The *Biographia Literaria* and the Contentions of English Romanticism

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The *Biographia Literaria* is one of the chief documents of English Romantic theory, and in recent years, thanks to the work of various critics, we have also begun to see the book as a more coherently developed text than it was earlier thought to be. This new scholarship has proved eminently Coleridgean in character, for out of it has emerged a reconciliation of much material in the *Biographia* which had before seemed rather opposite and discordant in its qualities. Today we see the book more clearly, I think, than we have ever seen it before; and the consequence of this new clarity is that we may also begin to see in exactly what ways the *Biographia* is crucial to an understanding of English Romanticism.

First of all, it is not crucial because it is the central theoretical document—not, at any rate, if by "central" we mean the one that incorporates all the major lines of thought associated with English Romanticism. Indeed, my present inquiry will try to decenter the *Biographia* in precisely this respect, to contrast it with two other important theoretical approaches that emerged in the Romantic movement. But in decentering Coleridge’s book, I shall also be arguing its seminal importance for the development of the original strands of English Romanticism, as well as for our understanding of the movement as a whole. A careful look at the *Biographia* in its contemporary setting, even in the restricted terms I am proposing for this essay, brings the variety and richness of Romantic thought and practice into sharp relief.

The first thing we need to see is what Coleridge himself thought about the form and purpose of his book. It is the author of the "Essays on
Method" who glanced intramurally at the *Biographia* as an "immethodical . . . miscellany",¹ yet the same author was to say a bit later, and extramurally, that the work "cannot justly be regarded as a motley Patchwork, or Farrago of heterogeneous Effusions".² Following the recent work of McFarland, Jackson, Christensen, Wheeler, and Wallace, however, we have learned to see the kind of order that underlies Coleridge's often wayward and digressive procedures—indeed, to see that Coleridge's "mosaic" or "marginal" or "miscellaneous" manner of composition is precisely what is needed, in his view, if one is to execute a truly methodical and theoretically sound critical operation.³

None of this is to say, of course, that the *Biographia* is a formal masterpiece, or even that all of the interlaced topics are equally interesting, or handled with equal skill. What we are bound to see, however, if we want to read the book profitably, is the truth in Coleridge's own account of what he had written. "Let the following words", he said, "be prefixed as the Common Heading" of the work:

An attempt to fix the true meaning of the Terms, Reason, Understanding, Sense, Imagination, Conscience & Ideas, with reflections on the theoretical & practical Consequences of their perversion from the Revolution (1688) to the present day, 1816—the moral of the whole being that the Man who gives to the Understanding the primacy due to the Reason, and lets the motives of Expedience usurp the place of the prescripts of the Conscience, in both cases loses the one and spoils the other. . . .⁴

This is a fair enough description, generally speaking, but troublesome because Coleridge said that it applied just as well to *The Statesman's Manual*, *A Lay Sermon*, and the three-volume *Friend* (1818). Yet this general application by Coleridge was both shrewd and correct. On the one hand, it called attention to the coherence of his purposes and preoccupations in these different works, and on the other it implied that the differences between them involved shifts in emphasis and in the relations established between the several topics. We need only glance at the "Essays on Method" to be clear about Coleridge's meaning. The *Biographia* moves by a process that Coleridge called "progressive transition." This is no "mere dead arrangement"⁵ but an accumulating set of interrelations which develop gradually (with references backward and anticipations forward) under the guidance and direction of a leading Idea, or what Coleridge called a "pre-conception" and "Initiative":

—Jerome J. McGann
Lord Bacon equally with ourselves, demands what we have ventured to
call the intellectual or mental initiative, as the motive and guide of every
philosophical experiment; some well-grounded purposes, some distinct
impression of the probable results, some self-consistent anticipation as
the grounds of the "prudens quaestio" (the fore-thoughtful query), which
he affirms to be the prior half of the knowledge sought. . . . 6

The Biographia takes up all of the same topics handled in The Lay Sermons and The Friend but disposes of them in a biographical field of relations. The emphasis of the work is therefore "literary," although literary in the broadest sense because Coleridge's literary life encompassed (besides poetry and plays) journalism, political pamphleteering, and philosophy. The Biographia is no different from Coleridge's other works in being committed to a critical procedure based upon what he liked to call "principles." Thus, when he speaks of an investigation or a discourse of "well-grounded purposes," the term "well-grounded" glances at the need for an initiative established on a priori "principles" rather than on a posteriori generalizations arrived at and refined through cumulative observation.

What then—to come to my leading idea—are Coleridge's "purposes" in the Biographia, what is his "distinct impression of the probable results" of this most famous of English literary lives? They are generally the same as those he specified for the Appendix to The State'sman's Manual: "The Object was to rouse and stimulate the mind—to set the reader a thinking —and at least to obtain entrance for the question, whether the [truth of the] Opinions in fashion . . . is quite so certain as he had hitherto taken for granted." 7 Coleridge set this attitude as the motto of most of his work, and it plainly applies to the whole thrust of the Biographia—in its critique of the reigning empirical school of philosophy; reviews and ideas about poetry; and gossip about Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the so-called Lake School of poetry. The Biographia opposed the "Opinions in fashion" on all these matters—indeed, opposes the idea that any truth at all could ever be found in fashion or grounded in opinion.

