Imagination is the most important term for romantic poets. But their use of the term is far from consistent. Wordsworth's Imagination, for instance, is admittedly a very elusive term. René Wellek observes that in many pronouncements of Wordsworth, Imagination is "substantially the eighteen-century faculty of arbitrary recall and willful combination of images", and in others it is "the neo-Platonic intellectual vision". "The neo-Platonic metaphysical conception", he adds, "permeates the last books of The Prelude and The Excursion, the psychological the Preface of 1815". But in using the term, Wordsworth "disconcertingly vacillates among three epistemological conceptions".

At times he makes imagination purely subjective, an imposition of the human mind on the real world. At other times he makes it an illumination beyond the control of the conscious mind and even beyond the individual soul. But most frequently he takes an in-between position which favors the idea of a collaboration,

An ennobling interchange
Of action from within and from without.¹

Wellek has indeed thrown much light on the meanings of Wordsworth's Imagination. But to clarify the term even more, I may add that the neo-Platonic or metaphysical imagination is a pre-composition power, the power Wordsworth felt in his wanderings (e.g., when crossing the Alps or ascending the Snowdon), the power that made Wordsworth feel the unity of all living things, the power that halted the travellers (as Hartman suggests) in Wordsworth's poems, or the power that Blake simply calls "the Divine Vision" and Coleridge confusingly calls "primary imagination". And the subjective or psychological imagination is a composition power, the power Wordsworth employed to write his poems when he was no longer wandering but had settled down and thought long and deeply, the power that Emerson defines as "the use which the Reason makes of the material world", or the power that Coleridge calls "secondary imagination".²

In his Biographia Literaria, Coleridge thus defines the two sorts of imagination:
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.  

In interpreting the definitions, Basil Willey equates "the infinite I AM" with Nature and says that by the definition of the primary imagination Coleridge "is affirming that the mind is essentially and inveterately creative". Willey may be right, but somehow he fails to explain why Coleridge calls the primary imagination "the living power and prime agent of all human perception". For me this definition echoes Wordsworth's assertion that imagination is "the faculty which is the primum mobile in Poetry". It tells the initiative as well as the creative nature of the power. In other words, the words prime, primum and primary are all indicators of time sequence as well as of degree in importance. By "prime agent" or "primum mobile" is meant the power which every man is born with and keeps until he loses it (as Wordsworth believes), the power which primitive people are most familiar with and civilization has somewhat suppressed (according to some anthropologists as well as Wordsworth), or the first power that brings the poet's perceptive and creative mind into play when he is receptively in contact with nature like a new-born babe or a primitive man. And this first power is unmistakably the Divine Vision, the power that helps the poet to "see into the life of things".

If Willey has missed a point about Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination, he has, however, rightly pointed out that "it is the Secondary Imagination which is at work in the making of poetry". According to Coleridge, the secondary imagination is "an echo" of the primary. This means, of course, both are quite like each other. When Coleridge says the secondary co-exists with "the conscious will", he is saying that it involves our active thinking, and implying that the primary imagination, unlike the secondary, may co-exist with the unconscious mind. When Coleridge says the secondary is "identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation", he may be saying that both sorts of imagination have the same mind for their agency, and that when they operate, one may seem stronger than the other although they operate in different ways. These words certainly do not make
it clear that the secondary imagination is what I call a composition power. But some further considerations will make it clear.

First, for both Coleridge and Wordsworth, imagination is closely associated with feelings or emotion. If we read Coleridge's definitions of the two sorts of imagination together with Wordsworth's famous passage beginning with "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow...", it may strike us that Coleridge's definitions and Wordsworth's passage seem to be echoing or illustrating each other. Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" or the emotion to be "recollected in tranquillity" is the expression, as it were, of Coleridge's primary imagination, while Wordsworth's "emotion-copy", which is produced after tranquil contemplation, seems parallel to Coleridge's secondary imagination. Just as Coleridge says the secondary imagination is "an echo" of the primary, so Wordsworth says the emotion-copy is "similar" to the original. Wordsworth's emotion-copy involves contemplation—that is, the "conscious will"—just like Coleridge's secondary imagination, while "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" is unconscious like the primary. Besides, since the overflow of feeling is "powerful", it may be stronger than the emotion-copy—explaining Coleridge's meaning of "differing only in degree", whereas the conscious and the unconscious minds explain his meaning of difference "in the mode of its operation".

