"Sir Walter Scott made a just observation on the fate of the *Biographia Literaria*,” wrote Coleridge’s brilliant daughter Sara, “when he said that it had made no impression upon the public.”¹ Thirty years passed before the most influential book of literary criticism and theory in English came to a second edition, begun by the poet’s nephew and son-in-law, Henry Nelson Coleridge, and completed after his death by Sara.

Since then we have had six more major reprints, and though almost all editors have claimed to reproduce faithfully the first edition of 1817, all but the recently published volumes edited by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (1983) in the *Collected Coleridge* set have departed from the original text in extensive ways. The manuscript, it will be remembered,

Some six months after this paper was delivered I wrote a long review-article on the Engell-Bate edition of the *Biographia* for *Studies in Romanticism*, 24 (Spring 1985): 141–73, wherein some of the illustrations and language that are used here in the necessarily brief discussions of textual and annotation problems will be found in greatly elaborated form. To avoid ventriloquism here I might have drawn upon an abundance of fresh examples that the editorial history of the *Biographia* readily supplies, as readers of my *SIR* essay will have no difficulty in accepting. However, I found that my several attempts to do so only weakened the concentration and energy of my original paper, a circumstance which has almost converted me to a belief in the doctrine of organic form.

This essay focuses primarily on chapter 1 and examines not only problems of text and annotation, but also seeks to provide a model for a more realistic and productive reading of the *Biographia* than we have had hitherto. It has therefore seemed inadvisable to unravel and reweave the fabric of a tightly knit argument so as to avoid any overlap with a review-article pursuing related but fundamentally different objectives. Given the history of Coleridge studies—especially the tendency of unwelcome evidence to disappear like vinegar in a sieve—the iteration of certain facts may not be entirely superfluous.
disappeared long ago—one of several related misfortunes which plague Coleridge studies.

Sara Coleridge stated that her edition contained “corrections of the text” (1:ii). Unfortunately, she did not say on what authority she and her husband had done so, and thus it is easy to suppose, as almost everybody does, that the many changes to be found in the text of 1847, when they do not correct “obvious misprints”—a treacherous phrase, as we shall see—lack authority. The 1847 text has two unauthorized deletions, both attacking Francis Jeffrey in personal terms. Sara carefully identified the passages and gave her reasons for dropping them (1:clviii–ix). But for these omissions, and the silent alteration of a false date, the text of 1847 probably reflects the author’s intentions more faithfully than any other, including the most recent. John Shawcross runs a very close second.

It is much to be regretted that Shawcross said very little about what principles governed his choice of text for the Oxford edition. “The original edition,” he wrote, “(besides numerous misprints, more or less obvious) contains many peculiarities of spelling, which can hardly be laid at the printer’s door. Neither this orthography, nor the frequent use of italics and capitals, has been strictly respected by later editors. But they are all characteristic of Coleridge, and as such deserve to be retained. At times, however, it has been difficult to discriminate between the printer’s errors and Coleridge’s idiosyncracies” (1:xcvii,[1907]). An understatement, surely. One could easily suppose from his brief note on the text that all Shawcross did was correct misprints and decide in a few cases where Coleridge was being idiosyncratic. The fact is that far, far more thought and confrontation with difficult problems went into his textual editing than one would suppose or has ever been commented upon.

Shawcross had before him at all times the texts of both 1817 and 1847, and where they differed, as they do in hundreds of places, he decided sometimes in favor of the one, sometimes the other. In general he retains 1817’s thicket of italics and capitals and many inconsistencies of spelling and usage. But where a verbal change is concerned—a far more substantive matter—Shawcross is usually guided by 1847. What becomes very clear is that he made a systematic comparison, and that he came to a conclusion which no other editor seems to have given any thought to, namely, that Henry Nelson and Sara Coleridge almost certainly did not make verbal changes on their own authority but were adopting Coleridge’s own corrections and emendations.
Early in chapter 1 of 1817, for example, there is a reference to "the manly simplicity of the Grecian" (1:7). The 1847 text alters that to "the manly simplicity of the Greek" (1:6). So does Shawcross (1:4). (To forestall the suspicion that I have ransacked the whole work for a few examples, I will be dealing throughout this essay mainly with chapter 1.) Later in the chapter, Coleridge wondered "whether the words should be personifications, or mere abstracts" (1:20). The 1847 text changes "abstracts" to "abstractions" (1:19), which makes more sense. Shawcross silently accepts this change also (1:12). In the same paragraph Coleridge wrote, with uncharacteristic slovenliness, of "the authority of the author" (1:20). In 1847 we find "the authority of the writer" (1:20), a simple but felicitous change, which Shawcross again silently accepts (1:13). Here, as everywhere, Engell-Bate rigidly follow 1817 and give no indication that alternate readings, possibly by Coleridge, exist.

