

*Biographia Literaria* is an autobiography in discourse by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which he published in 1817. The work is long and seemingly loosely structured, and although there are autobiographical elements, it is not a straightforward or linear autobiography. Instead, it is meditative, with numerous essays on philosophy. In particular, it discusses and engages the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Being fluent in German, Coleridge was one of the first major English literary figures to translate and discuss Schelling, in particular.

Critics have reacted strongly to the *Biographia Literaria*. Early reactions were that it was a demonstration of Coleridge's opiate-driven decline into ill health. Recent re-evaluations have given it more credit. While contemporary critics recognize the degree to which Coleridge borrowed from his sources (with straight lifts from Schelling), they also see in the work far more structure and planning than is apparent on first glance.

It is also taken as his longer-term reaction and comment on William Wordsworth, earlier (at the time of *Lyrical Ballads*) his close collaborator. The book contains his celebrated and vexed distinction between 'imagination' and 'fancy'. Chapter XIV is the origin of the famous critical concept of a 'willing suspension of disbelief'.

**“That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith”.**

When the reader/viewer becomes involved in the artist's work and, even though s/he knows that none of the events or person recorded in the story can actually occur, s/he “lets it happen” and can thereby enjoy a stronger bond with the mind of the artist.

It is a formula named as such to justify the use of fantastic or non-realistic elements in literature. Coleridge suggested that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative.

*The Biographia Literaria* was one of Coleridge's main critical studies. In this work, he discussed the elements of writing and what writing should be to be considered genius.

Not only does he discuss literature itself he discusses the many variables that influence and inspire writers. Through this discussion, he makes many value judgments. Some of the issues he tackles include politics, religion, social values, and human identity.

**"Imagination" and "Fancy"**

Rejecting the empiricist assumption that the mind was a tabula rasa on which external experiences and sense impressions were imprinted, stored, recalled, and combined through a process of association, Coleridge divided the "mind" into two distinct faculties. He labelled these the "Imagination" and "Fancy."

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 Imagination 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 operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

"Fancy," in Coleridge's eyes was employed for tasks that were "passive" and "mechanical", the accumulation of fact and documentation of what is seen. The Imagination on the other hand was "vital" and transformative, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation." For Coleridge, it was the Imagination that was responsible for acts that were truly creative and inventive and, in turn, that identified true instances of fine or noble art. The distinction made by Coleridge between Fancy and the Imagination rested on the fact that Fancy was concerned with the mechanical operations of the mind, those which are responsible for the passive accumulation of data and the storage of such data in the memory. Imagination, on the other hand, described the "mysterious power," which extracted from such data, "hidden ideas and meaning." It also determined "the various operations of constructive and inventive genius." Engell has demonstrated that Coleridge's division of the imagination into the "primary" and "secondary" draws a distinction between creative acts that are unconscious and those that are intentional and deliberate. "The Primary Imagination" was for Coleridge, the "necessary imagination" as it "automatically balances and fuses the innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the mind receives through the senses." It represents man's ability to learn from nature. The over arching property of the primary imagination was that it was common to all people. The Secondary imagination, on the other hand, represents a superior faculty which could only be associated with artistic genius. It was this aspect of the imagination, one which could break down what was perceived in order to recreate by an autonomous willful act of the mind that has no analog in the natural world—which Coleridge associated with art and poetry. A key and defining attribute of the secondary imagination was a free and deliberate will; "superior voluntary controul. . .co-existing with the conscious will." The secondary imagination, once activated by the will, "dissolves, dissipates in order to recreate." The significance of the Imagination for Coleridge was that it represented the sole faculty within man that was able to achieve the romantic ambition of reuniting the subject and the object; the world of the self and the world of nature. By establishing the creative act as mimicking the "organic principle" or "one"—a divine principle believed to underlie all reality—the romantic theorist sought to establish a harmonious relationship between the ideal world of the subject and the real world of the object. For Coleridge, the most important aspect of the imagination was that it was active to the highest degree. The creative act called the whole soul of man into activity.

The creative act, on the contrary, is a godlike-act-of-power and causing-to-be, imagination being the divine potency in man. The creative act by which the poet writes the poem is similar to the creative act by which God ordered the world out of chaos; if the poet's creative act is not a creation ex nihilo, it is a process of organic becoming through which the materials are transformed into something absolutely new, and also very likely, strange. Coleridge in the tenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* described this ability of the imagination as "Esemplastic."<sup>1</sup> Noting that *esemplastic* was a word he borrowed from the Greek "to shape," Coleridge explained that it referred to the imagination's ability to "shape into one, having to convey a new sense." He felt such a term was necessary as "it would aid the recollection of my meaning and prevent it being confounded with the usual import of the word imagination."

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from Greek words meaning "into" and "one" and "mold," and coined by Coleridge in 1817, the word means "having the function of molding into unity; unifying."