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The Politics of Autobiography
in the *Biographia Literaria*

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Romantic poetry is nothing if not the poetry of crisis, and, as its seminal theorist, Coleridge dutifully produces the most crisis-ridden poetry and prose of the period. In the *Biographia Literaria*, arguably the most traumatized of Coleridge's works, cohesive patterns of meaning never seem to emerge from the chaotic and fragmentary offerings. Instead, the frantic twists and turns away from a unifying development suspend coherence above an intellectual hodgepodge of inquiry, formulation, reformulation, and rebuttal. Jerome Christensen has recently termed this confusion Coleridge's "marginal method," arguing cogently that the *Biographia* is a compendium of fragmented commentaries on precedent texts—Hartley, Wordsworth, God, the will, the Bible, etc.[1] But Christensen, while reaffirming an opinion common to most readers of the *Biographia* (that the book is disorganized and hard to read), in no way represents mainstream Coleridge scholarship. To the contrary, his work radically threatens much of what is sacred. This is the case in part because Coleridge, more than any other Romantic poet, has fostered a tradition of critical apologetics. From daughter Sara's long-winded introductions and appendices to the latest and most impressive works on the *Biographia*, "Coleridgeans" have had to reconcile a very appealing genius with what are often very unappealing modes of presentation. As a result, the critical voices responsible for the poet's canonization have been necessarily strident. While the more vociferous apologists have all disappeared, their legacy continues in a less obtrusive but more effective form, in a very learned and respectable discourse which ingeniously deifies Coleridge while defusing any possibility for the recognition of the crisis so much a part of his Romanticism.

Two recent books on the *Biographia* both offer insightful new ways to approach a difficult work; and both are similar in method and assumption.[2] Kathleen Wheeler roots Coleridge in a Socratic tradition in order to find a pervasive irony and use of metaphor intended to educate the

uninitiated. Catherine Wallace invents a "speaker," an ironic self-parody who controls and manipulates the book's elaborate "design." Like Wheeler, Wallace sees the *Biographia* as a carefully orchestrated exercise in reader-education. Both critical works are heavily researched and convincingly written. Yet both exemplify what revisionist Jerome McGann has called the academy's "uncritical" perspective on Romanticism.[3] Adopting Romantic values as interpretive givens, the two studies make Coleridge into the master of the imagination and the *Biographia* into his masterful attempt to educate an ignorant public. In doing so, both critics ignore the precarious dynamics of Coleridge's philosophy and use the distance of irony to downplay the traumas of his autobiographical effort; they speak safely from within a scholarly tradition which automatically assumes the sanctity of "great works" and yet clings fiercely to the notion of its own disinterestedness. Consider Wallace's revealing dismissal (in a footnote) of Christensen:

> Jerome C. Christensen ingeniously seized this fact [that Coleridge uses an infuriating number of digressive examples] to argue that *BL* is radically self-deconstructed: it reveals C's understanding that statements are prisons, or that freedom is possible only within indeterminacy. A deconstructionist no doubt serves major strategic ends by arguing that even *BL* actively undermines its own traditional humanism, but C *never* valued the kind of indeterminacy Christensen describes. None the less, Christensen's description of C's 'marginal' method of composition holds great promise as the basis for a systematic theory of C's use of his own notebooks and others' texts.[4]

Misreading Christensen (rather violently), Wallace first makes indeterminacy a matter of intention, a move Christensen himself would never sanction.[5] This strategy enables her to dismiss indeterminacy, deconstruction, and Christensen with one self-assured appeal to Coleridge's own "values." Because Coleridge "*never* valued the kind of indeterminacy Christensen describes," indeterminacy should not be an issue in the *Biographia*, nor should it be allowed to raise questions about the controlled and controlling strategies Wallace celebrates as the *Biographia's* "design." But regardless of the pros and cons of Christensen's work, the real issue here is the logic of the dismissal. From Wallace's perspective, the obsessive convolutions of the *Biographia* have become an intended puzzle merely in need of unravelling by a good scholar well-versed in Coleridgean "values." This is ideological appropriation of a dangerous sort.

   If instead we demand a self-consciously historical criticism which does more than fetishize the past, which tries to keep its own ideology and that of its subject in illuminating contradistinction, then the *Biographia* offers a particularly vivid irony. On one hand, Coleridge stands as

the founding father of organic unity and the coalescent imagination, principles still integral to our critical thought. On the other hand, he has authored a work so immethodical that it seems to mock the very standards it exposes. Rather than granting Coleridge complete impunity by uncritically adopting his own values, or instead going to the other extreme and making his treatise into a "text" simply for the purpose of proving contemporary theories, I would like to use an understanding of autobiography in order to approach the *Biographia* as characteristically brilliant but fraught with its own evasions and self-contradictions. In short, I would like to question the sanctity of Coleridge's theories of self and imagination and expose in the process the *Biographia's* covert manipulations of "philosophical" authority.