More particularly, Coleridge's purpose was to set forth a theory of
poetry grounded in the distinction between imagination and fancy, for
were it once fully ascertained, that this division is . . . grounded in nature . . . the theory of the fine arts, and of poetry in particular, could not, I thought, but derive some additional and important light. It would
in its immediate effects furnish a torch of guidance to the philosophi-
This passage, which culminates the introductory four chapters of the *Biographia*, sets forth the "well-grounded purposes" and hoped-for "results" that Coleridge anticipated for his book. On the one hand, the *Biographia* was to be a model of literary criticism that would be represented in the practical discussions of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Maturin; and that would be polemicized in the critique of Jeffrey and the reviewing institution of the period. On the other hand, the *Biographia* was to establish guidelines for the writing of poetry. Both of these practical aims were to succeed because Coleridge's was a work of "philosophical" criticism which could be a model for critics, on the one hand, and which could show poets, on the other, how "to imitate without loss of originality" the work of other poets and of nature itself.

Coleridge's "well-grounded purposes" would be, finally, set forth as a man of letters' intellectual biography. The significance of the biographical frame for Coleridge's work cannot be too greatly emphasized, for the story he tells reveals a person whose work was steadfast in its principles—more, was steadfast in principles as such, was steadfast (that is to say) in God—from the beginning, but who only grew into his developing self-conscious grasp of the operation of these principles in his own life's work and practice. Like every human being in a world made by God, Coleridge was born a child of truth, but only gradually did he raise himself from an ignorance of what that meant to a methodical and active assent to its reality. In the *Biographia* he comes forth as the person he calls in *The Friend* the "well-educated man," of whom he goes on to say: "However irregular and desultory his talk, there is method in the fragments." The ultimate myth, or faith, of the *Biographia* is, therefore, that the "principles" of all things, including the principles of a benevolently dynamic human self-consciousness, are "grounded in nature." Coleridge's life and its narrative are important because together they "furnish a torch of guidance" to others. According to Coleridge, the intellectual dynamic that has been his life is the birthright of every human being—every Christian human being, at any rate.

We need to be clear about Coleridge's explicit aims and purposes in
the *Biographia* if we are to begin an accurate assessment of its achievements. The accusations of incoherence and disorganization, installed with the early reviews, have grown to seem much less important, and in certain respects misguided, as readers have tended to favor an aesthetic or hermeneutical method of reading the work over a positive and critical approach. To the degree that scholars have been interested in judging the correctness of Coleridge's various ideas and positions in philosophy, politics, and literary criticism, the consensus seems to be that (a) his critique of the empirical tradition and of materialism, and his correlative defense of Idealist positions, leaves that old debate more or less where it has always been (undecided, exactly where his German mentors in philosophy had left it); (b) his political views are independent and conservative, with both characteristics deriving ultimately from his religious and theological convictions; (c) the representation of his views on all matters, *in order to be objectively understood*, have to pass through the filter of Coleridge's subjectivity, and Coleridge himself must be the vehicle but not the master of that subjectivity (that is to say, Coleridge is not always candid, even with himself); (d) the literary criticism, both practical and theoretical, is the great achievement of the work.

For the remainder of this essay I shall be concentrating on Coleridge's literary criticism in the *Biographia*. I have spent some time on the general structure and method because the literary theory and criticism is of a piece with the rest of the book. Thus, Coleridge's argument that poetry is essentially ideal relates directly to his account of Idealist philosophy. Similarly, his critique of associationism and empirical philosophy connects just as directly with his critique of Wordsworth's poetry, and especially the principles which underly that poetry. Finally, the history of his own life from his early radicalism to his achieved religious conservatism—and culminating in the *Biographia* itself—argues the social and political importance of a correct view of poetry and criticism. Coleridge repeatedly associates radical political thought with the philosophic positions he attacks directly and at length. Indeed, much of this kind of "philosophical" political commentary in the *Biographia* is simply jingoism, as we see very clearly in his discussion of associationism. "Opinions fundamentally false" on these academic matters are not, he says, "harmless" at the political and social level:

> the sting of the adder remains venemous. . . . Some indeed there seem to have been, in an unfortunate neighbour-nation at least, who have
embraced this system with a full view of all its moral and religious consequences; some

who deem themselves most free,
When they within this gross and visible sphere
Chain down the winged thought, scoffing assent,
Proud in their meanness; and themselves they cheat
With noisy emptiness of learned phrase,
Their subtle fluids, impacts, essences,
Self-working tools, uncaus'd effects, and all
Those blind omniscients, those Almighty slaves,
Untenanting Creation of its God!

Such men need discipline, not argument; they must be made better men, before they can become wiser. (1:122–23)

These are the contexts in which Coleridge engages the question of poetry and of literary criticism—to his credit, let it be said that whatever one may think of his reactionary cultural and social views, he struggled to maintain a holistic approach to all human studies. The question of the excellences and defects of Wordsworth's poetry, and of Wordsworth's theoretical justification of that poetry, was important for Coleridge not simply for personal reasons, but because he felt that the poetry (in particular, the Lyrical Ballads) occupied a nexus of great importance for English, and even for European, society. Today we take it for granted that Coleridge won the argument with Wordsworth. I want to reconsider this question again by examining Coleridge's position for what it is, a polemical set of ideas about the nature and function of poetry. Specifically, I want to examine it in relation to the antithetical positions of Wordsworth and Byron.

