1815*, points out that Schelling was particularly influenced by Boehme in his later years. This is evinced, suggests Brown, by the drastic change in the direction of Schelling’s later philosophy, particularly the abandonment of the identity philosophy and of the idealism of his youth:

Schelling’s new ontology and philosophical theology in this period took shape under the decisive influence of the thought of Jacob Boehme. In three major works, Schelling appropriated many of Boehme’s ideas, developed them in a more sophisticated manner than did Boehme, and integrated them into his own revised philosophical system.\(^{434}\)

In formulating his argument, Brown positions himself against critics such as the aforementioned Orsini, as well as Harald Holtz who insists that: “Boehme’s central position in the development of Schelling’s philosophy is quite simply a legend which is neither historically founded nor objectively necessary, indeed it is not even plausible.”\(^{435}\)

It is not my intention here to trace out a new historiography for the development of Schelling’s thought, but rather to point out the importance of Coleridge’s own recognition of certain Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and indeed even alchemical sources in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*. Coleridge’s Hermetic hopes for Schelling, it appears, are not entirely unfounded. In fact, as early as April 1802, Schelling publishes a dialogue entitled *Bruno*, with a figure loosely patterned after


Giordano Bruno representing Schelling’s position. While we have no evidence of Coleridge’s knowledge of this text, Schelling’s dialogue seems to have been inspired by the recollection of a commentary that he had written upon Plato’s *Timaeus* as a boy at the Tubingen Stift. *Bruno*, as editor Michael Vater suggests, is “Schelling’s decision to turn back the history of philosophy and present himself as Plato risen from the grave.” Specifically, “Schelling boldly charges at Kant, leaps over his head, and runs – into the past! Echoes of the great metaphysicians of the past abound; Plato, Spinoza, Giordano Bruno, and Leibniz all contribute their doctrines and distinctive vocabularies to the discussion.” Appearing in the guise of Bruno, Schelling presents what he terms an “Absolute Philosophy” squarely in opposition to the philosophies of both Kant and Fichte, and looks back instead to the union of identity-and-difference in the undifferentiated epistemology of Hermetic philosophy. It is no accident that Schelling places his philosophy in the mouth of Bruno. Writing of the ancient Eleusinian rites so celebrated by the philosopher of Nola, Schelling remarks that it was there that “men first learned that there is something unchanging, uniform, and indivisible beyond the things that ceaselessly change and slide from shape to shape.” Describing a philosophy imparted by the mysteries, a philosophy of the fluidity of subjectivity and objectivity, Schelling expresses himself in the voice of Bruno and, in this voice, comes closest to Coleridge. Schelling, appearing as Bruno, states:

> To come to know this indifference within the absolute – that character whereby idea is substance, the absolutely real, whereby form is also essential reality and reality is form, each one inseparable from the other, whereby form and reality are not just perfectly similar likenesses, but directly are one another – this is to discover the absolute center of gravity. To know this is to uncover the original *metal of truth*, as it were, the prime ingredient in the alloys of all individual truths, without which none of them would be true.

Incorporating the alchemical metaphor into his configuration of philosophy, “as it were”, Schelling suggests that philosophy can only express itself in the discourse of a tradition long deemed

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436 Michael Vater in ‘The Significance of the Philosophy of Identity’ in Schelling’s *Bruno*, pp. 71-80, p. 73.
unrespectable. Alluding to the “absolute center”, or the “alloy” and “metal of truth”, Schelling is undoubtedly inspired by the alchemical heritage in which Bruno is well versed. It is worth noting here that it is only when Schelling expresses himself in the voice of this ancient Hermetic thinker, that he most closely approximates Coleridge’s philosophy. In fact, the alchemical heritage of Schelling’s thought, particularly in the invocation to “uncover the original metal of truth”, is evident in Coleridge’s thought all along. In The Friend, Coleridge writes:

Truth is self-restoration: for that which is the correlative of Truth, the existence of absolute Life, is the only object which can attract toward it the whole depth and mass of his fluctuating Being, and alone can unite Calmness with Elevation. But it must be Truth without alloy. 440

It seems that Schelling’s earliest metaphysics express the very philosophy of alchemy that Coleridge expounds all his life. That Coleridge should have recognised in Schelling’s Naturphilosophie something very much akin to the Hermetic tradition with which he is long familiar is not surprising. In his First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature, Schelling aligns his “general theory of the chemical processes” with “the pythagorean square, or the four world-regions in nature.” 441 Moreover, in his later works, Schelling seems more fully to return to these earlier alchemical foundations. In the Ages of the World, which Schelling never completed and which Coleridge could not have read, Schelling describes the manner in which “the I” makes itself “an object of self-consciousness” or, more accurately, the paradox in which the self is a “self-becoming-object.” 442 His description is remarkably alchemical: “Everything that occurs around us,” writes Schelling, “is, if you will, a constant alchemy.” 443 He elaborates:

No age has entirely suppressed the inexorable drive to become master of that inner essence, and this might serve as a proof of how familiar the idea of this essence is to all

440 The Friend, I, 37, italics mine.
442 Having written about the Eleusinian rites in his discourse Bruno (1802), Schelling returns to the mysteries in his later Treatise on the Deities of Samothrace (1815) in which he mentions the uncompleted Ages of the World. While Coleridge is familiar with The Treatise on the Deities of Samothrace, the Ages of the World remained unpublished in three drafts and it is unlikely that Coleridge ever read it. For more on Coleridge’s use of Schelling’s Treatise on the Deities of Samothrace see William K. Pfeifer, ‘Coleridge and Schelling’s Treatise on the Samothracian Deities’, Modern Language Notes, 52 (1937), pp. 162-5; also cited in CN V 5735n.
natural thinking. Let us abandon the usual representation of alchemy to the masses: the alchemists themselves understood what they wanted – never gold, but rather the gold of gold, as it were, or what makes gold into gold.\textsuperscript{444}

The alchemists were not searching for literal gold, suggests Schelling, but a way of making gold – that is, a way of making manifest a philosophical state of mind; that of the essential indifference between selfhood and otherness, unity and multitude. Seeking a way to make gold, in other words, the alchemists were seeking a way to express the perpetually inexpressible. The alchemical quest is nothing less than the philosophical desire to "ex-press" an undifferentiated state. In a posthumously published lecture from the numerous university courses he taught during the last four decades of his life, Schelling finally articulates and corroborates an understanding of his own philosophy as a "process of veritable alchemy."\textsuperscript{445} Remarkably, where Schelling only later arrives at a full articulation of a philosophical alchemy, Coleridge seeks evidence and confirmation of the Hermetic strain in Schelling's work much earlier. The purpose of this digression into the later, and decidedly more alchemical, philosophy of Schelling is to suggest that when Coleridge reads Schelling's system of Naturphilosophie, Schelling is only moving towards a position at which Coleridge has already arrived. It is notable that Schelling's later philosophy comes closer to Coleridge's own; and it is closer because it is more completely alchemical. Put differently, Schelling only veers towards the alchemical foundations with which Coleridge is already concerned. Reading Schelling, Coleridge sees not only the alchemical direction from which he himself is coming, but also intuits Schelling's use of its imagery in later works such as The Ages of the World.

Schelling and Steffens may have been the authors whose work Coleridge structurally relies upon to construct much of his system (at least as it is evinced most markedly in his plagiarisms), but it seems to me that Coleridge's cosmogony always favours the Hermetic account. Aware of the artifice involved in creation and the paradox of "othering" oneself in order to "know" oneself, the


Hermetic philosophy accounts for the alchemical and incarnational fictions of authorship with which Coleridge is concerned. While the Hermetic thinkers posit an essential identity between the nonoriginal origin and its presence in manifest creation, they also maintain an ironic attitude towards the ability to faithfully express and represent the absolute source in the manifest. Demonstrating an awareness of the ironic gesture of finite consciousness, the Hermetic tradition embraces the art of artifice and the necessary “trick” that becomes the informing aegis behind Coleridge’s essentially Chrysopoetic aesthetic.
PART THREE: COLERIDGE'S IMAGINATION AND THE GOLDEN TERTIUM
ALIQUID
Chapter Seven:  
The Art of Artifice: Coleridge, Consciousness, and Imagination

And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
*Such tricks hath strong imagination*…


...like a drunk man babbling, almost mad,  
he lay among his mysteries and desired  
only this gold crumb he already had.

*The Alchemist*, Rainer Maria Rilke446

It began with a perfect fiction…

*Coleridge, Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1 135

All consciousness separates. The absolute, in its undifferentiated state, separates itself for the sake of appearance. As we have seen, the art of alchemy, like the act of self-exposition, is the art of separation. The alchemical or Hermetic transformation of "one" thing into an "other" is more appropriately the separation out of an undifferentiated whole; a separation out of itself into different arrangements and proportions for varied expression. Alchemical metamorphosis and imaginative transformation of the self into an "other" is, simply put, a self-projection and trajectory of the self as other. It is a movement from inexistence to existence, from infinity to the finite, from formlessness into form. Partaking in an aesthetic of artifice, the absolute seeks self-consciousness through the necessary separation and division of what is indivisibly and inseparably one. Alchemy, in other words, is the art of necessary albeit fictitious separation.

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As we have seen, a complete theory of self-exposition cannot be one in which the entirety of an originating source is unproblematically expressed and conflated with manifest consciousness as Schelling suggests. Rather, the solution to the origination paradox is more generally Hermetic, and more precisely Chrysopoetic. Rather than a conflation of the narrative self with the expressive other, the Hermetic strategy retains the distinction between selfhood and otherness whilst negotiating the concept of origination and creativity in the lacuna in between. The Hermetic scheme affords the transcension of the limitations of selfhood and otherness by expounding a hermeneutic in which one becomes ““other” in order to become more fully “self.” Adopting this strategy to explain the workings of the human imagination, Coleridge defines the “original and ever-originating” as “that which is neither object nor subject because it is the root and identity of both.”

“Life absolutely,” he writes, is “the principle of unity in multeity.” Out of this principle of indifference, “the absolute will or Abyss... seeks self realization or Personēity”, and attains it by the “Begetting of the Identity in the Alterity.” It hardly needs mention here that this aesthetic of the coexistence of both aspects is formally a paradox. Certainly what it advocates is an aesthetics of the impossible: For how can something become separated as ‘other’ and yet remain its own ‘self’? How can an entire art be concocted out of this impossible scheme? How, precisely, does Coleridge create a completely unique critical hermeneutics of self and other; a philosophy in which the self can become other, without abjuring either? And how is it possible to sustain a philosophy that transcends opposites and yet keeps their differences intact? As we shall see, such conundrums are resolved by the quintessential and defining paradox of Coleridge’s twin theory of imagination.

Since all manifest matter, and every act of self-exposition, begins with separation (the ars spagyrica), Coleridge proposes that the Hermetic or alchemical tradition is the locus of the birth of philosophy itself; that is, the birth of the subject and the object out of a previously undifferentiated whole. There is no consciousness without this gesture of separation, suggests Coleridge; no

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447 OM 184
448 SW&F I 1510.
449 OM 199. italics mine.
subjectivity without the gesture of withdrawal from the undifferentiated absolute. Paradoxically then, the self only comes into existence by “outering” or “othering” itself; by making itself an “other.” In order for consciousness to come to know itself, it must first delimit itself. It must manifest itself as an ‘other’ and then know itself as such. Hence the paradox of spagyria is the paradox of seeking to know what is always within only by virtue of distancing oneself from it and projecting it as other. This is what makes consciousness ironic. The moment of conscious awareness, in other words, is the moment at which one is furthest removed from what one seeks to know because one has had to make it “other” in order to know it. Simply put, all acts of self-expression, generation, and creative exposition proceed, necessarily, by a manifest fiction and voluntary fraud. This necessary fiction and insincerity of consciousness is the informing principle behind Coleridge’s imaginative aesthetic.

i. Coleridge, the Caloric, and the Pythagorean Origins of Philosophy

Contraries outside the soul are not contraries in the soul, since they lose their own nature: they are transferred to a certain quality...and that quality is in a way imaginary.

Ficino, Theologia Platonica, V, 215.

It is the difficulty of this section that it is a reprise of some of the alchemical material I have already mentioned, but I reiterate it here in order to stress Coleridge’s particular formulation of it. Having looked at the intellectual trajectory that relates Coleridge to the Hermetic and alchemical traditions, it is important to note that Coleridge’s most extended consideration of the subject is found in his expostulations on Pythagoras. As we might expect, a philosophy beginning with Pythagoras recovers and informs Coleridge’s understanding of Hermeticism. As we have seen, for Coleridge (as for Ficino, Cudworth, Enfield, and Boerhaave), Pythagoras, after Hermes, is among the first great thinkers at the beginning of the alchemical genealogy. As Ficino tells us in Theologia Platonica, Pythagoras “borrows [his wisdom] from the Egyptian doctrines represented in the
In a series of philosophical lectures delivered in 1818, Coleridge recalls the dubious foundations of alchemy, stressing that it would indeed be no great wonder to learn that Pythagoras had within him "a spice of the impostor and the mountebank."451 "It does appear to me not improbable", writes Coleridge, "that Pythagoras, who went, as it appears, to all these oracles everywhere, had for his object the acquirement of those powers. Whether trick, whether powers of acting upon the imagination, I will not decide."452 Sustaining the ambiguity between a "trick" and the "powers of acting upon the imagination", Coleridge asserts that there is "one thing to be said in favour of the belief that [Pythagoras] worked apparent Miracles" and that is that "some even of the oldest writers... named him a Conjurer, a Trickster."453 Notably, in a manuscript version of his lecture on the Pythagorean doctrine, Coleridge asserts that his doctrine is indeed an "art (why call it trick?)."454 Convinced of the proximity of "trick" with "art" in the philosophy of Pythagoras, Coleridge again conveys the importance of the art of artifice in his formulation of a uniquely alchemical aesthetic.

For Coleridge, Pythagoras not only takes his position among the historical alchemists, he is the founder of "philosophy" more generally. As we have seen, the central problem of Cartesian philosophy is the dilemma of uniting the mind with the world, or the one with the many. Notably, in Coleridge's formulation of this epistemological problem, he traces the origin of the debate back, not to Descartes, but to the discoveries of chemistry and, more precisely, to the philosophy of Pythagoras. In a philosophical lecture delivered in 1819, Coleridge presents his position in detail:

For in this, in truth, did philosophy begin, in the distinction between the subject and the object... he who first distinguished heat from the supposed power externally, which he called 'caloric', might have been truly said to have begun philosophy; and the whole progress from that time to this present moment is nothing more than an attempt to reconcile the same.455

450 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, 1, 179. CM V 700.
451 LHP 1 72.
452 LHP 1 74.
453 LHP 1 96.
454 LHP 1 95.
455 LHP 1 115.
The issue of the "caloric" has been overlooked in Coleridge criticism, but it has much to tell us about his formulation of the epistemological debate on the relationship between the subject and object. The "caloric" is defined in chemistry as a specific heat substance. More precisely, it is the chemical term assigned to a hypothetical entity, supposedly an elastic fluid, which is present in all bodies and to which the phenomena of heat may be attributed. In the editor's footnote to the aforementioned passage, we learn that the term was invented in 1787 by the so-called father of modern chemistry, Lavoisier. Coleridge himself was fully aware of Lavoisier's use of the term, having alluded to it in his notebooks, but he later crossed out the name as if uncertain. It is worth noting here that Coleridge's designation of "he who first distinguished heat" from the "caloric" as the thinker who "begun philosophy" indicates a deliberately ahistorical as well philosophical interest in this otherwise physical substance. Certainly, Coleridge cannot be crediting Lavoisier with the beginning of all philosophy. So what, precisely, is he saying? Expressing reservation about the use of the caloric to denote the manifest expression of a "heat substance" in the external world, Coleridge stresses the metaphysical implications of this hypothetical material, and insists that many thinkers have "missed the true philosophic way of treating all these fictitious entities. Critiquing a literal reading of the caloric, Coleridge is far from partaking in a mere case of chemistry by analogy. Instead, he asserts that the dawning of the chemical distinction between caloric and heat is the beginning of epistemology itself. The idea, he goes on, is attributable not to Lavoisier but to Pythagoras:

"We know that chemistry found itself soon compelled to frame a different word for the cause to distinguish it from the sensation it was produced to effect, and hence we have the word calori[c] or calorific...Now it appears that Pythagoras had proceeded upon this opinion."

And again:

"Pythagoras, the proper founder of philosophy, proposed the whole problem, the attempt..."

456 CM V 244 n. 1.
457 LHP I 115 n. 19.
458 CN IV 5144n.
459 CM V 244.
460 LHP I 111.
to solve which constitutes the philosopher, namely the connection of the visible thing, the phenomenon, with the invisible thing, under a cause common to both and above both.\textsuperscript{461}

Attributing to Pythagoras the honour of having, as it were, “begun philosophy” by his denotation of the substance “caloric”, Coleridge makes the caloric the key to understanding the relationship between the mind and the outside world, perceiver and perceived, subject and object. The chemical division of “heat” and the “caloric”, suggests Coleridge, runs parallel to the philosophical division of subject and object. His argument proceeds as follows: It is the case that “we all of us and in all languages call the sensation heat or cold and the outward cause of it by the same names.”\textsuperscript{462} This linguistic tendency, explains Coleridge, to refer to the subjective experience of “heat” or “cold” with the same term as the objective cause of it, also termed “heat” or “cold”, leads to a “great confusion of thought.”\textsuperscript{463} This confusion of subject and object in designations of heat and cold, for instance, may be illustrated in statements such as: “I am hot because it is hot” or “I am cold because it is cold.” Since this confusion of the “I am” – “it is” reticulation is “common to all nations and arises out of the nature of the human mind,” Coleridge continues, “it may well be believed to refer to some important truth.”\textsuperscript{464} In other words, the tendency to employ the one word (either “heat” or “cold”) for both the subjective internal experience and the external objective cause of that experience seems to hearken back to a primordial, pre-ontological, and pre-philosophical indifference of subject and object.

The crucial point not to be missed in Pythagorean philosophy, as in alchemy, is that solid materiality has an immaterial foundation which can be said “to exist” only after it separates from itself. In chemistry, the “caloric” is defined as an indestructible, highly elastic, self-repellent, all-pervading fluid. It is the external visible manifestation or corporeality of heat. The denotation that there is a fluid elastic matter known as the “caloric” which is separate from, and the external cause of, the internal subjective experience of heat opens up a divide between the a priori notion of heat

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{461}{LHP I 170.}
\footnote{462}{LHP I 111, \textit{italics mine.}}
\footnote{463}{LHP I 111, \textit{italics mine.}}
\footnote{464}{LHP I 111, \textit{italics mine.}}
\end{footnotes}
and that which is experienced as heat; that is, between the idea of heat and the experienced reality of it or, we might say, between the grounds of epistemological indifference and manifest experience. It is for this reason, suggests Coleridge, that he who invents the term “caloric” may also be credited with the inception of philosophy itself. With the emergence of this manifest and visible “elastic” heat substance, the invention of the term “caloric” opens up a divide between subject and object that did not previously exist, and heat is “bethinged” as a substantive object. As Coleridge puts it: “Caloric implies according to the use & analogy of language that the subject is a thing.”465 The rise of the rift between subject and object, experience and thing, self and other, is the hallmark of philosophy itself and, with it, the rise of all philosophical attempts to bridge this rift.

For Coleridge, Pythagoras’s philosophy is among the first attempts “to show that in essence both object and subject were united in one.”466 His is the first attempt at a unified philosophy to solve the self-other dilemma of bifurcation. Coleridge explains:

[I]t appears that Pythagoras had proceeded upon this opinion, that those unknown somethings, powers or whatever you may call them, that manifest themselves in the intellect of man, or what in the language of the old philosophy would be called the intelligible world...these same manifest themselves to us and are the objects of our senses, I mean as creative and organising powers; in short, that the very powers which in men reflect and contemplate, are in their essence the same as those powers which in nature produce the objects contemplated.467

That the subjective powers of man, with which we “reflect and contemplate”, are “in their essence the same” as the powers of the “objects contemplated”, suggests that subject and object share a common pre-existent unity before they are separated and made externally manifest in visible substances such as the caloric. Recalling the language of the compass to describe the philosophical project, Coleridge says that it is Pythagoras’s intention to show “that there is one principle which produces the object of perception, and that the same principle at the other pole produces the

465 CN IV 5144, italics in original.
466 LHP 115.
467 LHP I 111-2, italics mine.
contemplation of that object. Despite the essential indifference, then, the difficulty lies in our inability to escape the conventional, bifurcated mode of consciousness:

We have been accustomed by all our affections, by all our wants, to seek after outward images; and...therefore, to whole truth, we attach that particular condition of truth which belongs to sensible bodies or to bodies which can be touched...[We] carry this onward through the whole of our being, however remote it may be from the true purposes of it.

It is the requirement of conscious existence, writes Coleridge, that it seeks a separative external image to support an undifferentiated internal experience. This external image is typically contradistinguished from the source to which it refers, as if oppositions in human language and consciousness are really the true conditions and the very essence of being itself. Simply put, the divisions enacted by consciousness are necessarily fictitious since they separate essential indifference into differential subject and object. That is, manifest existence is the result of the separation of what is, in essence, indistinguishable and inseparable. By virtue of this originating separation, inner reality is experienced as an outer one, and significant “outness” is granted to that which is, essentially, an underlying “in-difference.”

In order fully to appreciate the Hermetic significance of the caloric, we need to turn back to a series of scattered notes made by Coleridge almost eight years earlier. In a note entitled ‘Hints respecting Beauty’, dated July 1811, Coleridge writes:

It is a Freshman’s Example, that the man who would laugh at you for affirming that there was not Heat in a red hot poker, would equally laugh at you for affirming that there was a pain in a Cudgel or a Rod.

There is no one among us, writes Coleridge, who feels the least inclination to call a cudgel or rod a pain. The reason is evidently because a cudgel and the effect it produces are separate and distinct images to the sense. However, if we should deny that there is heat in a red hot poker, the same man would laugh, because in the case of heat the word for the cause and the word for the effect are one and the same. The language we use to refer to the subjective experience of heat and the objective

\[468 \text{LHP I 115, italics mine.}\]
\[469 \text{LHP I 113-4.}\]
\[470 \text{LHP I 114.}\]
\[471 \text{SW&F I 1278, italics in original.}\]
cause of it, suggests Coleridge, holds evidence of the pre-linguistic indifference of subject and object, cause and effect. However, he goes on to explain, consciousness dictates that this confusion of terms is too great, and so chemists have had to invent a new word ("caloric") to describe the external cause of heat as contradistinguished from the internal effect that it produces. This is as much the necessary limitation of consciousness as it is of language:

Ask 9999 in a myriad, what Heat is, and they will explain it by some excess of the quality; talk to them of Heat in Ice, & they laugh at you. Deservedly, if you have not previously explained yourself – and therefore Chemists have felt the necessity of inventing new words – Calorique for Heat...

