Estimates of the value of Coleridge's criticism have varied widely, although few have questioned the fact of its influence. Among authoritative professional scholars René Wellek has been able to perceive in Coleridge's critical theory only eclecticism roving amid the ideas of transcendental Germans. With much respect for Coleridge's critical acumen and some regard for his consistency, Professor Wellek finds little originality in his thought. T. M. Raysor, the most notable editor of Coleridge's critical writings, has boundless admiration for his subject's psychological insights and his practical results, but he rejects Coleridge's system completely, dismissing its central theory of imagination with some self-restraint as "unfortunate." Raysor also has reservations about the appropriateness of the Coleridgean method to the drama, considering that Coleridge talks not about plays but about dramatic poetry. Something will be said later of this. Coleridge's most recent editor, Kathleen Coburn, is also noticeably cautious in her claims for him.

Fine general critics of our times, such as Eliot, Tate, and Ransom, have been repelled by Coleridge's romanticism. Desiring objective certainty and precision, and unalterably opposed to romantic monism and transcendentalism, they have taxed him with overphilosophizing, overspsychologizing, sentimentalizing, confus-
ing, and in general muddying the waters of criticism and taste. The astringent F. R. Leavis remarked some years ago that the continued vogue of Coleridge was something of a critical scandal. Critics have been especially put off by what has seemed to them a confusion in Coleridge of subject and object, which Mr. Tate would no doubt set down ultimately to the noxious influence of Descartes. The objection is not new, as witness Carlyle, but it evidences either ignorance of or plain contempt for the very bases of Coleridge's system.

Others have been more favorable. It is not to the purpose here to speak at length of Coleridge's influence on criticism; indeed, I have little confidence that it could be reliably assessed. This influence, however, is undoubtedly both great and durable. One is surprised, for example, at its extent in the American golden age of the 1840's and 1850's, in Emerson, in Poe, in Hawthorne, in Melville, in Lowell, and in such contemporary powers as the now-forgotten E. P. Whipple. Later one comes upon its tracks in the delectable organicist narcissism of Henry James, a Coleridge sans philosophy, his critical eye turned inward upon the aesthetic vision in his own fiction. And in the critical renaissance of recent decades the place of Coleridge has been at the fore.

In 1948 Stanley Edgar Hyman stated in *The Armed Vision* (the title itself from the *Biographia Literaria*) that Coleridge is "the first really great modern critic," and that "the *Biographia Literaria* . . . is almost the bible of modern criticism. . . . He is . . . with the exception of Aristotle, certainly its most important progenitor." Modern critics and scholars such as James Baker (*The Sacred River*, 1958) have seen in Coleridge an early exponent of depth psychology, especially of the role of the unconscious and of dream in imaginative creation. Sir Herbert Read in particular has hailed him as a forerunner of surrealism and contemporary neoromanticism. Others have been fascinated by the possi-
bilities of the Coleridgean “reconciliation of opposites” for contemporary doctrines of irony and paradox in poetic language. Correspondingly, and still more important, the modern critical dogma of identity of form and content, as propounded by Cleanth Brooks in such essays as “The Poem as Organism” and by Brooks and Warren in the now-famous Understanding Poetry, at the least received much support from Coleridge’s theory of organic form. The degree of his influence would be impossible to calculate in the matter of organicism, for so many others might be pointed out as well: for example, Bosanquet, Bergson, and Croce. Yet Coleridge has been more accessible than these, and as a practical critic closer to the minds and hearts of his critical successors.

Above all, literary men have been heartened by his confidence in the meaning and the value of the language of the imagination. In a very large degree the formal literary criticism of the last two decades—one might almost add of the last two centuries—has waged continuous defensive warfare against the encroachments of science. Amid this battle the Coleridgean dictum, “Poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes,” has been as exhilarating to litterateurs as was to Sydney the ballad of Chevy Chase, or Emerson’s American Scholar to refractory young men in libraries. Coleridge’s defense of the order of imagination against the usurping orders of logic and of scientific and recorded fact won a deep response, even from positivists like the early I. A. Richards; rejecting his metaphysics as ancestral moonshine, they wished perforce it had been truth, and succeeded in transforming it to a brand of moonshine rawer but more acceptable to their time, with the label of semantics.

Today Richards’ and William Empson’s provocative
studies of "the interinanimation of words" have told us what they can. Freudian, Neo-Freudian, and Jungian depth psychology has done its best and its worst, from Maud Bodkins' *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* to Arthur Wormhoudt's *The Demon Lover*. Coleridgean dialectical exegesis, of the kind that he brought to bear in his Shakespearean criticism, and introduced to the schools by Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Robert Heilman, and others, has been assimilated and is no longer a horror and a delight. For the moment, indeed, Coleridge's criticism is neither a rallying point nor a position to be attacked, unless perhaps by Aristotelians—and they have had their full say on the iniquities of critical monism. There is, however, I am confident, a need for such a study as I here introduce: a study of Coleridge's criticism in itself, tentatively accepting the metaphysical assumptions on which it is based and focusing upon its central principles and inner relationships; endeavoring without direct regard for its external connections to the past and the present to see it as a whole, yet at the same time anxiously regardful of its permanent significance and its bearing upon practical criticism.

A straight view of Coleridge's criticism is hard to attain, from two serious hindrances: the nagging problem of his debt to the Germans and the incompleteness of his text. From De Quincey's attack in *Tait's Magazine* up to now there have always been scholars sincerely convinced that Coleridge owed an excessive debt to Kant, Schelling, the Schlegels, and others. He has had perhaps more defenders than attackers, yet the difficulty remains—for, once raised, it is not possible to settle it definitively. A recent University of Florida doctoral dissertation by Hardin McD. Goodman has considered it with magnificent thoroughness, examining the evidence for every German writer for whom influence on Coleridge has been alleged, and decisively rejecting the claim for any substantial indebtedness.