II

Coleridge said that, although the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads was half the product of his own brain, and although he and Wordsworth shared many of the same ideas about poetry, a fundamental difference of opinion about poetry separated them. He was right. Both men talked equally about the interchanges of mind and nature, but in each the emphasis was different; and this difference of emphasis, in the end, proved radical. In the Biographia Coleridge traced the source of this difference to eighteenth-
Contentions of English Romanticism

century theories of association and sensation, which he came to reject but which Wordsworth—if one is to judge by the "preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*—remained committed to. Chapters 17–22 of the *Biographia* argue that the defects of Wordsworth's poetry are the consequence of a defective, ultimately an associationist, theory of mind.¹⁰

One of the root problems with associationist thought, in Coleridge's view, was that it based itself not on "principles," or *a priori* categories, or "innate ideas," but on observation. A poetry founded on such a theory would therefore have to be in error, for "poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*, [and] avoids and excludes all *accident*; ... its apparent individualities ... must be *representative* ... and ... the *persons* of poetry must be clothed with *generic* attributes" (2:45–46). Again and again Coleridge returns to this theme in his critique of Wordsworth's theoretical and practical defects. Laying so much stress on the language of people in low and rustic life as a model for poetic language, Wordsworth "leads us to place the chief value on those things on which man *differs* from man and to forget or disregard the high dignities, which ... *may* be, and *ought* to be, found in all ranks" (2:130). Wordsworth's is a *levelling* poetry, perhaps even a democratic or Jacobinical poetry: a poetry which proposes that a "rustic's" mode of experience and discourse is a more appropriate norm for poetical experience and discourse than is the experience and discourse of "the educated man" (2:52–53). Coleridge vigorously opposes such an idea. In actual fact, Coleridge says,

the rustic, from the more imperfect development of his faculties, and from the lower state of their cultivation, aims almost solely to convey *insulated facts*, either those of his scanty experience or his traditional belief; while the educated man seeks to discover and express those *connections* of things, or those relative *bearings* of fact to fact, from which some more or less general law is deducible. For *facts* are valuable to a wise man, chiefly as they lead to the discovery of the indwelling *law*, which is the true *being* of things. ... (2:52–53)

The rustic is here used as a figure of what Coleridge called elsewhere "the ignorant man," the man who lacks the requisite self-consciousness to raise up out of his experience an image or reflex of subsistent harmony. For Coleridge, that image or reflex is the ground of imagination, and hence the essential feature of poetry; and it comes, he says, from "*meditation*, rather than ... *observation*" (2:82). Wordsworth's views not only place entirely too much emphasis upon details and particulars, on what Coleridge
calls "matters-of-fact"; they suggest that the subject of poetry lies outside the mind, somehow in "reality" or "the world." On the contrary, Coleridge insists that the poet's eye is not the observer's eye but the mind's eye, and further, that the mind's eye is directed inward, to the ideal world created and revealed through the imagination (both primary and secondary). This aspect of Coleridge's views has been insisted upon by all of his best readers: "The reality that poems 'imitate,'" as Catherine Wallace has recently put it, "is not the objective world as such but, rather, the consciousness of the poet himself in his encounters with the objective world. . . the poet's only genuine subject matter is himself, and the only ideas he presents will be ideas about the activity of consciousness in the world around him."¹¹

Finally, by emphasizing observation rather than meditation, and matters-of-fact rather than the ideal, Wordsworth suggests that his theory of imagination is mechanistic and associationist rather than creative and idealist. This difference which Coleridge observes leads him to stress the volitional character of poetic imagination. The whole point of chapters 5–8 of the Biographia is to insist upon the primacy of conscious will in the human being, and to attack associationist thought as a "mechanist" philosophy which undermines the concept of the will. Poetry is and must always be a product of what he calls "the conscious will" (1:904). When the poet "brings the whole soul of man into activity," the power of imagination is "first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irrepressible, though gentle and unnoticed, control" (2:15–16).

In his best practice, and recurrently in his theory as set forth in the "Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth (according to Coleridge) illustrates Coleridge's own ideas about the ideal, the conscious, and the volitional character of poetry and imagination. The defects in Wordsworth's poetic work are traceable to certain defects in his principles, in his theory of poetry as set forth in his famous preface. Coleridge scrutinizes the preface for residual traces of Wordsworth's associationist ideas, and he then argues that the faults in the poems in the Lyrical Ballads are the consequence of these residual—and, so far as Wordsworth's true genius as a poet is concerned—inessential ideas. This is the method of Coleridge's critique of Wordsworth in the Biographia.

And in point of fact he was right; Wordsworth's poetic theory and practice remained committed to certain associationist positions as Coleridge's did not. Where Coleridge would always stress the poet's will and
Contentions of English Romanticism

self-consciousness—indeed, where Coleridge would suggest that the poet’s (or at least the modern poet’s) central subject ought to be the act of the conscious will itself—Wordsworth’s poetic impulses drove him toward insights and revelations that stood beyond the limits of the conscious will. In contemporary terms, Coleridge’s is a theory of poetry as a process of revelation via mediations—indeed, a poetry whose subject is the acts and processes of mediation. Wordsworth, on the other hand, sets out in quest of an unmediated poetry, and in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* he offers a theoretical sketch of what such a project involves.

Briefly, what Wordsworth aspires to is a direct perception of what he calls “the subject.” This is his primary aim as a poet: “I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject; consequently, there is I hope in these poems little falsehood of description. . . .” This purpose, apparently so simple, is reiterated in more emphatic and explicit terms in 1815: “The powers requisite for the production of poetry are: first, those of Observation and Description,—i.e., the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer” (*Prose Works* 3:26). Coleridge, however, in his distinction between “copy” and “imitation,” vigorously opposes Wordsworth’s ideas on this matter, and later commentators—particularly 20th century critics and academics—have sided with Coleridge, and have even come to believe that his is the more innovative view. The most influential contemporary scholarship of Wordsworth’s poetry—the line established through the work of Geoffrey Hartman—has armed itself with Coleridge’s vision in order to save Wordsworth’s poetry from the poet himself. Wordsworth, we are now urged to think, was no mystic, and least of all was he a poet of nature. He is the poet of the mind, the revealer of the operations of the consciousness. He is, in short, what Coleridge said he was and ought to be.

