Coleridge and Milton: The Case against Wordsworth in the *Biographia Literaria*

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Coleridge's lavish praise of Wordsworth as a writer equal in imaginative power or even superior to Milton has had the effect of concealing the extent to which Coleridge identified with Milton and used him to expose Wordsworth's numerous defects as poet and critic. U. C. Knoepflmacher, for example, believes that in chapter 15 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge's analysis of the merits of Shakespeare's early writings was meant to draw Wordsworth's attention to the limitations of his dramatic capabilities and reinforce his sense of the Miltonic vocation, which he seemed to have "unwittingly forsaken." In my view, here, as elsewhere in the *Biographia*, despite his statements to the contrary, Coleridge sought to undermine Wordsworth's aspirations to be the Milton of the Romantic age, and to demonstrate the impropriety of placing Wordsworth in the company of Milton, as well as Shakespeare, an association which Wordsworth unabashedly claimed for himself in the preface to his 1815 collection of poems.

Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" has also misrepresented Coleridge's relationship to Milton, for Coleridge's real competitor and feared rival was not Milton, as Bloom indicates, but Wordsworth. Instead of becoming an object of anxiety for Coleridge, Milton in fact mitigated Coleridge's debilitating complex of inferiority toward Wordsworth, enhancing his self-esteem. Bloom oversimplifies the case when he notes that Coleridge transferred his earlier anxieties toward Milton onto Wordsworth and lumped both into a composite father figure. As I will show toward the end of this essay, although Coleridge encouraged the identification of Milton with Wordsworth in an effort to achieve an ideal
self-image, he also emphasized the incompatibility between Wordsworth's and Milton's standards of performance. In the period of growing alienation between Coleridge and Wordsworth, as Coleridge became aware of the radical difference in their views on poetry, he found in Milton a set of beliefs that helped him articulate his divergence from Wordsworth with greater confidence. Milton became the intermediary, or “tertium aliquid,” in Coleridge's terms, binding the two friends in an ongoing relationship of mutual dependence and barely suppressed antagonism. While Wordsworth used Milton to undo a seemingly flattering representation of his friend, Coleridge devised an extremely idealized portrait of Milton in order to mock Wordsworth's exaggerated sense of his importance as the “Head & founder of a Sect in Poetry.” As Lucy Newlyn argues, Miltonic allusion becomes “a shared habit, a token of exchange” between Coleridge and Wordsworth, but also “a signal of divergence.”

In the following discussion, I examine Coleridge's private writings prior to the composition of the *Biographia* which show that Coleridge's unreserved admiration for Milton was triggered by his disenchantment with the work of a contemporary writer, be it Bowles, Southey, or Wordsworth. Subsequently, I point out Coleridge's covert tactics of using Milton as an ally against Wordsworth in the *Biographia*. Milton enables Coleridge to advance an alternative conception of simplicity, superior to Wordsworth's view as formulated in the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1800 preface. Furthermore, Coleridge represents Milton as a writer whose works epitomize the ideal of organic unity to the fullest, an ideal which becomes Coleridge's most viciously successful tool for humiliating Wordsworth. In this matter I differ from critics who have taken Coleridge's statements on organic unity all too seriously either in a positive or negative sense. Although Coleridge was genuinely attracted to this ideal, its extreme formulation in the *Biographia*—which, as critics have often complained, conflicts so glaringly with the actual process of poetic composition or Coleridge's own practice,—was not an article of faith on Coleridge's part but a conscious strategy designed to settle his scores with Wordsworth once and for all. Throughout the *Biographia* Coleridge consistently evaluates Wordsworth's achievements in light of his organic theory, whereas he judges his own works according to an entirely different standard that privileges dynamic change and self-conscious improvement rather than the production of the impeccably organic work of art, as unchanging as the pyramids of Egypt.
Coleridge’s earliest references to Milton indicate that he was not, from the very start, as keen an admirer of Milton as his later writings might suggest. In 1794, for example, under the powerful impression made by his reading of Schiller’s *Robbers*, he wondered why “we ever called Milton sublime,” adding that Satan “is scarcely qualified to attend” Moor’s “Execution as Gallows Chaplain” (*CL* 1:122). By 1796 Coleridge was willing to grant sublimity to Milton in relation to Homer and Virgil, but compared to the Bible even Milton seemed to him “barely tolerable” (*CL* 1:281). Although some of Coleridge’s comments on Milton during this period are appreciative, and occasionally he appealed to Milton to justify his pursuits as poet and political reformer, Coleridge did not as yet perceive Milton as a writer of unique accomplishments. In a letter to John Thelwall of December 17, 1796, Coleridge proudly confessed his capacity to “admire, aye & almost equally, the head and fancy of Bowles, the solemn Lordliness of Milton, & the divine Chit chat of Cowper.” Here Milton appears to be as good and as bad as Coleridge’s contemporaries for, as he puts it, “whatever a man’s excellence is, that will be likewise his fault” (*CL* 1:279). Of particular note is Coleridge’s claim that Milton merits no more admiration than Bowles, whom he praises in this letter as “the most tender, and, with the exception of Burns, the only always-natural poet in our Language” (*CL* 1:278). In later documents Coleridge pointed out the unquestionable superiority of Milton to Bowles, especially as Bowles became a foil for Wordsworth, enabling Coleridge to isolate the faults of a poetry dominated by fancy rather than the imagination.9