What Coleridge is suggesting here is that while chemistry has been compelled to frame different words for the external objective cause of something (i.e. caloric or cudgel) and the internal subjective sensation that it effects (i.e. heat or pain), there is nevertheless an underlying indifference between the subject and object which is designated by our original tendency to refer to the subject and object of "heat" by the same name. Since the subjective and objective use of "heat" before the invention of the term "caloric" denotes its previous indifference, then so too might we understand the subjective "experience of pain" as inherent in the objective tool which "inflicts pain"; there must be pain in the rod or cudgel too, suggests Coleridge. On the pre-linguistic unity of subject and object, Coleridge explains in the Biographia in 1817 that because ice eventually melts due to heat, there must also already be "heat in ice." While "the chemical student is taught not to be startled at disquisitions on the heat in ice", continues Coleridge, to say to a person who has never studied the elements of chemistry that there is heat in ice is to appear to speak in paradoxes.473 While "the ideas of caloric, whether as substance or property, and the conceptions of latent heat, the heat in ice, &c ...excite the wonder and the laughter of the vulgar", what is important is the essential primordial indifference between the external objective manifestation of something and its internal subjective source.474 The rod or cudgel is the external manifestation or objectification of

472 SW&F I 278.
473 BL I 171.
474 SW&F I 494.
pain, just as the caloric is the material manifestation of heat. Simply put, we might say that subject and object pre-exist in indifference before they are categorically, philosophically, and indeed artificially, separated as two apparently opposing powers in manifest existence.

In order to expound upon the alchemical and Hermetic relevance of this notion of the caloric for Coleridge’s theory of imagination, we may do well to consider one further example of the inherent linguistic and epistemological conundrum involved. In a philosophical lecture delivered in 1819, Coleridge recalls the traditional “doctrine of Pythagoras” for its relevance in his expostulations on “honey” as “a particular substance.” Honey produces an extreme sense of sweetness on the palate, explains Coleridge, “and everybody knows it is extremely sweet in itself.”

Simply put, honey, which gives us the sense of sweetness, is itself sweet. However, Coleridge explains, there arises a usual tendency among thinkers to perform the “rather strange division of the same things expressed in different words.” “This strange division”, he continues, “will at once show at least this, how natural such a blunder is to the human mind when it first begins to think.” Coleridge is alluding once more to the inherent indifference of subject and object, this time as it applies to the term “sweetness.” Human language and consciousness, he explains, necessitates a fraudulent process by which we advance our knowledge; by separating and differentiating it in manifest existence under another name. This passage has not only been overlooked in Coleridge studies but, more disappointingly, it has not rightly been traced back to a passage that Coleridge read many years earlier in Cudworth. In Cudworth’s True System, in a similar discussion on the epistemological divide of subject and object, Cudworth insists that such divisive misnomers may be traced back to the inventor of language itself, that is, to “Thoth or Hermes.”

Beginning, as Coleridge does, with a discussion of “heat” and “cold” in order to explain this division of the subjective and objective, Cudworth also goes on to provide the example of the quality of “sweetness”:

475 LHP 1 116.
476 LHP 1 116.
477 Cudworth, p. 636.
Sensible things, as heat and cold, bitter and sweet, red and green are no real qualities in the object without...but only magnitude, figure, site, motion and rest. Of which we have not only sensible ideas, passively impressed upon us from without, but also intelligible notions, actively externed from the mind itself.\footnote{Cudworth, p. 636.}

"Bitter and sweet, hot and cold", writes Cudworth, "are only in opinion." The same may be said of all other sensible, outered, or "externed" properties; that is, none of them are absolute things in themselves, or real qualities in the objects without, but they are "begotten from the mutual congress" of the inner and the outer. Cudworth explains:

[By] begetting sensation and sensibles, both the object and the sentient are forthwith made to be so and so qualified, as when honey is tasted, the sense of tasting and the quality of sweetness and begotten both together, though the sense be vulgarly attributed to the taster, and the quality of sweetness to the honey...The conclusion of all which is summed up thus, that none of those sensible things is anything absolutely in the objects without, but they are all generated or made relatively to the sentient.\footnote{Cudworth, p. 11, italics mine.}

Subject and object, explains Cudworth, are united in the mind and are differenced only by a separative \textit{relativity}. The otherwise undifferentiated experiences of heat, cold, and even sweetness, are made manifest by their necessary falsification in objective and external \textit{forms}, such as the caloric and, here, "honey." These abstracted substances do not exist \textit{in themselves}, he stresses; they are "nothing absolutely" but only "relatively" to the undifferentiated source out of which they arise.\footnote{Cudworth, p. 33.} The emphasis, once again, is on the necessary artifice of generative activity and on the requisite limitations of language and consciousness itself.

It should not escape our notice here that Cudworth, in his later discussion of the Egyptians in the \emph{True System}, goes on to note that: "by that yearly feast kept by the Egyptians in honour of Thoth or Hermes, when the priests eating honey and figs pronounced those words, \textit{Truth is Sweet}; as also by that amulet, which Isis was fabled to have worn about her, the interpretation whereof was, \textit{True Speech}."\footnote{Cudworth, p. 316, italics in original.} That the declaration "Truth is Sweet" denotes at once the \textit{quality} of sweetness and speech \textit{itself}, affirms once more the inherent \textit{indifference} of external and internal properties, subjectivity and otherness. "True Speech", if indeed it is possible, suggests Cudworth, is...
that in which words are not deferred, projected, extracted, separated from their objective and subjective indifference. It is purely present, unveiled, naked, and offered up in its truth, without the detours of a signifier foreign to it. However, as the Hermetic account also makes clear, it is the necessary insincerity and paradox of language and of consciousness that it must separate what is undifferentiated and coexistent in all bodies in order to denote and come to an understanding of itself in manifest phenomena and material substance. The irony of language and consciousness is that every self requires an equal and opposite ‘other’ in order to come to know it’self.’ It seems that in Coleridge’s choice of “honey” in his exposition on the indifference of subject and object, he certainly had Cudworth’s account in mind. Such a formulation places him at the heart of a Hermetic tradition which necessitates the fictions of manifest reality and recognises the insincerity of all separative expression.\textsuperscript{482}

Coleridge’s treatment of the concepts of the “caloric” and of “sweetness” are particularly revealing for what they suggest about his alchemical and separative hermeneutics. Continuing his discussion on the “caloric” in \textit{The Theory of Life} in 1816, Coleridge turns to consider the same phenomena in terms of what he calls “aureity” or the property “peculiar to gold.”\textsuperscript{483} Just as the caloric is the outerance or manifest expression of heat, explains Coleridge, “aureity” is the expression of inherent “gold.” He writes:

\begin{quote}
Thus the properties peculiar to gold, were abstracted from those it possessed in common with other bodies, and then generalized in the term \textit{Aureity}: and the inquirer was instructed that the \textit{Essence} of Gold, or the cause which constituted the peculiar modification of \textit{matter} called gold, was the power of \textit{aureity}.\textsuperscript{484}
\end{quote}

Abstracted out of an original indifference, suggests Coleridge, the “property peculiar to gold” is extrapolated out of latent \textit{essential} gold and made manifest as a “power of aureity” in \textit{outward} objects. Like the caloric, “aureity” is the \textit{outward} manifestation or delimited \textit{ex-pression} of a more complex, albeit latent, indifference. The external manifestation of “aureity”, like the “caloric”,

\textsuperscript{482} The concept of “necessitated fictions” is developed in OM 337.
\textsuperscript{483} SW&F 1496.
\textsuperscript{484} SW&F 1496, \textit{italics} mine.
carries with it the burden of separative consciousness. What is a primordial indifference in the
“Essence of Gold” is expressed via fictitious separation. Coleridge elaborates:

[A] class of phenomena were in the first place abstracted, and fixed in some general term:
of course this could designate only the impressions made by the outward objects, and so
far, therefore, having been thus metamorphosed, they were effects of those objects; but then
made to supply the place of their own causes, under the name of occult qualities.485

To this extraction of “aureity” is added the misnomer of substantial form or external reality.

Coleridge continues:

[T]hought and will are superadded to the occult quality, and every form of nature had its
appropriate Spirit, to be controlled or conciliated by an appropriate ceremonial. This was
entitled its SUBSTANTIAL FORM. Thus, physic became a sort of dull poetry, and art of
medicine (for physiology could scarcely be said to exist) was a system of magic, blended
with traditional empiricism. Thus the forms of thought proceeded to act in their own
emptiness, with no attempt to fill or substantiate them by the information of the senses.486

In other words, manifest “gold” or “aureity”, like the manifestation of the caloric in chemical
philosophy, is the pretended phenomenon of an already latent, precognizant, and undifferentiated
essence. It is “commenced by acts of abstraction”, writes Coleridge, and “confounded with, and
substituted for, the proper substance of the thing, and honored with the title of its SUBSTANTIAL
FORM.”487 Coleridge returns to the hypothetical status of substantial form in 1822, in his essay on
The Science and System of Logic. Again, his musings on the nature of manifest form lead him to
expound upon its Hermetic implications. He begins: “The attempts in natural philosophy, the
pretended explanations of the facts and phenomena of the world without, were all commenced by
acts of abstraction, followed and seconded by another function of the discursive faculty, which I
have elsewhere named logical substantiation.”488 Referring to the “perversion” by which the
identity of the thinker’s own consciousness or, more precisely, “the unity of the understanding
itself”, is confounded by the “SUBSTANTIAL FORM”, Coleridge turns his attention once more to
the power of abstraction by which “the properties peculiar to gold were abstracted from those it

485 SW&F I 496, italics mine.
486 SW&F I 496-7.
487 SW&F II 1014-5.
488 SW&F II 1014-5, italics mine.
possessed in common with other metals...[and] were then generalised in the term aureity." He explains:

To complete this phantom, nothing was not wanted but an act of the imagination; by virtue of which the qualities, properties, and power of the human soul, implied in the privilege of self-consciousness, or inferred from the notices of the inner sense, were attributed, and, as it were, transferred to the objects outwardly existing... For instance, the disciples and nurslings of the school were instructed that the essence of gold, or the ground and constituent cause of the peculiar modification of matter so called, was its aureity, or vis aureitatis. The cloudy Juno was now bodily complete ('If bodily may be called that body had none').

The reference to the imaginative attribution of aureity as a kind of "phantom" existence, notifying us of an "inner sense", suggests that it partakes in a kind of false abstraction. Put differently, "aureity" itself is not an actual substance, but something that is made substantial by virtue of its expression and "separative projection." The paradox of consciousness is that "phantom" thought becomes confused with "thing" and is only then honoured with the title of bodily form or reality. In other words, it becomes object to the self, even while it is essentially self-created or self-generated.

Coleridge goes on to explain the manner in which the alchemists and astrologers "followed up the scheme and recipe of the scholastic logicians" who wrote of the epistemological fission of subject and object, and "blended [it] with the traditional superstitions of theurgy and demonology", thereby complicating its message. Like the caloric then, "aureity" at once communicates and conceals a deeper unity or indifference of essence within; a primordial absolute indifference out of which the outward manifest "gold" is only a delimited expression. The designation of aureity, like that of the caloric, reveals the contradictions and inherent fictions of consciousness by which that which is without ontological coordinates (that which is "without" a body) must put them on (be made "bodily complete") in order to be expressed and known in the world. Language, or origination, in this formulation, is as a false "putting on", as if from the outside, in order to indicate a deeper underlying indifference within. It both indicates and gestures towards the indifference.

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489 SW&F II 1015-6, italics mine.
490 SW&F II 1015-6, italics mine.
491 The term "separative self-projection" appears in OM 328.
492 SW&F II 1016.
while subsuming and disguising it. At once conveying and concealing the very thing it seeks to express, the outered or “externed” principles of caloric and aureity give a necessary nomenclature and delimitation to that which is, essentially, without nomenclature and limitation. In other words, while all matter retains its indifference within, expression and creation comes about through its separation. The act of creation is a division and differentiation in language of that which is previously undifferentiated. In short, self exposition is the contraction of a subject under the form of something other than what it is. The issue of the caloric, then, is precisely the Hermetic conundrum restated. As we have seen, the quest for gold is the quest for direct translation of the pure undifferentiated absolute into the world. Since the prima materia is latent preexistence, it cannot properly be said to exist until it is made manifest as something; but in manifesting it as something, that which is undifferentiated and pre-existent becomes, by definition, that which it is not. Manifesting itself in the form of something else, the unmixed absolute seeks self-specification in a system of coordinated difference.

As late as July 1830, Coleridge pens some notes into the marginalia of Lorenz Oken’s *Lehrbuch der Naturgeschichte* which are relevant here. Although Oken’s work is typical of the German Naturphilosophen, he demonstrates a more obvious partiality to alchemy and argues that its discoveries have been unjustly discredited by contemporary scientists. Upon reading Oken, however, Coleridge objects to his insistence upon a literal understanding of alchemy, dismissing it as “Alchemistische Nonsens.”⁴⁹³ Oken “ought to have known”, retorts Coleridge, “that the Radical of the Metals must be a Dynamis, not a Thing.”⁴⁹⁴ He explains:

[T]he whole doctrine of the Elements is worse than useless, assumed and interpreted as hath hitherto been the case, as material Entities. Only as Elementary Forms, have Earth, Air, Water and Fire any philosophic Significance – and to preclude the confusion it would be far better to say, the Aeriform, ignoform, aquiform etc. ⁴⁹⁵

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⁴⁹³ CM III 1029.
⁴⁹⁴ CM III 1029.
⁴⁹⁵ CM III 1024, italics mine.
Referring to the “philosophic significance” of Air, Fire, Water, and Earth as “Aeriform, ignoform, aquiform & etc.”, Coleridge not only promotes a philosophic, as opposed to a literal, alchemy but he clarifies the true nature of the prima materia as incorporeal and potential until it is made manifest in form. The “GROUND of matter”, writes Coleridge, is “materia immateriata”, that is, “matter unmattered.” From this unmattered, or pre-existent, state of matter there arises a series of “contractions, preceded by extroitions or extroitive tendencies.” Acting through these “extroitive tendencies”, or tendencies towards “externalization”, Coleridge explains, the underlying “phænomenal Product” finally “bursts thro’” and “manifest[s] itself.” Matter, then, is but the public or manifest expression of an originally undifferentiated base. Although the informing source contains all matter in it potentially, it does not yet exist in reality, so alchemy is the process by which informing matter (materia immateriata) separates in order to shape its own existence. The implication of this is that the absolute prima materia out of which all shape arises, is itself without shape or solution until it puts on the external fiction of some other form. The problem with contemporary chemists, writes Coleridge, is that they mistake the visible form of reality for the underlying pre-existent reality itself. Among “the great mistakes of the Natur-philosopher”, he contends, is “that they confound the Ideal Polar Powers with the Bodies entitled to represent them.” Failing to go as far as the Hermeticists in understanding the necessary insincerity involved in manifest expression and creation, the Naturphilosophen equate latent gold with the fraudulent external manifestation of it:

Hydrogen, retaining its Warmth, but coerced by the predominance of Carbon, and its Continuity made to Cohesion, but at the same time rendering the Cohesion of the Carbon, more continuous, is in combination with Carbon Metal – and [eminently] Gold.

That it is “eminently”, and not actually, gold is noteworthy. Clearly, Coleridge is not intending a scientifically accurate portrayal of the union of carbon and hydrogen, which by no means combine

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496 CM III 1024, italics mine.
497 CM III 1024.
498 CM II 853, italics mine.
499 CM II 855.
together to constitute gold. His meaning is entirely metaphysical and philosophic. The evidence of manifest reality, suggests Coleridge, is that all matter pre-exists, albeit only in potentia, and remains entirely unknown until it is "expressed" in an 'other' form. What this means is that while the absolute retains all objects and potentia within itself, the will is entirely drawn towards the particularity of things outside itself, and we are mistaken in our conscious allegiances to the manifest and visible "fictions" or "forms" of reality. The alchemical implications of Coleridge's argument become clear if we turn to an example from Ficino's Theologia Platonica. Ficino notes that, since creativity is a division and differentiation of what is previously indifferenced and undivided, "distinction comes about through act." The conundrum, as Ficino explains, is that while

...the universal and incorporeal species of gold is enough for an intellect that is about to understand gold; but it is not enough for the will. From the perspective of human life, the will wants the gold that is particular and corporeal, gold as it is in itself. The intellect, explains Ficino, is content with the universal and incorporeal notion of eminent gold, while the will "wants this particular and corporeal gold as it is in itself." Material gold is "separated conceptually by the mind" from the original "incorporeal species of gold" because, simply put, who in his right mind would prefer the idea of gold to gold itself? Consciousness seeks delimitation and manifestation, or re-presentation, in the real. Thus, while elemental "gold" is always and already within, it must be separated out in order to be manifest to consciousness. Ficino describes this as a movement away from the "indivisible essence, at once the foundation and origin of all" into "the axis of all that is in itself accidental, changeable." This movement from the originating centre to the axis of existence recalls the progression from the centre to the circumference of the hieroglyphic theta. Consciousness, in other words, is firmly caught in a double bind that requires the differentiation of substance from image even while it recognises that

500 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, V, 127.
501 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 247, italics mine.
502 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 47.
503 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 37.
such a differentiation is problematic and even fictitious. Previously undifferentiated and all-originating indifference meets at once its own creation and destruction in the process of self-expression. Writes Ficino, "such a nature is contaminated when it [enters into] the bosom of matter... It becomes divisible and impure... For everything must first exist as a pure example of its kind before it is corrupted."\(^{504}\) Unable fully to resolve the conundrum of manifest creation, Ficino concludes his account of the expressive intellect as follows: "For the present it is enough for us that... the intellect seeks to understand all things and in understanding is entirely clothed in their forms."\(^{505}\) Matter is, suggests Ficino, precisely to the extent that it puts on the guise of manifest existence, having come out of a more complex inexistence and indifference. In other words, there are certain qualities that matter has precisely to the extent that it does not have them; but precisely to the extent that it separates from itself and puts on those qualities as if from outside. While "truth inheres inseparably in us" and "unchangeably in the mind", writes Ficino, it does not "reside in sensible things... wherein we cannot be easily convinced that they are deceiving us by their rapid mutability."\(^{506}\) The human mind, he concludes, "when it attains something true sees not some true thing but rather it 'does truth' (facere veritatem)... it turns out the truth as if it were in the form of the mind."\(^{507}\)

It is the paradox of human consciousness and the irony of manifest creation that matter proceeds by an active artifice which "does" or per"form"s truth. Incarnation, writes Coleridge, is "the essential Infinite in the form of the Finite."\(^{508}\) The absolute takes on the form of reality and "we have only then to enquire what this form is, or rather... in what terms we shall least inappropriately clothe it <in> words."\(^{509}\) The implication here is that while in essence the subject and object are absolute and undifferentiated, in existence they must be separated and made to take

\(^{504}\) Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 29.
\(^{505}\) Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 241-3.
\(^{506}\) Ficino, Theologia Platonica, III, 315.
\(^{507}\) Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 27-9, italics mine.
\(^{508}\) SW&F II 1511, italics in original.
\(^{509}\) OM 205, italics mine.
on the guise or false vestments of the formal other. Expounding upon the nature of this manifestation as the false clothing of material reality, Coleridge explains:

[F]rom the mind [emerges] the idea of the total in omni parte {totally, all in each], which alone furnishes the Analogia – but that both it & a myriad of other material Images do inwrap themselves in these veste non sua {A garment not its own}, & would be even no objects of conception, if they did not – yea, that even the very words, ‘conception, comprehension,’ & all in all languages that answer to them – suppose this transinfusion from the Mind (even as if the Sun be imagined visual , it must first irradiate from itself in order for itself to perceive) is an argument better than all analogy. 510

The image of the mind “irradiating” from itself in order to perceive itself recalls the necessary insincerity of the compass gesture. Knowing itself at the expense of itself, the mind puts on “a garment not its own”, writes Coleridge, and coming “to be” is equated with taking on the likeness or garment of truth, rather than presenting the truth itself. Expounding upon the ambiguous nature of “becoming”, Coleridge also identifies the entire natural world as the outerance of God which “goes forth to declare, like a word spoken; or remains on the surface (or outside) to distinguish, like a word written; and in both cases, makes the thing outward, and outers (now spelt, utters) its nature.” 511 Equating “utterance” with “outerance”, Coleridge not only recalls the theta of alchemical hieroglyphics he insists upon the performative nature of creation, by which God’s creative utterance brings the universe into being with the WORD. The universal mind announces its presence to itself by an act of artifice. As we have seen, in the Chrysopoetic interpretation, what is separated from and projected out of the undifferentiated source is, in essence, the self appearing in the guise of an other. In an important etymological twist, Coleridge toys with the analogue between a garment which is said to become (i.e. flatter or befit) a person, and a person who becomes their garment. It is really “indifferent”, Coleridge remarks, “whether we say – It becomes He, or He becomes it.” 512 He elaborates:

There is sometimes an apparent Play on words, which not only to the Moralizer, but even to the philosophical Etymologist, appears more than a mere Play. Thus in the double sense of the word, become. I have known persons so anxious to have their Dress become

510 CM II 250, *italics mine*.
511 SWF II 850, *italics in original*.
512 AR 60, *italics in original*. 
them, so totus in illo [entirely in that], as to convert it at length into their proper self, and thus actually to become the Dress.\textsuperscript{513}

"Becoming" an other, suggests Coleridge, is at once an inner transformation and an external putting on. Using a fiction to project out of oneself, one becomes the fiction; and the very thing one seeks "to know" is in essence the most unreal thing to us. Procuring a simulacrum of truth by throwing a cloak over it, the simulacrum itself becomes the guiding reality. It is as though an underlying philosophic truth, by being actualised, becomes artificial. As Coleridge put it: "There is a philosophic (and inasmuch as it is actualised by an effort of freedom, an artificial) consciousness, which lies beneath or (as it were) behind the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings."\textsuperscript{514} Becoming the "garment" or taking on the "tincture" of reality, the mind partakes not in an act of hypocrisy but in the irony of conscious existence.

While, on the one hand, to become something is to enact a complete internal transformation of self into something other; on other hand "to become" means simply something topical, superficial, and imposed upon from without; in terms of clothing, it describes the trappings of the external world as being "put on" from the outside. By presenting the notion of "becoming something" by putting it on as if from the outside, Coleridge rearticulates the Hermetic aesthetic of artifice, where inner and outer, truth and fiction, art and artifice are indicative of the twin process of self-exposition in the "other." Coleridge manages successfully to blur without conflating the boundaries of external and internal, subjective and objective, transformation.

Where, in the Cartesian system, a subject is thought either to persist in oneself or to lose oneself in empty expansion in a signifying and alienating feature, the Chrysopoetic aesthetic affords a unique ambidextrous gesture by which one becomes other while remaining entirely self. Coleridge manages to sustain the paradox that the only way for us to conceive the absolute unity of the originary self is through the ‘other’ in the necessary fiction of contraction and expansion.