In trying to understand the importance of the differences that separate Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s ideas about poetry, we must not abandon what we have come to learn about Wordsworth’s poetry of consciousness. What we have to see, however, is that all his poetry—“The Idiot Boy” as much as *The Prelude*—is a poetry based in a commitment to unmediated perception, on the one hand, and to a theory of nonconscious awareness on the other (what Wordsworth calls “habits”). Both aspects of his ideas about poetry are intimately related to each other. In his critique of Wordsworth, Coleridge argued that Wordsworth’s attack on poetic diction in the
Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* was not, (could not have been), fundamental, but was rather directed to peculiar circumstances which had developed in English poetry in the eighteenth century (2:40-42). This is a very conservative reading of Wordsworth’s ideas, and in the end it is wrong. Wordsworth’s whole argument that there neither is nor can be any real or essential difference between poetry and prose is grounded in an impulse to avert altogether the grids, the Kantian “categories,” and all the complex mediations which stand between the act of perception and the objects perceived. It did not matter to Wordsworth whether the “subject” of the poet was an idiot boy, a broken pot, an abstract reality (nature, social classes or conventions, psychological events like “fidelity”), God, or even “the mind of man” itself and all its complex states of consciousness. The ideal was to set these matters free of the mediations which necessarily conveyed them, either to one’s self or to others.

This could be done, Wordsworth believed, by grounding poetry not in “the conscious will” but in “spontaneous” and “powerful feelings,” on the one hand, and “habits of meditation” on the other (1:127):

Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length . . . such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments . . . that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified. (1:127)

This is a highly pragmatic, even a tactical, way of stating his position. Not until Shelley would reformulate Wordsworth’s ideas more than twenty years later would the theory insinuated by Wordsworth receive a comprehensive and adequate formulation. This would happen when Shelley provided Wordsworth’s ideas with a broad social and political dimension, a comprehensive theory of culture in which poetry was revealed as a set of various related, and imaginatively grounded, social practices.

That subject is, however, beyond the scope of my present concerns.
Here I want only to indicate how consciousness and the structure of all forms of mediation are viewed by Wordsworth. Simply, they are impediments to clear vision. For Wordsworth, to show (in practice) or argue (in theory) that the mediations are themselves the subject of the poet is to abandon the ground of any nonsubjective experience, and hence to abandon the ground of all human intercourse and social life, which involve sympathetic relationships between persons distinct and different. To Wordsworth, Coleridge's position also involves a theoretical contradiction: for we cannot have knowledge of anything, not even knowledge of the mediations, unless an unmediated consciousness is at some point admitted to acts of knowledge and perception. In effect, Coleridge's Kantian position, by resituating the problem of knowledge, has merely reopened it at the level of epistemology. Coleridge's position stands under threat to the critique of an infinite regress: what will mediate the mediations? Coleridge's eventual response to this question, developed out of Schelling, was to argue for a continuous and self-developing process of mediated knowledge—that is to say, it was to make a virtue of necessity and turn the infinite regress into an organic process. It was also, needless to say, to have literally postponed both the problem and the answer to the problem. The move was a brilliant finesse.

Wordsworth took a different course—less spectacular and intellectually brilliant but in the end perhaps more daring and profound, at least so far as poetry is concerned. Observing and describing without the intervention of consciousness or subjective mediations, following blindly and mechanically the unselfconsciously meditated directions of unselfconscious feeling and thought: these are Wordsworth's remarkable procedures. Their object, as he says in various ways, is to avoid the veils of familiarity—the mediations—through which we experience the world. Unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth is seeking for a poetry, and a mode of perception, which will lay the mortal mind asleep in order that it may see into the life of things—in order that it may transcend the limits of experience laid down by Coleridge's self-conscious will and Kant's categorical imperatives. This program, needless to say, is anything but supernaturalist; it is in fact a deeply materialist and mundane program. What it seeks to transcend is not this world or concrete experience but the ideologies of this world and our modes of perceiving it. Coleridge was quite right to oppose this program on principle, for Wordsworth's ideal, in principle, is toward a poetry in which the mind transcends its own volitions and categories; in which
the mind, following not consciousness but "feelings," "impulses," and "sensations," is suddenly confronted with the unknown, the revelation of what is miraculous. Wordsworth calls his ideal "sympathy," an experience in which

passions and thoughts and feelings are . . . connected with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. (1:142)

At such moments—glimpsing a hedgehog or a flower, observing a peculiar encounter between two people, being wrapped in a specific atmospheric moment, perhaps of wind and humidity—the mind will be led to feel that it suddenly understands, that it has been brought to some moment of ultimate knowledge. In Wordsworth we are gently led on to these moments by the affections; it is not the conscious will that controls experiences of primary or secondary imagination, it is "habit," "impulse," and "feeling." Consciousness follows experience, not the other way round.

When Coleridge linked Wordsworth's poetry to materialist and associationist principles, then, his insight was acute. Equally acute was the way he attacked Wordsworth's "matter-of-factness." The "laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects, and . . . the insertion of accidental circumstances" (2:126) infects the poetry with what Coleridge sees as a sort of misplaced concreteness. Wordsworth's insistence upon treating peculiar experiences puts at risk the Coleridgean ideal of poetic harmony and the reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities. In Wordsworth, Coleridge is constantly being brought up against resistant particulars, details that somehow evade—or rather, details that seem determined to evade—the necessary poetic harmony and reconciliation. Coleridge calls this Wordsworth's "accidentiality," and he says that it contravenes "the essence of poetry," which must be, he adds, "catholic and abstract" (2:126). "Accidentiality" works against Coleridge's idea that poetry is the most philosophical of discourses because it alone can reveal the general in the especial, the sameness in the differences.