The first significant assessment of Milton in an unambiguously positive light occurs in a letter to Joseph Cottle of early April 1797. Here Coleridge complained of a dreadful depression that came over him after his return to Nether Stowey, quoting the well-known lines from *Samson Agonistes* that became the source of stanza 2 of “Dejection: An Ode.” The “calm hopelessness” Coleridge described in this letter, which again anticipates the mood of “Dejection,” must have been triggered by his sense of inferiority toward Robert Southey, whose overwhelming productivity had the effect of increasing Coleridge’s dissatisfaction with his own literary output. Evidently Wordsworth, who was visiting Coleridge, criticized Southey for writing verse with too much facility, an opinion which Coleridge readily endorsed in a subsequent attack on the unevenness of Southey’s poetry.
Coleridge and Milton and his preference for "story and event in his poems, to the neglect of those lofty imaginings, that are peculiar to, and definitive of, the poet." Against Southey's rushed and facile poems Coleridge presents the example of Milton, "his severe application, his laborious polish, his deep metaphysical researches, his prayers to God before he began his great poem" and "all that could lift and swell his intellect" which became "his daily food." Coleridge concludes the letter with his well-known plan, extravagantly ambitious in conception, concerning the labors he would undertake to write an epic poem. Unlike Southey who rushed poems into print, Coleridge, prompted by the example of Milton, was willing to spend no less than twenty years to produce an epic poem, ten to become conversant with all branches of science and "the minds of men," and ten to compose and revise the poem (CL 1:319—20).

One is struck by the dual role Milton fulfills here, offering Coleridge a language for articulating his hopelessness and sense of dwindling "genial spirits," as well as a language of self-assertion by projecting an ideal that Coleridge hopes to accomplish in some distant future and puts his immediate rivals to shame. Coleridge clearly invests Milton with qualities that represent his own strengths and potential achievements, for, undoubtedly, Coleridge was well versed in metaphysical studies and keenly interested in science, a concern which he maintained throughout his life. Milton emerges as Coleridge's ideal alter ego and becomes a figure of fantasy on whom Coleridge pins his wildest projections. More importantly, the letter indicates that Milton surfaces in Coleridge's discourse as an object of adulation at the point when he feels directly threatened by the work of a contemporary with whom he had formed close personal and literary ties. We shall observe the same juncture in documents connected with Coleridge's complicated relationship with Wordsworth. In fact, Coleridge's complaint that Southey produced insignificant poems due to his emphasis on story and event at the expense of "lofty imaginings" is almost identical to his critique of Wordsworth after 1800, as is his use of Milton in self-defense.

Coleridge's most outspoken attack on Wordsworth prior to the *Biographia* appears in two letters to Robert Southey (July 29, 1802) and Thomas Poole (October 14, 1803), both of which reveal the link between his deteriorating friendship with Wordsworth and his deepening need to see his beliefs reflected in Milton's achievements. In the letter to Poole, Coleridge criticized Wordsworth's involuted personality, his dangerous
withdrawal within the protective circle of his close admirers, and his aban­
donment of his great work *The Recluse*, which would have focused his “attention & Feelings” on “great objects & elevated Conceptions.” Words­worth comes off here no better than Southey in the letter to Cottle. He, too, appears to be engaged in writing insignificant poems instead of under­taking, like Milton, the laborious task of producing a poem of genuine philosophic import. “I have seen enough,” Coleridge states with unusual forthright­ness, “positively to give me feelings of hostility towards the plan of several of the Poems in the L. Ballads.” Coleridge was particularly off­fended by Wordsworth’s ambition to be “or rather to be called, the Head & founder of a *Sect* in Poetry: & assuredly he has written—& published . . . poems written with a *sectarian* spirit, & in a sort of Bravado” (CL 2:1013). It is important to bear in mind this open critique of Wordsworth’s “*sectarian* spirit,” for this underscores Coleridge’s attack on Wordsworth in the Bio­graphia, where he establishes through writers like Shakespeare and Milton the ideal of a poet who has no experimental predilections, and whose sub­jects are “very remote from” his “private interests and circumstances.”

A year earlier, in the letter to Robert Southey, Coleridge voiced as vehement a critique of Wordsworth as in the letter to Poole, noting in Wordsworth’s compositions a “daring Humbleness of Language & Versifi­cation, and a strict adherence to matter of fact.” Again Coleridge seems irritated by the “Bravado” exhibited by Wordsworth in accomplishing the experimental goals set up in his 1800 preface. Even though the preface was “half a child of” Coleridge’s “own Brain,” Wordsworth’s recent poems led him to perceive the “radical Difference” in their “theoretical opinions respecting Poetry.” Hence, Coleridge informs Southey that he plans to write a treatise on “the Canons of Criticism respecting Poetry,” a plan which, as critics have often noted, is the early nucleus of the Biographia. Less noted, however, is that even in this early formulation, Coleridge is thinking of Milton as the writer who will provide him with an alternative to Wordsworth’s misguided theory of poetry.11 “What an admirable Definition Milton gives quite in an obiter way,” Coleridge writes, “when he says of Poetry—that it is *simple, sensuous, passionate!*—It truly comprizes the whole, that can be said on the subject” (CL 2:830).

What Coleridge means by this definition becomes clearer from a letter to William Sotheby of September 10, 1802, and from its later elaboration in Coleridge’s lectures on Milton and Shakespeare. From the former, we derive an important clue regarding Coleridge’s assessment of passion as
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a main ingredient in poetry; from the latter, we begin to understand the special meaning Coleridge attributed to the standard of simplicity as a way of differentiating between Wordsworth’s and Milton’s beliefs.