Second, for both Coleridge and Wordsworth, imagination is also an image-forming faculty. This faculty can be employed in "the voluntary as well as in the merely associative" thought. When one sits at one's desk thinking for images to put in a poem, one is using not the freely associative thought but the voluntary thought. But when a poetic vision with vivid images comes to one's mind, one feels it is really like " Aeolian visitations" to the harp—the operation is "spontaneous, quick, and effortless".

Third, after saying that the secondary imagination operates in a different mode, Coleridge goes on to say:

It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify.

This is indeed to explain the voluntary mode of the secondary imagination engaged in composing poetry, in contrast with the involuntary mode of the primary that comes to the poet sponta-
neously. To dissolve, diffuse and dissipate is the function of analytical reason, akin to that of Wordsworth's Judgment. To idealize and unify, on the contrary, is the function of synthetic reason, somewhat similar to that of Wordsworth's Invention. But, of course, the secondary imagination is not pure reason, which is too "cool" to be life-like. As both an analyzing and a synthesizing power employed in composing poetry, the secondary imagination is still like the primary in that it involves a strong fit of passion and therefore seems a living faculty, capable of changing others and changing itself. This is the reason why Coleridge adds that the secondary imagination "is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead". 11

There seem to be a number of people who agree with R.D. Havens that the primary imagination is just a unifying and interpreting power, which all persons possess" and the secondary imagination is "the higher gift" (possessed by the poet alone). 12 This may be true for Wordsworth in the sense that every man is for him a born-poet, has his first creative sensibility" or "poetic spirit" until death if not "abated or suppress'd" in after years. 13 But it will be untrue if we think of the primary imagination as a pre-composition power, as the first cause of the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion which is to be recollected later in tranquillity as the "raw material" of poetry. For, in that case, the primary imagination will be equal to poetic vision which not all men can have at all times. In my opinion, contrary to Havens and others' the secondary imagination is easier to get since it involves our conscious will. In other words, we can all become thinkers of images and shapers of forms, creative in the sense of artifice, but we cannot all become real poets with second sight, divinely connected with the Muses, creative in the sense of nature. Thus, the primary imagination is a higher gift than the secondary imagination.

In fact, Wordsworth never explicitly or implicitly judges which of the two modes of imagination is "higher". But he does seem to hold that Imagination is a superior power to Fancy. In his Preface to the Edition of 1815, Wordsworth objects to Coleridge's calling Fancy "the aggregative and associative power". 14 His reason is: "the definition is too general. To aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the Imagination as to the Fancy". 15 He prefers to have a distinguishable definition although his own exposition regarding these two terms is likewise far from distinctive. His distinction seems to culminate in the statement that "Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal". 16 This suggests that Fancy is more capricious and less serious than Imagination.

2. See Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814, Ch. I; Blake, Annotations to Wordsworth's Poems; Coleridge, BL, Ch. XIII; and Emerson, Nature, VI.


5. Letter to Henry Reed of 27 September 1845.

6. "Tintern Abbey", l. 49. F. C. Prescott says the poetic thought (i.e., the visionary thought) is "older" than the ordinary thought; therefore, it is primary. See his The Poetic Mind, Ithaca, New York, 1922, p. 53.


8. J. Shawcross says, "In the first case our exercise of the power is unconscious: in the second the will directs, thought it does not determine, the activity of the imagination". See his Introduction to his edition of Biographia Literaria, p. lxvii.


14. This definition appears Southey's Omniana in (1812).

15. WLC, p. 184.

16. WLC, p. 185.

A. Works by Coleridge and Wordsworth


B. Other Reference Books