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Yet even such a study as Goodman's can, in the complexity of the issues, neither provide absolute proof nor win conviction from opponents. Perhaps, once the question is opened, it is best simply to point, as does Alfred Harbage, to the enormous number of sources that Coleridge might well have had. Remarking upon the Germans' own debt to the English empiricists, Harbage shrewdly comments, "We can only conclude that a scion of stock so mixed, empirical English and empyreal German, must have had an identity of his own." We know, too, of some empyreal English in Coleridge's background in the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists; we could go on to the esoteric tradition in Swedenborg and Boehme; note an avowed debt to scholastic philosophy for such terms as "subject," "object," and "individuation"; find large infusions of Aristotle in Coleridge's poetics and dramatic theory; and conclude by noting his expressed allegiance to Plato in his later writing. What Coleridge took, we may well think, was in the public domain.

My own argument rests upon internal evidence: the self-consistency and the vitality of Coleridge's critical writing when it is deliberately confined to its own relationships. As organicist and transcendentalist Coleridge is indeed a child of his time, with a particular affinity for the great Germans. It does not necessarily follow that he derives from them. As a philosopher he does not rival Kant or Schelling in sustained and systematic thought because it is not at bottom his purpose to do so; he is a poet-philosopher-critic, and his total contribution, though greatest in criticism, is not separable into its component parts. Coleridge is a genuinely organic thinker, whose mind is a totality and who aims always at synthesis. He appears incomplete if any of his gifts are isolated from the rest: indecisive as an aesthetician, shadowily oracular as a philosopher, fragmentary as poet and critic.

The incompleteness of his critical texts of course
raises a formidable obstacle for the student. The *Biographia Literaria* itself is in a sense an accidental outgrowth of the publication of *Sybilline Leaves* and, ironically enough, the product of Coleridge at his nadir. The rest of his criticism is lecture notes, marginalia in books, reports of his conversation such as may be found in Crabb Robinson’s *Reminiscences*, shorthand reports of his lectures by men of varying powers of comprehension, and, finally, passages in his relatively neglected letters and in journals only now publicly available through the industry of Miss Coburn, where an occasional critical nugget shines forth like a jewel in a manure pile. A critic of Coleridge’s criticism often has to tread lightly, unsure how much weight it is safe to bring to bear.

Yet Coleridge is the greatest English romantic critic, and he stands among the greatest critics of all time. His work is a unique combination of theory and concrete practice, a building so spacious that many see only parts of it, and not the whole of his achievement. An inveterate synthesizer or syncretist, he presents a different aspect from different points of view. To the Aristotelian Ronald Salmon Crane, for example, he is basically a Platonist, in search of the one in the many. To some scholars of romanticism he shows kinship to Aristotle, as in his conception of symbol and of character as a fusion of the particular and the general. By some his thought is distrusted for its seeming eclecticism, whereas others are dismayed by a certain obsessive monotony in it. Crabb Robinson thought he detected in Coleridge the sterility of a closed mind, and complained in almost the same breath of his freedom in handling the great Germans; such talk, said Robinson, would not have been permitted in Germany.

But Coleridge was at once consistent and capable of growth, with fixed principles but limitless boundaries. It is the peculiarity of his thought to be at once organic and discursive, preoccupied with oneness and yet con-
cerned to analyze. Thus comes about, as we shall later notice, his dual use of terms like “organic” and “imagination,” which may stand according to their contexts either for the synthesis to be achieved or for the part to be synthesized by reconciliation with its opposite term. Coleridge is organicist, but he goes beyond organicism in its simple or extreme sense by trying to include within it the benefits of systematic and analytical thinking, as in his account of the mind as at once an organic unity and a hierarchy of faculties.

This study of Coleridge’s criticism thus emphasizes its essential unity, an attribute difficult to demonstrate conclusively because of wide misunderstanding of his method and the incompleteness of his texts, and also because of persistent suspicions of his originality. The title, *The Idea of Coleridge’s Criticism*, is at once an expression of confidence and of deference to doubters. *Idea*, in Coleridge’s Platonic usage, is almost synonymous with *ideal*, the Platonic form of which the actual corpus of criticism is an imperfect and incomplete appearance, while yet implicating the perfect whole. So Eliot, himself drawing upon Coleridge, writes of *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Formally incomplete, Coleridge’s criticism sketches the outlines of completeness nonetheless.

This large praise of him, in grain a romantic and in some ways a Platonist, should be sufficient warning to Aristotelians or proponents of criticism as a science. I sympathize with Coleridge’s fundamental monism, and consider his critical scheme comprehensive enough to deal justly with the complexities both of literary history and of the individual work. I would maintain that pluralism is destructive of critical vitality and, conversely, that there can be no total objectivity in criticism (Coleridge’s is a system of object as well as subject). Correspondingly, I would defend the tempered and complex monism of Coleridge against the absolute monism of much contemporary criticism. The con-
ception of organic unity is unsatisfactory without the imaginative sense of the mind infused within the words of the literary object, and thus I distrust the attribution of complete autonomy, according to which a poem or a novel is literally possessed of its own life and unifying principle, independent of its creator.

All this is to avow great confidence in Coleridge himself, not merely as a historical example of romantic theory, or an interesting pioneer in the investigation of the unconscious mind, or a halfway house up the peak of modern organicism, but a critic sufficient in himself, of permanent value and enduring usefulness of application.

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R. H. F.