Anti-Materialism, Autobiography, and the Abyss of Unmeaning in the 
Biographia Literaria

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In an important study some years ago, Thomas McFarland offered a striking point regarding Coleridge’s complex response to the issue of romantic nature versus philosophy and formal learning:

... [T]he problem cannot be resolved by an easy preference for green and golden life over grey and bookish theory; it is compounded into a gravely perplexing choice. The green and golden meadow beetles dreadfully over the abyss of moral nullity; opposed to it is a chill moral freedom which, though grey, may be seen as the light of a hopeful dawn. And to choose one is to reject the other.

Such a choice Coleridge refused to make. He would accept neither alternative as finally satisfactory, or even as finally bearable, and yet, like Hamlet, he could not bridge the irreconcilability of his interests. (Tradition 109–10)

McFarland’s thesis that Coleridge remained determinedly both poetic and philosophic—attracted to the phenomenal world of “it is” yet denying it priority, and giving priority to the noumenal intellective “I AM” yet refusing to reduce all phenomena to abstraction—continues to supply an excellent perspective upon his later thought, both in its broad outlines and in its more circumscribed manifestations, such as the series of “philosophic” chapters in the Biographia Literaria.

In those famous, or infamous, chapters, Coleridge attempts to affirm ontological and epistemological premises ordering the relations of “it is”
and "I am." There, material nature and mental theory, the green meadow and the gray book, take on grim identities. The former, having been reduced to a congeries of masses and motions by the mechanical assumptions of empiricist materialism, is to be reconstituted by the latter, which is an array of metaphysical speculations and systems stretching back over the history of human thought that is ironically being pressed into that service (as Norman Fruman and others have shown) by such intellectual acts of violence as misattribution, distortion, and plagiarism. Overarching all is the paradoxical but undeniable fact of the Biographia's great influence and the equally paradoxical fact that the philosophic chapters, difficult and derivative as their contents may be, have continued to lend force and interest to the work. It is possible that the reasons for this have more to do with the subjective features of Coleridge's discourse in those chapters than with his ideas as such, and that their figural elements of structure and style cause us to react as readers rather like Charles Lamb did to the Rime of the Ancient Mariner: "I dislike all the miraculous part of it, but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery dragged me along like Tom Piper's magic whistle" (1:266). The convolutions of metaphysics hardly make mesmerizing scenery, but Coleridge's style does convey a sense of the feelings of the man under their operation.

For, as much as Coleridge sought a hopeful dawn in grey mental theory, he also knew that it could be less a refuge from, than a symptom of, "dejection." Indeed, the theme of dejection in Coleridge is a metonym for the dark side of romanticism itself—a side of it which (slighting such counter-balances as McFarland's later study of Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin) we ignore at the peril of oversimplifying, as Jerome McGann has recently warned (21–30). It is this that I have in mind in focusing upon the structure and style of the philosophic chapters to explore whether and to what effect the abyss yawns beneath the meadow and the theorizing mind in them. I am not primarily interested in Coleridge's affinities with modern existentialism; rather, I am interested in that feature of his work which reflects the sort of "sympathy for the abyss" seen in writings of all ages. This sense of the abyss appears in Coleridge's so-called mystery poems, in the darker passages of the Notebooks, and in works like "Limbo" and "Né Plus Ultra"—which latter, as Frederick Burwick has argued convincingly, were written shortly before, not after, composition of the Biographia.

The circumstances of Coleridge's life during this period are well known: his consciousness of the wreck of his past, his heroic efforts to resist the
tyranny of his addiction, his resolve to pull himself up by republishing earlier works and setting down his poetic principles—all testify to the magnitude not only of his achievement in writing the *Biographia* but also to the deep need for personal authentication which drove him. Autobiography in the *Biographia*, indeed, is at least as much a matter of present exigencies and needs as it is a matter of the past. All autobiography is apologia, to a large extent after the fact, but in Coleridge's case it was also a desperate attempt at reconstruction, at recovery from dejection; thus the biographical elements must not be discounted in the philosophic chapters, even though Coleridge himself referred to some of them as "digressions," for it is the mixture of autobiography and philosophy, or even the tension between them, not the philosophy as such, that gives these chapters their peculiar force. This tension, seen in Coleridge's structural motifs, images, and metaphors, supplies a vital subtext to his philosophy and portrays dramatically his struggle to fight his way back from the abyss, in theory.