Although there is considerable dispute as to whether the *Biographia* is a freestanding whole—the final result of the originally intended "Essay on the Elements of Poetry"—or an oversized preface to the volume of poems *Sybilline Leaves*, it began unquestionably as autobiography.[6]As early as September of 1803, Coleridge mentions the project in his journal: "Seem to have made up my mind to write my metaphysical works as *my Life*, & *in* my Life—intermixed with all the other events/or history of the mind and fortunes of S. T. Coleridge."[7] "Intermixed" indeed, but it was not until September of 1815 that the manuscript was completed and in the hands of the printer. Both references from that time—Mary Lamb's letter to Sarah Hutchinson and Coleridge's to Dr. Brabant—give the prospective title as *Autobiographia Literaria*.[8] When, after innumerable problems with the printers, the book finally appeared in July of 1817, it bore the title it now has. Somewhere between the first manuscript and the final printing, the "auto" was lost, dropped presumably by the author who realized how little his work resembled traditional "auto-biography."[9] The omission suggests that which Coleridge was unable to include—the self—and it is significant because it points to a central absence in the *Biographia* while implying a potentially problematical relationship between representation, self-representation, and the creating authority. For autobiography, as a recent burst of theoretical activity indicates, occupies a peculiar generic position.[10] Situated somewhere between the discursive presence of the lyric and the distant authorial absence of the epic, autobiography is the overt fiction of the self, the making of the self into "other" by means of what Louis Marin calls the "ruse of writing."[11]According to Marin, the inaccessibility of the autobiographer's actual birth and death necessitates not only the fictional projection of the immediate, personal self into the linguistic other—a phenomenon recognized by a variety of writers from St. Augustine to Jacques Lacan—but also an accompanying and cyclical return from that other back to the present authorial self. Marin sees autobiography as containing a continuing sequence of "interruptions" and "reprises," a series of "micro-births" and "micro-deaths"

which move the diegetic level alternately from "discourse" to "narra-tive" and back again as the writer shifts from past to present self, altering as he writes the degree of fictionality with which the self is portrayed.[12] This ongoing cycle of necessary projection and reassuring return microcosmically reflects the larger ambivalence of autobiography by incorporating both the lyric and epic selves within a single form. This ambivalence—at least according to Marin—is primarily concerned with alternating temporal positions—past or present—and changing fictional states—real or unreal. But the issue must also be one of authority, as the writer has to engineer a power relationship between his two textual representations. Either one may become the pronounced locus of pow-er. In Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for example, scenes of childhood, his recollected "spots of time," become sources of imaginative strength which bolster the flagging confidence of the composing poet: a strategy of return to the distant but holy other keeps the poem in motion.[13] But for Coleridge, the movement from self to other implies the surrender of an active self-consciousness to a dissociated fictional construct, and with this surrender there is an accompanying loss of authority. The present self is active, elusive, and in control; but the past self is fixed, for-mulated, and—most disturbing for Coleridge—open to interpretation.[14]

The discussion of self-consciousness so important to the *Biographia's* philosophical chapters makes it clear that the "act of self-consciousness," or "will," provides a starting point for Coleridge's organic transcenden-talism by uniting subject and object in an active first principle:

> This principle, and so characterised manifests itself in the SUM or I AM; which I shall hereafter indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self, and self-consciousness. In this, and in this alone, object 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.[15]

The controlled tone and orderly presentation are partially attributable to Schelling, to whom much of the material belongs, and to the fact that Coleridge limits his discussion of the self to its active role in time present. Although he equates objectivity with a kind of death and is forced to define self-consciousness in terms of the objective, he carefully avoids confronting the self as a potentially fixed and manipulable entity.

This apparently philosophical reluctance is made relevant to Col-eridge's attempted autobiography when one considers the less re-strained entries of the notebooks:

> Definition of Personality is—Hic et alter qui nihilominus est Hic: or
> Ego, et alter Ego—: or A + A = A. (*CN* III, 4195)
> [This person and the other who is nevertheless this one: or I, and the
> other I.]

> No one will understand me. TIS BETTER!—But Alas! to whom but
> thee, white-faced Friend & comforting Pandect, negative Comforter
> by passive unreuttering all-receptivity, have I the power of disburth-
> ening my soul—? What? tho' it <be> but a poor Shadow, a poor
> *fragmentary* Shadow, of Reflection from a Shallow Brook? What? tho'
> it be but an echo from a senseless Rock? Yet the solitary Exile will
> gaze at the human form in the Rivulet! Will talk with the Echo from
> the unhearing, <unslandering> or inhuman, Stone! (*CN* III, 4244)

The first entry, from May 1814, is more Coleridge than either Fichte or
Schelling, although it reflects largely the same positions articulated in
the *Biographia*. The important difference is that here Coleridge em-
phasizes more clearly the primacy of a divided self. Regardless of his
insistence on its eventual unity, the self begins in a divided state with
one half a negative counterpart to the other.[16] The second entry, from the
spring of 1815, places a distraught Coleridge in relation to his therapeu-
tic notebook. The linguistic "other," the self as represented in the
entries, is a "negative Comforter," "a poor *fragmentary* Shadow," "an
echo from a senseless Rock." Here the self-in-language loses its immedi-
acy and vigor upon being fixed on the lifeless page. But more important
is Coleridge's frantic desire for self-affirmation: the inadequacy of his
notebook image is proportional to his need of its support. Yet the
"solitary Exile" persists—seeking himself in shallow streams, in vague
echoes. This anxious desire for self-affirmation belies the unified con-
sciousness of Chapter 12 at the same time that it finds revealing
correlations among the frequently ignored later poetry,[17] revealing be-
cause Coleridge's anxiety (separation traumas of various sorts—
religious, sexual, philosophic, literary) intensifies as his public conser-
vatism becomes more strident, indicating extreme contradictions em-
bodied from the outset. I would like to suggest that Coleridge's concepts
of self and imagination as articulated within the *Biographia* stand purged
of their original misgivings and offer themselves as philosophical solu-
tions to what are actually personal and historical problems. In other
words, the unity and truth espoused are ideals in which Coleridge
desperately needs to believe, not those which he has found.