One would give much to know why Shawcross was not entirely consistent in accepting verbal changes, since his reasoning cannot always be reconstructed. For example, a memorable passage in chapter 1 begins: "At school I enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible, though at the same time a very severe master. He early moulded my taste," and so forth (1:7). An asterisk after "He" directs us to a footnote which reads: "The Rev. James Bowyer, many years Head Master of the Grammar-School, Christ [misprint for Christ's] Hospital." The awkwardness of relegating the important name to a footnote becomes apparent when one compares the 1847 text, which reads: "At school, (Christ's Hospital,) I enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible, though at the same time, a very severe master, the Reverend James Bowyer" (1:6). Strangely, Shawcross does not accept this change. One cannot help but wonder why. Would the editors of 1847 have altered Coleridge's language on their own volition? It seems doubtful. If they did so here, why not in multitudes of other places? "Throughout this edition," wrote Sara, "I have abstained from interference with the text, as far as the sense was concerned" (1:clviii). This statement is not as clear as one might wish, but I think what Sara means is that she has not altered words, but only italics, capitals, punctuation, and the like.

Any discussion of textual authority in the Biographia must always keep in mind that the editors of 1847 had in their possession a copy, now lost, of the Biographia "corrected" and annotated by the author. In a note to the locus classicus definition of the imagination on the final page of chap-
the following appears in 1847, after the phrase "and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation of the infinite 1 AM": "This last clause . . . I find stroked out in a copy of the B.L. containing a few MS. marginal notes of the author, which are printed in this edition. I think it best to preserve the sentence, while I mention the author's judgment upon it, especially as it has been quoted. S.C." (1:297, n.13).

Thus we know, if proof were necessary, that Coleridge had reread at least this particular page with a view toward a second edition. And in the 1847 paragraphs on imagination and fancy there are a few verbal changes from 1817, all for the better. Instead of 1817's "The secondary I consider as an echo," we find "The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo," which makes the reference clearer. And in the description of the fancy, 1847 alters "a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with" to "while it is blended with," and the phrase "But equally with the ordinary memory, it must" is amended to "But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must," thus getting rid of a slightly vague pronoun. Shawcross again accepts these alterations, and they have found their way into practically every anthology of Romantic Poetry and Prose and have been quoted innumerable times by scholars, few of whom have probably been aware that in citing Shawcross they were providing not Coleridge's language of 1817, but that of Sara Coleridge's 1847 edition. Engell-Bate reprint 1817 and do not consider that Sara's altered text may have the author's—excuse me—the writer's authority.

To suppose that the reverentially dutiful Sara—who was acutely, indeed excessively conscious of her limitations as an editor and scholar—would presume to improve upon her father's style seems unreasonable. Since we now know that Coleridge had stroked out a crucial phrase on this very page, why doubt that he took the opportunity to make other changes? Coleridge was never loathe to alter a text, his own or anybody else's, including the sonnets of Charles Lamb on the way to the printer. "I charge you, Col. spare my ewe lambs,"2 Charles had pleaded, to no avail. Anyone who has examined any book ever in Coleridge's hands knows that he found it difficult to keep his pen at rest. There are at least six annotated copies of The Friend.

The fact is that we just don't know how extensively Coleridge had "corrected" the copy of Biographia he gave to Gillman. We do know that he added a number of marginal notes, some of them long, which were incorporated in the 1847 text. It is at least a possibility that wherever 1847
differences from 1817—but for the exceptions I have mentioned, and possibly a few others—Henry Nelson Coleridge and Sara may have been following Coleridge's corrected copy. I don't think that is true with respect to the very many changes in italics and capitals—for reasons I will have to argue in detail elsewhere—but I do believe that most of the verbal changes are the author's.

Astonishingly, neither John Shawcross nor George Watson reprinted any of the additional notes, which Sara said came from her father's own hand. Can there be any question that Coleridge wrote them? Here is a short passage from a long and complex one in chapter 10 (1:207[1847]): "Thus, the attributes of Space and Time applied to Spirit are heterogeneous—and the proof of this is, that by admitting them explicit and implicit contraries may be demonstrated true..." Engell-Bate reprint this, not as a part of the text, but in one of their own notes, with the unnecessarily cautious comment: "presumably an annotation by C on a copy of BL" (1:203,n.2).

The editors of 1983 assert flatly that they follow the text of 1817 because that is "the only authoritative text as it was the only English edition published during Coleridge's lifetime" (1:xix). The conclusion here is not self-validating. This is not the place to argue the nightmare question of what text best represents Coleridge's intentions in a situation as complex as that of Biographia, but it can surely be said that unflinching devotion to battalions of inconsistencies and errors, which Coleridge could not possibly have meant to eternalize, does not constitute any authority we need venerate. "Obvious misprints" are silently corrected, the editors tell us (1:xix). Thus "Cowper's task" will be made "Cowper's Task" (1:25[1983]). Is not "the peasant's war in Germany" an obvious misprint (1:197[1983])? The editors dutifully correct "Christ Hospital" to “Christ's Hospital,” with a note to inform us of that fact (1:9). Didn't Coleridge know the name of the school he attended for eight years? Why leave "Love's Labour Lost" stand (1:6[1983]), as if Coleridge didn't know the correct title? What purpose is served in reproducing "Jacobinism" in both upper and lower case in the same sentence (1:217[1983])?