In the letter to Sotheby, Coleridge connects passion with the intellect and not with sensibility, as one might expect. The letter contains a vituperative attack on Bowles for his transparent “trick of moralizing everything,” his inability to unite the head and the heart, and his indulgence in fanciful similes. Bowles, Coleridge complains, “has indeed the sensibility of a Poet; but he has not the Passion of a great Poet. His latter Writings all want native Passion—Milton here & there supplies him with an appearance of it—but he has no native Passion, because he is not a Thinker” (CL 2:864). Milton, then, contrary to Bowles, is a poet of genuine passion precisely because of his “severe application” to “all that could lift and swell his intellect,” as Coleridge had praised him earlier (CL 1:320). Passion, as Coleridge conceives it here, is an intellectual power that unifies what would otherwise remain disparate data of sensibility loosely connected with the mood of a speaker through “formal similes,” as in Bowles. Drawing on his poem “To Mathilda Bentham from a Stranger,” Coleridge illustrates how the intellect leads to the profoundly unified logic exhibited by the best of poems, providing consistency and endurance to feelings, like a trunk that remains fixed however impetuously its branches “Toss in the strong winds.” In this context passion differs minimally from the intellect or the imagination for that matter, which Coleridge defines in this letter as the “modifying, and co-adunating Faculty” as opposed to fancy or the “aggregating Faculty of the mind.”

Just as passion for Coleridge means something other than mere sensibility, springing from the head as much as from the heart, simplicity takes on a different meaning, referring neither to unadorned diction, nor to the representation of the affections of ordinary people, as Wordsworth thought. In fact, in a notebook entry of 1808, in which Coleridge provides one of the few clearer statements on simplicity, we detect a distinct anti-Wordsworthian agenda. In this entry, which, significantly enough, was a draft for a projected lecture on modern poetry, including an examination of Wordsworth’s “System & Compositions,” Coleridge draws attention to the extraordinary importance of unravelling the true meaning of Milton’s parenthetical definition of poetry as “simple, sensuous, passionate.” Had this definition been properly understood, Coleridge reflects, “not only almost a Library of . . . false Poetry would have been either precluded
or still-born, but what is of more consequence, works truly excellent, and capable of enlarging the understanding, warming and purifying the heart, and placing in the centre of the whole Being the Germs of noble and manlike Actions, would have been the . . . common Diet of the Intellect instead.” After this preamble, Coleridge attempts to elucidate Milton’s conception of simplicity, arguing that simplicity is the distinguishing mark that differentiates poetry from science. While science labors “towards an end not yet arrived at,” poetry “supposes a smooth and finished Road on which the Reader is to walk onward easily, with streams murmuring by his side, & Trees & Flowers, & human dwellings to make his journey as delightful as the Object of it is desirable, instead of having to toil with the Pioneers, & painfully make the road, on which others are to travel . . .” (CN 3:3287).

It is not immediately apparent in what way Coleridge has given here a definition of simplicity. He shows rather that the ultimate aim of poetry is pleasure rather than the attainment of a given end, which is the main business of science. This distinction is familiar to readers of the Biographia, as is Coleridge’s point that in all good poetry the reader is not “carried forward . . . chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself” (BL 2:14). But there is something provocative about Coleridge’s notebook entry, particularly if we recall that in the letter to Southey of 1802, Coleridge thought of Milton’s definition as a direct reply to Wordsworth’s mistaken opinions regarding poetry. In what way, then, does this explanation of simplicity challenge Wordsworth’s critical program as carried out in the Lyrical Ballads?

My sense is that Coleridge sets up a distinction between science and poetry in order to suggest a more important distinction between experimental poetry and a poetry based on universally shared ideals. The former is written by authors who are bent on being “Pioneers” and who take the readers along a toilsome journey on a newly made road; the latter secures for readers a pleasant journey along a “smooth and finished Road” paved by generations of travellers. Readers of experimental poetry will be naturally impelled by curiosity, desiring to know where the new road is leading; whereas readers of poetry that has the sanction of traditional values, like the spectators of a Greek play who already know the plot, will enjoy “the attractions of the journey itself.” From this perspective it is possible to see why Coleridge thought that the standard of simplicity conflicted with Wordsworth’s goals in the Lyrical Ballads. Simplicity for Coleridge is
a quality which is least likely to be achieved by writers who, like Wordsworth, aspire to be “the Head & founder of a Sect in Poetry.” By contrast, simplicity comes naturally to writers who undertake a “submissive study of the best models” of art which have “the consent of ages”\(^{14}\) and whose works confirm Aristotle’s notion that poetry is “essentially ideal” (BL 2:45). This explains why at the end of chapter 1 of the *Biographia* Coleridge indirectly mocks Wordsworth’s affectations of simplicity;\(^{15}\) but at the close of chapter 22, he attacks openly and with uncontrolled indignation Wordsworth’s admirers who congratulate the poet for his “turn for simplicity” (BL 2:158). By such a framing device, Coleridge may have deliberately intended to demonstrate how little Wordsworth earned the praise of simplicity, for the true meaning of this term, as Milton understood it, escaped him altogether. It is no wonder that Coleridge was “not half as much irritated by hearing” Wordsworth’s “enemies abuse him for vulgarity of style, subject, and conception,” as he felt “disgusted with the gilded side of the same meaning, as displayed by some affected admirers with whom he is, forsooth, a *sweet, simple* poet!” (BL 2:158).\(^{16}\)

Coleridge’s notebook entry also clarifies a passage in chapter 14 of the *Biographia* where there is an elision in the text. Here Coleridge defines his conception of a “legitimate poem” in light of his organic theory and reiterates the view expressed in the notebook entry that a good poem will spare the reader the “restless” activity of laboring after “an end not yet arrived at,” offering instead the “attractions of the journey itself.” At this point Coleridge introduces an illustration which bears a tenuous connection with this statement: “Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward” (BL 2:14).

It is by no means clear how the movement of the serpent pertains to the pleasurable journey of the reader in the encounter with a “legitimate poem.” Coleridge complicates matters when he describes the serpent as an emblem of “intellectual power,” because we are led to infer that such power belongs to authors themselves and not to readers. In an early notebook entry, Coleridge used the same emblem to represent the “Inventive faculty” in a writer of genius, quoting Milton’s description of the serpent in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*. But in this entry, Coleridge emphasized the serpent’s continuous movement forward as a way of exposing a writer’s end-
less digressions. By contrast, a writer of genius, like the serpent in Milton's description, varies his course yet moves onward continuously (CN 1:609). It is apparent that in the Biographia, as Coleridge takes over the emblem of the serpent, he gives it a different twist. Here Coleridge stresses the importance of the serpent's movement backward, showing that it is precisely through its retractions that the serpent gathers the strength to move forward at all.