Wheeler's faith in Coleridge's use of irony for his own brand of
manipulative education proves useful for the exploration of metaphoric
subtleties, but because she accepts Coleridge as the master of her own
critical assumptions, she tends to ignore or misconstrue the *Biographia's*
blatant defensiveness. The frequent rants against hostile reviewers
come immediately to mind.[18] But Coleridge can also be far more re-

strained, camouflaging as he writes his own dominant strategy. Consider the book's opening paragragh, where he supposedly makes his "motives" clear:

> It has been my lot to have had my name introduced both in conversation, and in print, more frequently than I find it easy to explain, whether I consider the fewness, unimportance, and limited circulation of my writings, or the retirement and distance, in which I have lived, both from the literary and political world. Most often it has been connected with some charge, which I could not acknowledge, or some principle which I have never entertained. Nevertheless, had I no other motive, or incitement, the reader would not have been troubled with this exculpation. What my additional purposes were, will be seen in the following pages. It will be found, that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally. I have used the narration chiefly for the purpose of giving a continuity to the work, in part for the sake of the miscellaneous reflections suggested to me by particular events, but still more an introductory to the statement of my principles in Politics, Religion, and Philosophy, and the application of the rules deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism. 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 of impartiality the real *poetic* character of the poet, by whose writings this controversy was first kindled, and has been since fueled and fanned. (*BL* I, 5)

The posture assumed is initially one of indifference and extreme humility. His works are few and unimportant, and he has lived—apparently quite happily and of his own choosing—in "retirement and distance." Only chance, his "lot," has brought him before the public. In the process, much was misconstrued. But all that, he says, is of no importance: there are other motivations for the present work, and they will soon become apparent. After this evasion, he offers, as if in explanation. the fact that the work will include little of "myself personally." The events of his life, "the narration," will be used only to provide structure for, and are clearly surbordinate to, the more important "principles in Politics, Religion, and Philosophy." Then, as a subtle enticement, Coleridge closes by resurrecting the conflict over "the true nature of poetic diction" and promises a rigorous examination of the "real poetic character" of that poet who was actually at the source of the controversy— namely Wordsworth.

   There are three points of interest. First, as any reader of the notebooks or letters would know, the indifference and humility are only a posture. Regardless of the self-justifying distinction he frequently made between "reputation" and "fame," Coleridge was deeply affected by adverse

criticism and morbidly guilty about his erratic publications.[19] But, although he admired the "retilinear" careers of Wordsworth and Southey, he was not humble when it came to his own powers: he considered himself a man of "genius."[20] Second, the self-effacement of the opening lines culminates with the admission that little of what will follow will be directly "personal." With that admission a substitution is engineered: Coleridge displaces the already diminutive "personal" by setting it briefly in juxtaposition to the more important philosophic "principles." Third, this displacement is made complete as Coleridge effectively absences himself from the controversy over poetic diction. He retreats into a disinterested objectivity while making Wordsworth the focus of attention. The advantage gained by all three maneuvers should be obvious: the unquestionable authority of philosophical "principles" eclipses individual identity; it obscures the human behind the intellectual and stabilizes the discourse by appeal to a higher frame of reference; it legitimizes by evasion. W. J. Bate, then, says more than he realizes when marveling how "Coleridge can lose himself in his subject."[21] But a better understanding of this loss requires an examination of the relationship between the autobiographical enterprise and Coleridge's theory of the imagination. There, we will begin to see more clearly what was at stake for Coleridge.

Although in 1815 autobiography was not as generically defined as it is today, Marin's theory still obtains as a pattern of relationships from which one can understand the movements of consciousness so necessary to any kind of formal "self-making."[22] According to Marin, autobiography evidences an implicit reluctance to move to or stay within the fixed and formulated epic self; instead, it incorporates both its generic parents—the epic and the lyric selves—in an ongoing internal cycle orchestrated by the composing consciousness. Such a pattern is clearly evident, as David Haney has argued, in the opening book of The Prelude, where Wordsworth carefully controls the emergence of the "autobiographical figure."[23] The Biographia, on the other hand, seems an aberrant effort: Coleridge resists any formal attempt at sustained self-presentation. Yet this aberrance alone is not the major issue, for, as we have seen, it is deeply rooted in philosophical misgivings often concealed by author and critic alike. Consider (one more time) the famous and oft-belabored Chapter 13:

> 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 re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to 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; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (*BL* I, 304-5)

Although the primary imagination—as the "prime Agent of all human Perception"—is unquestionably the source or origin of all poetic and perceptual power, it is hardly "primary." More accurately, it is a secondary substitution for the real source, "the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." The referential authority is posited elsewhere as the "primary" imagination is merely "a repetition in the finite mind." "Repetition"—suggesting both replication and continued recurrence—points to an important temporal distinction. The eternal and infinite act of creation is unified and synchronic with a Zen-like wholeness whose only necessary linguistic utterance is the singular "I AM," while its human counterpart is decidedly temporal, existing in an endless state of secondary ingemination, of linguistic diachrony. Coleridge, of course, sees the temporal disparity: it is precisely his purpose to join the infinite, the atemporal, and the preconsciously instinctual to the finite, the temporal, and the conscious.