Why have "christian" and "protestant" and "bible" all in lower case in the same paragraph (1:229[1983]), when Coleridge spells them in the normal way almost everywhere? This kind of thing appears scores upon scores of times.

And if one is going to reproduce 1817 exactly, then why go about cor-
recting Coleridge’s many errors in umlauts, accents, breathings and the like (1:xix(1983)), thus preventing readers with knowledge of such matters from assessing Coleridge’s command of foreign languages, a subject in some dispute and importance as regards French and German? The correction of errors in foreign quotations, by the way, the *silent* correction, is an editorial principle of the whole Collected Coleridge enterprise.

Rigid devotion to the 1817 text lands an editor in endless difficulties. In chapter 3 of 1817 there is an incomplete sentence. It occurs in an unusually convoluted construction, immediately following upon a long quotation in Greek. 1847 completes the sentence without comment (1:56). Shawcross accepted this, but noted (1:220), that the final words, thirteen of them, “were added by the editors of the second edition.” Watson simply lets the fragmentary sentence stand.

In the final volume of Griggs’ edition of Coleridge’s correspondence (1971) appears a letter, previously unpublished, to Basil Montagu. By a happy quirk of fortune, the letter contains some thirty lines of chapter 3 of the *Biographia* (1:41[1907]), copied out by Coleridge, in which the defective sentence is completed with exactly the same thirteen words as had appeared in 1847. So there can now be no question as to the authority of 1847 text in this instance. Coleridge wrote Montagu: “I have transcribed the passage from Mr Gillman’s Copy corrected by the Author—S.T.C.”

Between the transcribed thirty lines in the Montagu letter, however, and the text of 1817 or 1847, discrepancies abound. In the first ten lines alone I have counted more than fifty changes in language, punctuation, and capitalization; however, 1847 is innocent of any knowledge of them. Why? Because, I believe, the alterations, with the exception of the completed sentence, exist only in the letter to Montagu, which the editors of 1847 did not see. Is this really so surprising? Coleridge could not possibly have made the changes shown in the Montagu letter in a printed copy of *Biographia* without filling the entire page, margins and between the lines, with new copy in a small hand. Who can imagine an entire text rewritten that way? I have no doubt Coleridge corrected mistakes—what author would not?—made some verbal changes and added marginal notes, as was his habit elsewhere. But he did not write and repunctuate wholesale. However, any time he actually took the trouble to transcribe, he would certainly have taken the opportunity to revise, and revise extensively, as he did in the letter to Montagu.

The *Collected Coleridge* editors ignore all this, though we have it on Cole-
ridge's own authority that he was providing "corrected" copy. If you are going to burden the text with such trivia as that in 1817, an i was left out in the word "parish," that Southey was given the initial "W," or that "phantasmal" was printed as "phantasm." (1:42,52,116) and so forth, should not the Montagu variants be recorded? And yet, one may well ask, to what end? The reader interested in these matters can always refer to the original edition and relevant related material. Despite a considerable search, I have not found even one article on textual differences in the various editions that has produced a single material point as to meaning. Why entail upon posterity the error-strewn and wildly inconsistent text of 1817, which is now sure to be precisely quoted, warts and all, by the next few generations of scholars, just as some misprints in Shawcross have been faithfully copied?

A final comment about the 1983 text, which I hope to deal with more extensively elsewhere. The 1817 *Biographia* has no running page heads, only page numbers centered at the top. Engell-Bate give the chapter number on the left-hand page, and a running head on the right, based upon Coleridge's language in the summaries at the beginning of each chapter. These running heads, of a kind found nowhere else in the *Collected Coleridge* volumes, provide emphases which are certainly not in the text. The result is especially intrusive in the controversial ninth chapter, where seven pages are headed, "Obligations to—," no less than four of them, "Obligations to Schelling." If Coleridge had actually labelled four pages with the words "Obligations to Schelling," much of the animus in the long and bitter dispute over unacknowledged borrowings would surely have been forestalled. But Coleridge provided no such wholesale advertisement of his massive debts to Schelling. On the contrary. Chapter 9's headnote includes together with several other topics, the words "obligations to the Mystics—to Immanuel Kant... Obligations to Schelling; and among English writers to Saumarez." The Engell-Bate headings do not mention debts to Saumarez or any other English writer, but do, to repeat, give over four pages to "Obligations to Schelling." Readers who suppose that the heads were provided by Coleridge—and many will—will be mislead.