Exposition and creative generation is at once both self-sustaining and self-annihilating. Apropos of

\textsuperscript{513} AR 60, italics in original.
\textsuperscript{514} BL I 164, italics in original.
the act of putting on clothes, which is akin to taking on the tincture or external guise of something 'other', it would seem that the fake "betray" the original it represents. To the extent that it reveals the absolute, it also turns against it. This is the necessary deceit and voluntary fiction of the Chrysopoetic aesthetic.

This configuration of creativity has immediate implications for plagiarism, which is traditionally conceived as taking on the words of an other – as if in order to merely mimic the external trappings of the "other" rather than of the "self." Upsetting the usual divide, however, Coleridge’s hermeneutic engages the external trappings of the other with the internal "becoming" and mental transmutation of the originating self, implying that fiction indicates truth, and that art mediates itself through artifice. Before I turn to consider Coleridge’s own configuration of this paradox, particularly in his formulation of the authorial imagination, I think it necessary to show just how prominent this idea is in the Hermetic tradition we have been examining and within which Coleridge is so thoroughly immersed.

Matter, as Ficino explains it, puts on a necessary fiction by which it enters into existence and becomes known to consciousness: "The mind then sees the soul swathed in its bodily clothing and believes that it is corporeal."515 "The Artificer of nature", Ficino elaborates, "takes this naked matter, and clothes it with the qualities and forms of the elements."516 Prime matter, in this view, enters reality by being covered up and outwardly assuming stable properties. The intellect becomes aware of itself by becoming an image for itself; a manifest visible "expression" of itself. "The intellect does not come to know things themselves", concludes Ficino, "unless it is clothed in the form of the things to be known."517

A similar verdict is pronounced in the Hermetica. Hermes describes the incarnation of the "soul down to the body's grossness" in terms of "garments" which it takes on in order to make itself known in the world. He specifies:

515 Ficino, Theologia Platonica II, 131, italics mine.
516 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, X, 133, italics mine.
517 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 225, italics mine.
In an earthy body occurs the combining of these garments...for the mind cannot seat itself alone and naked in an earthy body. The earthly body cannot support so great an immortality, nor can so great a dignity endure defiling contact with a body subject to passion. Mind, therefore, has taken the soul as a shroud.518

Discoursing with his son Tat, Hermes states that manifest existence is but the artificial covering or clothing of reality. The “earthly body” or manifest existence which is separated out of the immutable and immanent centre is as a “garment” or “tunic” of reality.519 This is “the deceit of the cosmos” and the “elementary fabrication we use here below.”520 Conscious creativity is attained only at its own expense, Hermes stresses, by moving away from the original unity and indifference which is its essence and “putting on” the semblance of reality by which consciousness can know it. By a necessarily fictitious gesture, the self is self, finally, only when it appears in the guise of another.

Notably, in Boerhaave’s account of the alchemical tradition, the alchemist who falsely tinctures metals to show what essentially lays within it, also falsely outers in order to render the truth visible. The alchemists, explains Boerhaave, “in all their operations use gold, either to gild the metals they work on, or to make appear as if some part were converted.”521 Specifically, “they disguise gold by diverse preparations, and present it under such foreign forms for a secret that augments gold, and transmutes metals...They tinge vessels of gold, and silver, with the colours of iron or copper; and by mercury, and tinge it in diverse ways; make nails half gold, half iron, and give the gold part the colour of iron, to have the reputation of converting it.”522 Interestingly, while Boerhaave upholds the possibility of gold-making, it is by no means clear that what he advocates is an endeavour to produce genuine gold as opposed to the mere similitude of the noble metal. What is striking is the alignment of creativity with the act of mimicry. The goal of making copper “look like”, “simulate”, or “appear to be” gold, maintains Boerhaave, is the goal of gold-making.

Recognizing that practical alchemy is often nothing more than the tinting of metals, or an attempt to

518 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 34.
519 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 34.
520 Copenhaver, Hermetica, pp. 49-50
521 Boerhaave, p. 42, italics mine.
522 Boerhaave, p. 42, italics mine.
give less valuable metals the appearance of those that are more precious, Boerhaave characterizes it as a "fraudulent" or "counterfeited" "doubling" by which genuine gold is alloyed with baser metals. However, while acknowledging that alchemy is nothing more than the tincturing, gilding or enamelling of gold as by a superinduction – as if putting it on from outside – Boerhaave nevertheless persists in maintaining that underneath such a “train of deceits” is the attempt to represent something that is essentially true about all metals; namely, that they all have gold in them already and are interchangeable. The tincture, Boerhaave insists, adequately provides a sustainable “simulacrum” of truth.

Cudworth’s True System also resorts to the vocabulary of “putting on” outwardly assumed properties or signifying features in order to expound upon the conundrum of coming “to be.” “Covering up” the inner life which is consumed by its own expression, manifestation is once more accounted for as a necessary fiction, a voluntary illusion, by which one comes to know the informing principle of the self by virtue of its expression in the guise of a fictitious other. As in the Hermetic tradition, matter succeeds in actualizing its essence only by a paradoxical process of self-othering, which at once reveals and conceals itself. As Cudworth indicates: “things being variously concreted and secreted, transposed and modified, change their form and shape only, and are put into a new dress.” Conceding that there is “nothing truly infinite, neither in knowledge, nor in power, nor in duration, but only one absolutely perfect Being” which takes on the form and shape of something else, Cudworth writes that matter can only “mentiri infinitatem, counterfeit and imitate infinity.” Coleridge, adopting the phrase, also employs it to indicate the delimiting insincerity of separative creation:

My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something great – something one & indivisible – … But in this faith, all things counterfeit infinity.

523 Boerhaave, pp. 104, 115.
524 Cudworth, True System, p. 41, italics mine.
525 Cudworth, p. 647.
526 CL I 349: The phrase “counterfeit infinity”, as W. Schrix points out, is borrowed from Cudworth’s True System. W. Schrix, “Coleridge and the Cambridge Platonists”, Review of English Literature, VII (1966): 71-91. However, while Schrix points out that Coleridge borrowed the phrase from Cudworth, the full implications of a Mentiri infinitatem or the counterfeiting of infinity have still failed detection.
Seeking to make manifest or express the “indivisible” infinite, we can only overtake it with fictions, suggest both Cudworth and Coleridge. Any attempt to capture the infinite is to delimit it in finitude. “Matter is nothing but localised motion out of the absolute”, surmises Cudworth, putting on “the clothing of this terrestrial body.”

Finally, Plato likewise refers to the all-originating source of creation as “the composing artificer.” Specifically, in _Phaedrus_, while alluding to Thoth’s invention of writing, Plato tropes writing as a “pharmakon.” The term, intended to detail the merits of writing, translates ambiguously as an antidote or magical elixir as well as, strangely, poison. Suggesting the inherent advantages and disadvantages of the medium of writing, Plato remains deliberately vague. Notably, the term “pharmakon” also translates, as Derrida points out, as “paint, not a natural color but an artificial tint, a chemical dye that imitates the chromatic scale given in nature.” That the pharmakon is a dye or tincture, as if it is a merely superimposed imitation of what it really is, suggests that writing, like the alchemical tincturing of metals, is at once that which makes known and yet at the same time diminishes and moves out of the very thing that it seeks to make known. As a fictitious re-presentation of what is essentially within, it makes something known by virtue of a moving away from it, a deferment of the known in the guise, “tincture”, or language of an “other.”

The pharmakon or tincture, then, is at once both necessary and deceptive. It is necessary in order to express the underlying indifference, but it only proceeds by virtue of destroying the indifference that it endeavours to express. Plato, following in the Hermetic tradition, deliberately positions Thoth’s invention in the ambiguous interspace between truth and fiction, inside and outside, essence and appearance. It is at once both a revelation and a deception, an unveiling and a covering up. As a unique mingling of both truth and falsehood, by which an observer attempts to ascertain an even greater truth, writing is like the tinctured gold of the alchemists and is at once

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527 Cudworth, p. 877.
528 Plato, _Timaeus_, 41a, in _Collected Dialogues_, p. 1170.
529 Plato, _Phaedrus_, 275a, in _Collected Dialogues_, p. 520.
both salutary and maleficent. It is not truth itself, but as the re-presentation or manifestation of it, it
most accurately indicates truth. Simply put, it is productive, not of truth, but of an appearance
which can pass for truth. It is worth pointing out here that when the term is first introduced in
Phaedrus, Plato uses it to describe the charm by which Phaedrus lures Socrates out of the city as
well as to denote the written text of Lysias which Phaedrus keeps hidden from Socrates under his
cloak. Denoting at once the act of concealment and the thing concealed, the term “pharmakon”
reveals the act of artifice at the same moment that it cloaks over itself. We might say that it reveals
itself by concealing itself. This paradox, as we shall see, is essential to understanding the aesthetic
value of artifice and bears immediate relevance to the ironic achievement of Coleridge’s
plagiarisms in which he takes on the words of an other in order to express his own meaning. By
retooling the source sartorially, or dressing the undifferentiated origin in the guise of something
else, language reveals by concealing. It is the nature of the absolute to communicate itself only by
“covering it up”, “clothing it over”, and concealing itself. The manifest fiction of language, then, as
of the Hermetic art more generally, belies a deeper underlying truth about conveying oneself in the
guise of something other than what one is. Between the undifferentiated source and the extraneous
superposition or foreign tincture that is put on over it in order to denote it, there lies the art of
artifice.

ii. Coleridge and the Hieroglyphic Theta: Primary and Secondary Consciousness

Where there is geniture one finds error.

Corpus Hermeticum, 87.

As we have seen, by positing a nonoriginal source for all creation, the Hermeticists
maintain an ironic attitude towards the possibility of expressing, understanding, and re-presenting it.
Demonstrating an awareness of the finitude of self-exposition, the alchemical aesthetic forwards a
fragile but necessary fiction by which the originary source manifests itself in reality. In the
Chrysopoetic scheme, the generative process of nature is the movement out of a universal undefined indifference into qualitative distinction in manifest matter. Matter is but a delimited re-presentation of the original process of universal indifference in the form of an other. Thus, the informing subject can never grasp itself as what it is, for precisely in expressing itself it becomes an other.

Consciousness is predicated upon rupture in the order of the absolute. It is the requisite fiction of consciousness that the originating self be placed in opposition to the very thing it seeks to know. Absolute indifference, therefore, can never be an object of knowledge. It is an object only to the extent that it is eternally presupposed in expression in the other. Such objectification and manifestation inevitably divorces subjectivity from reflecting consciousness and leads to a kind of bad faith. The informing and originating indifference is destroyed in the act of coming to be. Alchemically speaking, the will brings about “magically”, or by an act of manifest fiction, form from formlessness, and definition out of chaos. Based on this twin gesture of “becoming other” whilst “remaining same”, the Chrysopoetic aesthetic charts a hermeneutic of improbability and voluntary artifice. It is upon the foundation of this basic conundrum that Coleridge formulates his own conception of human consciousness and the twofold activity of creative imagination.

Expounding upon this aesthetic conundrum in the Biographia, Coleridge writes that the subject and object are the most primary logical form of the dyadic characteristic of consciousness. He notes: “the ground of Consciousness, i.e. that which every act of Consciousness supposes, is the Identity or Indifference of Object and Subject, but the Indispensable Condition of becoming conscious is the Division or Differencing of the Subject and Object –.”\(^{531}\) In consciousness, asserts Coleridge, true identity is a mocking identity; that is, an indifferenced identity which proves itself by presenting itself in difference, or as a separative self. While the “ground of Consciousness” is undifferentiated, he stresses, the act of “becoming conscious” is arrived at only through radical separation, as if its preferred way of being “itself” were to be “other” than itself. This is the basic contradiction of human consciousness. What is in essence limitless must, in form and existence, be

\(^{531}\) CN IV 5276, italics mine.
delimited and determined. With the awakening of consciousness, the undifferentiated original takes shape. We might say that it writes or performs itself into existence and moves from a state of inexistence to existence. The self originates in alterity.

One cannot overstate the importance of Coleridge’s view of manifest existence as “a sort of unnatural outwardness”, or, as Coleridge writes in the Opus Maximum, a “strange and unnatural magic.” That the originating mind becomes manifest by virtue of an “unnatural outwardness” suggests that the projected “other” by which it comes to know itself is, Coleridge explains, “a mere phantom.” “But,” he continues, “as a necessary consequence of the first false step in the formation of the human character...experience is the warrant of its truth.” In other words, while the act of separation from the absolute is the act of self-creation, subject and object can only be said “to be” in any sense only if the difference is real. Thus while the difference is, as we have seen, grounded in falsehood and artificial separation, “experience”, nevertheless, becomes “the warrant of its truth.” The separative division, in other words, is necessary to human consciousness and awareness. As Coleridge puts it in The Friend: “Not TO BE, then is impossible: TO BE, incomprehensible.”

To become conscious of the “identity or Indifference of Object and Subject”, suggests Coleridge, it is necessarily to negate our original proximity with it. That the mind separates out of itself and into something other betrays a duplicity at the heart of a consciousness which can constitute an idea of itself only as exiting outside itself. In his annotations to Emanuel Swedenborg’s Prodromus philosophiae, in a passage which John H. Muirhead revealingly dismisses as belonging to the “Pythagorean...eccentricities rather than the essentials of Coleridge’s thought”, Coleridge explains:

The Finite can have only subjective existence – ie. it is a mere act of the mind, arising from a defect of perception...– In this we seek first for the Unity, as the only source of Reality; and then for the two opposite yet correspondent forms, by which it manifests

532 OM 126.
533 OM 124, 126.
534 The Friend, I, 514.
itself. For it is an Axiom of universal application, that ‘\textit{Manifestatio non datur nisi per Alterum}’ (Manifestation occurs only by means of another).\textsuperscript{535}

Constituting an idea of itself only by existing \textit{outside} itself, self-expression is in fact a movement \textit{away} from identity into a separative “\textit{other}.” By 1827, Coleridge asserts that while the absolute may be defined as “a Subject that is its own Object” or, “\textit{with no less propriety}”, “an Object involving its own Subject”, this cannot be the definition of the existing or manifest “\textit{I}”. The “\textit{I}”, writes Coleridge, must be identified neither with a singular empirical, phenomenal self, nor with absolute mind. It is, rather, the paradoxical condition of a

\begin{quote}
\textldots Subject recognising itself as a Subject. The ‘\textit{I}’ therefore cannot be conceived as the whole Mind; and tho’ it is indeed the mind itself, of which the mind is conscious (\textit{rectius dicetur, scious}) yet it is not of necessity conscious of it as itself. Something more, therefore, seems to be required for the existence of an ‘\textit{I}’, than mind in the universal idea. What is this?\textsuperscript{536}
\end{quote}

The “\textit{I}”, Coleridge explains, is “conscious...yet it is not of necessity conscious of it as itself.”

Retracting the word “conscious” in the parenthesized italics, Coleridge contends that it would perhaps be more correct to say that it is “\textit{scious}” since “‘con’ implies shared knowledge.”\textsuperscript{537} The point he is making here is that self-consciousness is necessarily a delimited and other-determined consciousness. The “\textit{I}” without the “\textit{other}” is but a kind of half-knowledge. More accurately, since the preontological mind is undifferentiated, the “\textit{I}” only comes to know itself by \textit{becoming other}, and hence “\textit{con}” (with) “scious” (knowledge). Knowing itself only \textit{with} and \textit{through} an ‘other’, consciousness removes the originating mind from its previous and primary indifference and places it in the realm of corporeality. It is worth pointing out here that “consciousness” whose Latin source means “to know” (\textit{scire}) “with” (\textit{con}) or, more precisely, to “have knowledge” “\textit{with}” an \textit{other}, applies in its original form most closely to Coleridge’s use of the term, and only later comes to mean “to know in oneself, alone.”\textsuperscript{538} The difference between ordinary consciousness as we configure it today and its etymological origin suggests that, for Coleridge, the Hermetic paradox of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{536} CN V 5670, \textit{italics in original}.
\textsuperscript{537} CN V 5670.
\textsuperscript{538} For more on the etymology of the term “conscious” see Lancelot L. Whyte, \textit{The Unconscious before Freud} (London: Tavistock Publications., 1960), p. 43.
\end{footnotesize}
origination is not only the necessary limitation of consciousness, but is also the burden of language itself. Coleridge explains:

> [T]he true Philosophy is that the Self is in & by itself a phantom, an ens non vere ens; but yet a non-ens non prorsus non-ens [a kind of being which is not true being; but yet a non-being which is not completely without being] because it is capable of receiving true entity by reflection from the Nation. It strives to become by the act of radiating to the Periphery: and it actually becomes, it is, by the reflection, the retroition of itself from the Periphery. Without the resisting & returning outline it would be lost in vague space & be for ever a mere striving at Being, a pure Selfness. \(^{539}\)

Defining self knowledge in the nomenclature of “radiating to the periphery”, Coleridge is once again recalling the circular theta of Hermeticism. Examined in the Hermetic tradition, we might say that the informing center takes on the garment of the alterity of its own self. Projecting a still unknown center along a peripheral other, in the tincture of a stranger, the originating point deconstructs as well as reclaims the alterity-within-identity from which it begins. This is a critical hermeneutic that requires the presentation of oneself-as-another-self. The paradox of consciousness, then, is that in order for the self to become conscious of itself as an original pre-existent and pre-ontological harmony, that is, to truly know the inherent unity of subject and object within itself, it must first disown it and project it as “other.” Self-exposition, like language itself, is necessarily other-determined. As Coleridge writes: “All consciousness begins in the distinction between Subject & Object – the Cogitans & the cogitatum.” \(^{540}\) Distinguishing the “one thinking” from the “thing thought”, the “subject becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself.” \(^{541}\) In the act of becoming an other to itself, the originating absolute arrives at an awareness of itself in the other. That is, it becomes at once other and remains entirely itself.

Echoes of the Hermetic paradox of origination abound.

Self-expression confronts the burden of an implicit dilemma between, on the one hand, an eternal purity and undifferentiated freedom in which consists the transcension of all limitations (beyond otherness) and, on the other, the negation of its own essence and eternal freedom in the

\(^{539}\) CN V 6914, italics in original.

\(^{540}\) SW&F II 829, italics in original.

\(^{541}\) SW&F II 829; BL I 273, italics mine.
separative fiction of conscious awareness (otherness). The absence of denotation and delimitation in the primordial abyss means that it is incapable of either manifesting or apprehending itself. In order to know itself, it partakes in the manifest fiction of the self in the other. Contrariety is the necessary path to self-revelation. It is important that when Coleridge casts the project of his aesthetics, it is with the recognition that this fiction is the necessary limitation of the trajectory of language itself. Recalling his Hermetic persuasions, he writes:

I would make a pilgrimage to the Deserts of Arabia to find the man who could make me understand how the one can be many! Eternal universal mystery! It seems as if it were impossible; yet it is – & it is every where! – It is indeed a contradiction in Terms: and only in Terms!542

That the one and the many are in fact a contradiction “only in Terms” acknowledges their union in the primordial harmony of the absolute self before the necessary separations of language. In its essence the “other” partakes of the “self”, while it is language which necessitates the split. More precisely, the limitations of language necessitate the knowledge of the “one” as a separative “other or multifarious “many.” Manifest expression, implies Coleridge, is therefore a superinduction, a kind of “putting on” as if from the outside. He elaborates:

Essence, in its primary signification, means the principle of individuation, the inmost principle of the possibility, of any thing, as that particular thing. It is equivalent to the idea of a thing, whenever we use the word idea, with philosophic precision. Existence, on the other hand, is distinguished from essence, by the superinduction of reality.543

That reality, as opposed to essence, is “superinduced” implies a kind of false guise or superimposed tincture which serves at once to reveal and conceal the underlying complexity. To know oneself in consciousness is to require a body outside or “other” than oneself. Thus, in “clothing” oneself in the guise of another, one “expresses” oneself into existence. If the creative imagination is the “Laboratory which turns essence into existence”, as Coleridge puts it, it does so by means of a

542 CN I 1561.
543 BL II 62, italics mine.
necessary fiction, or “trick” in which the absolute takes on a manifest existence under the guise or cloak of some external “other.”

Language, like consciousness, proceeds by a necessary fiction, or a radical self-separation for self-knowledge. As Coleridge puts it, “a Subject knows itself by the act of making itself an object for itself—: for this is the necessity of limitation, and imperfect Being.” He goes on in the Opus Maximum to extend this idea to language more generally, noting that thought can only be communicated “by words or language” but “all language is utterance, i.e. Outer-ance” of something which is already within (namely, “ideas”, or “meanings”) into an external form. That the object is, by a process of necessary deception, transferred out of the subject into a sense of “outness” recalls the Hermetic tradition in which the workings of our own being are separated and transferred out, and cloaked with a sense of reality. Recalling the false tincture, clothing, or guise of the other by which the absolute self authenticates or authorises itself into existence and points back to the truth of its indifferenced nature, the ‘other’ in imaginative terms is an illusory self-projection through which the self explores the inherent, but as yet undifferentiated, duplicity of its own mode of being. “Outering”, or “uttering” from within the absolute mind, into the other; projecting out and taking on an existence; and putting on the cloak of reality or matter; the absolute takes on the appearance, tincture, guise or cloak of the ‘other’ in order to perform itself to itself. The result is a kind of “delusion”, as Coleridge puts it:

Above all must the philosopher be on his guard against the delusion which arises out of his own communication of thought…This he cannot effect but by words or language. But all language is utterance, i.e. Outer-ance, and with Outness the imagination necessarily associates a sensation of reality more or less faint, and it requires all the caution of reason to prevent this sensation from passing itself [off] for a sense.

Seeing the face of nature and the whole process of creation as the self-division of one active power into two forces, Coleridge configures creativity as but a fraudulent “outness.” Warning that these

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544 CN II 3158.
545 CM 1 618
546 OM 312.
547 OM 312, italics mine.
false “outer-ances” are not to be confused with the essence from which they come, Coleridge also
concedes that it is only by these counterfeits of ideal and transcendent thought that we arrive at the
absolute which otherwise remains inexistent and indifferenced. It is important that Coleridge
describes this outerance as a “delusion” arising out of the common communication of thought and
language. All creation proceeds, he suggests, by an element of delusiveness or illusion; at once
becoming a thing and yet, at the same time, fraught with overtures of fraudulence. Creativity
requires an act of insincerity. The imagination at once unfolds away from and returns to itself,
becoming other in an act of necessary fiction in order to become more fully oneself. As Coleridge
expresses it in Biographia: “[w]e crave an outward confirmation of that something within us, which
is our very self, that something, not made up of our qualities and relations, but itself the supporter
and substantial basis of all these.”548 In Logic, Coleridge formulates the process even more
succinctly: “Without the repetition or representation of this act in the understanding [that]
completes the consciousness we should be conscious of nothing.”549 Notably then, this repetition of
the self in conscious existence proceeds by virtue of a paradoxical self projection in the ‘other’ in
order to know the ‘self.’ It is, according to Coleridge, a “separative Self-projection.”550 This is the
double gesture by which, as Ficino puts it, the original “does truth.”551 The mind expresses, while
attempting to retain, the original unity of its being through the performance of the self as projected
other. The mind, writes Ficino, “puts on the idea and becomes the truth itself of the thing which has
been created by that idea.” Stated alchemically, “the mind of the most complete theologian is as
‘gold refined by fire.’”552 Once again, illusion and alchemy may be seized upon to illustrate the
process of intellectual creativity and, through the art of artifice, alchemy reveals its most poetic
truth.