The secondary imagination differs from the primary not in kind but in degree, in "mode of operation." As an "echo" of a "repetition," it is twice removed from its originating authority, and only at that distance can the actual process of articulation begin. The process—"dissolv[ing], diffus[ing], dissipat[ing], in order to re-create"—is essentially one of conflict, a war between necessary desynonymization and a subsequent creation. This conflict, however, is not limited to the secondary imagination: it is imposed from without. Because the struggle attempts to "idealize and unify"—to return through language to the ideal unity of the pre-primary, pre-linguistic, pre-experiential "act of creation"—the efforts of the primary imagination are clearly in evidence. But the other adversary remains obscured, that is, until Coleridge begins his discussion of fancy.

Unlike the secondary imagination, fancy is without conflict—but it is also without life. It "plays," but only with "fixities and definites," and, as a "mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space," it appears mechanical, flat, and almost unconscious. It is ostensibly synchronic. But like the primary imagination, fancy's synchrony is

paradoxical as it declares itself "emancipated" from the temporal and yet operates as a "mode of memory," itself a temporal process. Both the primary imagination and the fancy then claim to be atemporal and aspatial, and are hence similarly inaccessible; they exist more as hypothetical extremes against which to measure the secondary imagination than as descriptions of actual states or processes. If the primary imagination is pre-linguistic, the fancy is post-linguistic: a dead language fixed and formulated by a non-participatory mental process, mere mechanical associationalism.[24]

The oppositions begin to assert themselves as the tripartite structure searches for equilibrium. The fulcrum is of course the secondary imagination whose cyclical conflict holds the extremes in balance. The contestants are the primary imagination and the fancy; the battlefields are language and consciousness; and the struggle is for meaning. The pre-linguistic supremacy of the creative "I AM" is placed in dialectical opposition to its antithesis, the hopelessly inadequate, post-linguistic fancy. The struggle resolves itself in dynamic tension as both combatants are endlessly dissolved, diffused, and dissipated in order to be re-created. Importantly, both the primary imagination and the fancy *must* be present in the creative process. Like autobiography, the secondary imagination incorporates within itself the extremes between which it is situated. Also like autobiography, the secondary imagination carries with it a pronounced fear of a certain type of linguistic representation: the epic self in Marin's theory and the fancy in Coleridge's correspond to two related types of death in language. The first, Marin's, offers a dead self, a verbally calcified fictional construct in which the autobiographer is periodically force to reside. The second, Coleridge's, outlines a dead mental process, a lifeless manipulation of "fixities and definites." Both, obviously, are related. If Coleridge had chosen to write a more traditional autobiography, an ordered presentation of his intellectual development for example (following Gibbon or Vico), he would have been required to confront himself as an externalized, fixed linguistic entity, a fancified self whose mere existence would pose a threat to the composing consciousness, in addition to being an uncomfortable reminder of failed potential and wasted genius. Such a maneuver would be difficult for two reasons: one, authority would have to be relinquished from its creative source (i.e., Coleridge himself); and two, that authority, once posited externally, would become open to misinterpretation.[25]

In order to explore the two interwoven issues (the first psychological, the second linguistic), one could turn to the master of originary crisis—Freud. His theory of repetition-compulsion outlines a tripartite structure analogous to both Coleridge's theory of the imagination and Marin's theory of autobiography. For Freud, repetition-compulsion is a cyclical conflict between two antithetical instincts—Eros and Thanatos. The consciousness, dissatisfied with its separation from primal unity,

seeks substitute gratification as a release from the repressed instincts.
The process is cyclical because the consciousness never attains satisfac-
tion. Freud writes: "No substitutes or reactive formations and no
sublimations will suffice to remove the repressed instinct's persisting
tensions; and it is the difference in amount between the pleasure of
satisfaction which is *demanded* and that which is actually *achieved* that
provides the driving factor."[26] Because the trauma of separation has seen
to it that the primal unity of the pre-conscious self can never be
reduplicated, the cycle is endless, an ongoing and perpetually frustrated
attempt to return to the beginning. As Freud summarizes: "All the
instincts, the loving, the grateful, the sensual, the defiant, the self-
assertive and independent—all are gratified in the wish to be the father
of himself."[27] From this perspective Coleridge desires to be the father of
the divine Logos, the eternal "I AM" which is language in its primordial
essence. The "I AM" is also the self at its most narcissistic, a pre-
conscious unified being who defies linguistic transcription. Motivated
both by the desire to return to the origin of self and imagination, and the
fear of linguistic death, the secondary imagination is the creative con-
sciousness engaged in the endless cycle of repetition-compulsion. It
moves from the necessary desynonymization—the dissolving, diffus-
ing, and dissipating of the synchronic "I AM" into the reality of
diachronic language—forward to the "re-creation," the movement be-
yond language back to the primal, pre-linguistic "eternal act of crea-
tion," which itself exists only as a repetition, a substitute in the finite
mind. The authority is posited at the origin and at the re-creation, points
which are both extra-linguistic and extra-liminal. Language then be-
comes only a medium, a conduit through which meaning and self move,
but not in which they reside. Like consciousness itself, language is
inherently inadequate, always in the position of having to regain lost
ground.

   This is, of course, Freud looking back on Coleridge and not Coleridge
on himself. Although laden with its own insecurities and self-
contradictions, Freud's system provides a perspective for seeing under-
neath Coleridge's philosophic armor. Whereas Coleridge grounds his
thought in faith—faith in language, faith in the imagination, faith in
reason—and insists that the symbol partakes in that which it describes,
that the imagination echoes its divine counterpart, and that reason can
approach the transcendent Will, we should recognize—with or without
psychoanalysis—that Coleridge's beliefs operate concurrently with a
deeply embedded mistrust of their own abilities, that they incorporate
their own silent misgivings.