Because of the elements involved, an overview of the development and subject matter of chapters 5 through 13 may help to set the scene, as it were. We now know that Coleridge wrote the philosophical chapters last—not counting the extra material he was forced to assemble when his publishers insisted on expanding the *Biographia* to two volumes—and that he did so hurriedly, if determinedly, working under a deadline. We know too that this section, as much of the *Biographia* as a whole, reflects Coleridge's relationship with Wordsworth and his desire to articulate his intellectual distinctness from Wordsworth by carefully delineating his own ideas respecting language, creativity, poetry, and the function of the poet (*BL* civ—xiv; Whalley *passim*; Christensen 121—37; Wallace 110—43). All of these in turn depend upon the nature of the imagination as an independent force in relation to the external world. This premise was implicit in much that Coleridge had already composed before he turned to the philosophic chapters, but he still felt impelled to explain his metaphysical position explicitly. Accordingly, and with at least half an eye on his future *Logosophia*, he penned a lead-in at the end of chapter 4, then composed a section nearly as long as all that he had already written and inserted it as chapters 5 through 13. In his lead-in, he indicates the importance of the added material by characterizing it as a series of considerations necessary to "an intelligible statement of my poetic creed . . . as deductions from established premises" (88).

Establishing premises begins as decidedly negative work. An elaborate
effort of refutation and repudiation makes chapters 5 through 8 one of the most sustained discursive sequences in the book. In chapter 5, Coleridge traces associationism from Aristotle, insisting that whatever merit the concept has is psychological, not epistemological, and shifting credit and authority regarding it from modern to classical thinkers. In chapter 6, he draws heavily upon Johann Maas’s critique of Hartley to argue that Hartley’s concept of cause and effect in intellection is circular and implies either delirium or a greater mental chaos, wherein all thoughts are present at once (111-12). In chapter 7, he discusses “the necessary consequences of the Hartleian theory” and the “mistake” which led people to accept it. The “consequences” are in effect an obliteration of all sense of individual agency in human affairs; the “mistake” was that of confusing “the conditions of a thing with its causes and essence; and the process by which we arrive at the knowledge of a faculty, for the faculty itself” (123). In chapter 8, he widens the attack to dispose of Cartesian dualism and materialism in general as incapable of supplying a theory of perception (129). Translating from Kant and Schelling, and drawing heavily on the ideas of other philosophers, he denies the absolute separation of matter and spirit and the exclusive reign of either in the physical world. With associationism, dualism, and materialism behind him, Coleridge is now ready, it would seem, to move forward to the work of establishing his positive philosophic position.

Chapter 9, however, shifts back to autobiography; there Coleridge recounts the long course of studies which prepared his mind for the ideas of Kant, and he acknowledges his acquaintance with the work of Fichte and Schelling, anticipating charges of plagiarism. In chapter 10, he returns to his purpose by introducing his coinage, “esemplastic,” and by reintroducing what he calls the “scholastic” distinction between subject and object; he also sets forth his conception of the distinction between the reason and the understanding—which he insists he had worked out fully before he met with Kant’s critiques. But the rest of the chapter shades into an account of his periodical publishing ventures, his early political opinions, the reactionism in England which cast both Coleridge and Wordsworth under suspicion of complicity with France, and finally his retirement in disgust to a cottage in Somersetshire, where he devoted his “thoughts and studies to the foundations of religion and morals” (200). In chapter 11, he gives a short “affectionate exhortation” to young would-be authors not to make the same mistakes he did.

Only after a long interlude, then, does Coleridge return, in chapter 12.
to his task of supplying a positive theory of perception and the deduc­tion of the imagination—hedging it with "requests and premonitions," one of which is his plea that the reader either pass over his argument or read it "connectedly," with respect for its place "in the organic Whole" (234). He follows these with a distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental taken from Kant, a discussion of the intuitions of true philosophy and the true philosopher taken from Schelling and Jacobi, and an explanation of "The postulate of philosophy . . . KNOW THYSELF," leading into the ten theses on the nature of knowledge and the imagi­nation—all appropriated from Schelling (252–84). Similarly, chapter 13 opens with a paragraph translated from Schelling and works with ma­terials taken from Fichte and Schelling until it breaks off when Coleridge inserts the celebrated letter from a sage well-wisher advising deferral of further "demonstration."