548 BL II 216-7, italics mine.
550 OM 328.
551 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 27.
552 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, IV, 29, italics mine.
In an important section entitled ‘On the Philosphic import of the Words, OBJECT and SUBJECT’ presented in the Shorter Works and Fragments, Coleridge refines his position as follows:

In the ordinary and unreflecting states, therefore, of men’s mind, it could not be otherwise, but that, in the one instance, the object must be lost, and indistinguishable in the subject; and that, in the other, the subject is lost and forgotten in the object, to which a necessary illusion had already transferred that outness, which, in its origin, and in right of reason, belongs exclusively to the subject... For outness is but the feeling of otherness (alterity) rendered intuitive, or alterity visually represented. Hence, and also because we find this outness and the objects, to which, though they are, in fact, workings in our own being, we transfer it, independent of our will, and apparently common to other minds, we learn to connect therewith the feeling and a sense of reality; and the objective becomes synonymous first with external, then with real.553

In the Hermetic vein, Coleridge insists that consciousness is engaged in a voluntary fiction or “necessary illusion”; the “other” is only the “feeling of otherness rendered intuitive, or alterity visually represented”, he writes. Recalling the limitations of the nomenclature of the caloric and of aureity, Coleridge suggests that while essence is undifferentiated, manifest expression requires the alignment (albeit mistaken) of the absolute with the “external”, and the further alignment of the “external” with the “real.”554 The self, subsequently, is conscious only of forms which work or effect it as a power other than itself. As Coleridge puts it:

I find myself alternately conscious of forms (=Impressions, images, or better or less figurative and hypothetical, presences, presentations) and of states or modes, which not feeling as the work or effect of my own power I refer to a power other than me, i.e. (in the language derived from my sense of sight) without me. And this is the feeling I have, of the existence of outward things.555

In Appendix B of the Opus Maximum, Coleridge continues in this vein, asserting that creativity is “mere potentiality... actualized” as other. Noting that the “darkness” from which all things emerge is “materia prima” or “indistinction in actu, multeity in posse”, Coleridge asserts that indistinction is, in essence, multeity in potentiality.556 This is the Hermetic formulation reiterated; namely, that all matter emerges out of an indifference in which all things exist in potentia until outered in the

553 SW&F II 929, italics in original.
554 SW&F II 929.
555 SW&F II 926, italics in original.
556 OM 389, italics in original.
multifarious variety of manifest existence. The "other", in this view, is essentially the projected indifference reflected back to itself. As Coleridge explains it: "Multeity" is actualized out of "Indistinction...so that the one shall be the Ground of the other." He continues: "Here commences the retro-action, of the second on the first as the first, the result of which must be contemplated distinctly tho' inseparably from the second."557 Once again, we are confronting the originary paradox of the one and the many; in which the one must be made two in order that the one may know itself as one. Coleridge ends the passage as follows: "we have the mere possibility of polar power" until something contained in the polar work "be superinduced" upon it. "This is the manner in which that which is Patiens acquires ens at all, or a Subject under any form."558

In order to bring together all these scattered references to expressive creativity in Coleridge's thought, I suggest that it is useful to regard them under the aegis of alchemical philosophy. Coleridge himself, throughout the course of his intellectual life, is riddled by "an intense craving after a resting-place for [his] Thoughts in some principle, that was derived from Experience, but to which all other Knowledges should be but so many repetitions under various limitations, even as circles, squares, triangles, & are but so many positions of space."559 This desire, albeit phrased rather peculiarly, recalls Timaeus' account of gold being poured into differently shaped moulds, and leads Coleridge to settle upon the theta hieroglyph in order to expound his own philosophy. Seeking to understand how the one can be many, or how the originating mind can repeat itself in the infinite variety of its creations, Coleridge suggests that generation occurs along a compass structure, in the expression of the self in the form of something else. His musings on the theta have much to suggest not only about the irony of consciousness, but also about the irony of his own plagiarisms. The manifestation of all formless ideas, musings, and speculations along formative, measurable and quantifiable categories of otherness in a compass configuration is a

557 OM 389, italics in original.  
558 OM 389.  
559 CL V 239.
fundamental, if overlooked, feature of Coleridge’s thought, and yet provides unparalleled insight into the plagiaristic representation of his own voice in the words of another.

The closest Coleridge ever comes to cataloguing a strict historical connection between his ideas and the ideas of those thinkers who precede him is in a notebook entry dated 1 January 1806 in which he describes his philosophy as a kind of “Spinozo-Kantian, Kanto-Fichtian, Fichto-Schellingian Revival of Plato-Plotino-Proclian Idealism.” The statement is clearly central to the whole question of Coleridge’s intellectual indebtedness. However, rather than satisfying the source-hunters of Coleridgean scholarship, I suggest that this statement is in fact a proud testament to Coleridge’s own mental vitality and, more revealingly, provides something of a hermeneutic strategy by which to better understand the borrowings and plagiarisms of the period. The entire passage reads:

It is the Iliad of Spinozo-Kantian, Kanto-Fichtian, Fichto-Schellingian Revival of Plato-Plotino-Proclian Idealism in a Nutshell from a Lilliput Hazel...all little Miss Thetas, the being a Circle, with the Kentron [Kentrum], or central Point, creating the Circumference & both together the infinite Radii – the central point is primary Consciousness = living Action; the circumference = secondary Consciousness (or Consc. in the common sense of the Word) and the passing to and fro from the one to the other Thought, Things, necessary Possibilities, contingent Realities...The • is I which is the articulated Breath drawn inward, the О is the same sent outward, the Θ or Theta expresses the synthesis and coconstantaneous reciprocation of the two Acts, the Dualism of Thought by Distinctions, the Unity of Thing by Indivisibility and then the Radii.

Aligning his syncretic aesthetic with the theta, a unique image in which a “Kentron” or central point defines the circumference of a circle and both together inform the infinite radii, Coleridge recalls the hieroglyph of gold. Recalling the alchemical nomenclature to explain the workings of his own creative process, Coleridge employs the theta as the symbol of his entire aesthetic project. The kentron or central point • of the theta, suggests Coleridge, informs the dimensions of the circumference, and both the centre and the circumference together О form the infinite radii. In

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560 CN II 2784; Orsini draws attention to this passage in Coleridge and German Idealism, p. 268.
561 CN II 2784; italics in original.
other words, as the central point remains fixed and the same, the circumference radiates out and
shapes and shifts itself into ordinary consciousness in manifest and varying forms. The image is in
fact an accurate depiction of the concept of unity in multeity, or of the possibility of becoming all
things while yet remaining the same. More precisely, Coleridge explains, the centre of the theta • is
“I, which is the articulated Breath drawn inward”, while the “O is the same sent outward.” In order
for the kentron to apprehend itself, he suggests, it must first express itself as an “other.” The theta
then represents the syntheses and coinstantaneous reciprocation of the two acts of self-exposition
and other-delimitation as \( \Theta \). The theta is a double gesture, or a uniquely ambidextrous move, in
which one attains “the Dualism of Thought by Distinctions” and “the Unity of Thing by
Indivisibility.” This amounts to a sense of “out-breathing”, or of breathing-out, by which an
unchanging central unity sustains itself while entering into and becoming an “other” along a
periphery.

In Patterns of Consciousness, Haven attempts one of the few analyses of the theta passage
in Coleridge criticism. However, his description is interesting less for what it says than for the
questions it leaves unanswered. Haven’s most substantial insight into the precise meaning of this
passage, for instance, amounts to nothing more than a flippant dismissal of its most promising
connections: “Like many of [Coleridge’s] speculations on natural philosophy,” he writes, this
passage “seem[s] like…the same kind of fanciful excess which we find in some alchemists.”

While Haven evokes the alchemical tradition here, he does not explore the matter any further.
Suggesting only that the passage is obtuse and obscure in the manner of the alchemists, he fails
even to mention that the theta symbol is in fact a rearticulation of the alchemical symbol for “gold.”

\[562 \text{Haven, Patterns of Consciousness, 129. For another, albeit equally brief, consideration of the theta symbol see J. A.}
\text{Appleyard, Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature: The development of a concept of Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard}
\text{University Press, 1965), pp. 105-6.}\]
Essentially, what Coleridge is identifying in this passage is the ironic growth of consciousness, or, what he calls the “incommunicable attribute of self-comprehension.”  Becoming more fully “itself” only by means of self-othering, or outering itself, the otherwise incommunicable kentron, or ‘I AM’ (the “articulated Breath drawn inward”), is re-presented in the manifest world by breathing itself forth in the “other”, which is after all, “the same sent outward”. This is a unique twofold function in which the originating source is preserved even as it extends itself out into manifest being. By a kind of “breathing out”, a central undifferentiated point sustains itself while entering into and becoming something “else.” In the Chrysopoetic aesthetic, the uniform kentron and its varied expression in the “other” is the hieroglyphic of the transcension of the formal categories of selfhood and otherness; more accurately, it is the manifestation of the principle of beyond otherness itself. It is certainly a fitting symbol of Coleridge’s aesthetic project, which he describes elsewhere as a “Forth-breathing Sound” and an “Ever re-incircling Act!”

Encompassing the Hermetic conundrum in a simple circular configuration, Coleridge employs the theta to brilliant effect in an attempt to expound upon the workings of his own creative mind.

In the passage on the theta, Coleridge aligns the central point to what he calls “primary Consciousness”, while the circumference corresponds to “secondary Consciousness.” As such, the theta illustrates the twin gestures which define the fictions of consciousness or, more appropriately, “con”-sciousness, itself. Pivoting about on its own centre, and hovering suspended between states of crystallization and contradiction, consciousness is twofold. It is at once that which allows for the transmutation of the self into an other and the emergence more fully of one’s own self. Moving in a circle, one radiates out of oneself into an other while yet always referring back to one’s originating point. In other words, the originary source, or author, is at once in himself and outside himself at the same time, at once entirely self and wholly other. Primary and secondary consciousness

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563 CL II 1196.
together perform self-knowledge through self-differentiation as the unchanging uniform kentron reveals itself to itself as other.

Consciousness in this light is quintessentially alchemical, and creativity proceeds by a twofold Chrysopoetic separation. Breathing itself forth as "other", the kentron or primary consciousness expresses itself relative to the formless indifference that is its origin. Expression or outerance partakes of an aesthetic existence or, more precisely, a separative reflexivity. Simply put, all expression occurs in the form of otherness. The in-breathing spirit is pressed out as an animated voice, or out-breathing, which is the voice of the originating author expressed as a separative other. The movement from hiddenness to manifestation, namelessness to name, undifferentiated primary consciousness to differentiated secondary consciousness is at once an act of self-annihilation and a gesture of self-discovery in the other. Expounding a hermeneutic of becoming by unbecoming, the twin function of the theta suggests that the shortest route from self to the self is inevitably through the other.

As we have seen, the theta is the hieroglyph of an impossible aesthetic. As the image of gold-making it represents the quest to express or extrapolate the source of all meaning and origination. The twin gesture proceeds only by virtue of a voluntary fiction. As Coleridge puts it, while "one central Point" unites the inherent complexity of manifest matter, expression necessitates positing a "lie, and a false and imaginary centre" out there.\(^{565}\) Expression, or substantial form, emerges out of pre-symbolic inexistence at a price. Coming to exist outside the self, it partakes in an irretrievable externalisation and alienation. With the emergence of the objective word for the substance, one passes out of indifference to difference by way of a separative fiction. The pre-existent unity of subject and object is an unthinkable, immanifest, and unutterable beyond-being, and it translates into language or conscious awareness only by "betraying" itself. Certainly, it is little wonder why Coleridge in his notebooks describes matter as "the phantom of the Absolute

\(^{565}\) CM I 560.
Will” or a “phantom self; that is, not united with the Absolute.” All manifest expression is a kind of “trick.” Simply put, creativity, like consciousness, is the separation and differentiation of an otherwise undifferentiated centre.

Ten years after his initial allusion to the theta in his notebooks, Coleridge recalls the language of the theta in the Biographia and reformulates his epistemological conundrum as follows:

Intelligence is a self development...under the idea of an indestructible power with two opposite and counteracting forces, which...we may call the centrifugal and centripetal forces. The intelligence in the one tends to objectize itself, and in the other to know itself in the object. 567

Self-knowledge or self-articulation occurs not only through the separation of self into an “other”, it is also captured most effectively in the image of a centrifugal or central force and by its projection or expression onto a centripetal or circumferential space. Continuing with this circular gesture a few pages later, Coleridge extends the twin activity of intelligence to “the imagination”, which,

...instinctively, and without our noticing the same, not only fills out the intervening spaces and contemplates the cycle (of B.C.D.E.F.&c.) as a continuous circle (A.) giving to all collectively the unity of their common orbit; but likewise supplies by a sort of subintelligitur the once central power, which renders the movement harmonious and cyclical. 568

The image of a unifying central power which essentially radiates the many ‘out’ of itself, as a necessarily cyclical fulfilment of itself and of its own potentiality, once again immediately recalls the theta passage of 1806. In the editorial notes to this passage in the Biographia, the circle image is attributed by Engell and Bate to either Schelling or Fichte who both contain an image of a circle used in a similar way. Satisfying the general tendency to hunt Coleridge’s thought back to some German formulation, the editors assert that: “Coleridge more immediately borrows the metaphor of these forces from Schelling.” 569 Hesitating, they then posit more tentatively that perhaps “Coleridge’s position is general, almost abstract, and Kant is also one of several possibilities he has

566 CN IV 5448; CN V 5661n.
567 BL 1266, italics in original.
568 BL 1267, italics in original.
569 BL 1286, n. 3.
Notable for its absence, however, the possible alchemical and Hermetic foundations of the passage still remain entirely ignored.

In a notebook entry dated around 1820, Coleridge returns to the compass structure and explains it as follows:

"[O]nly by meeting with, […] so as to be resisted by, another, does the Soul become a Self. What is Self-consciousness but […] to know myself at the same moment that I know another, and to know myself by means of knowing another, and vice […] versa an other by means of & at the moment of knowing my Self. Self and other are as necessarily interdependent as Right and Left, North and South."

While the vocabulary indeed resembles that used by Schelling, I suggest that the informing essence behind this passage is rooted in Coleridge's much earlier hermeticism. As he records in a passage in the notebooks almost twenty years earlier:

"My nature requires another Nature for its support, & reposes only in another from the necessary Indigence of its Being. -Intensely similar, yet not the same; or may I venture to say, the same indeed, but dissimilar, as the same Breath sent with the same force, the same pauses, & with the same melody pre-imaged in the mind, into the Flute and the Clarion shall be the same Soul diversely incarnate."

The "same Breath sent with the same force" but "diversely incarnate" recalls the inbreathing and outbreathing functions of the theta which, as it attempts to know itself, breathes itself forth in the form of an other. While the infusing spirit is the same, the manifestation is different, "similar, yet not the same", writes Coleridge, or if "the same, indeed yet dissimilar." In this unique aesthetic, self-expression proceeds by the entry of the self into the other. The imagination is the instrument whereby, in losing, we may re-create our selves, and only in opting out of the self may we come to know it. There is no coming to be without self-manifestation or self-expression in the other, Coleridge explains. Existence is predicated upon the delimitation of the self in the other. In Coleridge's etymology, "existence" necessitates the fiction of self-realisation or conscious personéity in the form of something "else." He writes: "By existence, i.e. stare extra [to stand outside], they of necessity became finite, & therefore inadequate, Images of their Prototypes in the

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570 BL I 267 n. 1.
571 CN IV 4929.
572 CN I 1679, italics mine.
divine mind...deriv[ing] their distinguishing & separate Natures from not-Being.” Put differently, by separating the infinite into the finite, consciousness comes “to know” by virtue of the fictitious separation of a more complex ground. Put another way, it passes into an other in order to know itself as self. In the etymology of existence, defined as “stare extra”, to come to be, or to take on narrative self-existence is to stand out beyond oneself in a process of endless self-surpassing. With the uncreated or immanent at the centre, manifest expression proceeds out of it and is “created” or “begotten.” Conscious existence thus proceeds only by the necessary creation of the ‘other’, and its subsequent arrangement in differentiation ‘out there’, from a space in which the ‘other’ itself cannot properly be said to “exist.” True to its alchemical hermeneutics, this is nothing less than the aesthetic of artifice.

Through a process of self-surpassing, the originary source passes out of itself into a space beyond the self. By a system of contraction and expansion or repulsion and attraction out of this central “punctum saliens”, the salient or starting point, all creation and existence emanates. Recalling the theta function, Coleridge explains how the absolute moves from “essential to all actual existence [as it] expands, or produces itself, from the point into the line, in order again to converge, as the initiation of the same productive process in some intenser form of reality.” Describing the movement from indifference to expression as a line – a manifestation and separation out of an original unity – Coleridge characterizes the originating indifference as “the equatorial point of the two counteracting forces.” Thus, the manifest form takes shape by separating from, and subsuming, its inherent indifference and infinite potential. Conscious existence opposes itself in order to become more fully itself.

In the Opus Maximum, Coleridge explains that while the “ground of possibility” contains “a contradiction as its essence”, it is only by the “ineffable distinction in the transcendent Unity” or by a “correspondent distinctness” that there arises “the actualization of the Indistinction and Multeity,

573 CM 1 573, italics mine.
574 SW&F 1 521.
575 SW&F 1 520, italics in original.
which so actualized in all the after grades of their potenziation becomes the real Poles in the omni
creato.” Actualisation, expression and manifestation, suggests Coleridge, proceed out of
indistinction into forged distinction. Splitting an originary indifference into two so that it may know
itself as one, the ab-solute (“without solution”) takes on the fictions of thisness and thatness,
selfhood and otherness, in order to approximate the indistinction out of which it originates. “In
resisting THIS,” continues Coleridge, “it of necessity allies itself with THAT.” This is the paradox
of origination and creative generation. “Distinction is the phantom of Division”, explains
Coleridge, as the indistinction appears or performs itself into being by “superinductions…and
superinducents” which are but an artistic rendering of the undifferentiated abyss from which it
originates. He stresses: “I scarcely need add that in reality neither of these Poles can exist, but as
variously modified by all.” Recalling the nomenclature of the theta, Coleridge describes the
process as the “Abduction from the Self, as manifesting the being drawn towards the true Center, as
the self-seeking or tendency to the false and fantastic centre in the opposite direction. These are
realized Poles, and manifested in the Creature = Vis centrifuga Vis centripetalis.” The
alchemical implication of such epistemological formulations is one of necessary artifice. Coleridge
renders the entire conundrum in one rather cryptic but succinct note in which he explains the theta
as follows: “Identity, or Co-inherence of two in one previously to the Manifestation of the
One, as two.” What is in truth the coinherence of “two in one” anterior to creativity, writes
Coleridge, must be made manifest as “two” in order to be known to consciousness. In other words,
what is inaccessible to consciousness must be made manifest, rendered in existence and in
difference and, in so doing, must lose itself. The other is a projected separation out of the self in
order for it to come to know itself as self. The separation is not only necessary for consciousness, it
is necessarily fictitious.

576 OM 327, italics mine.
577 OM 327, italics mine.
578 OM 392.
579 OM 328. also OM 392.
580 CM III 138, italics mine.
Since the absolute can never grasp itself as what it is, for precisely in attempting to become conscious of itself it becomes an other, life itself, as Coleridge puts it, is "artificially supplied by some delusive counterfeit." He writes:

It is only in the process of artificial education, though doubtless a necessary, though not necessarily a permanent, result that life itself becomes generalized into the more abstract formula of power...Whatever is visible, or rather, whatever is an object of sense as distinct from sensation, is shape. The principle, therefore, of shape must be invisible. In the implicit conception, therefore, of life as unity, as plastic, and as invisible, the human mind commences.

The necessary artifice, then, refers to the fiction involved in any act of self-construction, of which the aesthetic is one specialised version. All expressions essentially come out of an undifferentiated invisible "principle", suggests Coleridge, which takes on a false guise in the form of an other in order to be known to consciousness. Life entire, we might say, is necessarily and justifiably "hocus-pocused" into existence. An example from Coleridge's life might serve to elucidate some of the complexity he is suggesting here. In a letter to John Dawes dated May 1822, Coleridge voices his concern over his son Hartley's listlessness and lack of discipline. Lamenting his son's "absence of a Self...the want or torpor of Will, that is the mortal Sickness of Hartley's Being, and has been, for good & evil, his character-his moral Idiocy-from his earliest Childhood", Coleridge writes that Hartley displays no "narrow proud Egotism" but only the "relationless, unconjugated, and intransitive Verb Impersonal with neither Subject nor Object, neither governed or governing." Describing Hartley as the embodiment of subject-object indifference, "with neither Subject nor Object...governed nor governing", Coleridge asserts that the solution to Hartley's lack of character will only be if "Hartley could but promise himself to be a Self and to construct a circle by the circumvolving line." Lacking self-definition, Hartley must "construct" himself like a "circle", writes Coleridge, by a "circumvolving line." In other words, Hartley must radiate or project his centrality out of himself and establish it in another form. The allusion is unmistakably
Hermetic, and refers once more to the configuration of primary and secondary consciousness as it is illustrated in the theta. Characterising Hartley as “neither Subject nor Object” but a “relationless, unconjugated, and intransitive Verb Impersonal”, Coleridge implies that self-knowledge only comes by the one taking on the guise of an other; that is, by a subject coming to know itself as its own object. Six years earlier, Coleridge muses on “the individuality of Man” in comparable terms. Writing that while much “springs out of [man’s] own nature”, Coleridge notes that this very nature is “conditioned & determined by an outward Nature, that comprehends his own –”.

Once more, it is only by the subject’s delimitation in an other that the self may be said ‘to be’ itself. “Bethinged” by the “Circumstances & Inclosure” of the other, as Coleridge puts it, the relationless void progresses towards self-knowledge. Describing the inclosures and delimitations of the other as a “ring-fence” or “circumvolving lines” of outward Nature, Coleridge recalls once more the peripheral “circumvolving lines” of otherness that are the necessary condition of “self”-knowledge:

[T]his conspiration of influences is no mere outward nor contingent Thing...rather this necessity is himself, that without which or divided from which his Being can not be even thought must therefore in all its directions and labyrinthine folds belong to his Being, and evolve out of his essence.

Identity is expressed in the theta, along the periphery and manifest variety of otherness. As a formal paradox, Coleridge requires that we embrace the aesthetic authenticity of what is a formal impossibility.

As in alchemical metamorphosis and imaginative transformation, Coleridge describes the movement of the self into an other as an act of self-definition, a self projection or trajectory as “other” for self-identification. “And yet without confounding the inherent distinction between subject and object,” writes Coleridge, “the subject witnesses to itself that it is a mind, i.e. a subject-object, or subject that becomes an object to itself.”