It is all too easy for an editor, poring over textual problems, to lose perspective as to the importance of such work. It is perhaps well for an editor to recall now and then Dr. Johnson's remark in his *Preface to Shakespeare*: "it is not very grateful to consider how little the succession of editors has added to this author's power of pleasing. He was read, admired, studied,
and imitated, while he was yet deformed with all the improprieties which ignorance and neglect could accumulate upon him." I doubt that Johnson would alter this remark two hundred years later. No matter what text of *Biographia* you read, you are reading Coleridge. The meaning is perfectly clear through whatever typographical blemishes an editor, through ignorance, design, or mistaken judgment chooses to preserve.

This is, however, decisively not true when it comes to the problem of annotation. Coleridge’s editors have had, and will continue to have, an enormous influence over how *Biographia* and the prose works in general are perceived. For ninety years (between 1847 and 1956) the only inexpensive reprints of *Biographia* were the old Bohn Library and 1895 Everyman Library editions, both almost devoid of annotation, and the effect of this upon generations of readers has been very great in protecting Coleridge from the hazards to which he had exposed himself.

Since 1817 we have had only three fully annotated editions, those of 1847, 1907—sixty years later—and 1983, seventy-six years later still. George Sampson’s richly annotated Coleridge student edition of 1920, still worth consulting, omitted chapters 5 through 13 because, he thought, they were beclouded by “yesterday’s philosophy” (vi). George Watson’s 1956 Everyman edition omits Satyrane’s Letters and the *Bertram* critique, is very lightly annotated, and adds little to what had long been known.

The decision by Coleridge’s heirs to republish *Biographia* with an extensive commentary and notes was taken as a direct result of Thomas De Quincey’s abrasive disclosures in a series of articles in *Tait’s Magazine*, not long after Coleridge’s death in 1834. De Quincey asserted that large portions of chapters 12 and 13 of *Biographia* had been taken, without acknowledgment, from a German philosopher then scarcely known in England, Friedrich Schelling. This, together with the charge that the popular “Hymn Before Sunrise” was based on a poem by an obscure Danish-German poet, Friederica Brun, provoked a fierce controversy, all the more exacerbated by the fact that Coleridge had died as a widely respected author of devotional works promulgating the doctrines of Trinitarian Christianity.

The turmoil had scarcely subsided when a ferocious attack appeared in *Blackwood’s* (March 1840), written by an incensed Scottish philosopher and academic, James Ferrier. Ferrier’s documentation was far more precise and damning than De Quincey’s, and extended the range of silent borrowings substantially, including the assault on Hartley’s doctrine of
association in chapter 5, together with almost all its learned quotations in Greek and Latin, taken, as Ferrier was able to show, from yet another obscure German, J. G. E. Maass.

The form and tone of the edition of 1847 was largely determined by the need to defend Coleridge from his detractors. One can only marvel, in the circumstances, at how brilliantly Sara performed her difficult, psychologically almost impossible task. Her three-volume edition leads off with a passionate, one-hundred-page vindication of her father's character and literary honesty; and I think it fair to say that her explanations of the seeming deliberate plagiarisms and other breaches of literary ethics resisted any serious challenge for the next century and a quarter.

Although one can dispute her conclusions—as I do—she was determined to lay the evidence she had before the reader. Sara has never received anything like the credit she deserves. No doubt there is a bit of sexism in this, and some professional snobbery towards someone who has no formal training as a scholar. "The trouble I have taken with this book is ridiculous to think of," she wrote a friend. "It is a filial phenomenon—nobody will thank me for it, and no one will know or see a twentieth part of it." She consulted hundreds of scarce and difficult books, many of them in Greek, Latin, German, French, and Italian; she followed innumerable tortuous trails, and where parallel passages were involved, she set forth many of them plainly. When a source came from the German, she would often print the German together with a translation. The result was, in my opinion—strictly with respect to the German sources—by far the best edition of *Biographia* until Engell-Bate of 1983.

If Sara Coleridge's work has been sadly underrated, John Shawcross's introduction and textual annotation have been drastically over-valued. His eighty-page introduction was for generations, and perhaps still is, immensely influential. His notes, stuck away at the back of each volume with no indication in the text that a note was to be consulted, add little of value to what could be found in the 1847 edition, on which he leaned very heavily, as everybody knows, and which he forthrightly acknowledged. But where Sara, as I have said, printed many parallel passages with translations, Shawcross was content merely to direct those readers with a command of German to works which could be found only in great libraries. Many key titles had been out of print for generations. How many readers would or could take the trouble to follow up on a note which reads: "With this paragraph, cp. the *Abhandlung zur Erläuterung*, &c. *Werke*, I, i, 403"
Moreover, Shawcross’s long introduction trumpets from beginning to end that Coleridge was fundamentally independent of German thought, the effect of which inevitably was to chill anyone’s interest in pursuing the subject. Here are some typical judgments: Coleridge’s “conception . . . of the imaginative faculty . . . must have been arrived at entirely independently of German influence” (1:xxiv); “he was a metaphysician long before he studied the German philosophers” (1:xxvii); “Thus Coleridge, largely if not entirely by the force of independent thinking, has reached a mental attitude in sympathy with the critical philosophy and its developments” (1:xxxii); Coleridge’s “deepest philosophy was drawn not from the speculations of other men, but from the teaching of life” (1:xxxii); “to him [Kant] alone could he be said to assume in any degree the attitude of pupil to master. Yet even to Kant his debt on the whole seems to have been more formal than material—to have resided rather in the scientific statement of convictions previously attained than in the acquisition of new truths” (i, xli); “While The Friend abounds in the fruits of Kant’s teachings, there is nothing in it which we are justified in ascribing to the influence of the German idealists” (1:xlix). The effect of all this on Coleridge studies has been incalculable.