There is irony in all this, of course: the very sequence which Coleridge insists must be read connectedly is the most heavily plagiarized in the book, and the whole argument is undercut and disconnected by his one wholly original act of composing in the philosophic chapters, a fictitious letter from an admiring correspondent who is actually himself. Yet, more telling patterns emerge. For one thing, the alternation between autobiography and philosophy suggests a parallel to the approach-avoidance syndrome that McFarland documented in Coleridge's attitude toward pantheism and German idealism. Coleridge is clearly repelled by materialism, but by turning in the other direction he is like Christabel, his hapless heroine who is unable to speak to any good effect. Or, like Geraldine, the other perhaps ego projection in his unfinished gothic tale, he seeks delay. And the delay he finds by recounting the development of his metaphysics and the tribulations in his life he hopes will give him strength. Both with re­gard to his personal life and the life of his mind he needs to establish that he has "come through." We see this most strikingly in the metaphors that he employs throughout the philosophic chapters.

Most obvious, and indeed almost off handed, is Coleridge's pervasive use of the language of structure—one is tempted to say, of construction and deconstruction. In his assault on associationist and materialist posi­tions, for instance, he systematically charges them with insubstantiality. He faults Hobbes on his idea of contemporaneity as "the basis of all true psychology" because "Hobbes builds nothing on the principle . . ." (91–93; emphasis added). Likewise, in arguing that absence of conscious agency in the materialist psychology means that morality and intelligence are "re-
duced” to physical laws (119), he can conclude that “the process, by which Hume degraded the notion of cause and effect into a blind product of delusion and habit . . . must be repeated to the equal degradation of every fundamental idea in ethics or theology” (121). But this is all groundless, he concludes in chapter 8 regarding associationist imitation: “We might as rationally chant the Brahmin creed of the tortoise that supported the bear, that supported the elephant, that supported the world, to the tune of ‘This is the house that Jack built’” (137–38). Throughout, Coleridge’s efforts at refutation employ metaphors which undermine the materialist position as a construct, reinforcing his fundamentally ironic argument that the world of matter, and therefore any metaphysic deduced from matter, is without foundation.

Such “structural” language, it is true, is a familiar feature of all argument; it has long since reached the status of, virtually, “dead metaphor.” However, when one employs a metaphoric commonplace so frequently as to call it back to conscious attention, one resurrects the metaphor, albeit grotesquely. Such becomes the case particularly when Coleridge turns to his alternative to associationist materialism. He begins chapter 9 with the question, “Is philosophy possible as a science, and what are its conditions?” (140). Recognizing that the premises of Lockean epistemology, if granted fully, would annihilate all of Kant’s categorical forms and their correspondent logical functions “with crushing force,” Coleridge offers an engagingly frank special pleading: “How can we make bricks without straw? Or build without cement?” (142). This confession of intellectual and psychological need suggests a more persuasive explanation for Coleridge’s recourse to philosophic idealism than his (unacknowledged) use of Maas’s assertion, at this point, that Locke’s system was based on the logical fallacy of confusing origin with development. Avoidance of that logical fallacy did not necessitate idealism; that idealism seemed the only alternative may owe much to the characteristic figuration of structure in the style of the German idealists. Indeed, the language of construction may be as important a factor in Coleridge’s attraction to German metaphysics as the concepts themselves. Certainly his English figuration suggests this. After acknowledging his need for straw and cement for his metaphysical bricks’ and philosophic structuring, he ventures a premise:

The term, Philosophy, defines itself as an affectionate seeking after the truth; but Truth is the correlative of Being. This again is no way con-
ceivable, but by assuming as a postulate, that both are ab initio, identical and co-inherent; that intelligence and being are reciprocally each other's Substrate. (142-43)

As his editors inform us (143n), the OED cites Coleridge as the first to use "substrate" as a noun for "substratum." However, he may have been merely anglicizing the word from Kant and Schelling. So too with even his habit of referring to his transcendental metaphysics as "the Constructive philosophy": both Kant, and especially Schelling, exploit the idea of mental Konstruktion in their philosophies, drawing upon the analogy of mathematical construction.