That the informing center seeks its own periphery suggests the necessary separation and movement out of pre-existent matter into manifest

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585 CN III 4109.
586 CN III 4109, italics in original.
587 CN III 4109, italics in original.
588 SW&F II 928.
existence. Creation, Coleridge insists, proceeds by passing out of oneself into manifestation; a self-positing in the other. "We shall recognize the same forms", he writes, "under other names."\(^{589}\)

Understood in the twofold formulation of the theta, it would appear that in employing the words of others, the Chrysopoetic author is engaged in imaginatively, or indeed Chrysopoetically, locating himself. Elaborating upon the idea in the imagery of the compass, Coleridge writes:

> For Depth without Life is nonsense. And be pleased to observe throughout, that the Synthesis uniformly shews the Thesis and Antithesis, each taken separately, to be mere abstractions... but what is a center without a periphery? What a periphery without a center? What is a Circle without a describer? All mere absurdities, if interpreted as other than forms of Logic, means of distinct conception. —So again, we might perhaps deceive ourselves for a moment with Length and Breadth; but when we come to the Synthesis, viz. Length \(\times\) Breadth = Depth, we find that we have no real multiple but only a Length of Relation — but that a Life, a Power, an Inside, must have pre-existed, of which Length and Breadth are the process, the fluxions; and of which the Substance, the Life appearing, are the result.\(^{590}\)

Insisting that we "deceive ourselves" with the measurable quantifiers of conscious experience, Coleridge draws upon the nomenclature of length, breadth, and depth in Schelling’s system of natural philosophy, but what he stresses is the inherent artifice of the Hermetic conundrum of origination.

Expounding upon the inherent and voluntary fiction by which consciousness or self-knowledge proceeds, Coleridge emphasises that the self is othered as if by a kind of superimposition, a fiction that is put on from without. The self “doth not partake of its inwardness”, writes Coleridge in the Opus Maximum, “still heterogeneous from the Spirit it partakes only of the direction of the Spirit.”\(^{591}\) That is, the self is only “self” to the extent that it moves in the direction of the Spirit but never recreates the inward spirit itself. He explains: “It is the dry Leaf that moves <with> the motion of the moving Air, but neither inhales nor assimilates its vital inwardness. ‘The Spirit of God moved upon the surfaces of the Indistinctions.’”\(^{592}\) Creation, stresses Coleridge, emerges out of a vital “inhaled” “inwardness” but is expressed out of itself as a superficial act, a

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\(^{589}\) SW&F 1:522.

\(^{590}\) CL IV 773, italics mine.

\(^{591}\) OM 390.

\(^{592}\) OM 390, italics in original.
putting on of the likeness of something other in order to better know the self. The process results not in the “vacuity of Power, but [in] a relative Negation.” The result is no longer “<as in the Chaos> a mere potentiality <in essence>, but an actuality potentialized <ab extra>. “593 It is indeed not the same as the originating chaos, but is a re-presentation of it in the manifest world, albeit at its own expense. In the vocabulary of the theta, “ex-pression” is the pressing out of the amorphous inbreathing in the exhaled other. As an incarnational poetics, Coleridge explains it as follows: “it was the Breath of God on the closed Eye-lids of the Darkness.” Put differently, “The <Breath> goeth before the Word; but the Word is never without the Breath, but every accompanying ever followeth that which even more proceedeth thro’ and from the Word.”594 While the inbreathing consciousness is the primary origination, the “outbreathing” of it into the world in secondary manifestation is but the superpositioning of an other reality in place of the informing essence, gesturing towards but never attaining it.

As we have seen, Coleridge’s most comprehensive formula for life is the twin “power which discloses itself from within as a principle of unity in the many.”595 According to the dictates of consciousness, creativity first begins in the will. The will exists as a center for all creation, what Coleridge refers to as “primary Consciousness.” For the originating will to apprehend itself, to come to know itself as such, it must first breathe itself forth. This amounts to an expression of the “self” in the form of an “other.” This is denoted as “secondary Consciousness.” Self-exposition is therefore the twin gesture of “ex-pressing” or generating the self along the manifest periphery of the projected other. Whilst becoming “other”, however, the originary mind maintains within it the propensity to continue being what it is; that is, it becomes other while remaining entirely self-same. In order fully to comprehend the implications of this twofold paradoxical aesthetic of primary and secondary consciousness, we may now turn to examine its influence upon Coleridge’s formulation of the primary and secondary imagination.

593 OM 391.
594 OM 391.
595 SW&F 1510.
iii. Coleridge on Primary and Secondary Imagination

I have reserved until now Coleridge's precise definition of primary and secondary imagination because I needed first to finish establishing the alchemical framework in which I am attempting to situate it. Alchemy for Coleridge clearly encompasses certain aesthetic claims. The relative significance of Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination in his system of aesthetics is not without its contenders. Walter Jackson Bate, for instance, writes:

[T]his rather artificial distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' imagination is not among Coleridge's more lucid contributions to aesthetics... The passage may be regarded as simply a cryptic phrasing of what one may discover in other ways to be Coleridge's general theory of imagination... Whatever its meaning, Coleridge does not dwell upon it elsewhere. As it now stands, it is neither clear nor particularly helpful. 596

Dismissing Coleridge's definition of imagination as perfunctory and "unhelpful", critics such as Bate fail to appreciate the full significance of the twofold division in Coleridge's aesthetics. McFarland similarly remarks that: "there is no preparation for the [primary and secondary] distinction of chapter 13 in Coleridge's previous writings, there is none even in the Biographia... nor is it paralleled by anything else" in his reading. 597 Having considered in some detail Coleridge's distinction of "primary" and "secondary Consciousness" established in 1806, I suggest that the groundwork for Coleridge's theory of imagination already lies in the Hermetic tradition. For Coleridge, we are all the proprietors of a divided consciousness and, likewise, a divided imagination. Caught between the desire to express an undifferentiated source and the necessary delimitations of "otherness", the imagination, like consciousness, confronts its twofold nature and embraces the artifice of origination. As we shall see, the Biographia is particularly concerned with the transformative double gesture of the imagination. Hovering between the "primary" desire to assert the originating "I AM" and the inevitable failure of the "secondary" function to express it in one's own voice, not only does Coleridge's twin theory of imagination correspond precisely to the

597 McFarland, Originality and Imagination, pp. 91-2.
Hermetic conundrum of the theta, it is the consuming philosophical goal that Coleridge has been expounding for much of his life.

The twofold distinction of primary and secondary imagination is one of the most famous passages in Coleridge’s prose, yet it continues to be one of the least satisfactorily understood. The definition in the *Biographia* reads:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be 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. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.

Despite Coleridge’s ordering of primary and secondary imagination, scholars persist in contriving that the secondary imagination holds primary importance. Editor J. Shawcross, for instance, holds that primary imagination is merely “the organ of common perception, [or] the faculty by which we have experience of an actual world of phenomena.” Similarly, I. A. Richards maintains, rather reductively, that:

[Primary imagination is normal perception that produces the usual world of the senses...the world of motor-buses, beef-steaks, and acquaintances, the framework of things and events within which we maintain our everyday existence, the world of the routine satisfaction of our minimum exigencies.]

More recently, the editors of the Bollingen *Biographia* continue to depreciate Coleridge’s primary imagination to lesser acts of sensory and intellectual perception by asserting that the “Primary imagination is the power behind what Coleridge elsewhere calls the ‘mystery of perception’”, while the secondary imagination is the more creative or poetic force. This analysis by Engell and Bate concludes with the assessment that “there is no originality in primary imagination”, “the primary 

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598 BL I 304, *italics in original.*
601 Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, p. 58.
602 “Editors’ Introduction” in BL lxxxix.
imagination is more 'primitive'" and represents simply "the earlier powers of perception and realisation."603

Against this usual treatment of primary imagination as a relatively unimportant, simple organ of common perception, Jonathan Wordsworth expresses his reservation, pointing out:

Why should a man describe 'the world of the routine satisfaction of our minimum exigencies' as the result of a 'repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'? It seems a little extravagant.604

Reflecting on the longstanding confusion over the primary and secondary division, Wordsworth contends that Coleridge's movement from primary to secondary imagination in his definition is in fact a logical progression "from most to least important."605 The primary imagination, stresses Wordsworth, is aligned with the "eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" of which the secondary is but a mere "echo." The primary imagination, in other words, is privileged over the secondary.606 Following neither Wordsworth nor his predecessors in their placement on either side of the debate, but taking Coleridge's allusion to the primary imagination as a "repetition" of the infinite "I AM" as my starting point, I suggest that it is propitious here to regard the primary imagination as progressing naturally through to the secondary imagination and, more importantly, to expound upon and to sustain the continuum and exchange *in between* the two functions.

Specifically, in Coleridge's account of the primary imagination, we read that "the primary IMAGINATION" is "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and a repetition *in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM*." The primary imagination, it seems, is what Coleridge refers to in a letter to Richard Sharp in 1804 as "a dim Analogue of Creation" in the human mind.607 As a "repetition" in the finite mind of the "*eternal act of creation*", which undoubtedly describes the superiority of *divine* creation, the primary scheme implies the

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603 'Editors' Introduction' in BL xci, xcii, *italics* mine.
604 Wordsworth, *Borders of Vision*, p. 84.
607 CL II 450.
aspiration of the human imagination to attain to the divine unity of expression of the infinite and absolute "I AM." The primary imagination, in other words, aspires to the divine; it is the desire to repeat the "eternal act of creation" in the self- affirming "I" of human subjectivity. Coleridge's definition of the "repetition" of the "infinite I AM" in the primary imagination is recalled at the end of chapter twenty four, at the close of Biographia. Asserting that it is "the Object" of his "LITERARY LIFE" to "preserve the Soul steady and collected in its pure Act of inward Adoration to the great I AM, and to the filial WORD that re-affirmeth it from Eternity to Eternity, whose choral Echo is the Universe", Coleridge appears to be alluding to the "repetition" of the "infinite I AM" in the primary imagination. In Coleridge's Poetics, Paul Hamilton suggests that the correspondence between the definition of primary imagination in chapter thirteen and the closing lines of the Biographia may be accounted for by the original positioning of these two lines in close proximity, if not immediately side by side, before the extensive revisions to the text led to their later expansion and separation. Moreover, given the verbal and figurative "echo" in both passages, it is likely that the original formulation of the primary imagination held both of these lines together, thereby aligning the primary imagination with the divine act of creation in the universe more explicitly.

If indeed the primary imagination is a repetition of the "eternal act of creation" in the finite mind, it most certainly designates something greater than a mere organ of common perception. Approximating most closely the creative power of God by "repeating" the "I AM" of divine creativity, the primary imagination attempts to reconfigure God's first and eternal creative act in the human imagination. The poet, in other words, strives to "echo" the creativity of the divine mind by attaining his own unmediated expression of the "I" in his creation. The connection of the poet creating his poem to God creating the world is a Platonic and Hermetic thought of venerable antiquity. Recalling the Delphic Oracle to "KNOW THYSELF!", Coleridge suggests that the

608 BL II 247-8.
609 Hamilton, Poetics, pp. 47-54.
primary imagination is but one version of this Delphic command from on high. In order fully to appreciate the continuum between the divine “I AM” and the primary imagination, we must begin with an assessment of the nature of the “I AM.” Coleridge’s reference to the “infinite I AM” ostensibly implies the superiority of divine creation (the “I AM THAT I AM” of the Bible). Providing an extensive footnote on the nature of “the absolute self, the great eternal I AM” in chapter twelve of Biographia, Coleridge asserts that Jehovah in his “self-consciousness”, that is, in his naming of himself to Moses in Exodus as “I AM”, “reveals the fundamental truth of all philosophy.” The precise nature of this revelation is worth examining. Coleridge writes:

It is most worthy of notice, that in the first revelation of himself, not confined to individuals; indeed in the very first revelation of his absolute being, Jehovah at the same time revealed the fundamental truth of all philosophy, which must either commence with the absolute, or […] cease to be philosophy.

That all philosophy must begin with the absolute “I AM”, the eternal act of self-affirmation by God the Father, undoubtedly affirms the primacy of the primary imagination, which is its repetition in the finite mind. Expressing his regret at the general tendency among readers to misunderstand this principle of “I AM”, Coleridge writes:

I cannot but express my regret, that in the equivocal use of the word that, for in that, or because, our admirable version has rendered the passage susceptible of a degraded interpretation in the mind of common readers or hearers, as if it were a mere reproof to an impertinent question, I am what I am, which might be equally affirmed of himself by any existent being.

Insisting upon the primacy of the “I AM” assertion, Coleridge returns to the subject in 1833 with the pronunciation that: “None but one – God – can say I am I, or That I am.” Expanding upon the importance of this principle in a manuscript note to Robert Southey’s copy of Omniana, where Southey writes that “I am he who am, is better”, Coleridge retorts:
No! the sense of *that* is = because, or in that – I am, in that I am! meaning I affirm myself [and], affirming myself to be, I am. *Causa Sui.* *My own act is the ground of my own existence.*

The divine configuration of the “I AM THAT I AM” who sent Moses to his Forefathers in Egypt, explains Coleridge, presides at the beginning of all philosophy and is at once an existing and self-subsisting reality. It represents the *ideal* of direct, *unmediated,* self-expression. In response to Moses’ question, the assertion “I AM THAT I AM” not only *affirms* God’s identity, but *is* the identity it affirms. The *act* of saying I AM, in other words, *is* the ground of its own existence. It is for this reason that the active and formative “I AM THAT I AM” is not interchangeable with the simple denotative “I AM WHAT I AM.” Coleridge explains that the assertion “I AM THAT I AM” is at once God’s *act* of self-conscious expression *as well as* his actual identity. In *expressing* Himself He *is* Himself. The “I AM” is the eternal antecedent or ground of Being *as well as* the “Self-affirming Actus purissimus [Absolutely Pure Act].” He *is* at once the voice that speaks as well as His expression; while He sits outside and performs the action, He is also immanent and implicit within it. Coleridge writes:

> If we elevate our conception to the absolute self, the great eternal I AM, then the principle of being, and of knowledge, of idea, and of reality; the *ground of existence,* and the *ground of the knowledge of existence,* are absolutely identical, Sum quia sum; I am because I affirm myself to be; I affirm myself to be because I am.

God’s self affirmation is a tautology, writes Coleridge; that is, an enigmatic turn of phrase which both *affirms* and *is* the unique reality of divine origination. The “ground of existence” and the “ground of the knowledge of existence” are one and the same. As Coleridge explains, the phrase “I AM THAT I AM” at once *affirms* the self and *is* the self that it affirms. God both *is,* and is *manifest in,* His self-affirmation. This divine gesture, writes Coleridge, is the expositional imperative and sustainable paradox of God *alone.*

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615 BL I 275 n. 2.
616 CM I 287.
617 BL I 275., *italics mine.*
In the primary imagination, then, emanating out of a *repetition* of the “infinite I AM” in the finite mind of man, the human mind also seeks to express or manifest itself to itself unmediated by the limitations of differential knowledge. The primary imagination, in other words, is akin to the divine exegesis of the “I AM” which expresses itself in the phenomenal world and, in so doing, *knows* itself. Guided by the will to self-knowledge, the “I” is engaged in a narrative of self-manifestation and self-expression and seeks to assert itself in its creation. Simply put, the primary imagination is guided by the desire of the “self” to *assert itself*. However, whereas in the Godhead, self-expression is attained via a direct and unmediated process in which God is at once the voice that speaks and the expression that is spoken (that is, where God’s self-assertion, “I AM THAT I AM”, is identical with the existential Being it expresses), this is *not* the case in primary imagination. Unable to assert “I AM THAT I AM” without loss or movement away from the self, which is the exclusive domain of the originating divinity, human creativity advances only by a necessarily fictitious gesture out of itself. In other words, while the divine “I AM” is equated with the idealist notion of Creation, the primary repetition of it in the finite mind, by contrast, is more precisely a function of the properly poetic work of human imagination and, with it, the necessary aesthetic limitations of the creative artist.

Since direct unmediated self-exposition is only possible in the absolute Godhead, who alone can say “I AM I” or “THAT I AM”, the immediate questions for the case of primary imagination in the finite mind are: What are the necessary conditions by which the *human* mind might aspire to acquire self-consciousness or self knowledge in order to say “I AM”? How does human consciousness “know itself”? Given that the primary imagination is the “*repetition*” of the eternal act of creation *in the finite mind*, how precisely might we account for the creative difference between God and man? The answer to all of these questions comes in the form of the *secondary* imagination and is predicated by something Coleridge has already witnessed in the Hermetic tradition. While the Godhead is able to assert “I AM” without any mediation or loss of self, the
imaginative process in man is inevitably burdened by the inherent difficulty of saying “I am” in one’s own voice.

Before I turn to Coleridge’s explanation of how the secondary imagination mediates the primary desire for self-expression, it is worth briefly pausing to consider the Hermetic distinction between divine creativity and creativity in man. In the *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino writes: “If the Creator of the world knows all things, He certainly did not look to others in order to perceive them.” Unlike God, who knows all things *in Himself*, man acquires self-knowledge only through mediated *otherness*. Ficino elaborates:

God’s own understanding is to understand Himself... He does not need to look outside Himself at the ultimate effects in the *secondary* causes, since He is the *primary* source of His own being and the cause of being in all the secondary causes... [God sees things] not in themselves but in Himself, not through their images but through His own essence... He does not have to look for them: He possesses them.

Ficino’s account of the “primary source” of being in God and the “secondary causes” as they are manifest in the counters of consciousness undoubtedly prefigures Coleridge’s separation of primary and secondary imagination. It is the artifice and fiction of human consciousness, suggests Ficino, that one must seek one’s own character expressed at a separative distance *outside* oneself. While God knows Himself without the assistance of anything *other* than Himself, human consciousness and imagination are precisely delimited by the “other.” Self-exposition in man is necessarily other-determined. As Ficino explains: “divine being is act directed towards itself, since divine *not-being* would be act directed towards *another.*” When the mind “rises up towards the intellect and [the] universal it is also called indivisible, but when it sinks down towards the senses and individuals it is called divisible.” Ficino further elaborates upon this distinction by relating the difference between the primary source and secondary causes to the difference between the sun and the variously coloured windows through which it shines. He writes:

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By means of various intermediaries the divine power divides itself into different effects, just as the light of the Sun, which in itself is indifferent to any given color, if it shines through two stained glass windows, one of which is red, the other green, will produce two patches of lights on the floor, one red, one green. That each is bright derives absolutely from the light. That one is red, the other green also derives from the light, but the light takes different forms depending on which window it is shining through.  

While the secondary causes or forms imply certain properties of the primary source, explains Ficino, they do not account for the nature of being itself. In other words, while the windows through which the sun shines account for the differences of colour and visible effects, they do not account for their light. While the primary power is direct and unmediated being, the secondary cause diffuses and diversifies the primary cause, able to know it only in its manifestation as something other than what it is. Unable to communicate the primary cause directly, the secondary agent confines it to its own differential imperatives and thereby causes it to be of one kind rather than another.  

Ficino concludes: “Being is the first of all effects, for the rest is nothing other than particular determinations and properties of being. Every single thing in nature first exists; then it exists as this or that, as a particular thing.” This tendency towards divisibility and dissolution in the secondary or finite mode of being is elaborated in the Corpus Hermeticum which formulates the conundrum as follows:

It is impossible for all coming-to-be to come to be of its own; coming-to-be necessarily comes to be of another… in an immortal body the change is without dissolution; in a mortal body there is dissolution. And this is what distinguishes immortal from mortal, mortal from immortal.

In the finite attempt and desire to partake of divine creativity, the human mind confronts the inevitable failure and insincerity of consciousness. Separation, dissolution, and the artifice of otherness is the necessary prerequisite of human creativity, explains Hermes. In the Hermeticum, the necessary separation and dissolution of the secondary consciousness is posited firmly against the indissoluble or absolute will. Enquiring after the nature of the absolute, Tat asks Hermes: “Tell

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622 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 143-5, italics mine.
624 Ficino, Theologia Platonica, I, 143, italics mine.
625 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 59, italics mine.
me father, does this body constituted of power ever succumb to dissolution?" Outraged, Hermes gives Tat the following reply:

Hold your tongue; do not give voice to the impossible! Else you will do wrong, and your mind’s eye will be profaned. The sensible body of nature is far removed from essential generation. One can be dissolved, but the other is indissoluble; one is mortal, the other immortal.

This Hermetic distinction between the absolute “I AM”, which is an indissoluble and finite consciousness, with that which is necessarily dissoluble and subject to the constraints of time, history, mutability, and manifest existence, is the informing impetus behind Coleridge’s own formulation of the distinction between primary and secondary imagination.

Striving to repeat the self-affirming and self-generating quality of the infinite “I AM”, the primary imagination cannot sustain the paradox of divine creation without loss. Instead, it must be mediated and negotiated through the activities of the secondary imagination. Coleridge’s definition of the secondary imagination reads:

The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.

“Co-existing with the conscious will”, the aspirations of the primary imagination are tempered by the actions of the “secondary imagination.” Fulfilling the primary will to self-knowledge only by the mediations of secondary expression in the conscious world, the secondary imagination is characterised by its lapse into dissolution and separation. Specifically, as Coleridge explains, the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.” Far from the divine, unmediated, assertion of the “I AM THAT I AM”, the secondary imagination satisfies the primary desire to recreate or repeat it only by paradoxically destroying it. Whereas in God, to know and to will are of the same kind, for they both begin and end in God (God is his act of self-expression), the human imagination is unable to sustain such a paradox without lapsing into artifice. While God can perform the action and finish it within Himself, the human capacity to know or to will something is

626 Copenhaver, Hermetica, p. 52.
627 BL 1304.
something one does, not something one is, and the action must necessarily be relegated to an object which is other than oneself.

In the secondary imagination, then, the human mind comes to an understanding of its own artifice. The absolute may be inferred but not be re-presented except as polarity, division, and dissolution of the very thing it seeks to express. This is the conundrum with which Coleridge is occupied from his earliest Hermetic readings and it is here reformulated as the conundrum of the twofold imagination. Seeking primary incarnation by secondary dissolution, the manifest is fulfilled by distortion, creation by dissolution, and "self"-expression by delimitation in the "other." As Coleridge elaborates:

Absolute oneness in the manifestation may be known, indeed, or inferred, as Oneness; but cannot appear except in and by the many, or not-one, as the condition of the Distinct – an angle requires two lines to manifest it – &c...Since then the Monad or Indistinction can be made manifest only by the Many (the Dyad we will suppose;) and as each is distinct in relation to that from which it is distinguished; it follows, that all manifestation is by Opposition...as distinct Muleity to absolute Identity.628

Manifest consciousness, Coleridge insists, is but the imposition of difference upon that which is, in essence, indifferent. Transforming unity into multeity, the secondary imagination ironically fulfills the demands of the primary desire for self-knowledge, "for unity is essential to the Imagination, but at the same moment the Imagination must make it many."629 This is the necessary, if paradoxical, twin gesture of the twofold imagination. The secondary imagination, suggests Coleridge, is the power of "imagining" the primary "I" into the manifest world, and yet it does so only by artifice and necessary fiction. Secondary imagination is the spagyric, or alchemical, process which, by diffusion, distillation, separation, and rearrangement, provides paradoxical insight into that which is previously indifferenced and inseparable. These two gestures of the imagination together symbolize the self-affirming and self-erupting psyche, as the original "articulated breath drawn inward" is "out-breathed" in the form of a dissolved and separated "other"; what is essentially one must be denoted as two.