My assumption is that Coleridge was using part of his 1808 notebook entry in this section of the Biographia, but concealed the reference to Milton's definition of simplicity. The fact that Milton was very much on his mind is evident from his use of the emblem of the serpent drawn from Paradise Lost. But the serpent image makes more sense in the context of the notebook entry than by itself in the Biographia. In the notebook entry, as I have shown, Coleridge criticized the ambition of the experimental writer who always wanted to charge forwards, opening a new road before him. The serpent image reinforces this critique, by suggesting that a writer of genius will first move backward (take stock of the best models of composition that precede him), before taking a distinct direction of his own. It is in this sense that radical creativity takes place only through a process of imitation. The hidden implication here is that Wordsworth missed the mark when he fell prey to his ambition to originate a new trend in poetry, and, like the naive "Pioneers," only saw the road on which he was travelling himself.

It is by such detective work of suppressed or partially concealed references that one can unravel Coleridge's relentless assault on Wordsworth in the Biographia, especially in sections where Wordsworth is marginally present. In the Biographia Coleridge drew extensively on notes he kept in his journals in preparation for his lectures on Milton and Shakespeare. Between 1808 and 1815 Coleridge had developed some of the main weapons he was to use against Wordsworth in the Biographia, including his organic theory of poetry and the Shakespeare-Milton dichotomy. Although Coleridge failed to deliver his projected lecture on Wordsworth, he was clearly relying on his Shakespearean criticism to work out a theory of poetry contrary to Wordsworth's opinions. Milton, too, was very much on his mind during this period, so much so, that (as Kathleen Coburn remarks in an editorial note to one of Coleridge's journal entries) "when Coleridge thinks of WW and/or of the mental processes behind poetry, he thinks also of Milton, and vice versa" (CN 3:3257 n.). I should like to
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turn now to the *Biographia* and show not only that Milton and Wordsworth were inseparable in Coleridge's mind, but also how Coleridge consciously manipulated this association to Wordsworth's disadvantage.

III

In chapter I of the *Biographia*, Coleridge establishes from the very beginning his personal alliance with Milton and Shakespeare, to whom he attributes an important formative influence on his career as a poet. Milton and Shakespeare, Coleridge claims, taught him the severe economy and tight logic essential in all good poetry, a lesson he integrated in his formulation of the organic theory of art. By identifying with Milton and Shakespeare, Coleridge is able to make even his defects look like virtues. For example, Coleridge's scrupulously self-critical admission that he overused double epithets in his early poetry, upon closer examination, turns out to be a confession of his strength rather than weakness; in a strategic footnote Coleridge draws attention to the same fault in Milton's and Shakespeare's juvenilia (*BL* 1:6–7). His point is that a writer of genius does not exhibit a perfect command of his craft from the very start. As Coleridge put it in a lecture of 1811, it “would be a hopeless symptom” if one “found a young man with perfect taste” (*BL* 1:6n.2). The proof of genius will be found in writers who are able to assess their faults and develop as radically as the caterpillar undergoes its metamorphosis into a butterfly in the ancient emblem for the “poetic” soul. It “is remarkable” (Coleridge notes in chapter 4) “how soon genius clears and purifies itself from the faults and errors of its earliest products” (*BL* 1:78), a statement ostensibly directed at Wordsworth, but which applies just as well to Coleridge himself in chapter 1 where he demonstrates how mercilessly he “pruned the double epithets” in his later writings, as did Shakespeare and Milton before him.

In the process of using the authority of Milton and Shakespeare to redeem the sins of his early poetry, Coleridge surreptitiously establishes the ideal of a self-improving artist whose strength lies not in an immediate mastery of organic form, but in his capacity to perceive his weaknesses and correct them accordingly.17 And yet in subsequent references to Shakespeare and Milton both in the first chapter and later on, these writers are consistently brought up as examples of the power of genius to produce a
flawless work of art. Thus Coleridge shows how, thanks to his stern teacher Reverend James Bowyer, he came to appreciate the value of an organically integrated work, as exemplified by Shakespeare and Milton. This informs his self-consciously “bold” claim that “it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare, (in their most important works at least) without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say” (BL 1:23).

It is apparent that Coleridge introduced two models of creativity in the opening chapter that require different kinds of competence from a writer. The two models are not antithetical to one another, and may even be shown to conflate partially, but they remain distinct nonetheless. One emphasizes the imperfections that exist in any work of genius, the other the perfections. One encourages dynamic change and gradual progress toward higher forms of art, the other privileges the already perfected and immutable work of organically interlocked parts. In judging his own works, Coleridge refers only to the standard of a developing artist and conspicuously avoids subjecting his poetry to the exacting norms of organicity that he so eloquently defends in the Biographia. On the other hand, Wordsworth’s poems are severely tested according to the organic model, as well as the standard of progressive change, both of which highlight his various shortcomings.