Coleridge may have been attracted to philosophic idealism because of its metaphoric exploitation of "structure," then, and he adopted that strategy himself. It is perhaps quite significant, however, that his own prose consistently renders the language of structure more graphic and dramatic than that language appears in his comparatively dispassionate and rationalistic German sources. We see this particularly in the autobiographical dimension of his writing, for instance, when he recounts his philosophic studies with a veritable roll call of ancient, medieval, and renaissance forebears just after he has called for bricks and cement, and has suggested a metaphysical foundation in the reciprocal substrates of intelligence and being. His studies, he says, prepared him for the thought of Kant, whose writing, in "the solidity and importance of [its] distinctions," and "the adamantine chain of [its] logic" so impressed him that Kant's works "took possession of me as with a giant's hand" (153). Eager to extend Kant's philosophy to encompass religion, he was delighted to encounter Fichte, whose theory "completed" Kant's system: "Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre, or Lore of Ultimate Science, was to add the key-stone of the arch" (157-58; emphasis added). Or, alternatively, in a letter to J. H. Green, "Fichte . . . has the merit of having prepared the ground for, and laid the first stone of, the Dynamic Philosophy by the substitution of Act for Thing" (Letters 4:792; quoted Biographia 1:158n; emphasis added). He burlesques Fichte because "this fundamental idea he overbuilt with a heavy mass of mere notions. . . . Thus his theory degenerated into a crude egoismus . . ." (158; emphasis added), but Coleridge is clearly enthusiastic regarding the "structural" function of Fichte's concept of an act by the self-conscious "1 AM." In similarly dramatic fashion during his autobiographical account of the development of his opinions in religion, he explains, "I became con-
vinced that religion, as both the corner-stone and the key-stone of morality [emphasis added], must have a moral origin," for he had come to realize the necessity of assuming God "as the ground of the universe" (202–03).

All of this intellectual autobiography, including its figuration, constructs a kind of mask which presents an image of Coleridge as a seeker who has shaped his own philosophy independently through assimilation of the ideas of many others, whose peer he is. Moreover, it prepares his readers to accept the appropriated ideas which will appear in chapters 12 and 13 as his own rightful property no matter who originated them. And the metaphorical emphasis on foundations and structures is also a subtle preparation for the mathematico-metaphysical "constructions"—including Archimedes' lever and all the rest—which he takes straight from Schelling in chapters 12 and 13. In this latter respect the autobiographical account of his philosophic development suggests conscious calculation, but there remains a sense of urgency and even anxiety in Coleridge's metaphors of structure that probably is not deliberate, and cannot be explained as mere stylistic reinforcement of thesis.

This point gains confirmation from a striking structural image in the fictitious letter Coleridge wrote as an excuse to break off his reasonings in chapter 13. In the guise of a well-intentioned friend accustomed to modern philosophy, he describes his own system as an eerie Gothic cathedral wherein modern philosophers are represented in statuary "perched in little fret-work niches, as grotesque dwarfs; while the grotesques [i.e., ancient esoteric philosophers] 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 everywhere shadows were deepened into substances" (301). This, I suggest, is a telling image of Coleridge's philosophic intentions—as is his final characterization of what he has achieved, still speaking in the guise of the friend: "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 compression, that what remains, looks...like the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower" (302–03). His conscious intention, obviously enough, is to effect an ironic critique of misdirected modern sensibility, but eeriness and fragmentation overshadow this intent, and the disorientation we feel associates with Coleridge himself. With this image in mind, I wish now to turn attention to another metaphoric strain in the style of the philosophic chapters, one which works as counterpoint to Coleridge's language of construction by opposing fluid horizontal motion to vertical structure.
Coleridge's "affectionate exhortation" to would-be authors in chapter 11 is one of the most directly personal, and also apparently one of the most digressive, sections in the philosophic chapters. Yet it contains a passage which suggests significant parallels between autobiography and philosophy. Speaking of any young person deferring an honorable calling such as the clergy because of doubts and "objections from conscience," he says,

Happy will it be for such a man, if among his contemporaries elder than himself he should meet with one who with similar powers, and feelings as acute as his own, had entertained the same scruples; had acted upon them; and who by after-research . . . had discovered himself to have quarrelled with received opinions only to have embraced errors, to have left the direction tracked out for him on the high road of honorable exertion, only to deviate into a labyrinth, where when he had wandered, till his head was giddy, his best good fortune was finally to have found his way out again, too late for prudence though not too late for conscience or for truth! (230; emphasis added)

The metaphor of the wanderer and the labyrinth is familiar, of course, and Coleridge's implication that he is himself the "elder" person who has come through to serve as damaged premonitor is obvious enough. Given the context of this passage as part of a "digression" from a daunting metaphysical undertaking in his book, however, a question arises whether Coleridge actually is what he represents himself to be, that is, one who has "come through."