628 CN IV 4513, italics in original.
629 CM IV 382.
Unable to sustain the inherent paradox of origination, the originary self acquires existence only at the expense of itself as the secondary imagination dissolves, diffuses, dissipates it in order to re-create it as something else. It becomes by unbecoming, as self-expression amounts to a projection or dissolution of the originary center. Defining the finite imagination as a twofold activity, uniting the primary desire to express the informing “I AM” with the dissolving function of the secondary imagination, Coleridge combines primary and secondary activities to promote a unique aesthetic of artifice. The primary imagination attests to the drive for self-knowledge, while the secondary imagination attains it only by virtue of “dissolving, diffusing and dissipating” the self under the auspices of otherness. Negotiating the nomenclature of alchemy with his definition of the secondary imagination, Coleridge sheds some light upon “that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination” by which an author “re-creates” the self as other.\(^{630}\)

In the attempt and desire to partake of divine creativity, then, finite consciousness comes up against the inevitable failure and insincerity of human creativity in the form of secondary imagination. Coleridge’s exposition in the Biographia on the necessarily ironic nature of self-expression is frequently sourced back to Schelling who clearly expounds upon a similar idea. In Schelling’s System of Transcendental Idealism, for instance, we read:

> In the fact of my knowing, objective and subjective are so united that one cannot say which of the two has priority. Here there is no first and second; both are simultaneous and one – Insofar as I wish to explain this identity, I must already have done away with it.\(^{631}\)

Coleridge’s appropriation of Schelling in the Biographia is as follows:

> During the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs. There is here no first, and no second; both are coinstantaneous and one. While I am attempting to explain this intimate coalition, I must suppose it dissolved.\(^{632}\)

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\(^{630}\) BL 1304, II 16.

\(^{631}\) Schelling, System of Transcendental Idealism, p. 5, italics mine.

\(^{632}\) BL 1255, italics mine.
While the formal pattern of Coleridge’s passage may be derived from Schelling, what is important here is that Coleridge explains the attempt to express the fundamental indifference of the absolute as a process of chemical dissolution. This formulation is entirely Coleridge’s, and is more expressly alchemical than Schelling’s account. Betraying his alchemical and Hermetic system of thought, Coleridge goes on to write:

Consciousness must therefore be an ACT; for every object is, as an object, dead, fixed, incapable in itself of any action, and necessarily finite. Again, the spirit [originally the indifference of object and subject] must in some sense dissolve this identity, in order to be conscious of it, *sit alter et idem* [It is made another and the same].

Describing the diphasic nature of all expression, Coleridge accounts for the necessary dissolution of the essential indifference of self and other even as one tries to affirm it.

Recalling Coleridge’s configuration of secondary consciousness, the secondary imagination satisfies the will to self-expression by the spagyric or alchemical “splitting apart” or “dissolution” of that which it seeks to express. Coming up against the limitations of its own separative inadequacy, the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates” in order to re-create the self as something other than itself. Elaborating upon the particular nature of the “dissolution” in secondary imagination, Coleridge points out that it is the paradox of the human condition and of creative self-expression more generally that in the blind striving by which one seeks to know oneself, one loses the self entirely. In the Opus Maximum, Coleridge refers to this conundrum as “the perpetual act of Self-destruction by essential Contradiction in the self-affirming Will.” Self-exposition, he writes, is the alienation and manifestation of the self in the form of an other.

Creation is:

...a going forth...but yet it is *a going forth against*, for it is the Apostate Self-Will, *<it>* is a blind coveting, *<an uncoiling and distending>* enmity which is the materia or subject of the influence. It is still the Self-will actualized...<or dis-self’d->.

Seeking to express itself by a “blind” uncoiling and distending of the self away from the self, creativity is a dissolution of the very thing it seeks to express. It is, as Coleridge stresses, a “dis-

633 BL 1 279, *italics mine*.
634 OM 390, *italics mine*.
selfing” by which the self is ironically dissolved in the attempt to assert it. Expression is a fragile but necessary fiction, suggests Coleridge, the result of which is but a “division and dissolution” of an otherwise indissoluble absolute. It is the necessary fiction of consciousness and the requisite limitation of language that the secondary imagination constructs by deconstructing.

The desire to assert the primary I AM at the level of the finite mind results in the dialectic of self-consciousness and imaginative self-othering. Paradoxically, then, the repetition of the absolute I AM in conscious existence proceeds by virtue of an ironic drive towards self-manifestation in the “other.” While the primary imagination aspires to repeat the expressive achievement of the divine “I AM”, the secondary imagination confronts the limitations of separative artifice. Satisfying the quest to “know thyself”, the secondary imagination succeeds only by the irony of a “separative projection” of the self as other (“dis-self’d”). The primary and secondary imagination, then, may be said to combine to form a unique twofold gesture by which an author can simultaneously become something “other” (by virtue of the secondary imagination) and yet remain entirely “oneself” (the “I AM” of primary imagination). The I AM, desirous of its own self consciousness, issues forth in duality. Originating in an undifferentiated unity-in-multeity (a state of indifference and inexistence, or, the identity of identity and difference), the movement from inexistence into existence necessitates, by definition, a bifurcation of what is originally and essentially beyond division into the language of ‘otherness’ in manifest consciousness. This “separative projection”, as Coleridge terms it, acts as a “requisite” and “serviceable fiction".635

Where God sustains the paradox, then, the duplicity of human consciousness disallows it and we fall into necessary artifice. Coleridge explains that in the Godhead, “both factors pre-exist, each in the other, a perfect One as Prothesis; [but] in man the analogous factors appear severally as Thesis and Antithesis, and he himself is to complete the analagon by uniting them <in> a Synthesis which, as is before shown, he can effect only by a continued act of subordinating the one to the

635 SW&F I 534.
other." The secondary imagination, like secondary consciousness, operates by virtue of a separative fiction by which it understands the primary consciousness which informs it. As Coleridge writes: "the results of the individual Will, [are] determinable only by history, that is, the fact itself...that, therefore, the proper character may be lost." The paradox of consciousness, that is, is that self-knowledge is necessarily acquired at the loss of the self or, more accurately, by the artificial exclusion of everything that belongs to the self being placed outside self-consciousness.

In the end, then, it is the aesthetic artifice of the twofold imagination that the task of self-exposition invariably necessitates insincerity and impersonation. Enacting both primary and secondary gestures, self-knowledge is at once a rupture from out of the self into the other and an act of self-affirmation, or return to the self. Only in the interspace between the primary and secondary imagination can we understand fully the Hermetic implications of Coleridge’s formulation. In the Hermetic tradition, this ambivalence stems from the genetic link between fiction and reality; artifice and the absolute; truth and necessary artifice. In the imagination, the cycle of projected other and self-return is the necessary fiction of consciousness and a requisite of the divine dictum "Know Thyself." In the Hermetic analysis, the secondary imagination fulfils the specialised requirements of the primary imagination by a kind of manifest fiction. Hovering between the demands of the primary imagination and the necessity of separating oneself into the “other”, the debate about the comparative merit of primary and secondary powers is superseded by the imagination’s ability to transcend such binaries and to embrace the interplay in between the two. The alchemical influence upon Coleridge affords a reinterpretation of his theory of imagination. A “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” is not a poor copy of a distant reality; it is the only reality to which we are permitted narrative access. “There is here no first, and no second; both are coinstantaneous and one”, writes Coleridge. In the negotiated interspace between

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636 OM 81.
637 OM 83.
638 BL I 255.
primary and secondary functions, we become the other and the other lays open to us secrets of our own.

For Coleridge, as for the Hermeticists, human imagination images divine consciousness, but only as a dim analogue. Labouring simultaneously under the delimitations of a secondary imagination which “co-exists” with a “con-scious” will, the mind must look through others in order to look at itself. Where God’s creative act and His revelation of Himself to Moses is a literal identity, human exposition is never literal, original, or independent, in the same way. The twofold imagination is already a repetition at a remove from the indifferenced subjectivity and objectivity that it seeks to convey. Unable to assert unproblematically the tautological I AM THAT I AM, the author projects and reflects the originary “I” in the form of a distanced and separative “other.” Caught between the twin gestures of primary and secondary imagination, the author comes to a realisation of the impossibility of saying “I AM” in one’s own voice.

The result, once more, is a lapse into the artifice and fictions of alterity and con-sciousness, by which we require a separative “other” in which to know the “self.” Proceeding by way of artifice, trick, and play, the twin imagination allows us to fictionalise and achieve ironically that which is simultaneously present in the absolute. While God does not need the ruse to sustain the paradox, it is the necessary irony of human consciousness that we must be insincere in order to have a role in which to be sincere. Insofar as one attempts to attain self-knowledge through primary imagination, the “self” must be “dis-selved” in its expressive or poetic incarnation in the secondary imagination. While the desire to express the undifferentiated self is the point of departure, the self can only be known through the secondary intentions. Seeking self-expression primarily, the human self is dissolved secondarily, and it is only in the artifice of the twin gesture that one recognises the essential indifference of the self. Coleridge’s twofold imagination is a quintessentially alchemical act. Operating in the lacuna between the desire for self-expression (primary imagination) and the necessarily other dependent nature of all expression (secondary imagination), the imagination is at once an aesthetic failure and an ironic achievement.
Chapter Eight:  
“Play”giarism and the Aesthetics of Betrayal: The Mirror and The Lamp Revisited

I want to read something by somebody [else...]  
if only to give an arrangement to my own thoughts.  

Coleridge to Davy, 2 December 1800\(^{59}\)

How do I know what I think until I see what I say?  

E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel.\(^{640}\)

[The] soul must become its own betrayer...the mirror turn lamp.  

W. B. Yeats, The Oxford Book of Verse.\(^{641}\)

As we have seen, the imagination progresses by a movement away from what it seeks to express in order to express it. This conundrum results in the twin process of “receding” in order to “proceed.” Put differently, the imagination seeks to make manifest that which is beyond manifestation by bringing the originary absolute into secondary and separative existence. The movement occurs in what Coleridge calls the “tremendous Medium between Nothing and true Being.”\(^{642}\) This “tremendous Medium” in which the self expresses itself and yet becomes an other, is the Hermetic paradox by which indifference moves into difference, and the immanifest moves into manifest consciousness. The expression of the self, in other words, necessitates the falsification of self as other.

The Hermetic author inhabits the space between the desire for primary incarnation and the dissolving counterspirit of secondary imagination. Between the desire for self-knowledge and the

\(^{59}\) CL 1648.  
\(^{642}\) CL IV 545.
difficulty of saying "I am" in one's own voice without dissolution and loss, the twofold imagination enacts an aesthetic of necessary artifice. Every act of self-exposition overrides distinctions of subjectivity and otherness since twin imagination, like twin consciousness, necessitates the feigned expression of oneself in the words of another. This movement out of the nonoriginal origin into manifest otherness is not altogether different from the movement of life into art, ideas into narrative, thought into expression. Operating in the lacunae between the absence of meaning and the desire to make meaning, or between the amorphous abyss and the desire to extract and express manageable gold (or God) from it, all Chrysopoetic exposition or poësis is a mediating "play" in between Cartesian opposites.

We are the heirs of a divided consciousness. In between the desire to attain knowledge of the I AM and the necessary artifice of self-expression which dissolves, diffuses and dissipates the very thing we seek to know by "recreating" it as "other", the mind hovers in an in-between state. As we shall see, in order to account for this mysterious in-between state, Coleridge proposes what he calls a "tertium aliquid", or "third something", which is the space where the imagination truly triumphs. Caught in an aesthetic of artifice, the imagination operates in a tertium "play" in between the desire for self-expression and the inadequacy of other-determined consciousness. Notably, Coleridge also refers to this space as the "golden tertium aliquid", thereby rearticulating the essentially Chrysopoetic gesture of consciousness and creativity. In this unique interspace, the mind is able to sustain the distance between self and other without conflating the opposition. Self-expression proceeds by a continual self-othering and, in the paradoxical space between origination and utterance, the originary source becomes "other" in order to preserve authenticity rather than to destroy it altogether.

Coleridge, as we have seen, assumes a personhood founded upon the performance of two enacting sides of consciousness and imagination. In the separation, dissolution, and projection of elements already within the self, the imagination allows that one becomes something other while becoming more fully oneself. The art of alchemical imagination, then, is the art of artifice. The
fiction or necessary fraud of the other is in fact the tell-tale quality of the originating self. It is the paradox of separative "con-sciousness" and self "ex-pression" that the emergence of the self requires the sacrifice of the self. The necessarily fictitious nature of this twin process is also the defining conundrum or, if you will, the deliberate art(ifice) of Coleridge's "play" giarisms. Assuming a personhood founded upon the performances of an enacting, othered, self, Coleridge's "play" giarisms enact the confounding paradox of authenticity and utterance in its purest form.

i. The Aesthetics of Betrayal

The desire to express the inexpressible is necessarily fraught with paradox. Expressing oneself in the form of an other, all expression necessarily occurs in the language of otherness. When we speak, write, and express ourselves, we do so in the constraints, bonds and superimpositions of a language that is essentially other than the amorphous prelinguistic absolute we seek to express. All expression is bound by the constraints of alterity. What is anterior to creativity, and yet inaccessible to consciousness, must be made manifest or rendered in existence, in difference. This is, essentially, the paradox of spagyria; the self must be placed in opposition to that which is entirely self-generated. "In a self conscious and thence reflecting being," writes Coleridge, "no instinct can exist without engendering the belief of an object corresponding to it...that by which, in every act of conscious perception, we at once identify our being with that of the world without us, and yet place ourselves in contra-distinction to that world." Coleridge elaborates: "every Thing or Phenomenon is the Exponent of a Synthesis as long as the opposite energies are retained in that Synthesis." It is therefore the paradox of the heaven-descended Know Thyself "that what [one] seeks he has left behind, and but lengthens the distance as he prolongs the search." Coleridge is speaking here of an aesthetic that goes beyond "self-object differentiation", and is the foundation of all imaginative experience and creativity. Its logical impossibility is that

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643 The Friend, 1, 497.
644 The Friend, 1, 94n, italics mine.
645 The Friend, 1, 509, italics in original.
while it overcomes the subject-object dualism of modern epistemology, it also necessarily preserves that dualism in order to explain the reality of the world in which it operates. Put another way, Coleridge’s position requires a unity of self and world in order for the assimilation and recognition of the “self” in the “other” to occur. On the other hand, a firm division between self and world must also be sustained in order for a perceiving mind to come to know itself through its relationship with a differentiated other. The problem is that of overcoming the epistemological indifference of subjective and objective while still accounting for the differences between them. In alchemical terms, the problem is that of going beyond otherness (metallêty) while sustaining otherness (allêty) itself. The self could not experience the other had it not a ground of indifference with it, and yet it cannot know the ground of indifference without the separative projection of it as a now separative other. Coleridge captures the conundrum of transformative self-exposition most eloquently in the following notebook entry:

Poetry [is] a rationalized Dream dealing [out] to manifold Forms our own Feelings, that never perhaps were attached to us consciously to our own personal Selves. – What is the Lear, the Othello, but a divine Dream/ all Shakespeare, & nothing Shakespere. – O there are Truths below the Surface in the subject of Sympathy, & how we become that which we understandably behold & hear, having, how much God perhaps only knows, created part even of the Form. –

Returning to the metamorphic aesthetic which characterizes Shakespearean authorship, Coleridge returns us once more to the Hermetic conundrum with which we began. Poetry “deals out” to us “our own Feelings” that we had never before recognised as our own, suggests Coleridge. It does so by formulating “our own personal Selves” in the projected “subject” of our sympathy, as we fail to realise how we ourselves are the very thing we look upon – at once other and yet self-generated before our very eyes. In essence, what one witnesses as an aspect of the apparent “other”, is but a manifestation out of one’s own complex nature. Overcoming the dualism between the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, there is at once a correspondence and interaction between the subject and object which explains the possibility of knowledge as well as the preservation of

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646 CN II 2086.
dualism as it upholds the reality of the external world. Importantly, Chrysopoetics allows for the preservation of the very dualism it transcends.

Going beyond otherness essentially means being at once entirely other and wholly self. How, then, might we account for the otherness of others? The solution to the problem of 'otherness', Coleridge suggests, is simply that we cannot have knowledge of that which is other than us unless it is already one with us. The observing mind, explains Coleridge,

...separates the relations that are wholly the creature of his own abstracting and comparing intellect, and at once discovers and recoils from the discovery, that the reality, the objective truth, of the objects he has been adoring, derives its whole and sole evidence from an obscure sensation, which he is alike unable to resist or to comprehend, which compels him to contemplate as without and independent of himself what yet he could not contemplate at all, were it not a modification of his own being. 647

Object and subject, being and knowing, suggests Coleridge, essentially involve and presuppose each other. One cannot know or understand anything unless one is already one with it. This is, essentially, evidence of the ground of indifference out of which all manifest difference comes. Coleridge is asserting the Hermetic conviction that "we must be it in order to know it." 648 The paradox of the Hermetic situation, however, is that self-recognition does not have its dwelling in itself, but rather only proceeds by the manifestation of the self as other. At once contracting and unfolding itself into an "other", the originating source says "I" for the first time only when it enters into the space of composition; becoming at once other and remaining entirely self.

In 1816, in a passage on 'Consciousness and Self-Consciousness' collected in Shorter Works and Fragments, Coleridge expands upon this spagyric formulation of imaginative self-consciousness as follows:

[There is] a pure unmixed [and] incommunicable knowledge, and that it is knowledge at all depends on the Soul's distinguishing it from her Self, as a modification of the ground from the ground -- and then comparing herself thus modified with her Self as the ground of <other>. 649

647 The Friend, 1, 509, italics mine.
648 CL IV 768, italics in original.
649 SW&F 1 427, italics in original.
By contradistinguishing the self from the absolute, Coleridge explains, one learns “to exclude or rather to project them from herself (more strictly from the inner & more immediate Sphere of her Action) and partially as it were to disown them/ which process, when perfected constitutes the outness.” Without separation and projection, “there might be a Self, but no Consciousness of conscious Self-Knowledge – and Knowledge without Consciousness is not a Knowing but a Being, and consciousness is impossible without Distinction.” In other words, there must be a necessary rift between the thing known from the knowing agent, even though essentially they are undifferentiated. Every act of self-knowledge and awareness is a movement away from unity into the separative “other” for consciousness. It is, as it should be clear by now, the paradox of conscious self-awareness that consciousness is necessarily other-determined. Recalling the Hermetic theta and situating the author in the negotiated fictions of absolute meaning and othered expression, the imagination performs what Coleridge calls the “law of bi-centrality – i.e. that every Whole...must be conceived as a possible center in itself, and at the same time as having a Center out of itself, and common to it with all other parts of the same System.” In this uniquely formative interspace, the author does not submit his individuality to the other but rather confronts his own individuality “othered” (uttered).

The paradox of consciousness then, as Coleridge elaborates, is that “man sallies forth into nature – in nature, as in the shadows and reflections of a clear river, to discover the originals of the forms presented to him in his own intellect.” Transcending the self-other binary, and recalling the epistemological divisions with which we began this study, the imagination becomes at once both mirror and lamp. Negotiating the self affirming and self negating imagery of the lamp and mirror, Coleridge posits the self as an “other” reflected back to itself.” Positing as other that which has been latent and within all along, the mind is engaged in an imaginative artifice. As Coleridge

650 SW&F I 427, italics in original.  
651 CN IV 5464, italics mine.  
652 The Friend, 1, 509, italics mine.
writes in 1829: “we behold our own light reflected from the object as light bestowed by it.”

This is the necessary fiction of consciousness and the true meaning of Yeats’s assertion that the soul “become[s] its own betrayer.” The paradox of coming to consciousness, in other words, is the attempt to attain consciousness of having been conscious. As Coleridge continues in the above passage:

Over these shadows, as if they were the substantial powers and presiding spirits of the stream, Narcissus-like, he hangs delighted; till finding nowhere a representative of that free agency which yet is a fact of immediate consciousness sanctioned and made fearfully significant by his prophetic conscience, he learns at least that what he seeks he has left behind, and but lengthens the distance as he prolongs the search.

Striving to find a reconstruction of itself in nature, self-knowledge is rooted in the conundrum of knowing ourselves in the form of something else. As Coleridge explains: “this act of limiting, this perception of limits, [is] the means of bringing the pre-existing Idea <or subjectum limitabile> into our Consciousness. In short, the Sophism is grounded on the identification of consciousness (or rather, the Consciousness of having been conscious) with the Truths of which we become conscious.”

Able to know itself only through another, and at a distance from itself, consciousness negates its original proximity with what it seeks to know and becomes its own “involuntary Imposter.”

By projecting the self out of itself and onto something other, the mind constitutes the idea only as existing outside itself, and the other reflects back to us the face we show it. As Coleridge explains:

The alterity must have some distinctive from the original absolute identity, or how could it be contemplated as other, and yet this distinctive must be such as not to contradict the other co-essential term, it must remain in some sense the Self, though another Self.