Shawcross nowhere confronts the plagiarism controversy directly. He ignores the specific charges which Sara Coleridge was at such pains to refute, though much had come to light in the intervening sixty years. It goes without saying that he had no intention of suppressing information. He simply didn’t think the matter worth fussing over: “an investigation of the exact amount and nature of his debt to German contemporaries would be a task of but doubtful value or success. Nothing, I believe, is more remarkable with regard to Coleridge than the comparatively early maturity of his ideas” (1:iv–v).

Shawcross was, of course, entitled to his opinions, which, as everybody knows, have been shared by generations of Coleridgeans. Nevertheless, one can object to an editorial approach which deprives readers of information necessary to form independent judgments and at the same time constantly thrusts forward only one view of an important and highly controversial subject.

Thus it was that between 1847 and 1983, the dominant edition of Biographia came from a formidable scholar and ardent champion who did not think the subject of Coleridge’s intellectual debts worth pursuing.

Watson’s annotation of the philosophical chapters and the work in gen-
eral can be quickly disposed of. His one-volume edition provides very light commentary, and his approach to Coleridge in 1956 was traditionally reverential. His views appear to have changed somewhat since then. James Engell's annotation of chapters 5 through 13 deserves to stand, and will, as a monument of scholarship. It is melancholy to reflect upon the fact that so much of the fire and fury that have afflicted Coleridge studies since De Quincey and Ferrier might well have been avoided if only the facts had been available. Vigorous controversy will continue as to the meaning of the facts, of course, but at least there will be a far more solid basis for discussion. It is easy to suppose therefore, that the major difficulty in editing the *Biographia* has at long last been overcome—the willingness of an editor and publisher to confront what is disagreeable. "Society makes what is disagreeable into what is untrue," wrote Freud in the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* of 1916-17. "It disputes the truths of psychoanalysis with logical and factual arguments; but these arise from emotional sources, and it maintains these objections as prejudices, against every attempt to counter them." Something like this was certainly true until very recently with respect to Coleridge's plagiarisms. The very word almost always has cautionary inverted commas around it when used in the vicinity of Coleridge's name. Some fresh air is now blowing through the subject, but there is still plenty of smog to contend with.

There are, and always have been, two fundamental problems in annotating the *Biographia*, which is, among much else, an intellectual autobiography. Its editors, without exception, have not only failed to confront the problems, they have exacerbated them. I refer to Coleridge's extreme inflexibility when writing about himself, and his masterful exploitation of the reader's will not to disbelieve. "Shakespeare," said the fearless Dr. Johnson, "with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit. I shall shew them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or superstitious veneration. No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet's pretensions to renown, and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than truth." "Candour," in Johnson's dictionary, is defined as "absence of malice," and "kindliness," thus, "little regard is due to that bigotry which sets kindliness higher than truth."

In annotating the *Biographia* it is simply not possible to lay out the facts in a neutral way and let the reader draw his or her own conclusions. In multitudes of instances, the reader will not know that there is any sort of
judgment to be made, unless the editor calls attention to it, and the editor who does that can and probably will be charged with unseemly intrusiveness. It is always much safer to say nothing on a controversial matter, in all human affairs. But to say nothing is also to act. Silence can also be a form of intrusiveness, and a particularly insidious one.

Let me illustrate the difficulties confronting an annotator of the *Biographia* and indicate what I think yet needs to be done. Again, my illustrations are almost all from chapter 1. The *Biographia* begins: “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.” No editor has thought it necessary to comment on this astonishing sentence. When Coleridge wrote it, he had for years been a very well-known member of the English literary and political world. In the five years immediately preceding, he had delivered an important series of literary lectures in London and contributed scores of articles to newspapers with large circulations. His periodical *The Friend* had been reissued in 1812, and his play *Remorse* had a considerable success at the Drury Lane Theater in 1813. His three essays “On the Principles of Genial Criticism” were published in 1814. In that year he wrote Daniel Stuart, the owner of several powerful newspapers, that the *Quarterly Review* had “insolently reproved” him “for not publishing.” “I could rebut the charge,” he continued, “& not merely say but prove—that there is not a man in England, whose Thoughts, Images, Words & Erudition have been published in larger quantities than mine—tho’, I must admit, not by or for myself” (*CL* 2:532), one of his many complaints that his own writings and conversations had been widely plundered. In a later chapter of *Biographia*, in quite a different context, Coleridge wrote: “Even if the compositions, which I have made public, and that too in a form the most certain of extensive circulation . . . had been published in books, they would have filled a respectable number of volumes, though every passage of merely temporary interest were omitted” (1:148–49[1907]). That is certainly true.