At the end of chapter 5, in which he showed that Hartley had departed from the received opinion of associationism as tracked out in a descriptive tradition reaching back to Aristotle, Coleridge promises to prove that Hartley "differed only to err." That done, he will himself explore a correct understanding of the origin and nature of our mental processes—in which task, he says, "I earnestly solicit the good wishes of my readers, while I thus go 'sounding on my dim and perilous way'" (105). The "sounding" (mis)quotation alludes to Wordsworth's dejected Solitary in *The Excursion*, published a year previously. That allusion may be taken as a casual reference, a complimentary acknowledgment of Wordsworth's achievement and a modest confession of the difficulties lying ahead in Coleridge's own book. But to offer Wordsworth's Solitary as analogue of oneself is hardly a positive sign. In *The Excursion*, the Solitary became a foil to Wordsworth's protagonist; whereas the latter had kept to the high road of honorable exertion, the Solitary had entered the labyrinth of Revolutionary utopi-
anism and had reemerged a blasted exemplar of differing only to err. His "sounding on, a dim and perilous way" (Excursion 3:701) is his intellectual examination of his past life, attempting to find some meaning in it. Jerome Christensen comments on the relationship of this to Coleridge's current autobiographical account, suggesting that "the Solitary's reflections on his past illuminate the method of Coleridge's text," which is in effect an attempt to find a self by writing of self, and the result is not positive (118–85). Whether we regard Coleridge's project as one of finding a self or of finding and validating a philosophy, his references to himself as labyrinthine wanderer and as voyager through dim and perilous channels characterize his portrayal of his intellectual development in a metaphoric pattern which presents a striking conjunction with his "structural" language regarding philosophic concepts. Terrestrial or aquatic, his way is consistently uncertain, and the sense of disorientation, even alienation, amid constructs of doubtful substantiality overshadows any prospect of successful termination.

In recounting his early philosophic studies at the beginning of chapter 9, for instance, Coleridge asserts that Locke, Berkeley, Leibniz, and Hartley did not provide "an abiding place for my intellect"; moreover, he says, mere reflection without spiritual faith was unable "to afford my soul either food or shelter." During this period, his readings among the mystics had kept his mind "from being imprisoned within the outline of any dogmatic system," and "If [these readings] were too often a moving cloud of smoke to me by day, yet they were always a pillar of fire throughout the night, during my wanderings through the wilderness of doubt, and enabled me to skirt, without crossing, the sandy deserts of utter unbelief" (140–41; 152). And again, in describing his retirement to Somersetshire to study the foundations of religion and morals, he says, "I found myself all afloat. Doubts rushed in; broke upon me . . . and it was long ere my ark touched on an Ararat, and rested" (200). His ark "rested" in "The idea of the Supreme Being . . . as the ground of the universe" (200, 203), though at this time he "remained a zealous Unitarian" awaiting "A more thorough revolution in my philosophic principles" (204–05). In these two metaphors, each employing allusions to biblical wanderers—Moses in the wilderness, Noah adrift; one subject to shifting sands, the other to wayward currents—Coleridge expresses figuratively a psychic condition the depth and severity of which he was not prepared to acknowledge literally and publicly (his private record in the Notebooks is of course yet another, corroborative, matter).
Again and again in the *Biographia*, Coleridge portrays his metaphysical inquiry in terms of wandering and drifting, seeking an abiding place and probing for foundations in an uncertain universe. "Sounding," indeed, seems the compelling term. To proceed by means of "sounding" is to journey by water; one "sounds" to find the bottom in uncertain channels, to establish the *ground* relationship when one is floating. It is a tedious and doubtful activity, needless to say, not at all comparable to charting one's course by the stars and running before the wind; its attraction is the promise it offers of stability—not of sailing freely, but of coming ultimately to rest. Clichés and simplifications about poetry and philosophy might rush in here, but the famous lament in "Dejection: an Ode" is far behind. In the *Biographia* philosophy and the philosopher are more noble than mundane, for better or for worse. Both metaphorically and literally, indeed, they are called to momentous duties; they are charged with the task of bringing security and stability into an insecure and insubstantial world.