Without eroding the Cartesian divide, Coleridge goes beyond it. While subject and object are, in essence, absolutely united, they must be constantly distinguished (albeit by a separative fiction) for

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653 CL VI 813.
654 The Friend, 1, 509, italics in original.
655 CM IV 115, italics in original.
656 CL II 959.
657 OM 196, italics mine.
the purposes of philosophizing; that is, “in order to allow the unification to take place before our eyes.”\textsuperscript{658} Surpassing the divisive nomenclature of the mirror and the lamp, Coleridge suggests that it is the necessary beginning of all sense of identity and alterity that the author must stand outside himself in order to look inside himself. To see oneself in the eyes of another or, better yet, with the eyes of another, is to recognize the self in the other. As Coleridge writes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he form in the shape and the form affirmed for itself are blended in one, and yet convey the earliest lesson of distinction and alterity...[It] learns its own alterity...and becomes a person; it is and speaks of itself as ‘I,’ and from that moment it has acquired...a sense of alterity in itself.\textsuperscript{659}
\end{quote}

Mind and understanding, selfhood and otherness, are diaphanous, suggests Coleridge, at once both a reflex image and a correspondent ray. In other words, the imagination at once projects itself out of itself and receives back from nature the mind’s own self-reflection. As Coleridge puts it, the mind’s projection is at once itself and other: “at once the light and inward eye.”\textsuperscript{660}

Representing one full cycle of the twofold primary and secondary Chrysopoetic gesture of both imagination and consciousness, the self manifests itself straight outward into an immediate object while the object points back to the self. More accurately, we may say that the observing eye (or “I”) only becomes an “I”/eye when it manifests itself to itself in the form of an “other”. The vision gives birth to the eye just as much as the eye gives birth to the vision, and the two are mutually informing. Able to perform the functions of both mirror and lamp, the imagination is at once entirely within and wholly ‘other’. Elucidating more precisely upon this twin phenomenon, Coleridge recounts the following experience of the imaginative conundrum whilst sitting in his library at Keswick:

The window of my library at Keswick is opposite to the fire-place, and looks out on the very large garden that occupies the whole slope of the hill on which the house stands. Consequently the rays of light transmitted through the glass (i.e. the rays from the garden, the opposite mountains, and the bridge, river, lake and vale interjacent) and the rays reflected from it (of the fire-place, &c.) enter the eye at the same moment. At the coming on of evening, it was my frequent amusement to watch the image or reflection of the fire,

\textsuperscript{658} Schelling, System of Transcendental Idealism, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{659} OM 132, italics mine.
\textsuperscript{660} CM V 191.
that seemed burning in the bushes or between the trees in different parts of the garden or fields beyond it... For still as the darkness encreased, the image of the fire lessened and grew nearer and more distinct; till the twilight had deepened into perfect night, when all outward objects being excluded, the window became a perfect looking-glass; save only that my books on the sides shelves of the room were lettered, as it were, on their backs with stars, more or fewer as the sky was more or less clouded, (the rays of the stars being at that time the only ones transmitted). 661

Describing the reflected light of the outside world and the transmitted rays of the internal room entering the eye together at the same time, Coleridge affords a beautiful example of the twin “mirror” and “lamp” functions engaged at precisely the same moment. The two together, continues Coleridge, constitute “the great law of the imagination.” 662 At once reflecting and emanating, hitting the eye at the same time from both without and within, the imagination is at once the light of a self-generated external object and of an outwardly-perceptible projecting self. More precisely, we might say that the imagination acquires a quality of transparency in which the object and subject are not in themselves, but are rather in the reflecting or radiating beam in between each other. As the outside garden and fields become enveloped in the fire inside the sitting room, and as the stars become the letters on the backs of the books in the library, the imagination acquires its most fitting expression. At once both subject and object, and yet both separatively distinguished from each other, the imagination acts “like two sounds of which no man can say positively which is the voice and which the echo.” 663

Coleridge goes on to employ this configuration of the imagination in order to provide some insight into the true nature of his own plagiarisms. Describing the process of reading the work of one author and yet seeing himself in it, Coleridge explains:

...the Ideas rise up within me as Independent Growths of my Spirit... these seem a Looking-glass to me in which I recognize the same truths as the reflected Images of my Ideas. 664

661 *The Friend*, 1, 144-5, *italics in original.*
662 *The Friend*, 1, 146.
663 CN II 2557.
664 CN V 5624.
Employing the vocabulary of a looking-glass in which he sees "reflected [the] Images of [his own] Ideas", Coleridge certainly goes beyond Abrams's epistemological division of the mirror and lamp. Since, as Coleridge tells us, an "idea can be beheld in that mirror only in which the reflex is one with the substance", then it must be the case that the mirror which is held up to Coleridge in the writings of others is simultaneously a lamp in which he reflects back to himself his other self. While the originating truth is one, the emanating gesture is twofold. The complicated gesture is reformulated as follows:

You and I would hold the one for a subjective phenomenon, the other only for objective, and perhaps illustrate the fact, as I have already done elsewhere, by the case of two appearances seen in juxta-position, the one by transmitted, and the other by reflected, light.

Such a configuration of Coleridge's twofold imagination goes some way in elucidating the true nature of Coleridge's plagiarisms. The imagination, transcending the bifurcations of "subjective" and "objective" phenomena, is at once the transmitted and the reflecting light. At once both mirror and lamp, the imagination reveals the self to itself, albeit in the form of an other. The formulation is not only alchemical, in that it subsumes or goes beyond the conventional Cartesian divisions, it is also, Coleridge explains, the informing excellence of Shakespeare:

[E]ach Exterior is the physiognomy of the Being within, its true Image reflected & thrown out from the concave mirror – & even such is the appropriate Excellence of her chosen Poet, of our own Shakespeare/ himself a Nature humanized, a genial Understanding directing self-consciously a power & a [implicit] wisdom deeper than Consciousness.

Both reflecting and projecting, Shakespeare attains a unique double vision. The imagination does not simply conjoin two things at once, or translate one thing into another, but enacts a single mode of seeing, as if it were built into the eye ("T") itself, in which we simultaneously see, and see through, the other. This otherwise impossible aesthetic fulfils a "wisdom deeper than Consciousness", maintains Coleridge. Reading himself into an other, and being informed by the other upon which he gazes, the Hermetic author finds both a center within and without himself. Put

665 OM 197
666 SW&F 930, italics mine.
667 LL 1 495.
differently, while the goal of the primary imagination is self-knowledge, it is to be achieved not at the expense of, or annihilation of, all objectivity, but rather by making objectivity self-reflective; that is, by transforming subjectivity into the othered object, as a lamp, so that it may then serve as a mirror of consciousness. As Coleridge puts it most succinctly:

\[ \text{[W]hen I f[i]nd my own ideas well expressed already by others...I seem to know, that much of the matter remains my own, and that the Soul is mine.}^{668} \]

Rightly defined, it is not merely varied external sources that are transmuted in the imaginative act but the poet himself, who at once undergoes the very transformation he enacts and becomes the object of his own gaze; remaining completely self-possessed while entirely “othered.”

Rejecting the binarism of self and other which emphasizes a notion of “Romantic interiority” and originality over otherness and influence, Coleridge reclaims the originary indifference by situating it in the impossible hovering interspace in between selfhood and otherness. Musing on the necessary fiction, or “trick”, by which the absolute takes on manifest existence in the other, Coleridge writes:

\[ \text{In the One and all of the Absolute ...there is an original identity, original coinherence of object in the subject...[out of this] the sense must be distinguished artificially [and] by a voluntary act of abstraction in order to be subordinated, but is subordinated in the same instant that it is distinguished – what...have we gained by the inversion of this process but...a delusive projection of the subject as object, <resembling other of the phantoms> of a concave mirror; and when we have thus brought ourselves to <mistake it for> an object, then to seek for the <corresponding> subject elsewhere? We invent some outward object that is no object to act the part of a subject.}^{669} \]

It is important here that this creed of artificiality and voluntary abstraction naturally follows from the nature of the absolute. The “Absolute esse” is “an original coinherence” of object and subject and, out of this, writes Coleridge, sense must be “distinguished artificially”, by way of a “delusive projection of the subject as object.”\(^670\) We invent some outward object, he stresses, “to act the part of a subject.” But “is it delusion? Is it grounded in falsehood?”, he wonders.\(^671\) It is, as the

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\(^{668}\) CN II 2375, italics in original.
\(^{669}\) OM 135-6n, italics mine.
\(^{670}\) OM 135n.
\(^{671}\) OM 136.
Hermetic tradition would have it, at once artificial and revelatory, at once maleficent and salvific. The delusive projection of the subject, which we then "mistake for an object", Coleridge concedes, is but a necessary "classification of the accidents of my own mind and senses."\textsuperscript{672}

ii. The Case of Abrams: The Mirror and the Lamp Revisited

It is necessary at this point to reconsider in more detail the mirror-lamp bifurcation with which this study began. While Abrams employs the mirror-lamp metaphors of creativity, he remains suspiciously immune to their Hermetic implications. Appropriating the twofold epistemological construction of the mirror and the lamp from William Butler Yeats, Abrams in fact removes the distinction from Yeats's own rather more Hermetic and mystical meaning and perverts it for his historiographical ends. Rather than being inspired by the Hermetic allusion to the vast and twin transformative potential of the human imagination, Abrams employs the passage to support his conceit of "mirror" and "lamp" as two divergent schools of literary thought along which the history of the imagination progressively advances. For Abrams, the mirror of mimetic theory is juxtaposed entirely to the lamp, which shines by its own unreflected light in later idealistic trains of thought. This divisive and strictly linear conception of the development of the imagination has, as we have seen, had an unrelenting influence upon Coleridge criticism to date.

In order to emancipate ourselves from the divisive linearity of Abrams's system and from the nomenclature of plagiarism with which we typically understand the workings of Coleridge's mind, I suggest that we reassess the mirror-lamp tradition in its original, more Hermetic, context. Firstly, it is no accident that Abrams obliquely refers to Yeats's lines in his epigraph, citing them as a passage of verse and failing to provide any precise reference for them. Citing Yeats's words as pithy verse, Abrams fosters a longstanding misinterpretation of the actual significance of the passage. Indeed, upon closer examination, it becomes clear just how much Yeats's meaning diverges from Abrams's appropriation of it. Yeats, thoroughly steeped in the mystical tradition and

\textsuperscript{672} OM, 135, 138, \textit{italics mine.}
deeply influenced by Coleridge, introduces the distinction of mirror and lamp, not in verse, but in a lengthy prose discussion in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Verse* on the poetry of the English socialite, author, and literary editor, Dorothy Wellesley. Suggesting the *simultaneous* occurrence of both mirror and lamp faculties in *one* informing activity in her poetry, Yeats configures the imagery of the mirror and lamp in terms of an aesthetics of *betrayal*. Praising Wellesley’s philosophical poetry as among the greatest of the twentieth century, Yeats writes:

To Dorothy Wellesley nature is a womb, a darkness; its surface is sleep, upon sleep we walk, into sleep drive the plough, and there lie the happy, the wise, the unconceived:

They lie in the loam
Laid backward by slice of the plough;
They sit in the rock;
In a matrix of amethyst crouches a man.

Invoking nature as a dark “womb” or “matrix”, Wellesley for Yeats recalls the principles of Hermetic origination. He goes on to explain: “[T]he individual soul, the *betrayal of the unconceived at birth*, are among her principal themes, it must go further still; that soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp.”

For Wellesley, suggests Yeats, reality is expressed through contradiction. The soul “betrays” itself by being manifest at birth; the unconceived is conceived, and that which betrays also delivers. The activity of the creative mind, in other words, is a movement out of an undifferentiated matrix into existence; it is at once the witness, reflector, or mirror of its pre-existent self and the lamp through which it projects itself as “other.” These twin gestures of creation and destruction, deliverance and betrayal, are expressed beautifully in the following lines cited by Yeats from Wellesley’s poem *Matrix*:

Hear: how in love the lips moan,
For Man must pursue
Love the lamp back to darkness again;
Is not this death too?

Out of her beauty at birth,
Out of her I came
To lose all that I knew:

Though somehow at birth I died. 674

The lamp imagery appears to come, not from Yeats, but from Wellesley herself. Language, she suggests, is a movement out of the matrix into the darkness of life. Creativity is manifestation by destruction or, more accurately, separation and projection out of the informing source, or “self”, into an “other.” Since the movement “out” at birth leads to the loss of “all that I knew”, to construct is more accurately to de-construct, and birth is at once a death. Wellesley concludes: “The womb that loathed the bones...cast out the soul.” Expounding upon this theme in her poem Fire, also cited by Yeats, Wellesley writes:

Life ends where life began,
At the death or birth.
‘Is it son or daughter, man?’
‘Earth, Air, Fire and Water!’

The imagery of earth, air, fire and water is clearly alchemical. Writing of conception as “the last deception”, Wellesley comes closest to Coleridge’s own configuration of the transformative conundrum of creativity. 675 Seeking to express the originating source, one must project a version of oneself outside the self, and recognizes oneself in it. Yeats’s allusion to the mirror and the lamp, then, represents the essential link between the self and the other upon which it gazes. Understood in the Hermetic context, the manifest world of which we are perceptually aware is a series of projected outerances (“utterances”) which partake of and reflect back to us the face we show her. Performing at once the duties of both mirror and lamp, the imagination attains self-knowledge by begetting an “other” in which the self is reflected back to itself. Just as the eye projects itself out into the observed world (lamp), it is reflected back to itself as the object upon which it gazes (mirror). The licence to attain self-consciousness through the seemingly antithetical self-objectification and deconstruction in an ‘other’, results in the precise moment in which, as Yeats puts it, the “soul must become its own betrayer...mirror turn lamp.” Rather than implicating a division between the receptive mind (“mirror”) and the projected idealist mind (“lamp”), or between materialism and

idealism, Yeats employs the terms to describe the “one activity” in which the observer is at once wholly self-creating and entirely other-determined.

The alchemical art, then, is a reconciliation of two principles, outerance and self-recognition or, more properly, it is the performance of two opposite directions of the one same principle. Making the self an other (lamp) the poet locates himself in it (mirror); at once mirror and lamp, the heart becomes its own betrayer and, as Coleridge puts it, the deceiver betrays himself. The Hermetic aesthetic is entirely the aesthetic of artifice, in which the self becomes other in order to know itself. Between the self and the other, then, there emerges a third principle as the means of interrelation between them. This is the hovering realm of the Chrysopoetic imagination, in which one is at once all things and yet entirely self. This medium for self-objectification and self-othering is, essentially, the compositional space in which, in becoming other, one writes oneself into existence. To quote from Coleridge’s literary lectures, the poet “appears to transfuse from himself to others & to receive from others into himself.” 676 This is the mutual metamorphosis of the alchemical imagination. He elaborates:

The individual has by this time learnt the greatest & best knowledge of the human mind that we are in ourselves imperfect and another truth of perhaps equal importance that there exists in nature a possibility of uniting two beings each identified in their nature but distinguished in their separate qualities so that each should retain what distinguishes them & at the same time acquire the qualities of that which is contradistinguished to them. This is perhaps the most beautiful part of our nature. 677

It is a consequence of the necessarily asymptotic nature of imagination and consciousness that identity lies in the narrative interspace, or play, between selfhood and otherness. Such confounding “tricks” are the key to Coleridge’s aesthetic and “the most beautiful part of our nature”, he stresses.

iii. The Tertium Aliquid

As we have seen, alchemical poetics, or Chrysopoetics, is based entirely upon a separation of what is by definition essentially inseparable. In other words, the Chrysopoetic and alchemical

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676 LL 1 328, *italics mine.*
677 LL 1 333.
imagination begins with a necessary fiction in which the self is dissolved and diffused into an other in order to come to know itself as self. It is not the annihilation of one at the expense of the other but rather the sustained hovering in between both. What is important here is that alchemical and imaginative consciousness proceeds only by virtue of a necessary (albeit fictitious) language of otherness; all language is the language of the other, just as all expression is an expression of the self as other. More accurately, all manifest creation is the separative manifestation of a fictitious "other" in which to situate the "self" from which it originates. This is an aesthetics of betrayal. As Coleridge puts it: there is a "middle state between self-illusion and voluntary fraud."678 This "middle state" is later identified by Coleridge as a "tertium aliquid" or unique "third something", that makes us at once imposters, necessarily fraudulent to ourselves, and yet engaged upon the path towards truth.679

As Coleridge explains, one must eloign and alienate the self, that is, bare it before consciousness in the form of an 'other', in order for it to be self. In this unique hovering interspace, the self creates itself in an other, though another self:

[O]bject and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject. It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses.680

The subject and object are manifestations of the same power presupposing each other. Put differently, consciousness is a perpetual falling off from the originary indifference of identity and non-identity. "The Spirit (originally the identity of object and subject) must in some sense dissolve this identity in order to be conscious of it", Coleridge writes, "fit alter et idem."681 Since identity dissolves the moment one tries to look at it directly, self-consciousness is never really the consciousness of identity but it is rather the moment of beholding oneself in an object. Instead of

679 CL II 688.
680 BL I 273, italics mine.
681 BL I 279, italics mine.
seeing itself as self, the conscious subject beholds itself as other and as a self-producing self. The “other”, in this light, is but the subject confronting itself in the act of self-consciousness; it is the self lying on the other side of its Cartesian boundary.

The imagination, then, hovers between projecting the other and being gratified by it. In its suspended state, the imagined other is not rigid but reflects the face we turn towards it. It is, however, not just a question of mere optical reflection but of an actual autonomous other which reveals the self-generating nature of that which it answers. Thus the imagination operates precisely in the Cartesian muddle, not in just the self nor the reflected image, but in the space in between. In this Chrysopoetic aesthetic, a strange impermanence of meaning seems to hang over the notions of selfhood and otherness, such that the poet at once secures and dissolves himself by virtue of a poetic artifice. Performing itself in the “tertium” interspace, the imagination hovers between conventional distinctions while going beyond them. The subject at once creates, and is created by, the other.

The tertium interspace of the hovering imagination, which Coleridge variously refers to as the “medium aliquid” or the “golden tertium aliquid”, returns us immediately to the alchemical tradition. In a series of lecture notes delivered in 1819, Coleridge tells us:

[The alchemists] talked of...a belief that every being, however apparently inanimate, had a life if it could be called forth...arising from what is called the polar principle, that is, that in order to manifest itself every power must appear in two opposites, but these two opposites having a ground of identity were constantly striving to reunite, but not being permitted to pass back to their original state which would amount to annihilation they pressed forward and the two formed a third something.

Rather than an “objective” other, carefully situated at a distance from the subject, in alchemy the spiritual and physical transformation of the subject and object are an integral part of understanding the transformation of matter. This confluence of the inner reality of the alchemist and the outer reality of the matter to be transformed exists in an area of imaginal discourse that is no longer subject to notions of inside and outside, selfhood and otherness. The merger of outer and inner occurs in an “intermediary” space, a strange area that is neither material nor spiritual, but mediating...
between them. This "third something", as Coleridge terms it, has long since left our own conscious Cartesian awareness. It is, however, necessarily Hermetic and entirely alchemical.

In the *Biographia*, Coleridge stresses the necessary artifice and voluntary fiction of the tertium space: "This is one instance among many of deception, by the telling the half of a fact, and omitting the other half, when it is from their mutual counteraction and neutralisation, that the *whole* truth arises, as a *tertium aliquid*, different from either."684 Our only access to the originary truth, suggests Coleridge, is in the artifice of the hovering interspace between oppositions. It is through fraud alone that the Hermetic author reveals his most poetic truth. In the hovering interspace between self and other the imagination posits the authenticity of artifice itself. Refusing to posit reality against illusion, the Hermetic formulation of imagination penetrates the *reality of illusion*. Conspicuously proffering up its own artificiality, the author operates in a realm beyond "self-object differentiation." In the tertium interspace between one's own and an other consciousness, the poet not only shows himself outwardly (as other), but he becomes for the first time that which he *is*. This twin gesture undoubtedly recalls the Hermetic theta and goes some way in understanding Coleridge's assessment of the hovering interspace as the "golden tertium aliquid."

Coleridge's notion of the "tertium" state allows him to sustain what is best characterised as a constant "play" between the world of thought and being; between, on the one hand, the tendency towards indistinction and chaos (indifference), and, on the other, the tendency towards the art(ifice) and actuality of distinction (difference). Inhabiting the tension between indifference and difference, essence and existence, art and artifice, both imagination and consciousness are engaged in a kind of *play* out of which all things spring. Caught between remaining silent on subjects whereof we cannot speak and choosing to speak at the expense of an underlying indifference, the author is left with the paradox of either undifferentiated truth or the fraudulent language of the "other" by which truth may be known. Whilst the separation of the undifferentiated absolute is erroneous, since the "I" is never really separated off from the absolute even as it claims to set itself up at the farthest

684 BL I 44n, *italics mine.*
remove from it, the artifice of Coleridge's system of imagination is redeemed in the aesthetic irony of play.

It is no accident that the major problem of Coleridge's plagiarism occurs in the Biographia, and particularly in those chapters in which Coleridge is concerned with the relationship between the self and the other. As Susan Eilenberg points out, "Plagiarism in such a context is necessarily a special case...the method of composition seems to reflect too ironically upon the material to be accidental."685 Explaining the method of composition in the Biographia, Coleridge tells us from the beginning that what he writes is not an autobiography in the conventional sense:

It will be found, that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally...
But of the objects, which I proposed to myself, it was not the least important to effect, as far as possible, a settlement of the long continued controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction: and at the same time to define with the utmost partiality the real poetic character of the poet.686

A biography, written largely in the voice of "others", and "the least" of which concerns the author "personally", is certainly not a biography in the normal sense. Notably, while Coleridge originally proposes an "Autobiographia Literaria" in a letter to R. H. Brabant in 1815, what he delivers instead is the Biographia Literaria, a text more accurately denotative of the development, not of his own life, but of the narrative progression of literature itself.687 It is, I would suggest, a statement concerning the generation and development of expressive creativity. The text of Biographia, the scene of Coleridge's most controversial plagiarisms, then, performs its own philosophy.688 For instance, as Eilenberg points out, the imperative to "Know thyself" in the Biographia occurs in the midst of a chapter most heavily indebted to Schelling.689 Substituting another voice for his own in or near a passage in which he emphasizes the full importance of self-knowledge, Coleridge at once

686 BL 15, italics in original.
687 CL IV 578.
688 In Sources, Processes and Methods, Kathleen Wheeler suggests that Coleridge unacknowledged quotations and borrowings are "fundamentally creative, imaginative experiences". The plagiarisms act as "either metaphorical or as functioning as 'reader recipes'...not for the sake of content or dogma, but for their role in [Coleridge's] method of producing metaphoric situations." For more on the self-referential performance of Coleridge's Biographia see Wheeler, Sources, Processes, and Methods, pp. 81-106, 191-3, p. 193.
689 Eilenberg, pp. 153-4.
affirms the importance of identity whilst undoing it. Fulfilling his own injunction to “Know thyself” by the necessary utterance (or ‘other’ance) of himself in an other, Coleridge performs the alchemical imperative of the twin imagination. In the Chrysopoetic aesthetic, represented by the twofold gesture of primary and secondary imagination, self-knowledge is attained only in the revelation of one’s own otherness. At once the same and different, permanent and transformative, the self becomes the other in order to become more fully itself. If we consider the Delphic command as “the postulate of philosophy and at the same time the test of philosophic capability”, the Biographia stages vicariously in the words of other thinkers the manner in which “the other” tells the tale of “the self.” Writing is a process of self-creation by self-destruction. In (o)uttering oneself, one necessarily becomes the other. The Biographia evinces the very philosophy it expounds. As Eilenberg puts it:

> Self-interrupting, digressive, plagiarized, and full of discussion about plagiarism, false voices, limitations, and vocal possession, the Biographia suffers the problem that is its theme: the impossible need for identity, the irremediable compromising of the self by the other. 691

In the midst of the Biographia, then, Coleridge enacts not so much a “remarkable failure”, as narrative identity ironically founded upon “others.” 692 Satisfying the claims of the Hermetic burden, Coleridge takes the shortest road from the self to the self through the other; existence becomes narrative, and unitary selfhood is expressed and manifest in a series of varied and verifiable “others.”