Is an editor to say nothing about any of this for fear of being labelled intrusive, or hostile? Silence almost guarantees that the reader, especially the young student first encountering this towering classic, will begin the *Biographia* with a radically false idea of Coleridge’s actual position in English intellectual circles, and ask no questions as to the author’s motives in presenting himself in this strange way.
In the first sentence of the second paragraph, Coleridge states that his first volume of poems was published in 1794, "when I had barely passed the verge of manhood," that is to say, when he was 21 years old. 1847 silently corrects this to read "In the spring of 1796." Subsequent editors quietly give the correct date in a note. Should it be pointed out that Coleridge misdated many of his poems, almost always to assign them to an earlier period? The poem "Time, Real and Imaginary," often cited as an example of the precocious flowering of his poetic and philosophical genius, was actually written in his 30's, though he published it in *Sybilline Leaves* as a "schoolboy poem," a "favourite epithet" which, Dykes Campbell bluntly observed, "attached by Coleridge to any poem of his is of no value as evidence." The issue is not irrelevant, for one of the two dominant themes of chapter 1, and a major subtext throughout the *Biographia*, is the author's astonishingly precocious boyhood and youth. "At a very premature age, even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in metaphysics, and in theological controversy" (1:9[1907]); this is but one of many similar remarks.

The other crucial theme in chapter 1 is the author's perhaps unique scrupulosity in acknowledging intellectual debts. The many ingenious counterpointings of the theme—worthy of Bach in *The Art of the Fugue*—reach the following crescendo:

Though I have seen and known enough of mankind to be well aware, that I shall perhaps stand alone in my creed, and that it will be well, if I subject myself to no worse charge than that of singularity; I am not therefore deterred from avowing, that I regard, and ever have regarded the obligations of the intellect among the most sacred of the claims of gratitude. A valuable thought, or a particular train of thoughts, gives me additional pleasure, when I can safely refer and attribute it to the conversation or correspondence of another. (1:9[1907])

Is it neurotically suspicious to suggest a connection between this superbly orchestrated Credo and the long controversy over Coleridge's repeated failure to identify his sources? Is the Divine Ventriloquist fanfare alone to be heard?

Referring to the critical response to his first book of poems, Coleridge emphasized that "even at that early period... I saw and admitted the superiority of an austerer and more natural style, with an insight not less clear, than I at present possess" (1:3[1907]). Obviously, it was of the utmost importance to Coleridge to establish that in his early youth he
already possessed his mature opinions in almost all important respects, aesthetic and political. In chapter 2, he goes so far as to say: “I had derived peculiar advantages from my school discipline, and ... my general theory of poetry was the same then as now” (1:27[1907]), that is to say, before the age of seventeen Coleridge had arrived at the same general theory of poetry as he possessed in middle age. These are matters of great historical interest. If Coleridge's claims are true we can assign him almost everything of enduring value in Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads, and forget about what he may have learned from German aesthetics, which certain critics have gladly done.

What about those “peculiar advantages” which Coleridge repeatedly claimed to have derived from his “school discipline”? This brings us to the “inestimable” James Bowyer, from whom Coleridge says he learned that 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. (1:4[1907])

Here is one of the most influential statements in the history of literary criticism, as “exhilarating,” according to one scholarly enthusiast, as Sidney's “Defense of Poesy” and Emerson's “American Scholar” (Richard Harter Fogle, The Idea of Coleridge's Criticism, ix). One could easily lament that Coleridge neglected to pass on to posterity Bowyer's proof of what even the greatest classical scholars have failed to achieve, despite repeated efforts, namely, a convincing demonstration that Pindar's odes are governed by a clearly discernible logic. Be that as it may, Coleridge did not learn this in boyhood from an amazing schoolmaster. In a letter of 1802, long after he had left Christ's Hospital, he wrote in a letter: “Young somewhere in one of his prose works remarks that there is as profound a Logic in the most daring and dithyrambic parts of Pindar, as in the [Logic] of Aristotle—the remark is a valuable one” (CL 11:864). Coleridge's notebooks for 1795 show that he was copying and paraphrasing passages from Edward Young's essay “On Lyric Poetry” (1728), which contains the following sentence: “Pindar, who has as much logic at the bottom as Aristotle or Euclid, to some critics has appeared mad.” Somewhat surprisingly, the idea was not unusual in the late eighteenth century. Alexander Gerard, in An Essay on Genius (1774), wrote: “Pindar is judicious even in his irregularities. The boldness of his fancy, had it been under no control from
reason, would have produced, not wild sublimity, but madness and frenzy" (73); and Coleridge's friend George Dyer wrote in the Preface of his Poems (1792), which Coleridge certainly saw: "The verse of Pindar is subject to as strict rules, as the most accurate and methodical rhyme" (vii).