The organic model is the dominant code in Coleridge’s examination of Wordsworth’s artistic transgressions in chapter 22 of the Biographia. The leitmotif of Coleridge’s critique is the disunity present at the core of so many of Wordsworth’s compositions. Caught between his compulsion to prove the validity of a poetry based on the language and emotions of ordinary people and the “natural tendency” of his mind to become attached to “great objects and elevated conceptions,” Wordsworth was bound to produce poems lacking in organic wholeness and made of incongruous parts, some written in a strikingly original style and others in a language “not only unimpassioned but undistinguished” (BL 2:121). Wordsworth’s tendency toward mental and verbal “bombast” also resulted in poems marked by discontinuities between expression and thought, or between the intensity of feelings and the objects that occasioned them. A further source of Wordsworth’s violation of organic unity was his stubborn “matter-of-factness” evident in his “laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects” that imposed on the reader the unpleasant labor
of attending to successive visual details, "not very dissimilar to that, with which he would construct a diagram, line by line, for a long geometrical proposition." Unlike Milton who in his descriptions of natural scenery engages the imagination—allowing the reader to apprehend the "whole picture flash'd at once upon the eye"—Wordsworth in his descriptions appeals to the fancy and produces a "mode of poetic painting" rather than genuine "creation" (BL 2:126–28).

If in light of the organic model, Wordsworth is defeated not only by his glaring faults but also by his "excellencies," he seems to fare better by the norm of a developing artist, at least temporarily. In chapter 4 Coleridge concedes that, like Shakespeare and Milton, Wordsworth was able to overcome the weaknesses of his earlier writings. Coleridge cites "Guilt and Sorrow" as a poem in which all traces of "strained thought, or forced diction" had disappeared almost entirely, marking a significant progress over a poem such as "Descriptive Sketches." But in volume 2 of the Biographia, Coleridge systematically undermines the illusion of Wordsworth's perfectibility as a poet. For example in chapter 15, Coleridge's enthusiastic eulogy of Shakespeare is clearly aimed at Wordsworth because the very qualities he singles out in Shakespeare's early writings mirror as many faults in Wordsworth's poetry. Although Coleridge's ostensible purpose in chapter 15 is to illustrate not just the merits of Shakespeare's juvenilia but likewise the "obvious proofs of the immaturity, of his genius" (BL 2:19), the reader will be hard pressed to find any indication of Shakespeare's weaknesses, being given an impressive list of his incomparable strengths. By contrast in chapter 22 Wordsworth's defects are set in bold relief, while his presumed excellencies seem as negligible as Shakespeare's faults. Coleridge's analysis suggests that as late as The Excursion, Wordsworth was still struggling to accomplish goals that Shakespeare had already achieved in his earliest composition. The inescapable conclusion is that although Shakespeare had little to improve on, Wordsworth began his career with such colossal handicaps that his chances of fulfilling the promises of his genius seemed doubtful at best. Coleridge clearly relies on the force of such a conclusion when he remarks toward the close of chapter 22 that although Wordsworth was capable of producing "the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHICAL POEM," it was difficult for him to "prophesy" what Wordsworth "will produce" (BL 2:155–56). An equally uncharitable prognosis of Wordsworth's artistic career is suggested at the end of chapter 15 where Coleridge divides the spoils of poetic power evenly between Milton and
Shakespeare, conspicuously excluding Wordsworth from the seats on the "glory-smitted summits of the poetic mountain" that are already occupied (BL 2:27-28). It is worth noting that in his 1815 preface, Wordsworth used the distinction between Shakespeare’s dramatic and Milton’s egotistical imagination, as developed by Coleridge during his 1811–1812 course of lectures, without acknowledging his debt to his friend. It is possible that at the end of chapter 15 Coleridge perceived an opportunity to penalize Wordsworth for this offense. Certainly the quotation from one of Wordsworth's sonnets with which Coleridge ends the chapter could not have been intended kindly. Coleridge’s allusion to Wordsworth’s own praise of Milton and Shakespeare is insidiously ironic, for Coleridge makes it clear that Wordsworth does not belong to the illustrious company he so unwittingly celebrated.

Commentators have sometimes viewed Coleridge’s distinction between Milton and Shakespeare as an attempt to isolate two fundamentally incompatible forms of the poetic imagination. This was not, however, Coleridge’s intent, as indicated by his statement in chapter 15 that the two writers were not to be regarded as “rivals” but as “compeers” (BL 2:27). I agree with Stephen Bygrave that for Coleridge, the protean and egotistical imagination (as represented by Shakespeare and Milton) were “two sides of the same (circulating) coin.” In a notebook entry of 1805, which features one of the earliest anticipations of the Milton-Shakespeare dichotomy, Coleridge described his own personality as uniting an attraction toward becoming “great & good by spreading thro’ and combining with all things,” with the opposite tendency of absorbing all things into his being (CN 2:2495), an opinion confirmed by Coleridge’s contemporaries, some of whom regarded him as characterless, others as egotistical. This suggests that Milton and Shakespeare can be viewed as opposites only in the special sense that this term acquires in Coleridge’s dynamic philosophy: like two poles of a magnet, they share the same essence and presuppose one another.

Throughout the Biographia Coleridge carefully documents the affinities between Shakespeare and Milton, the bond between the two writers that secures Wordsworth’s exclusion from Parnassus. Both writers are credited with the achievement of impeccably organic works, both are identified with the poetic imagination characteristic of genius, and last but not least, both are praised for their unflinching commitment to the life of the mind. Coleridge’s analysis of Shakespeare’s abundant gifts in chapter 15 culmi-
nates with his eulogy of the writer’s “DEPTH, and ENERGY of THOUGHT,” proving a point upon which the whole project of the *Biographia* depends, namely, that “no man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher” (*BL* 2:25–26). Milton, too, amply attests to the veracity of this belief, for, as Coleridge had pictured him all along, he was the quintessentially intellectual poet, and for that matter genuinely passionate. It is to Milton that Coleridge attributes his earliest interest in metaphysics and from whom he seeks support for his theory of poetry based on the faculties of the mind. Milton’s authority is invoked at key points in the *Biographia* when Coleridge advances some of his leading philosophical ideas, including his definition of intuition (*BL* 2:172), his theory of the imagination, his distinction between reason and understanding (*BL* 1:173–74), between fancy and imagination (*BL* 2:127–28), between illusion and delusion (*BL* 2:134). Like the mythical Atlas, Milton is the omnipresent deity supporting the architectonic of Coleridge’s metaphysics, which becomes the foundation of his critique of Wordsworth. Indeed, Coleridge grew so accustomed to relying on Milton as a counterexample to Wordsworth that in the heading to chapter 17 he included as part of the chapter’s contents the argument that Milton’s language was “as much the language of real life, yea, incomparably more so than that of the cottager” (*BL* 2:40); yet Coleridge never took up this subject in the course of discussion, as if by this point in the *Biographia* this conclusion should have been obvious to readers.