To Wordsworth, however, accidentality was precisely the means by which feelings and impulses outwitted the mind's catholic and abstracting censors. "I am sensible," he says,
that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance, I may have sometimes written on unworthy subjects; but I am less apprehensive on this account, than that my language may frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself. ... Such faulty expressions ... I would willingly take all reasonable pains to correct. But it is dangerous to make these alterations on the simple authority of a few individuals, or even of certain classes of men; for where the understanding of an Author is not convinced, or his feelings altered, this cannot be done without great injury to himself: for his own feelings are his stay and support. ... To this may be added, that the critic ought never to forget that he is himself exposed to the same errors as the Poet, and, perhaps, in a much greater degree. ... (1:153)

Once again the ground of Wordsworth's decisions, both as regards his subject matter and his choice of words, is determined by "feelings." He means to act, as Blake said of Jesus, by impulse, and not by rules. The critical mind—even the poet's own conscious and critical operations—may suspect accidentality and arbitrariness in the poem's subject matter or language, but if the feelings which led the poet to his choices cannot be shown to be factitious, then the choices must be maintained. It is not merely that the heart has its reasons; the choice must be maintained because the consciousness has its reasons. The mind directs itself to the ordering of experience, to the establishment of harmonies; the feelings direct themselves to the enlarging of experience itself. Wordsworth's "feeling" is what Blake called "the Prolific": judge and censor of the judgmental and censorious consciousness, the feelings and their concomitant train of accidentalities refuse to let the mind settle into its a priori harmonies.

Coleridge is an ideologue, and his theory of poetry is not merely an ideology of poetry; it finally argues that poetry is the perfect form of ideology (more philosophical than philosophy, more concrete than history). Poetry is the revelation and expression of the Ideal, of the idea and what is ideational, of the world as a play of the mediations of consciousness. It is the product of the conscious will. But to Wordsworth, the true human will is not located in the ego or the superego, it lies in the unconscious; it is a form of desire, an eros, not a form of thought, an eidolon. A poetry of sympathy rather than a poetry of consciousness, it covets irrelevant detail and "accidentality" as the limit and test of its own imaginative reach.

Insofar as it is a poetry of the mind and consciousness, Wordsworth's
work is strongest and most characteristic when it represents mind at the moment of its dawning and self-discovery, consciousness falling upon itself in its instants of wonder and surprise. In such poetry—*The Prelude* is the preeminent example—consciousness is rendered as an experience rather than as a knowledge or form of thought. The difference between Coleridge's and Wordsworth's theorizing on these matters reflects, then, a small but in the end crucial difference of emphasis: for Coleridge, poetry is an idea and is to be understood via the networks of intellectual mediations which are poetry's ultimate ground and "principles"; for Wordsworth poetry is an experience and is to be understood primarily in the event itself, but in any case only through the rhetorical and sympathetic networks which the poems set in motion. It is a matter, as Wordsworth's "Preface" says, of contracts and arrangements, not—as Coleridge insists—of *a priori* ideas and "principles."

Ultimately, Coleridge's theory of poetry sees it as a continuous play of signifiers and signifieds, and its object is to provide, in the traces left by this play, glimpses of the ordering process which is the ground of the play. For Wordsworth, however, the semiotic dance traces a referential system back into the material world. In the play of language, the dance of the signifiers and the signifieds, we glimpse the structure in which the system of symbols and the order of references hold themselves together. Coleridge, too, says that poetry affords a glimpse of a superior reality lying behind the appearances of things. But for Coleridge this superior reality is nonmaterial, in the order of platonic or ideal forms. For Wordsworth, by contrast, the order is emphatically concrete and material, an order of actual sympathies and arrangements which we have, in our getting and spending, only neglected or forgotten. In Wordsworth, the play of the signifiers and the signifieds, the spectacle of the mediations, lies under judgment to a superior reality, the order of the referents. Wordsworth's poetry is a symbolic system which aims to disappear, but with a flash that reveals the invisible world—which is to say, *this* material and human world, the very world of all of us that has too regularly "been disappeared" (so to speak) in the symbols and ideas we have made of it.

III

In the *Biographia*, Coleridge sought to replace what he felt to be an outmoded theory of poetry and poetic perception with a more adequate and
advanced theory. Wordsworth's famous Preface was his point of attack, first, because he felt that Wordsworth's actual practice as a poet went far beyond his theory; and second, because he felt that insofar as the practice was weak, it reflected the poverty of Wordsworth's theory. This well-known and important theoretical struggle about the nature of poetry has had, and continues to have, weighty consequences for scholars and for poets alike. Its importance looms even larger, however, if we reflect upon an equally relevant but (so far as I can see) completely unknown fact: that Byron's Don Juan was consciously conceived as a response to the Biographia. Scholars are of course well aware that Byron began his masterwork by lashing out at Wordsworth, Southey, and the Lake School in general. What is not realized, however, is the extent to which the Biographia inspired Byron's Don Juan.