Only long after his schooldays, it would appear, did Coleridge perceive the significance of this insight; and when he restated the principle in the Biographia, he invested it with resonances and implications which made its origin in a suggestive statement by an eighteenth-century poet scarcely recognizable. And surely one of the unique impulses of Coleridge's genius is his insistent quest for unifying principles governing the creation and criticism of the arts and a philosophical system so embracing as to include all thought and all phenomena. Always he had before him this fiery column as a guide. No man in England had so encompassing a vision of the potential breadth of literary criticism and theory.

The tributes to Bowyer have found their way into many histories of education and are constantly quoted when Coleridge's intellectual development is discussed. Christopher North, in a Blackwood's review of 1817, refused to "credit this account" of Bowyer, and noticed that "Mr. Coleridge's own poetical practices render the story incredible." Leigh Hunt, who arrived at Christ's Hospital the year Coleridge left for Cambridge, wrote in his Autobiography, rather tartly, that Bowyer's "natural destination lay in carpentry." Hunt was well aware of Coleridge's tribute in the Biographia, and he meets it head on: "Coleridge has praised Bowyer for teaching us to laugh at 'muses' and 'Castalian streams'; but he ought rather to have lamented that he did not teach us how to love them wisely, as he might have had he really known anything about poetry . . . Even Coleridge's juvenile poems were not the better for Bowyer's training" (108). According to Charles Lamb, Coleridge's contemporary at Christ's Hospital, Bowyer's "English style was crampt to barbarism. His Easter anthems (for his duties obliged him to those periodical flights) were grating as scrannel pipes." Bowyer is said to have shown "no mercy to phrase, metaphor, or image, unsupported by sound sense, or where the same sense might have been conveyed with equal force and dignity in plainer words" (1:5[1907]). One might easily deduce that this obscure schoolmaster (and thus Coleridge) had anticipated not only the basic principles of organic unity, but much of Wordsworth's supposedly revolutionary argument about poetic language in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads. As Hunt and Christopher North acutely
observed, there is nothing in Coleridge's early poetry, and intermittently at all times thereafter, to sustain a belief in the efficacy of Bowyer's instruction. It happens that Bowyer kept a book into which he had his students copy their original verses which met his own presumably severe standards, the so-called *Liber Aureus*. Some time ago I read through that fascinating volume in the British Library, and I found no correlation whatever between Bowyer's supposed principles and the poetry he chose to honor. This is hardly surprising if one credits Hunt's scornful remark that "Coleridge's lauded teacher" had once put into his hands "(for the express purpose of cultivating my love of poetry), the *Irene* and other poems of Dr. Johnson!"  

Perhaps the wisest and possibly most comforting conclusion to draw from these conflicting accounts of Bowyer's teaching is that we ought to repose no confidence in student evaluations.

Credulousness is rarely criticized in dealing with the illustrious dead. Skepticism is usually pounced upon as a sign of constitutional antipathy towards one's subject. But the problem of Coleridge's veracity will not go away, though scholars have, down the generations, with a few notable exceptions, left the subject strictly alone, when they have even noticed that a problem exists.

It cannot be repeated too often or emphatically that nothing Coleridge says about his intellectual history is to be accepted, except provisionally, in the absence of outside evidence. In chapter 1 Coleridge says that during his first Cambridge vacation he "assisted a friend in a contribution to a literary society in Devonshire" (1:12 [1907]). For a page and a half following, drawing upon his memory of that essay, Coleridge impressively discusses Gray's borrowings from Shakespeare and Milton, the reasons he prefers Collins' odes to Gray's, "drawn from a comparison of passages in the Latin poets with the original Greek," all of which "at that early period [here is that significant phrase yet again] led to a conjecture" which he much later heard independently stated by Wordsworth [priority over Wordsworth again] involving the translation of "prose thoughts into poetic language" (1:12–13 [1907]).

The editors of *1847* were unable "to discover any traces of this essay" (1:18, n. 22). Shawcross goes further: "This [literary] society was probably the *Society of Gentlemen at Exeter*, a volume of whose essays was published in 1796. . . . As Coleridge was not a regular member his essay was not published in the volume, and it is greatly to be regretted that no other trace
of it is to be found" (1:209). Shawcross simply takes it for granted that such an essay was actually written. He does not observe that the literary society's first and only publication, in 1796, was already five years after the date Coleridge says he "assisted" a friend in writing it. And he confidently states as established fact that the society didn't publish it because Coleridge was not a regular member, all this about a society which may have nothing whatever to do with Coleridge! Incidentally, in his Introduction Shawcross has Coleridge joining a literary society at Cambridge, for which he "wrote essays [now plural] to vindicate Shakespeare's art" (1:xiv), a remarkable and not entirely uncharacteristic extrapolation. Shawcross might have observed that Coleridge throughout his life referred to unwritten works as actually existing, or even at that very moment in press—but he says nothing because it does not occur to him that there is anything to say.