To explain this special calling and special province of the philosopher in chapter 12, Coleridge presents an elaborately extended metaphor drawn variously from Abraham Tucker, Schelling, and Jean Paul, portraying "the scanty vale of human life." Its nearest range of hills is the only horizon conceivable by the majority of the people, and even that region they understand imperfectly and superstitiously:

But in all ages there have been a few, who measuring and *sounding* the rivers of the vale at the feet of their furthest inaccessible falls have learnt, that the sources must be higher and far inward; a few, who even in the level streams have detected elements, which neither the vale itself or the surrounding mountains contained or could supply. (239; emphasis added)

The "intuitive knowledge" of these few is ultimately mysterious—"The vision and faculty divine" not to be understood by mere mortals—and thus the portrayal of the philosopher here, and consistently throughout the *Biographia*, makes him or her a kind of heroic exception-figure who can master mysteries not penetrable by others. The description of the wizards of the vale of human life suggests, in fact, that the philosopher is particularly important because of his or her mastery of the external world. Coleridge's complaints about the endless flux of matter and the "streamy" nature of associationism are well known; his transcendental philosopher is one who conquers this lawlessness. As in his comparison of the mind thinking to a "small water-insect on the surface of rivulets [which] wins its
way up against the stream" (124), Coleridge's philosopher, with his faculty of imagination, overcomes the flux. With intellectually constructive power he prepares a fortress in the desert and an island in the sea. He wins his way up, indeed, "for man must either rise or sink!" (242).

The opposition between material flux and mental construction remains an uneasy one for Coleridge, however. As he moves forward in chapter 12 armed with his premise of that elite faculty "the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition" (241), he places himself under the necessity of demonstrating such power in his own reasonings. Adopting the concept of postulates in philosophy from Kant and Schelling, he undertakes to "deduce the memory with all the other functions of intelligence" (247) and to settle the question of the priority of the objective or of the subjective in favor of the latter. Then, turning to "the deduction of the imagination, and with it the principles of production and of genial criticism in the fine arts" (264), he sets down the notorious "Ten Theses" stolen from Schelling, Kant, and Jacobi. In the course of Thesis X, a significant "break" occurs in Coleridge's otherwise virtually whole-cloth paraphrasing and translating from Schelling—a break which dramatically exposes the art of his necessities. Returning to the question of priority between the objective and subjective despite having already dealt with that matter earlier, he insists that

even when the Objective is assumed as the first, we yet can never pass beyond the principle of self-consciousness. Should we attempt it, we must be driven back from ground to ground, each of which would cease to be a Ground the moment we pressed on it. We must be whirl'd down the gulph of an infinite series. But this would make our reason baffle the end and purpose of all reason, namely, unity and system. Or we must break off the series arbitrarily, and affirm an absolute something that is in and of itself at once cause and effect, (causa sui) subject and object, or rather the absolute identity of both. (285; emphasis added)

The ideas here are from Schelling, with possible interlarding of Jacobi, but there is no metaphoric counterpart in the German original to the phrases I have emphasized (284-85). The vivid image of the ground opening up beneath his feet, and the horrific whirling down the "gulph" of an endless regress, are apparently Coleridge's own. He has inserted them tellingly just before the logical/necessitated choice in his source: "or we must break off the series arbitrarily."

Coleridge finishes chapter 12 still pursuing his rationale of "self con-
struction” (286) and promising to proceed to “the nature and genesis of the imagination” (293). In chapter 13 he attempts to promote the German transcendental concept of the generation of abstract power as the product of opposed and interpenetrating abstract forces. But two far more real forces persist in destructive opposition. Mental “construction” has been acknowledged as resting on nothing more than an arbitrary and willful choice made in the face of a sheer materiality so devoid of “unity and system” that Coleridge can see nothing there save the abyss of unmeaning. In this view, that fictive letter, with its tongue-in-cheek image describing his Constructive Philosophy both as a massive cathedral and as a ruined tower is ironic nostalgia indeed.