The story begins in the autumn of 1817, when Byron received and read Coleridge's literary autobiography. In a letter to Murray of October 12, Byron refers contemptuously to the Biographia's treatment of the program of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the enthusiasts of the Lake School. His disparaging remarks on the book are concentrated, however, on the review of Maturin's play Bertram, which Coleridge had savaged in chapter 23.13 This letter to Murray is also important because it contains Byron's first announcement that he had just "written a poem (of 84 octave Stanzas) humourous, in or after the excellent manner of Mr. Whistlecraft... on a Venetian anecdote."

Let us begin with Coleridge's attack on Bertram. Critics who write about Coleridge's great book rarely spend any time on chapter 23, probably because it is one of the least creditable passages, in several senses. But in fact it is one of the most interesting chapters in the book, because it shows Coleridge's literary criticism operating at its most polemical moral level. Coleridge's attack on Bertram begins with two critical indirections: first, Coleridge's argument that this kind of so-called Gothic (or "German") drama is English in origin and fundamentally Jacobinical in its moral tendencies; and second, Coleridge's extended discussion of the Don Juan tradition in drama, and in particular of "the old Spanish play, entitled Atheista Fulminato... which... has had its day of favour in every country throughout Europe" (2:219). The point of these indirections is to erect a model for the treatment of evil in theatrical productions. What places the Atheista Fulminato "at a world's distance from the spirit of modern jacobinism" in plays like Bertram is the following:
The latter introduces to us clumsy copies of these showy instrumental qualities [i.e., appearances of virtue] in order to reconcile us to vice and want of principle; while the Atheista Fulminato presents . . . them for the sole purpose of displaying their hollowness, and in order to put us on our guard by demonstrating their utter indifference to vice and virtue. . . . (2:221)

Unlike the ideologically correct Atheista Fulminato, Bertram is typical of recent Gothic drama for “representing . . . liberality, refined feeling, and a nice sense of honour” in people that tradition teaches us are wicked, and for “rewarding with all the sympathies which are the due of virtue, those criminals whom law, reason, and religion have excommunicated from our esteem” (2:221). Coleridge was attacking Bertram, but he might as easily have made the same charge against all of Byron’s famous tales and against Byron’s recent Gothic drama Manfred as well. In an earlier version of this passage printed as part of “Letter II” of “Satyrane’s Letters,” Coleridge declared that “the whole System” of dramas like Bertram “is a moral and intellectual Jacobinism of the most dangerous kind.”¹⁴

It is difficult to resist the impression that the very subject of Don Juan was chosen as an antithetical move against Coleridge’s discussion of Jacobinical drama in this chapter of the Biographia. In the first place, his letter to Murray shows that he took personal offense at Coleridge’s critique of Bertram. His anger was partly the consequence of his sense that Coleridge had behaved meanly and ungratefully toward both himself personally, and the Drury Lane theatre committee in general.¹⁵ Nor could Byron have been insensible to the import of Coleridge’s critique of Bertram, which was as much an attack on Byron’s sympathetic treatment of bad men in his poetry.

Equally impressive are certain other internal connections between what Coleridge wrote in the Biographia and what Byron wrote in Don Juan. The first line of Coleridge’s direct attack on Bertram is aimed at “the prodigy of the tempest at Bertram’s shipwreck” (2:222). Coleridge ridicules the treatment of the storm for its absurd lack of probability. The events are inherently hyperbolical and beyond belief (“The Sicilian sea coast: a convent of monks: night: a most portentous, unearthly storm: a vessel wrecked: contrary to all human expectation, one man saves himself by his prodigious powers as a swimmer”); besides, when one of the characters gives his “theory of Sicilian storms,” it is, Coleridge says, “not apparently founded on any great familiarity of his own with this troublesome article” (i.e., Sicil-
ian storms) \((2:222-23)\). Anyone familiar with Canto II of *Don Juan* will recognize some of its essential features anticipated here: in Byron’s poem we will not only see once again that “prodigious . . . swimmer” who alone escapes his shipwreck; the entire treatment of the event will emphasize the accuracy and truthfulness of its circumstantial details.

I could expatiate on a number of other specific intertextual connections between the early cantos of *Don Juan* and the *Biographia*, but I shall have to relegate them to a footnote, for the sake of maintaining the larger train of the argument.\(^\text{16}\) Coleridge’s principal criticism of *Bertram* is that it is indecent and immoral. Coleridge searches out the scenes in the play which demonstrate its apparently fixed intention to display evil and vice in a favorable or at least in a sympathetic light. Perhaps nowhere else has Coleridge’s literary criticism lapsed so badly. His diatribe culminates in the discussion of Act IV, where the disasters that attend the illicit love of Bertram and Imogine begin to unfold in the play’s series of deaths and madness. “I want words to describe the mingled horror and disgust, with which I witnessed the opening of the fourth act. . . . The shocking spirit of jacobinism seemed no longer confined to politics” \((2:229)\). What Coleridge means is that “The familiarity with atrocious events and characters” seemed to “have poisoned the taste” of the people watching the play. The event leaves Coleridge in a state of moral breathlessness:

> that a British audience could remain passive under such an insult to common decency, nay, receive with a thunder of applause, a human being supposed to have come reeking from the consummation of this complex foulness and baseness, these and the like reflections . . . pressed as with the weight of lead upon my heart. . . . \((2:229)\)