Another instance of the irony of Coleridge’s strategy in the Biographia occurs in chapter twelve. Asserting the reciprocal relationship between the subjective and the objective, Coleridge suggests that they are united under the informing “tertium” function. He explains:

> The counteraction then of the two assumed forces does not depend on their meeting from opposite directions; the power which acts in them is indestructible; it is therefore

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691 Eilenberg, p. 140.
692 Coleridge appears to have had a special interest in the general subject of plagiarism. Among the countless plans with which he toyed was the following: “I have ample materials for a most interesting Historical & Metaphysical Essay on Literary Forgery.” (CL 1585). For more on Coleridge’s fascination with the career of Thomas Chatterton, the perpetrator of the Rowley fraud, see Fruman, Damaged Archangel, ch. 9.
inexhaustibly re-ebullient; and as something must be the result of these two forces, both alike infinite, and both alike indestructible; and as rest or neutralisation cannot be this result; no other conception is possible, but that the product must be a tertium aliquid, or finite generation. Consequently this conception is necessary. Now this tertium aliquid can be no other than an inter-penetration of the counteracting power, partaking of both. 693

Following this definition of the “tertium aliquid” and of the resolution of the infinite opposition of counteracting powers in the imagination, Coleridge asserts that he will “proceed to the nature and genesis of the imagination.” 694 In place of the promised definition of the imagination, however, Coleridge launches into “a letter from a friend” which allegedly convinces him that he would do well to defer his definition for a “future publication.” 695 Confessing later that the letter was written “without taking my pen of the paper except to dip it in the inkstand”, it seems that Coleridge deliberately disowns himself here in order to present himself in the guise of a falsified other. 696 Breaking off with the line: “Thus far had the word been transcribed for the press, when I received the following letter from a friend”, Coleridge’s letter, not unlike his plagiarisms, substitutes an “other” voice where one most expects to read Coleridge himself. 697 Separating himself from his own utterance, and presenting it in the guise of an other, Coleridge’s letter effectively performs the philosophy of the tertium aliquid just expounded. Rather than disrupting the philosophical system that absorbs him in the preceding chapters of the Biographia, the letter positions Coleridge in between, if not altogether above, the epistemology of selfhood and otherness. Engaging the fullest implications of his own version of epistemology, Coleridge demonstrates how the truest and most original author hovers between self-possession and delimitation in the other. Since “truth is universally placed in the coincidence of the thought with the thing, of the representation with the

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693 BL I 300.
694 BL I 1168.
695 BL I 300, 304.
696 CL IV 728.
object represented”, Coleridge asserts his position by sending himself elsewhere – into the other – in order that he may be known. 698

The Hermetic necessity of becoming “other” in order “to know” more fully oneself has interpretive resonance for the concept of “plagiarism” itself. Employing a plagiarised metaphysics, all for the sake of “the deduction of the imagination”, Coleridge draws attention to the failure of self identification without the falsification of the self as other. In other words, by decentering the self in the form (or words) of the other, Coleridge demonstrates the difficulty of saying precisely what one is without projecting oneself into an other in order to know the self. Put differently, we might say that the reader best grasps Coleridge’s philosophy by understanding it ironically; that is, by experiencing for himself the lacuna between Coleridge and his utterance. Certainly, to read the Biographia is to experience firsthand the dissolution of the author in the other in his desire for self-knowledge.

Promising a completed system whilst simultaneously postponing its elaboration, the Biographia engages in an entirely Hermetic scheme as narrative identity is asserted in the aesthetic play in between. Coleridge notes that the imaginative faculty is a “magical power.” 699 Enacting an alchemical aesthetic, the imagination occupies a realm that is understood only by an experience of its obscurity, a sense of its mysteriousness and incommensurability and incommunicability that precision and definition would only reduce. As he writes in a notebook entry in 1803, one must necessarily “mix up truth and imagination, so that the I AM may spread its own indefiniteness over that which really happened.” 700 The distinction and transcension of that which is true and that which can only be gestured towards is performed in the twin function of primary and secondary imagination. Coleridge describes the oscillating and hovering nature of the imagination as follows:

[T]here is an effort in the mind, when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites, and to leave a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other when it is hovering between two

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698 BL I 1254.
699 BL II 16.
700 CN I 1541.
images: as soon as it is fixed on one it becomes understanding, and when it is wavering between them, attaching itself to neither, it is imagination.\textsuperscript{701}

This suspended, hovering, or in-between, state is the intermediary faculty where primary and secondary imaginations meet. Rather than siding on either this or that side of the debate, the twin imagination resides in the rift between subject-directed idealism and object-directed materialism. Capitulating the central philosophical effort to know thyself in the form or guise of the other, the Biographia is a narrative in which the self is not so much impinged upon by external sources and influences, but becomes the external "other" upon whose configuration the "self" is defined. The paradox is encapsulated in Coleridge's assertion, in chapter ten, that "no one [can] charge me with tricking out in other words the thoughts of others.\textsuperscript{702} Transcending the usual bifurcation between self and other, the Biographia is an ironic reflection upon the nature of self-expression. The self, capable of dealing with itself only prosthetically, as something completely outside itself, is engaged in a kind of surrogate existence. Able to "know" oneself only through another, and at a distance that seems to negate one's original proximity with it, the author is trapped in a suspension between selfhood and otherness. Between the inexistente and undifferentiated absolute and the necessity of its projection as other in order to know itself, Coleridge advocates a tertium play between the "I am" and the "it is." More accurately, hovering between the desire for self expression and the necessary fiction of other-determinism, all language is a necessary pl(a)y/ariasm.

In the act of imagination, then, there is no subject and object. We are neither entirely ourselves nor wholly others, the other is in us and we are in it. More accurately, we are in between selves. At once entirely self and wholly other, the imagination with which we respond to the other is the same in kind as the imagination which produces it, and we are left with the play in between. In the tertium play between becoming something other and yet staying entirely oneself, the authorial self is only that which it is in the process of becoming. The imagination leads us out of

\textsuperscript{701} LL 1311, italics mine.  
\textsuperscript{702} BL 1220, italics mine.
ourselves in order to become more fully ourselves. Asserting the “self” in the language of an “other”, Coleridge performs the art(ifice) of self-exposition in the texture of his plagiarisms.

The task of self-expression invariably involves insincerity and impersonation. This is the Chrysopoetic resolution to the Cartesian myth of solitary authorship. There is no coherent solitary sacred author from whom all utterance and manifestation emerges. The self only becomes self by means of becoming other. In his plagiarisms, then, Coleridge takes on a mocking identity; that is, an identity whose preferred way of being itself is to be other than itself. Identity and authorship is manifest in difference, expressed in the manifold multiplicity of variant “others.” It is the precariousness of human consciousness that it requires something other than it is in order to know what it is. Only by facing the daring ruin of the self in the other can one know the self as self.

The crux of the Chrysopoetic aesthetic, then, lies in the paradox of the hovering interspace between oppositions. Articulating one’s own voice by silencing it, finding the self by disguising it, Coleridge’s plagiarisms are an instance of a handsome fraud. Between absolute indifference and separative existence is the authorial play of becoming. The imaginative attempt to become other and to remain the same is also, as we have seen, the guiding aesthetic behind the alchemical quest, not for literal gold, but for a way of making gold; that is, of extrapolating out that which is already latent within. Performing an aesthetic of necessary fiction and voluntary fraud, Coleridge promulgates a narrative in which it is only by employing the words of another, that one can imaginatively, if Chrysopoetically, locate oneself. In essence, all utterance is performed in the narrative of the “other.” Demonstrating the impossibility of saying “I am” in one’s own voice, Coleridge’s plagiarisms are a self-realizing fiction; a lie that proves its own truth.

As we have seen, for Coleridge, human imagination operates in the gap or lacuna between the originating self and the thing that is originated; that is, in the necessary interspace of artifice and fraud. Negotiating the self through the other, Coleridge distances himself from himself and locates himself in the distance. Essentially, the only way out of the twin paradox of imagination and of consciousness is to embrace the art of artifice. Rather than sacrifice the integrity of either the “I
am” or the “it is”, Coleridge’s only possibility is to find a scheme that allows him to play in the interchange between the two, as he engages in an entirely unique aesthetic which, with some interpretive freedom, I can only think to refer to as a kind of “play” gaianism. The tertium space between self and other, art and artifice, is the realm of creativity and expression. To side on either this side or that, or to unite the two in a Schellingian embrace, is to collapse the space altogether and to annihilate creativity.

It is worth recalling here that in the Hermetic tradition, the author of the cosmos is the avatar of play; Hermes himself is a trickster god. Hermes puts on his identity by becoming other than what he is and, in his version of an incarnational poetics, performs the alchemical philosophy of authorship and play. As Derrida notes:

[Thoth] takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and for which it substitutes ...it thereby opposes itself, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly a god of the absolute passage between opposites. If he had any identity – but he is precisely the god of nonidentity – he would be that coincidentia oppositorum ...The god of writing...cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, who puts play into play. 703

At once the god of wisdom and a patron of deceiving philosophy, Hermes is both the inventor of language and a floating signifier. He is quintessentially, the god of play. Taking Hermes as his guide and darling study, Coleridge reconfigures the usual interpretation of authorship as the continuous rediscovery of our own origins in the other. Exploiting the wound between the self and the other, or between that which is inexpressible and the desire for self-expression, Coleridge reenacts the Hermetic aesthetic. Negotiating between the distinctions of selfhood and otherness as “two rival Artists, both potent Magicians”, Coleridge suggests that we embrace the authenticity of artifice. 704 The imagination, simply put, is the instrument whereby, in losing, we re-create ourselves. In the aesthetic of artifice, one learns to understand the fraudulence of differential

703 Derrida, Dissemination, p. 93, italics in original.
704 CL V 496.
knowledge and to appreciate the irony of Coleridge’s plagiarisms. For, in the Chrysopoetic analysis, it is not inept to engage in the fraud but rather not to be able to engage in it at all.

Since the only way to legitimise the center (originary self) is through the artifice of a manifest other, creativity occurs in the paradoxical nexus between the point at which one is wholly original and the point at which one is self-originating (in the other). Creativity is the point at which one is wholly unique and yet entirely performed in the other. Constrained by the impossibility of saying “I AM” in one’s own voice, Coleridge’s plagiarisms preserve the ambiguous interspace between self and other, and perform a literary lie in the service of an aesthetic and metaphysical truth. What we assert of hieroglyphic gold, we may also say of Coleridge: “he moves in an unaccountable diagonal between truth and falsehood, sense and nonsense, sophistry and the common-place.”705 Since all expression is grounded in “difference”, the self we assert implies differentiating ourselves, not from others, but from ourselves. In the Chrysopoetic inversion of the Cartesian scheme, self-knowledge is tainted by willed imposture, and the epistemological conundrum that results is best understood in aesthetic terms. Attempting to configure itself in the form of an “other”, thereby losing as it affirms itself, the truest and most authentic author is stuck in the constant interplay between being and becoming, and strives towards an end that never arrives but always betrays.

Conclusion

Writing becomes plagiarism: speaking becomes quoting... I myself must articulate my historical voice as well as silence it, lose my life and find it.

Ihab Hassan, A re-Vision of Literature. 706

The idea that an author is at the centre of a literary work is crucial to the reception of literature, and to the way in which literary texts and concepts of “originality” and “authorship” are understood. Against this marking out of the author as a singular, autonomous, and uniquely privileged figure, Coleridge seeks to go beyond otherness, or beyond the self-other bifurcation that is the defining epistemology of the Cartesian tradition. In its place, Coleridge offers an alternative trajectory for the authorial self, one in which the dislocation of the self from itself is the truest path to self-expression, and where one becomes other in order to become more fully itself. Going beyond Abrams and Engell, and beyond our own usual adherence to Cartesian bifurcations of selfhood and otherness, Coleridge confronts the nagging problem of how subject and object meet in a meaningful relationship by proposing a twofold construction of the imagination which unites the mirror with the lamp, art with artifice, and self-expression with delimitation in the other.

Formulating a transformative or alchemical aesthetic, Coleridge begins with the idea of an undifferentiated pre-principle out of which emerge the fictions of autotelic selfhood and otherness. Positioning Coleridge’s complex pattern of “borrowings” and plagiarisms in the Hermetic tradition, which advocates a confused interplay between authorial voices, we come to a greater awareness of the limitations of historical progression and influence in accounting for such a conceit. The entire history of Hermeticism eschews the traditional dogmatism of history and source hunting. In place of the tyranny of master historical narratives, the Chrysopoetic aesthetic offers up its own rather unique narrative strategy. This is a tradition in which historical fraud reflects poetic truth,

pseudonymous practice evokes a prescient past, and the words of multiple "others" are employed in
the expression of a singular, sacred voice. Hermeticism is an imaginative world of fraudulent
authorship and erroneous history; a world where self and other transcend their divisions and speak
in varied voices the same underlying meaning; where the words of one thinker just as adequately
express the meaning of another; and the present historical moment is but a stage in a mental and
spiritual process of alignment with a truth that is unchanging and timeless. As we have seen,
Coleridge has the epistemological strength not only to sustain such paradoxes but to afford them the
highest degree of imaginative certainty.

Modern positivism, encouraged by notions of progress, seems to have made ideas such as
alchemy more or less obsolete. But I suggest that it is in this older tradition that we must attempt to
relocate Coleridge. For Coleridge, chemistry and metallurgy, science and mysticism, are all tightly
compacted under the Hermetic scheme. Having studied Ficino, Cudworth, and Boehme, Coleridge
formulates the outline of a transcendental metaphysic which, with the help of several German
thinkers, belies a metaphysical and Chrysopoetic truth. Made from pieces of Naturphilosophie and
German idealism, alchemy and Hermeticism, Neoplatonism and Boehmean mysticism, Coleridge’s
theory of the imagination is a truly architectonic mythology which performs its own philosophy.

As I have tried to show, the paradox of alchemical consciousness is that negation is the
necessary precedent of all expression. The constituted self and the created world both arise from
necessary spagyria, and self-creation is at once self-destruction. The imagination, in its twofold
capacity, revolves about itself, in a self-circling gesture, as "a power that in every instant goes out of
itself and in the same instant retracts and falls back on itself." As Coleridge elaborates: "in order
to be an individual Being it must go forth from God, yet as the receding from him is to proceed
towards Nothingness and Privation, it must still at every step turn back toward him in order to be at
all — Now a straight Line, continuously retracted forms of necessity a circular orbit." Envisioning

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707 CL VI 598, italics in original.
708 CL IV 545, italics mine.
imagination as the circular interchange in which one becomes other while remaining entirely same, in “the production, or self-evolution, of the point into the circle,” Coleridge finds its counterpart in the hieroglyphic theta whose natural course may be likened to the movement about its own source in the form of an other. What is within must be protracted without in order to be made manifest to the observing eye or “I.” This Hermetic and hieroglyphic construction is the informing principle behind Coleridge’s twofold scheme of primary and secondary imagination.

Uniquely informed by alchemy, Coleridge’s theory of imagination is the key to his epistemology. More than an act of mere rhetorical subvention, the alchemical process overcomes the subject-object division in modern dualist epistemology and figures the attempt to “make gold” as the attempt to realise an undifferentiated source in the form of something other. Falling off from usual standards of sincerity, Coleridge evokes a heterodox and fluid notion of the self. The author is a shape-shifting creator, inspired by Proteus, capable of a transformative power which can situate the self in the other while it remains true to itself. Constructing “subjectivity” and authenticity through a variety of “otherness” and artificiality, the Chrysopoetic spectrum ranges from a misrepresented self to an authentic one, and complicates the usual polarisations of authenticity and fraud, aesthetic and artifice. Absolute “beyond being”, we might say, necessitates the separation of ourselves from ourselves. Since all expression originates in a nonoriginal origin, that is, the originary indifference of subjectivity and objectivity, difference and sameness, it is the nature of all expression and manifestation that it comes to be by means of a necessary counterfeit or guise. The originary absolute, if it can be indicated at all, is to be indicated solely in terms of a separative artifice or necessary fiction of the other arising out of itself. In this light, the most authentic author is not he who is entirely “self” or unsullied by the influences of an “other”, but rather he who is capable of putting on the separative and ironic form of something other. Since meaning remains undifferentiated until its performative inception in the manifest “other”, the plagiaristic pathology of the creative act attains theoretical legitimacy.
Challenging the solipsism of a sacred authorial self, Coleridge’s musings on the alchemical nature of the imagination hover between selfhood and otherness, self-possession and self-annihilation, and between self-exposition and recognition in the other. The Hermetic author, Coleridge concludes, performs a kind of tertium “play” in which he takes on the likeness of an other in order to reflect back to himself the face that he shows it. Expressing himself in the guise of an other, he puts on the tincture of an other in order to see himself in it. In this light, we might say that all writing or self-expression is an act of “play”giarism – an expression of oneself in the language of an other – by which we take on the likeness of an other and see ourselves reflected back to us. Becoming other, one becomes more fully oneself. Pla(y)giarism, in this view, does not violate the principles of originality, but redefines them.

In the end, a full appreciation of Coleridge’s aesthetic has nothing to do with a required list of antecedents. While the source-hunters of tradition pay uncritical tribute to Coleridge’s precedents and precursors, Coleridge’s conception of originality and authenticity necessitates the appropriation of the voices of “others.” Requiring the guise or nomenclature of the “other” to carry the burden of originality, consciousness itself is ironic. The moment of conscious awareness is the moment at which one is furthest removed from what one seeks to know, because one has had to make it “other” in order to know it. Paradoxically, selfhood is to be reached through the odyssey of alterity. Rather than an idolatrous worship of authenticity and sacred authorship, Coleridge’s alchemical aesthetic makes a claim for the poetic truth to be found in the artifice of imposture and forgery. Identity is conjectural, transformable, protean, and difficult to categorise. To attain key concepts of values like “originality” and “authenticity”, one must merge with copy and counterfeit.

Performing their own aesthetic of artifice, Coleridge’s plagiarisms are a handsome fraud. Caught in the interplay of the illusory and the real, fraud and truth, the self has narrative existence. Since the task of self-construction invariably involves insincerity and impersonation, the authorial creed is the compound of eternal truth and necessary fiction. While in Cartesian terms, an author falls short of a standard of sincerity and originality when he takes on the words of an “other”, in the
Chrysopoetic formulation the truest and most original author is not he who preserves the sanctity of a unified identity and coherent “originality”, associated with the purity of singularity and selfhood alone, but he who is capable of separative self-projection in which all language is plagiaristic. All language is the language of an “other” in which one’s verbal “utterances” become “outer”ances or, more essentially, “other”ances of one’s own “self.” Embracing the artifice of its own epistemology, the Chrysopoetic aesthetic liberates itself from the constraints of the Cartesian system and affords an entirely unique authenticity of artifice. Without countering the traditional belief which postulates a natural dichotomy between object and subject, or self and other, Coleridge lives in the fullest contradiction of his aesthetics and makes artifice the condition of its truth.

This thesis is in no way an attempt to gloss over or to extenuate the fact of Coleridge’s borrowings. I do not challenge his plagiarisms, only how we choose to understand them. To see Coleridge as a bastion of insincerity is certainly a disorienting, but nevertheless critically rewarding, gesture. Aligning the metaphysics of betrayal with the metaphysics of authenticity, Coleridge situates the Hermetic author in the gaping lacunae between selfhood and otherness, identity and alterity, singularity and multiplicity. Hovering in the liminal interspace between the desire for self-knowledge and the impossibility of expressing oneself in one’s own voice, Hermetic authorship succeeds by foiling its own premise. Finding himself only by losing himself, the Hermetic author becomes himself only by becoming other. Operating in a “golden tertium” state, the Chrysopoetic imagination retracts into itself whilst expressing itself in the other; it becomes by unbecoming; and constructs identity by deconstructing “authority” and alleged “autonomy” and placing it in the nomenclature of the “other.” Occurring in the tertium space of composition, the twofold imagination is always potentially transgressive; refusing the psychic universe its oppositions, it skews distinctions of inner and outer, self and other, art and artifice, intention and expression. Expressing an originary locale that is without ontological coordinates, it proceeds only by becoming other than what it is. The imagination proceeds only by renouncing itself, by exceeding its own identity, and by partaking in the ironic fiction of consciousness and utterance. Manifesting the self
at the expense of the self, the Hermetic author disappropriates the self in order to know the self, and opens itself to the otherness of all expression. Essentially, the feigned expression of an originary self in the words of an other is not altogether different from the “play”gianism of life into art, formlessness into form, ideas into narrative, or of thought into language. Performing the self into existence in the hovering interspace between absolute meaning and the “othered” (uttered) nature of expression, alchemical self-exposition is a “play” which enacts the irony of otherness and reveals to us the negotiated fictions of our narrative lives.

There has not yet been a single comprehensive study of the influence of the alchemical body of thought upon Coleridge’s notion of imagination and the concepts of originality, individuality, and authorship. This thesis is an attempt to open up this arena of critical debate. Notably, the Chrysopoetic tradition affords a particular cache of material which holds wide implications not only for the study of such concepts as they are formulated by Coleridge but also as they inform the legacy of “originality” in our own age, and continue to inform the progress of academic research itself. Deftly employing charges of plagiarism against anyone who should be so inept as to bear witness to the influence of some “other” more “original” mind, we continue to define concepts of originality and authenticity based upon our Cartesian bifurcation of “self” and “not-self.” As I suggest, however, the ethics of plagiarism and authenticity can no longer be enforced at the level of such divisive misnomers. We must own up to the heavily derivative and other-determined nature of self-expression. At best only a half-truth, the Cartesian scheme must come to an understanding of its own inadequacy. Embracing the artifice of creativity in the Chrysopoetic analysis, the alchemical strategy liberates itself from the misnomers of plagiarism and arrives at an entirely unique authentication of artifice. All writing becomes pla(y)iarism, just as all language becomes the “expression” of the self as other. Finally, it is worth reiterating here the point with which I began this study. We are making a mistake if we think that originality is the particular domain of the artist alone. It is, above all else, in the research culture of academia itself that the concept of originality is most operative and influential. Defined as an “original”
contribution to knowledge, it is the final dishonesty of our understanding of plagiarism even today that this thesis, while it encourages us towards an understanding of originality which leads away from the paradoxes internal to the conventional conceptualisations, must nevertheless adhere to the standards of a deeper kind of intellectual conformity.
Figure 1: Petrus Bonus, *Pretiola margarita novella* (1335). The Four Elements Symbolized along a Compass configuration
Figure 2: The mystical compass from Robert Fludd. *Utriusque cosmi-historia*, 2 vols. (Antwerp, 1564) II, 28.
Figure 3: CN V 5090: Coleridge's configuration of the poles of the compass as Oxygen and Chlorine, and, variously, as Apollo and Phaeton.

Figure 4: CN IV 5092: The poles of the compass, North, South, East, West designated as Negative Magnetism, Positive Magnetism, Contraction and Dilation.
Striving after "Something", the primordial will introduces a duality into the otherwise undifferentiated Nothing."

"God considered as manifested in and through the seven Spirits or Properties of the eternal Nature"
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