Milton ultimately allows Coleridge to show that the same deficiencies found in Wordsworth’s work also characterize his personality as a whole. This happens early in the *Biographia* in a chapter which seems to be a detour from the main concerns of the book but which, upon closer scrutiny, contains a scathing critique of Wordsworth. It is not immediately clear why in chapter 2 of the *Biographia* Coleridge bothers to refute the charge that men of genius are irritable. Coleridge compiles an impressive list of writers from the past who remained calm and cheerful under the most testing circumstances, ending with a moving portrait of Milton, who, though “poor, sick, old, blind, slandered, persecuted,” maintained his faith in himself and continued to listen to “the music of his own thoughts” (*BL* 1:37). To emphasize Milton’s plight in his old age, Coleridge quotes a line from Wordsworth’s description of Milton in book 3 of The Prelude. We are immediately alerted by this seemingly unimportant allusion that Wordsworth may well be at the center of Coleridge’s discussion,
because it is by such incidental remarks that Coleridge characteristically plots his campaign against his friend. It is hard to imagine that Coleridge is not thinking of Wordsworth when he states, shortly after quoting from *The Prelude*, that “From others only do we derive our knowledge that Milton, in his latter day, had his scorners and detractors; and even in his day of youth and hope, that he had enemies would have been unknown to us, had they not been likewise the enemies of his country” (BL 1:37). Certainly the same could not be said of Wordsworth who in his “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)” angrily denounced his critics charging them with gross ignorance and an incompetence even more “flagrant” than their malice. In chapter 22 of the *Biographia* Coleridge deliberately draws attention to the vituperative tone of Wordsworth’s response to his critics, begging the readers not to judge his friend too harshly for “having expressed himself too indignantly, till the wantonness and the systematic and malignant perseverance of the aggressions have been taken into fair consideration” (BL 2:156). But surely if the example of Milton carries any force, readers are not likely to sympathize with Wordsworth, for it is the business of genius to mind “the music of his own thoughts” rather than be concerned with the abuse of critics, however unmerited.

A number of pieces both from the *Biographia* and other writings converge in what appears to be an increasingly clearer picture of Coleridge’s hidden agenda in chapter 2. Coleridge’s earliest refutation of the opinion concerning the presumed irritability of genius occurs in a letter to Sotheby of September 10, 1802, the same letter in which he praised Milton as the poet of passion and intellect, and damned Bowles as the poet of fancy, implicating Wordsworth in this charge. In this letter, as in chapter 2 of the *Biographia*, Coleridge presents an idealization of himself as a writer least interested in the opinion of the world concerning his works, be it praise or blame, and by implication, least likely to be aroused by anger at an unfair accusation (CL 2:869). The view that he is by nature unaffected by anger is also expressed in Coleridge’s letter to Poole of October 14, 1803, both directly and by means of a highly loaded portrait of his son Hartley, which succeeds his outspoken critique of Wordsworth’s personality and his experiment in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Hartley, Coleridge notes with unconcealed admiration, is “an utter Visionary,” moving “in a circle of Light of his own making.” “Of all human Beings,” he writes, “I never yet saw one so utterly naked of Self—he has no Vanity, no Pride, no Resentment / and tho’ very passionate, I never yet saw him angry with any body” (CL 2:1014).
Here in full view is the very nucleus of chapter 2 of the *Biographia* in a context where the connection with Wordsworth is unmistakable. Hartley is clearly presented as an antitype to Wordsworth and as Coleridge's *alter ego*. While Wordsworth isolates himself in a small circle of "Devotees" because he is oversensitive to criticism and seeks only praise, Hartley lives securely and happily within the "circle of Light of his own making," his sense of self being completely independent of all external agency. Furthermore, Wordsworth's ambition to establish a new "Sect in Poetry" anchors him in the fickle world of public opinion, exposing him to the ravages of self-doubt and aggressive self-assertion, but Hartley's life as an "utter Visionary" makes him immune to vanity or pride, and hence to any manifestation of anger. As Coleridge reflected in a highly personal notebook entry concerned with his wife, Sara, anger "will be found in those most who become slaves "of the Eyes and Ears of Others," that is, who "most hang upon the opinions of others, & to whom these opinions are of the most importance" (*CN* 1:979).

We can now better understand the source of calm and self-possession that Coleridge attributes to the writer of genius in chapter 2 of the *Biographia*. Like Hartley, all writers of genius are visionaries living in an ideal world of their own making. They are profoundly disinterested in the opinion of the world concerning their works, listening, like Milton, solely to the "music" of their "own thoughts." This explains why Coleridge was so adamant in defending Milton's egotism as an attractive feature of his personality. Clearly all visionaries are egotists in the sense that their identity is generated from within, and their self-assurance is undisturbed by the opinions of others. Paradoxically, visionaries are so entirely all self, as to be, like Hartley, "utterly naked of Self"; their very self-absorption protects them from vanity, envy, and resentment which always beset those who construct their self empirically in relation to external objects. This underlies Coleridge's statement in chapter 2 that from Milton himself one would never have known that he had any enemies. Milton evidently was too secure about the worth of his mission as a writer to be affected by or impelled to respond to the merciless attacks waged by his detractors. Hence anger never disturbed his peace of mind, for anger is always a sign of personal insecurity in a writer, stemming from a "debility and dimness of the imaginative power, and a consequent necessity of reliance on the immediate impressions of the senses" (*BL* 1:30). It is easy to see how Coleridge pointed this critique of the irascible writer at Wordsworth. In light
of Coleridge’s analysis here, Wordsworth’s “matter-of-factness” discussed in chapter 22 emerges as the obvious source of his angry response to his critics. Wordsworth’s excessive concern with objects of sense at the expense of “lofty imaginings” ultimately affected his self-confidence and quality of mind, making him prey to expressions of “Indignation at literary wrongs.” As Coleridge put it in one of his most cruel remarks addressed to Wordsworth as well as the anonymous critics, “Experience informs us that the first defence of weak minds is to recriminate” (BL 1:31).