   Perhaps Coleridge did not write a more orthodox autobiography for
the simple reason that he loathed his past as an unwanted reminder of
failed potential and weakened will. He preferred the intellectual pre-
sent, that continuous moment of philosophical speculation in which the

self could be forgotten, disregarded in deference to the metaphysical. The entire thirteenth chapter, in fact, stands as part of such a moment, as the culmination of a long philosophical section (Chaps. 5-13) which Coleridge intended to be the book's vital center, leading into and justifying the extended critique on Wordsworth. Yet it is important to remember that this middle section was probably written last in order to stabilize what Coleridge already knew to be a precarious "miscellany." Obviously, the philosophy would legitimize the often vicious rants of the later chapters by providing a ground for his ideas on poetic diction, at the same time that it would complete—although on a different plane—the fragmented autobiography of the first four chapters.[28] But the philosophic section is replete with its own contraditions and incon- sistencies, not the least of which is the famous Chapter 13, which duplicitously excuses its own fragmentation while deferring its respon- sibilities. The chapter is not, however, simply "a mad dash from an untenable position"; nor does it justify itself as part of a larger scheme, "do[ing] no damage to the integrity or completeness of the work as a whole."[29] It is instead a gesture of compensation, a corrective for misplaced emphasis and subsequent failure to deliver. The importance of the imagination had been emphasized early on as the active and vital alternative to Hartley's passive associationalism, and Coleridge tried twice to articulate his theory (Chaps. 10 and 12) before finally resolving the issue in Chapter 13. But in scrambling to confront the truncated theory Coleridge did eventually write, most critics ignore the signifi- cance of the infamous fictional letter.[30] There, centrally positioned with- in a central chapter, Coleridge finds the solution to his philosophical and autobiographical quandary.

Coleridge's theory of the imagination is an attempt to explain how the human consciousness dynamically defeats the subject/object, real/ideal, and nature/mind dichotomies by uniting all oppositions in an act of will, a *tertium aliquid* which synthesizes via "interpenetration." At the crux of the transcendentalist enterprise, the imagination must prove the self capable of fusing "knowing" and "being" in one act of the mind. The process is essentially one of definition—"What is the self and how does it function in the world?"—and this definition is, as I have tried to show, inseparable from a theory of language which unavoidably includes its own worst fears as part of its defining structure. But Coleridge's theory is also, and more importantly, a polemic arguing for a particular type of philosophical freedom, for a world of the mind unfettered by historical circumstance and unencumbered by political realities. "Freedom," he argues at the end of Chapter 12, "must be assumed as a *ground* of philosophy."[31] This is the case not only because he bases his system on the first principle of an *active* will, but more significantly because he begins all inquiries by first establishing "philosophical principles" and then proceeding to the facts or observations.[32] Such "principles" mas-

querade as eternal verities, unchecked by reference to historical context and exhibiting what might be termed false consciousness: they deny their own historicity and preclude the possibility of change. Most importantly for Coleridge, these "principles" stabilize a very fragile narrative, bolstering a self which is most comfortable when least visible. But unfortunately, the chapter on the imagination—the book's projected cynosure—existed only in the author's mind, a problem Coleridge would ingeniously solve. As he admitted to his publishers (with a slight bravado), "that letter addressed to myself as from a friend, at the close of the first volume . . . was written without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the inkstand" (*CL* IV, 728).

As the whole of Coleridge's letter to Curtis makes clear, the ease with which the fictional letter was written was the result of its distance from the defined "effort":

> For such is my *nature*, i.e. that which from complex causes, partly constitutional, partly inflicted or acquired *ab extra*—to my own unhappiness and detriment—that I can do nothing well by *effort*. Hence it is, that I often converse better than I can compose; and hence too it is, that a collection of my letters written before my mind was so much oppressed would, in the opinion of all who have ever seen any number of them, be thrice the value of my set publications. Take as a specimen -------'s Letters, which never received a single correction or that letter addressed to myself as from a friend, at the close of the first volume of the Literary Life . . . (April 29, 1817)

The anxieties of performance find relief in spontaneity or, in the case of the thirteenth chapter, duplicitous fiction. There, distancing himself from authorial responsibility, Coleridge becomes his own reader and critic. This is the ultimate act of self-effacement, a complete disappearance from the narrative. Yet it also grants maximum control, allowing Coleridge to manipulate the authority to which he defers. Simultaneously author and not-author, self and other, he has the advantage of having it both ways in the process of acting out the very psychological phenomenon he is discussing.

Coleridge's "friend," responding as directed, first gives his personal reaction to the chapter and then his opinion on its prospects if published as part of the new "introduction." The personal response divides—in good Coleridgean fashion—into its effect upon his understanding and the effect upon his feelings. With regards to the former, the friend notes that the argument was not only "so *new*" but also "so directly the reverse" of his accepted "truth" that he "should have felt as if I had been standing on my head." This condition, he tells us (and footnotes a note from Chapter 4), is precisely that described by Coleridge as being "the antithesis to that in which a man is when he makes a bull," in other words, a moment of such profound revelation that the truth has been

accepted intellectually but not yet emotionally.[33] Momentary disequilib-
rium figures unavoidably in the conversion.