Engell has a longer note on the subject, gives more information about the literary society, repeats that "C was not a regular member," and concludes that "the essay mentioned by C does not appear [in the 1796 volume], but the preface notes that 'materials for another' volume 'have been preserved'" (1:19–20,n.4). Such comments inevitably tend to establish the existence of a dazzling teenage essay, of which no trace exists. Of course, it is possible that Coleridge wrote it, even though there are no other literary essays from the whole early period. Shouldn't the reader be given some sort of context in which to evaluate its probable existence? More important, much more important, if Coleridge is inventing, what purpose does that serve in the overall design of the Biographia?

Such commentary inevitably molds the reader's attitudes and beliefs into shapes consonant with the editor's. I am not suggesting that there is any deliberation in this. What I am saying is that an editor's view of Coleridge determines in multitudes of subtle ways what the reader will think. In view of the exhaustive research into the "lost" essay, it is at least a bit surprising that no editor has thought it worthwhile to comment on Coleridge's claim, in the notoriously unreliable chapter 10, that his political essays had been reprinted "in the federal journals throughout America," and that from his articles on the War of 1812, not only "the sentiments were adopted, but in some instances the very language, in several of the Massachusetts state-papers" (1:148[1907]). Surely when libraries are being ransacked to confirm a trivial date there must have been some curiosity about these widespread state and federal appropria-
tions, a charge which, incidentally, aroused the patriotic indignation of a contemporary American reviewer of the *Biographia.* In his first *Lay Sermon,* Coleridge had declared that his essay on “Vulgar Errors in Taxation,” originally published in *The Friend,* had been “reprinted in two of the American Federalist papers.” But as Coleridge was just fifteen years old when the American Federalist papers first appeared, we can ignore that particular claim. Shouldn’t editors confront facts like these? Of course. The point is that an editor’s assumptions will often control what facts impinge upon consciousness.

Chapter 1 closes with an amusing and seemingly irrelevant anecdote about a man who was eager to meet Coleridge, but hesitant because he was “the author of a confined severe epigram on my ancient mariner, which had given me great pain. I assured my friend that, if the epigram was a good one, it would only increase my desire to become acquainted with the author, and begg’d to hear it recited; when, to my no less surprise than amusement, it proved to be one which I had myself some time before written and inserted in the Morning Post.” The epigram reads:

To the author of the Ancient Mariner.

Your poem must eternal be,
Dear sir! it cannot fail,
For ’tis incomprehensible,
And without head or tail.

(1:18[1907])

The “severe epigram,” however, was not a *jeux d’esprit* poking good-natured fun at himself, as Coleridge wished the reader to believe, but an attack on the poet-laureate “Mr. Pye, on his *Carmen Seculare* (a title which has by various persons who have heard it, been thus translated, ‘A Poem an age long’).” As George Sampson observed, “There is some point in saying of a *Carmen Seculare* that it ‘must eternal be’; none in saying it of The Ancient Mariner,” which I think we will agree is one of the most intense and dramatically concentrated poems in our language. The epigram, moreover, was adapted, without acknowledgment, from Lessing’s *Die Ewigkeit gewisser Gedichte* (“The Eternity of Certain Poems.”) The 1847 edition does not comment upon this, and Sara discreetly dropped this epigram from her collected edition of 1852. Ernest Hartley Coleridge identified all the poetry in the *Biographia* with the exception of this epigram. Shawcross curtly says, “Coleridge is here inventing.” Watson says nothing. And the editors of 1983, unreconciled to the possibility that Coleridge could delib-
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erately say the thing that is not, pirouette on the corpse of credibility in defending Coleridge against the charge of distorting fact (1:29,n.1).

Interesting and even entertaining as these matters may be, they are of little importance in themselves. What matters is that they throw light on a real question: what function does this anecdote serve in the structure of the Biographia? Coleridge described the book as a whole as "an immethodical miscellany," but the author of the Essays on Method and a bulky treatise on logic will always be found to display method in his miscellanies, and especially in his seeming meanderings. At his best Coleridge was a great writer in prose as well as poetry. It is scandalously disrespectful to Coleridge the artist, who had lived by his pen for twenty years and by his wits and brilliantly concealed shrewdness since adolescence, to suppose that he did not know precisely what he was doing when he scattered inventions through a work purporting to be fact.

If the first chapter of the Biographia were the first chapter of a novel, the alert reader would surmise that he was dealing with a formidably unreliable narrator, and would confront the rest of the text in that light. The narrator's genius would not be compromised, and to some readers he might become an even more absorbing figure than the received conception of him. Such readers would, I am convinced, have a far deeper understanding of the text, its subtexts, and the complex motives that have resulted in one of the most difficult, justifiably canonical, and booby-trapped works in world literature.