At long last Coleridge found a way of repaying Wordsworth for describing him in book 4 of The Prelude as a hopeless metaphysician, whose mind, “Debarred from Nature’s living images,” was “Compelled to be a life unto itself” and became “unrelentingly possessed by thirst / Of greatness, love, and beauty” (ll. 305–16). Coleridge invalidates Wordsworth’s assumption that those who live in a circle of their own making are liable to “thirst” for greatness, showing that this trait of character is more likely to be found among those who, like Wordsworth, are tied to objects of sense and become slaves of “the Eyes and Ears of Others.” Metaphysics, then, is not to be lamented as a sickness for the self, for it attaches the self to “ideal creations,” leaving it untainted by vanity or anger. Throughout chapter 2, Coleridge stresses now and again his utter indifference to the fate of his works to the point of “ostrich carelessness and ostrich oblivion” (BL 1:45–46), and his disinterest in expressing his “Indignation at literary wrongs,” a task which he leaves to others “born under happier stars” (BL 1:45). Coleridge thus fully assumes Milton’s deportment in the face of unmerited persecution and asserts his superiority to Wordsworth. By showing the link between Wordsworth’s preoccupation with objects of sense and his equally damaging preoccupation with the public reception of his works, Coleridge proves that the faults of mind and art are likewise faults of character, the mind containing the full picture of the self. In a roundabout way Coleridge implicitly affirms the superiority of the Biographia to The Prelude. He shows that his “Literary Life and Opinions” is more purely a story of the “Growth of a Poet’s Mind,” than The Prelude. Although the Biographia contains no references to events of Coleridge’s personal life or childhood experiences in the midst of nature, it is by no means incomplete. In the end, the story of the growth of one’s mind is identical to the story of the writer himself. Coleridge implies that his intellectual biography is a full autobiography and the only kind of autobiography worth writing.
IV

Given Coleridge's attack on Wordsworth in the *Biographia* and his recurrent use of Milton and Shakespeare as counterexamples to Wordsworth, how seriously can we regard his belated statement in chapter 22 that "in imaginative power" Wordsworth "stands nearest of all modern writers to Shakespeare and Milton; and yet in a kind perfectly unborrowed and his own" (*BL* 2:151)? This conclusion has by no means been "variously evident all along," as Catherine Wallace asserts. In the context of the *Biographia* the claim sounds more like a species of Coleridgean "bombast," as it highlights the disproportion between Coleridge's elevated opinion of his friend and Wordsworth's actual accomplishments. And yet it would be a simplification to dismiss this statement as perversely insincere, particularly as we have earlier documents, such as Coleridge's letters to Poole of March 21, 1800 (*CL* 1:582) and to Richard Sharp of January 15, 1804 (*CL* 2:1034), where Coleridge expresses similar views with unmistakable conviction. We are faced, rather, with a profound ambivalence in Coleridge's sentiments toward Wordsworth, which gives rise to his vacillating opinions concerning Wordsworth's proximity to Milton or his radical divergence from his great predecessor. Coleridge actually desired to aggrandize rather than humiliate Wordsworth, for he sought in him a strong partner that would bring to fruition his own genial capacities. Even in the *Biographia*, which represents Coleridge's most aggressive attempt to assert his difference from Wordsworth, he remained dependent on Wordsworth's success as a poet to validate his own literary enterprise. Hence every attack on Wordsworth was bound to feel as a diminishment of Coleridge's own reputation. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the end of chapter 22, after having demystified Wordsworth, Coleridge attempted to reidealize him, as it were, granting him powers equal to those of Shakespeare and Milton. But this extravagant eulogy of Wordsworth comes too late and lacks persuasiveness, as its foundation is completely demolished by Coleridge in his preceding analysis of Wordsworth's "defects." In the end, Coleridge cannot sustain the idealization of Wordsworth, and Milton fulfills better his need to find in another an ideal image of himself.

Temperamentally Coleridge was predisposed to worship men of superior qualities, a proclivity which was reinforced by the ethos of the Romantic age, in which idealization of another was held in high esteem and viewed as the characteristic way of attaining self-knowledge. Jean Paul
Richter, for example (in a passage Coleridge marked in his journals) wrote eloquently about "the eternal thirst" in "every noble heart" for "one more noble, a thirst in every beautiful heart for one more beautiful; such a heart desires to see his Ideal outside himself as a physical presence, an idealized or imagined body, in order that he may reach it the more easily, because a superior man will mature only in contact with a superior man, just as diamonds are polished only by diamonds" (*CN* 3:4276n.). In relation to Wordsworth, Coleridge undoubtedly wanted to feel ennobled by recognizing in him his likeness embodied in ideal form. His eulogies of Wordsworth, therefore, although not disinterested, are sincere to the extent that they suited his need to seek an ideal outside himself. Furthermore, by celebrating the work of a contemporary poet, Coleridge also gained a pleasing self-image as a writer who was able to promote the work of a rival with exemplary equanimity. It is of interest in this respect that in 1808 when Coleridge was preparing for a projected lecture on Wordsworth, he intended to win his audience by assuming the role of a gifted writer eager to revere the work of a contemporary in whom he recognized the achievement of an ideal. More importantly, Coleridge found in the following passage from Milton the exact language of adulation and selfless prostration before Wordsworth which suited his purposes:

What besides God has resolved concerning me I know not, but this at least: He has instilled into me, if into any one, a vehement love of the beautiful. . . . Hence it is that, when any one scorns what the vulgar opine in their depraved estimation of things, and dares to feel and speak and be that which the highest wisdom throughout all ages has taught to be the best, to that man I attach myself forthwith by a kind of real necessity, wherever I find him. If, whether by nature or by my fate, I am so circumstanced that by no effort and labour of mine can I myself rise to such an honour and elevation, yet that I should always worship and look up to those who have attained that glory, or happily aspire to it, neither gods nor men, I reckon, have bidden nay. (*CN* 3:3257n.)