This emphasis continues as the friend describes in detail the effect of
the chapter upon his emotions. He compares reading it to being left
alone for the first time inside a large Gothic cathedral "in a gusty
moonlight night of autumn":

> The effect on my feelings, on the other hand, I cannot better
> represent, than by supposing myself to have known only our light
> airy modern chapels of ease, and then for the first time to have been
> placed, and left alone, in one of our largest Gothic cathedrals in a
> gusty moonlight night of autumn. 'Now in glimmer, and now in
> gloom;' often in palpable darkness not without a chilly sensation of
> terror; and then suddenly emerging into broad yet visionary lights
> with coloured shadows, of fantastic shapes yet all decked with holy
> insignia and mystic symbols; and ever and anon coming out full
> upon pictures and stone-work images of great men, with whose
> names I was familiar, but which looked upon me with countenances
> and an expression, the most dissimilar to all I had been in the habit
> of connecting with those names. Those whom I had been taught to
> venerate as almost super-human in magnitude of intellect, I found
> perched in little fret-work niches, as grotesque dwarfs; while the
> grotesques, in my hitherto belief, stood guarding the high altar with
> all the characters of Apotheosis. In short, what I had supposed
> substances were thinned away into shadows, while every where
> shadows were deepened into substances:
>> If substance may be call'd what shadow seem'd,
>> For each seem'd either!
>>   MILTON.   (*BL* I, 301)

Once again the moment is clearly one of conversion. "Visionary lights"
emerge from the "palpable darkness" to make mockery of the speaker's
previous assumptions. Those thought "almost super-human in mag-
nitude of intellect" become "grotesque dwarfs," while the once gro-
tesque become great and holy. As the transformation intensifies, all
substance fades into shadow and all shadow hardens into substance: "a
chilly sensation of terror" pervades all. Both allusions—the first from
"Christabel," the second from *Paradise Lost*—add to the forbidding
atmosphere and complicate the various relationships. The line from
"Christabel" occurs just as Geraldine and Christabel—trenchant evil
and naive innocence—"steal" past the Baron's door, "As still as death,
with stifled breath!" Like both Coleridge and his "friend," the two
women are duplicitously avoiding confrontation, sneaking past their
obligations under the protective guise of innocence. In each case,
assurances to the contrary cannot alleviate the incumbent guilt and
susceptibility. The lines from Milton reiterate the same concerns, de-
scribing the allegorical figure Death whom Satan meets (along with Sin)

while sneaking through the Gates of Hell on his journey through Chaos to Eden.[34] Significantly, Death is born of Sin, a relationship which suggests a psychological source for Coleridge's use of negative imagery, as well as simply extending the fearful "other-side" of his theory of the imagination.[35]

The Gothic cathedral serves as both the location for and the vehicle of a complex emotional and intellectual transformation. Regardless of the distinction attempted by the friend, the effect upon the understanding cannot be differentiated from the effect upon the feelings: as the descriptions make clear, the two work together. This is precisely the "intermediate faculty" described in Chapter 7:

> Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal *wins* its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. (In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION. But in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary controul over it.) (*BL* I, 124-5)

Both active and passive, the imagination is integral to the "mind's self-experience in the act of thinking"; like the thirteenth chapter itself, it serves as a kind of "fulcrum" between internal and external experience. Reading Coleridge's unwritten treatise on the imagination causes the friend to undergo the very process being discussed; and in order to communicate the profundity of his conversion (a transformation to a theory of transformation), he uses the Gothic cathedral as a locus for self-confrontation. There, the friend externalizes his own internal metamorphosis so that both occur simultaneously and with perfect reflexivity: internal and external merge as subject and object become one. Like Coleridge, whose fictional letter is both his and not his, the friend watches himself from a distance. Yet unlike Coleridge, whose orchestrating hand remains hidden, the friend acknowledges the fictional status of his illustration: he engineers an imaginative confrontation between self and self-as-other in order to *explain* his experience. The success of his example is contingent upon our implicit sanction of his

use of fiction. Coleridge, on the other hand, can make no such conces-
sion: neither his philosophic nor his autobiographical discourse will
permit it. While fiction stands capable of generating its own authority,
both philosophy and autobiography purport to be vehicles for some-
thing greater.

His personal experience related, the friend next turns to the chapter's
probable effect upon the public. Predictably adopting the party line, he
urges Coleridge to omit the chapter from the "present work":

> So much for myself. But as for the PUBLIC, I do not hesitate a
> moment in advising and urging you to withdraw the Chapter from
> the present work, and to reserve it for your announced treatises on
> the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity. First,
> because imperfectly as I understand the present Chapter, I see
> clearly that you have done too much, and yet not enough. You have
> been obliged to omit so many links, from the necessity of com-
> pression, that what remains, looks (if I may recur to my former
> illustration) like the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined
> tower. Secondly, a still stronger argument (at least one that I am sure
> will be more forcible with you) is, that your readers will have both
> right and reason to complain of you. This Chapter, which cannot,
> when it is printed, amount to so little as a hundred pages, will of
> necessity greatly increase the expense of the work; and every reader
> who, like myself, is neither prepared or perhaps calculated for the
> study of so abstruse a subject so abstrusely treated, will, as I have
> before hinted, be almost entitled to accuse you of a sort of imposi-
> tion on him. (BL I, 302-3)