It is against this sort of bourgeois moralism that *Don Juan* was written; indeed, it is against this simplistic and narrow attitudinizing—one can call it nothing better—that all of Byron’s poetry was conceived. It was a tone which Byron caught in the work of most of the Lake School writers, but especially in Southey. It is rare in Coleridge, but its appearance in the critique of *Bertram* is important to remember, for Coleridge’s ideology of poetry—that is, his conviction that poetry should be the vehicle of the willed acts of a reconciling consciousness—necessarily implies the specifics of his critique of *Bertram*. Coleridge was entirely correct, and—as always—entirely consistent when he said that his work was founded on principles. The critique of *Bertram* displays the principles in an applied and specific form.
If chapter 23 suggested to Byron that he might usefully make the Don Juan legend the focus of an attack upon the Lake School and middle-class ideology in general, and if it also influenced Byron’s choice of subject and approach in Canto II of his masterwork, chapter 16 seems to have brought into focus the central stylistic issues. In this chapter Coleridge establishes a contrast between “the materials and structure of modern poetry” (2:32) and “the more polished poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, especially . . . of Italy” (2:33). This contrast prepares specifically for the extended discussion of Wordsworth which begins in chapter 17. Coleridge’s critique of Wordsworth’s matter-of-factness, of the meanness of his diction, of the excessive particularity, is based in his praise of the contrasting manner of the earlier Italian poets. In the modern period, Coleridge says, “few have guarded the purity of their native tongue with that jealous care, with which the sublime Dante in his tract ‘De la nobile volgare eloquenza,’ declares to be the first duty of a poet” (2:30). The manner of these early poets and their “dolce stil nuovo” provides, in Coleridge’s view, a challenge and critical model for the poets of the present:

The imagery is almost always general: sun, moon, flowers, breezes, murmuring streams, warbling songsters, delicious shades, lovely damsels, cruel as fair, nympha, naiads, and goddesses, are the materials which are common to all, and which each shaped and arranged according to his judgement or fancy, little solicitous to add or to particularize. If we make an honorable exception in favor of some English poets, the thoughts too are as little novel as the images; and the fable of their narrative poems, for the most part drawn from mythology, or sources of equal notoriety, derive their chief attractions from the manner of treating them: from impassioned flow, or picturesque arrangement. In opposition to the present age, and perhaps in as faulty an extreme, they placed the essence of poetry in the art. The excellence, at which they aimed, consisted in the exquisite polish of the diction, combined with perfect simplicity. This their prime object, they attained by the avoidance of every word, which a gentleman would not use in dignified conversation, and of every word and phrase, which none but a learned man would use. (2:33)

Such stylistic purity passes a judgment on the characteristic faults and defects of modern poetry, which Coleridge summarizes this way: “a downright simpleness, under the affectation of simplicity, prosaic words in feeble metre, silly thoughts in childish phrases, and a preference of mean, degrading, or at best trivial associations, and characters” (1:75).
In Byron’s critique of Wordsworth’s poetry in *Don Juan* he follows Coleridge’s line fairly closely. Most critics have assumed that Byron was recalling Jeffrey’s strictures in the *Edinburgh Review*, and in fact he may well have been. But Coleridge’s critique of his friend does not disagree with the *particulars* of Jeffrey’s criticisms, it simply dissents from the general tone and attitude. To Coleridge, Wordsworth is a great poet whose defects are “characteristic” of his place and epoch. In the *Biographia* Coleridge summarizes very well the typical negative judgments brought against Wordsworth by contemporary reviewers, and it may well be that *Don Juan’s* criticisms and travesties of Wordsworth’s poetry owe more to Coleridge’s summary presentation than to his recollection of Jeffrey and the other reviewers.

However that may be, *Don Juan* is certainly responding directly to the stylistic challenge laid down in chapter 16 of the *Biographia*. We should recall that Byron’s first reference to the *Biographia* occurs in the letter which announced the completion of the first draft of *Beppo*. The latter was specifically written in imitation of “the new style of poetry very lately sprung up in England”17 in the work of Rose, Merivale, and especially Frere. This “new style” returned to fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy for its models—that is, to the work of Boiardo, Ariosto, Pulci, and Berni. Byron adopted (and adapted) this stylistic reformation in various ways between 1817–24. His defense of Pope against his Romantic detractors was part of his program to reform and purify the language and its poetic possibilities: “There is no bearing [the atrocious cant and nonsense about Pope] any longer, and if it goes on, it will destroy what little good writing and taste remains among us” (*BLJ* 7:61). His experiments in drama were part of this effort to restore greater correctness to English poetry, his translations from Dante and Pulci were exercises and acts of homage, as were *The Lament of Tasso* and *The Prophecy of Dante*, but *Don Juan* was the capstone and masterwork in Byron’s new stylistic program. No one can read Byron’s letters of 1817–24 and not be aware that he looked upon his poetical work during these years as all of a piece, and that one of its principal aims was to “[guard] the purity of [his] native tongue with that jealous care, which the sublime Dante . . . declares to be the first duty of a poet”:

> you know that [*Beppo*] is no more than an imitation of Pulci & of a style common & esteemed in Italy. I have just published a drama [*Marino Faliero*], which is at least good English—I presume—for Gifford lays great stress on the purity of its diction. (*BLJ* 8:114)
It was probably Rose and Kinnaird who gave Byron a copy of the *Biographia* to read in September 1817, at the same time that they brought him Frere’s imitation of Pulci. Thus, the following famous passage in Byron’s letters—in which he first declares his intention to set off on a new course in poetry—is haunted by the two books he was reading at that time, Frere’s “Whistlecraft” and Coleridge’s *Biographia*:

With regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it—that he and all of us—Scott—Southev—Wordsworth—Moore—Campbell—I—are all in the wrong—one as much as another—that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system—or systems—not worth a damn in itself—and from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free—and that the present & next generations will finally be of this opinion—I am the more confirmed in this—by having lately gone over some of our Classics—particularly Pope—whom I tried in this way—I took Moore’s poems & my own & some others—and went over them side by side with Pope’s—and I was really astonished (I ought not to have been so) and mortified—at the ineffable distance in point of sense—harmony—effect—and even Imagination Passion—& Invention—between the little Queen Anne’s Man—and us of the lower Empire—depend upon it [it] is all Horace then, and Claudian now among us—and if I had to begin again—I would model myself accordingly—(BLJ 5:265)

In the years that were to follow, Byron defended *Don Juan* on a number of fronts, not the least of which was stylistic. When he fought against the accusations of immorality and indecency, he was also arguing for the purity (in both senses) of his new work. In the *Biographia* Coleridge had called for the reintroduction of linguistic correctness into contemporary English poetry, and had taken his contemporaries to task—even the greatest of them—for lapses from such standards of correctness, indeed, for lapses which were the “characteristic defects” of a new “system” of poetry. *Don Juan* picks up on both of these arguments and gives them a further range of meaning not contained in Coleridge’s position. Here is Byron on the “wrong revolutionary poetical system” we now call Romanticism:

You are taken in by that false stilted trashy style which is a mixture of all the styles of the day—which are all bombastic (I don’t except my own—no one has done more through negligence to corrupt the language) but it is neither English nor poetry.—Time will show. (BLJ 7:182)

As for writing poetry which exhibited “exquisite polish of diction” and “perfect simplicity,” poetry in a language “which a gentleman would not use
in dignified conversation, and . . . which none but a learned man would use, it all depended upon what one meant by the terms ‘conversation,’ ‘gentleman,’ and ‘learned.’ Don Juan—as Byron well knew, and as all later scholars have recognized—is an impeccable rendering of aristocratic conversational idiom. This is the discourse of well-bred gentlemen who are ‘learned’ not in bookish and academic ways, but in what Byron called ‘the world.’ A letter to Douglas Kinnaird of October 26, 1819, states his views in that prose—at once simple, polished, and expressive—which many regard as the finest ever written in the English language.

As to ‘Don Juan’—confess—confess—you dog—and be candid—that it is the sublime of that there sort of writing—it may be bawdy—but is it not good English?—it may be profligate—but is it not life, is it not the thing?—Could any man have written it—who has not lived in the world?—and tooled in a post-chaise? in a hackney coach? in a Gondola? against a wall? in a court carriage? in a vis a vis?—on a table?—and under it?—I have written about a hundred stanzas of a third Canto—but it is damned modest—the outcry has frightened me.—I had such projects for the Don—but the Cant is so much stronger than Cunt—now a days—that the benefit of experience in a man who had well weighed the worth of both monosyllables—must be lost to despairing posterity. (BLJ 6:232)

This is the prose of a man who has well-weighed the worth of all his monosyllables. Its lightness of touch, its wit, and even its outrageousness cannot, should not, disguise its precision and purity. This is also a prose which finds its poetical equivalent in the musa pedestris of Don Juan.

At this point certain generalizations seem in order. In the first place, we see in all three of these men—Wordsworth, Byron, and Coleridge—a shared interest in renovating the medium of poetic work. Each worked consciously, even programmatically, toward that end, but in each case the end took on a different appearance. Byron and Wordsworth stand opposed to Coleridge in their stylistic empiricism, if I may so call it: that is to say, both Wordsworth and Byron set as their linguistic standard a real and current idiomatic usage. The language of poetry reflects, is modelled on, an actual linguistic practice which the poet takes to be a critical standard for his own work. This stylistic empiricism stands in sharp contrast to Coleridge’s idealistic—ultimately, his academic—approach to poetic discourse. Lest this characterization of Coleridge’s program seem invidious, I should point out that its offspring in later work is to be found in the some of the richest traditions of symbolist poetry.
Of course, Byron reflects the idiom of the aristocracy whereas Wordsworth’s poetry is modelled on the usage of the “lower and middle orders” of “rustic” society. Coleridge’s critique of Wordsworth’s linguistic standard—that it is a usage that often reflects no more than the unself-consciousness and even the ignorance of the classes it is drawn from (2:42–55)—helps to explain the significance of the different choices made by Wordsworth and Byron. Wordsworth precisely wants a language which can be seen to say, or to imply, or to know, more than it understands at a self-conscious level. Byron, on the other hand, chooses an idiom which reflects language being used at the very highest pitch of self-consciousness.

This difference between Wordsworth and Byron brings into sharp relief a similarity in the positions of Coleridge and Byron. In contrast to Wordsworth, both laid a premium on the self-conscious and voluntarist dimensions of poetic discourse, just as they both praised the polished and artful work of Renaissance Italian poetry. Byron was as consciously ideological in his work as Coleridge. They differed, however, not only in their politics and class allegiances, but in the salient that their poetic self-consciousness took. Where Coleridge is working toward balances, reconciliations, and a harmony of elements that might otherwise remain discordant, Byron covets surprises and the upsetting of balance, antithetical moves of every kind, and what he called, in a wonderful portmanteau word, “opposition.”

Much more could and should be said on these matters. We need to specify, in a detailed way, how these different theoretical positions work themselves out in actual poetic practice. Equally important would be to incorporate the related views of Shelley, Keats, and Blake—especially Shelley. Obviously this is not the occasion for such a demonstration. In a series of unpublished papers, however, I have worked through these lines of inquiry at considerable length and depth. The *Biographia*, however, is the obvious place to begin an investigation of the variances and differentials of Romantic stylistics because it is—as scholars have always known—the key text in this area. I hope the present essay has helped to clarify precisely why and how Coleridge’s greatest work was and is so crucial.