The quotation from Milton identifies a source that tells us why Coleridge could not sustain the high sentiments toward Wordsworth of which he thought himself capable. It shows rather patently that a large ego is required to ensure the success of all projects of idealization. Certainly Milton's worship of another is not articulated from a position of inferiority. Milton seems in no doubt that he, more so than others, was endowed with "a vehement love of the beautiful," for which he has the consent of both men and gods. Richter, likewise, emphasized the equality of the pur-
suer to the ideal he places above him, as is evident in the striking image of diamonds that "are polished only by diamonds." But Coleridge did not possess a strong sense of self-esteem and Wordsworth often left him with a disabling awareness of his own infirmities. In Wordsworth's presence Coleridge did not feel like a diamond catching the glitter from another, but more like an undistinguished piece of glass. His eulogies of Wordsworth, however sincerely felt, border so closely on self-contempt that one cannot easily tell which is the cause and which the effect. This fact was evident to Coleridge's close friend Thomas Poole, who after receiving a letter from Coleridge in which he praised Wordsworth above Milton, immediately inquired why Coleridge had to prostrate himself before his friend instead of thinking of his own creative powers. In his reply to Poole's letter, Coleridge strongly reiterated his position that Wordsworth may turn out to be a greater poet than Milton, but his confession at the end of the letter that his imaginative powers were "dwindling" and on their way to be "dried up wholly," confirmed Poole's original suspicion that Coleridge's masochistic self-denigration was the root of his elevation of Wordsworth to extravagant heights (CL 2:582, 584).

Coleridge's idealization of Wordsworth was not only threatened by his lack of confidence but also by Wordsworth's failure to reciprocate the love and admiration that Coleridge felt he had consistently bestowed upon his friend to the point of "enthusiastic self-oblivion" (CL 3:888). As Coleridge elaborated in another context, the construction of an ideal self cannot be accomplished through the efforts of a single person but only by "the action of kindred souls on each other" (CL 2:1197). But Wordsworth constantly frustrated Coleridge's project of idealization, remaining unresponsive to his need for sympathy and adulation and discouraging Coleridge's effort to move in a "distinct current" of his own. Under such conditions it is small wonder that idealization turns into disillusionment and disillusionment into anger and contempt. As Burke well knew, when an object viewed as sublime is demystified, the subject will experience a feeling of contempt proportional to the awe with which he previously regarded the same object.

Idealization is a tricky business, for while it requires a personal stake to be desired at all, it is doomed when carried out on a personal rather than purely abstract level. Perhaps intuitively, Coleridge felt this when he replaced Wordsworth with Milton. As a poet of the past, Milton could not be made answerable to the requirement of reciprocity that Coleridge expected so keenly from Wordsworth. This may explain why, paradoxi-
cally, Coleridge, who was by nature so dependent on others, worshipped Milton's egotism as a form of self-reliance closely approximating that of the deity. Clearly in relation to a figure who attracted "all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own IDEAL" (*BL* 2:27–28), Coleridge felt unconcerned about lack of reciprocity, learning instead a measure of self-reliance in the pursuit of an ideal which he badly needed to offset his dependence on Wordsworth. Furthermore, Milton freed Coleridge from the conflicting needs of copying and opposing a rival, of wanting to be like him and unlike him at the same time. As Coleridge well knew, one's identity was always constituted by likeness and difference. Consciousness itself, Coleridge wrote, is in essence the "perception of identity and contrariety; the least degree of which constitutes likeness, the greatest absolute difference." Although in relation to Wordsworth, Coleridge experienced the anguish of these extremes, he desired to attain a peaceful state beyond difference that he could barely describe by alluding to a passage from *Lycidas*. In this ideal state, "all things are at once different and the same; there alone, as the principle of all things, does distinction exist unaided by division; there are will and reason, succession of time and unmoving eternity, infinite change and ineffable rest."³³

Here, then, we have Coleridge's vision of what literary influence and the relationship between two writers should be: a relationship in which difference is not attained at the expense of sameness, nor likeness at the expense of distinctness. This relationship is conspicuously free of oedipal tensions or rivalry and remains a pure abstraction, almost religious in nature. That Coleridge could not sustain this ideal in his complicatedly human interaction with Wordsworth but projected it onto the distant and absent figure of Milton, is not particularly surprising. In fact, the ideal state Milton represents for Coleridge is essentially (and appropriately) theological because the demands Coleridge places upon this form of literary idealization are comparable to those at work in his conception of the Trinity: a unity which does not threaten individuality, and a form of distinction that does not generate division.³⁴ This ideal is present in *Biographia*. It is a strain that surfaces in Coleridge's theory of the imagination in chapter 13 and completely dominates his concluding chapter. In a work, in which Coleridge is so profoundly afflicted by fits of self-loathing and self-aggrandizement, so beset by transgressions large and small, his need for a figure of idealization approaching divinity is supreme. From Milton, so much a God unto himself, to the "I AM" there is, for Coleridge, a rather short leap.