Like his personal response, this section is divided into two equal parts:
the first details an objection to the chapter as fragmented "from the
necessity of compression"; the second reminds the author that the
added pages will "greatly increase the expense of the work." Both seek
to establish the authority of the missing section as they justify its
absence. While the economic considerations further the image of Col-
eridge as the concerned philosopher sensitive to his public, the structur-
al criticism—"what remains . . . looks like the fragments of the winding
steps of an old ruined tower"—carefully outlines a central paradox in
which the chapter's chief faults—its omissions—become the result of its
all-inclusiveness: "I see clearly that you have done too much, and yet
not enough." The omitted "links" occur not as the signs of lack, of
intellectual emptiness or passivity, but as indications of excess, of an
overwhelming knowledge which uncomfortably resists compression
into an ordered verbal presentation. Absence here is being argued as
the sign of presence—argued by a non-existent "friend," argued in a
fictional letter, argued about an unwritten chapter. Fragmentation,
abstruseness, disorganization—all are redeemable by an external,

ahistorical, omnipotent "Truth," which informs and legitimizes human irregularities via reference to an unchanging verity. This paradox, embedded at heart of the *Biographia*, is also at the heart of Coleridge's autobiographical method.

The fictional letter interrupts the philosophic inquiry at mid-sentence, offering itself as a substitution for, and an explanation of, the *Biographia's* missing center. As such, it fictionally plugs a rather gaping narrative hole, supplementing a drooping discourse with a sudden and novel shift to a new external voice. This new voice is an invented authority which surreptitiously permits full exercise of authorial control at no authorial risk: it guarantees both power and distance. Yet this incident is not, as I have tried to show, an isolated maneuver precipitated solely by the strained circumstances of composition. Instead, it continues a strategy of self-effacement which stands at the center of Coleridge's autobiographical attempt. Originally, the self had disappeared behind a daunting bulwark of philosophical principles, avoiding the perils of any kind of human representation at the same time that it appropriated the unquestionable authority of eternal Truth—a parasitic *homo philosophicus*, it became inextricable from its host. But the missing chapter on the imagination forced a gesture of self-defense, a momentary excursion in order to repair the walls. From that gesture, from an understanding of its intricacies and duplicities, from an attempt to place it within its teeming and labyrinthine context, we begin to see Coleridge's *Biographia* not as a distant and holy artifact ripe either for plunder or adoration, but as a human effort historically specific and ideologically committed, fraught with consistencies *and* inconsistencies, brilliant yet deceptive.

NOTES

[1]"Coleridge's Marginal Method in the *Biographia Literaria*," *PMLA*, 92 (1977), 928-40. See also Christensen's "The Genius in the *Biographia Literaria*," *SiR*, 17 (1978), 215-31; and his book, *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981).

[2]Kathleen Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge's 'Biographia Literaria'* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980); and Catherine Wallace, *The Design of the 'Biographia Literaria'* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).

[3]See his recent book, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).

[4]Wallace, p. 151n.

[5]Christensen says, "The *Biographia* is itself a parody, but not one which could accurately be called intentional or unintentional—just because the *Biographia* is a parody not of a particular book but a parody of the idea of book, a parody of the kind of book it would like to be." ("The Genius in the *Biographia Literaria*," p. 231.)

[6]Daniel Mark Fogle's "A Compositional History of the *Biographia Literaria*," *Studies in Bibliography*, 30 (1977), 219-34, is generally regarded as the best treatment of the ambiguities surrounding the composition of the *Biographia*. But Norman Fruman has recently and persuasively challenged Fogle's argument, maintaining that the philosophical chapters (5-13) could not have been, as Fogle claimed, written last and under great pressure from the printers. See Fruman's "Aids to Reflection on the New *Biographia*," *SiR*, 24 (Spring 1985), 141-73. See also George Walley, "The Integrity of the *Biographia Literaria*," *Essays and Studies*, 6 (1953), 87-101; and Lawrence Buell, "The Question of Form in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*," *ELH*, 46 (1979), 399-416.

[7]*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), I, #1515. Henceforth *CN*.

[8]See *Letters of Charles Lamb, to which are added those of his sister, Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1935), II, 172; and *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), IV, 578-9. Henceforth *CL*.

[9]Although autobiography existed in various forms prior to 1800—"vita," "confessions," "memoirs," etc.—the term itself did not appear until 1809 when, according to the *OED*, Robert Southey first used it. Coleridge would have known it from the German where it appeared slightly earlier, but undoubtedly he was already familiar with the tradition, especially with Gibbon's *Memoirs*, which may have served as a kind of model for the *Biographia*. On the emergence of autobiography as a genre, see Karl Weintraub's "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1975), 821-48.

[10]I am thinking in particular of James Olney's *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972) and *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980); Jeffrey Mehlman's *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974); and Elizabeth Bruss's *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976). See also Avrom Fleishman's helpful first chapter in his *Figures of Autobiography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983).

[11]Louis Marin, "The Autobiographical Interruption: About Stendhal's *Life of Henry Brulard*," *Modern Language Notes*, 93 (1978). Also see a similar and very influential essay, Jean Starobinski's "The Style of Autobiography," in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

[12]Diegetic levels are levels of fictionality, and I see "discourse" and "narrative" operating on two separate planes of utterance—in a way which is not dissimilar from Roland Barthes' distinction between "readerly" and "writerly." Lyric discourse is writerly; epic narrative is readerly.

[13]This dependence is a commonplace among Wordsworth critics. See, for example, Harold Bloom's *A Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971); or Richard Onorato's *The Character of the Poet: Wordsworth in 'The Prelude'* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971).

[14]Coleridge's fear of misinterpretation surfaces repeatedly throughout the poetry and prose. The gloss on the "Ancient Mariner," the digressions of the *Biographia*, the rants against critics, the ever-increasing commentary of the *Aids to Reflection*, the preface to "Kubla Khan," and the late poem "Alice du Clos," all stand as part of a frantic attempt to clarify and then re-clarify authorial positions. "Alice du Clos" is a particularly vivid portrait of a tragedy caused by faulty interpretation. See also *CN* III, 4182, 4191, 4262, and 4309.

[15]*Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), I, 272-3. Henceforth *BL*.

[16]"But in Self-limitation is implied the co-existence of Activity & Passivity—The Spirit is at once active & passive, and as this is a condition sine qua non of our Consciousness, this union, the absolute Oneness of an individual Nature—i.e. a new development of the original Self-prediction/Passivity = Negative Action. Absolute Passive is absolute

Nothing = nihil *privatatium*. In us it is it *aliquid negativum*." *CN* III, 4186. See also III, 4168.

[17]I am thinking in particular of "Limbo," "Ne Plus Ultra," "Constancy to an Ideal Object," "Alice du Clos," and "Phantom or Fact."

[18]Chapter 21, for example, comprises a sustained attack on Francis Jeffrey, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*. See also *CN* III, 3337, 4323; and *CL* IV, 831-2.

[19]See *CN* III, 3291, 3325, 3671, 4197, 4301, 4321; and *CL* III, 83-4, 87.

[20]For a discussion of the "rectilinear virtue" of Wordsworth and Southey see *BL* I, Chaps. 3-4. On "genius" see Chap. 2 as a foil for *CN* III, 4248.

[21]*BL* I, xliii.

[22]Marin's theory particularly illuminates Weintraub's discussion of the link between autobiography and the rise of "historical consciousness" by providing a structure against which one can measure the pre-1800 autobiographical efforts.

[23]"The Emergence of the Autobiographical Figure in *The Prelude*, Book I," *SiR*, 20 (1981), 33-63.

[24]For an impressive recent reading of Coleridge's theory of the imagination, and one to which I am indebted, see Frances Ferguson's "Coleridge on Language and Delusion," *Genre*, 11 (1978), 191-207.

[25]A revealing insight into Coleridge's distrust of the interpretive process occurs in *Aids to Reflection* (4th ed. [New York: Kennikat, 1971], p. 116.), where, writing on the Bible, he notes that the book is

> so strangely written, that in a series of the most concerning points, including . . . all the peculiar tenets of the religion, the plain and obvious meaning of the words . . . is no sufficient guide to their actual sense or to the writer's own meaning.

Coleridge never questions the existence of meaning; rather he doubts the validity of its representation: words can *mean* other than what they say. Correct interpretation involves the recognition of an absent authority working through the language, as the authority of the words themselves is clearly suspect. His standard tripartite structure—"All things in Heaven & on Earth & beneath the Earth are but one Triplicity revealing itself in an endless series of Triplicities" (*CN* III, 4244)—appears in the relationship between the "plain and obvious meaning of the words," "their actual sense," and the "writer's own meaning." The middle term—"their actual sense"—virtually disappears, a victim of the tension between the "plain and obvious meaning of the words" and the "writer's own meaning." The writer's meaning identifies the originating authority and the locus of referential power; the "plain and obvious meaning" is clearly Coleridge's own once he becomes the source for semantic re-origination. The "actual sense"—that is, the words themselves—is rendered insignificant by the two extremes it is said to represent.

[26]*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), p. 36.

[27]*Collected Papers*, eds, J. Riviere & J. Strachey (New York: The International Psycho-Analytic Press, 1930), IV, 201.

[28]This point is argued (too emphatically, I think) by James Engell: "In biography and chronology, Chapters 1-13 provide an unbroken chain of development." See *BL* I, cxxxii-cxxxvi.

[29]The first position is Thomas McFarland's in his *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 156. The second is Wallace's, p. 87.

[30]There are three notable exceptions: Christensen, *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language*, pp. 161-78; Gayatri Spivak, "The Letter as Cutting Edge," *Yale French Studies*, nos. 55/56 (1977); and David Ferris, "Coleridge's Ventriloquy: The Abduction From the *Biographia*," *SiR*, 24 (1985), 41-84.

[31]Freedom was an important issue for Schelling as well. Compare these passages translated by Kathleen Coburn from *System des Transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800):

> What everyone who has followed us attentively so far will see for himself is that the beginning and end of this philosophy is *freedom*, the absolute Non-Demonstrable, that demonstrates itself by means of itself. (p. 62)

> The concept that is our starting-point is that of the Self, that is, of the subject-object, to which we rise by means of absolute freedom. (p. 81)

Coburn cites these passages in reference to notebook entries which eventually become part of the *Biographia's* Chapter 12.

[32]In addition to the *Biographia's* first paragraph, which I have already discussed in these terms, see *BL* II, 58-88; and *CN* III, 4301. In *Table Talk* (ed. T. Ashe [London, 1923], p. 212) Coleridge makes the process clear:

> You must therefore, commence with the philosophic idea of the thing, the true nature of which you wish to find out and manifest. You must carry your rule ready made, if you wish to measure aright.

Compare McGann on this point, pp. 40-49.

[33]For the dissenting opinion see Wallace, pp. 82-91.

[34]*Paradise Lost*, Book II, 669-70.

[35]On the question of original sin see Aphorism X in the *Aids to Reflection;* see also *CL* I, 396 where he writes: "I believe most steadfastly in original sin; that from our mothers' wombs our understandings are darkened; and even where our understandings are in the Light, that our organization is depraved, & our volition imperfect."