Poetry and Barrel-Organs: The Text in the Book of the *Biographia Literaria*  
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“Christendom,” Coleridge says in chapter 16 of the *Biographia Literaria*, “from its first settlement on feudal rights, has been so far one great body, however imperfectly organized, that a similar spirit will be found in each period to have been acting in all its members.”1 This historicized Christianity is common to European Romanticism. Chateaubriand and Novalis were its most lyrical advocates in France and Germany, and Coleridge was its theoretical spokesman in England. But Coleridge, unlike Chateaubriand or Novalis, is still echoed in fragmentary strains of ideas he imagined could arise only from inseparable literary and religious principles. The *Biographia*, the *Lay Sermons*, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* witness his constant attempt to produce that inseparability. Christianity he finds diversely manifest and almost everywhere—in the details of Greek grammar, in the idea of the English Constitution, and obviously in Milton, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth, poets who, whatever their flaws, had divinity in their voices.

That divine literary voice Coleridge defended against something he deeply feared—its commodification in a society increasingly pervaded by commerce. The defense of that voice is central to the Christianized politics of the *Biographia*. Its renunciation of materialism, dualism, and mechanistic psychology, and the constitutional, economic and literary principles in the long critique of Wordsworth—all this leads to the object of his “literary life,” which is to “. . . preserve the Soul steady and collected in its pure Act of inward Adoration to the great I AM, and to the filial Word that reaffirmeth it from Eternity to Eternity, whose choral Echo is the Universe”
This announced purpose, closing volume 2, ends with the invocation, in Greek, of “Glory to God Alone,” a doxology, our editors remind us, commonly placed at the end of seventeenth-century books.

This tacked-on salutation to God, like “Satyrane’s Letters” and the review of Maturin’s *Bertram*, helped stretch manuscript copy into the proper second volume, which emerged during his publisher’s clumsy patching together of Coleridge’s “literary life.” Rounding off his book with Renaissance doxology is, however, even as patching, significant. Coleridge would have preferred the audience he imagined for Richard Hooker, Thomas Browne, Francis Bacon, and Jeremy Taylor. Milton confidently wrote for a “fit audience though few.” Coleridge sensed that the fit and few were now unreachable except by passing through the contaminating crowd of the unfit and the many. He could dedicate his book to the glory of God, apprehended in the same inward ontological I AM that grounds poetic imagination. But this book, which he pulled and padded, and partly plagiarized into existence, is also immediately in search of a complex audience, which he imagines made up of friends, the learned, and anonymous admirers.

These make up what he calls, in a common Enlightenment phrase, a “literary republic,” an idealized presence midst the ill-defined and many-headed “reading public,” that which foreshadows our mass audience and for which Coleridge had only contempt. Sometimes the contempt is lightened with humorous disdain, as in this passage from *The Stateman’s Manual*:

... among other odd burs and kecksies, the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity, we have now a reading public—as strange a phrase, methinks, as ever forced a splenetic smile on the staid countenance of Meditation: and yet no fiction! For our Readers have, in good truth, multiplied exceedingly, and have waxed proud. It would require the intrepid accuracy of a Colquhoun [a statistician] to venture at the precise number of that vast company only, whose heads and hearts are dieted at the two public ordinaries of Literature, the circulating librarie and the periodical press. But what is the result? Does the inward man thrive on this regime? Alas! if the average health of the consumer may be judged of by the articles of largest consumption; if the secretions may be conjectured from the ingredients of the dishes that are found best suited to their palates; from all that I have seen, either of the banquet or the guests, I shall utter my Profaccia with a desponding sigh. From a popular philosophy and a philosophic populace, Good Sense deliver us! (SM 36–38)

Coleridge was only one of many who feared communal catastrophe in the marketplace, from Goethe who, in *Faust II*, warned about the effects
of paper money on consciousness to Wordsworth who wrote of preferring paganism to a Christian world of getting and spending. Not everyone was horrified. Fanny Burney comforted her father, who thought her five-decker novel *Camilla* had been roughly treated by the critics, with a reminder of its vast success. Or as she more plainly put it:

> Now heed no more what Critics thought 'em  
> Since this you know—All People bought-em.²

But light-hearted certainties such as this or Samuel Johnson's assurance that no one but a blockhead ever wrote except for money were becoming merely quaint, not appropriate to the Romantic desire for cultural survival. Johnson could speak in the 1760s of the "teeming modern press,"³ but it was then still not what it would be in the post-revolutionary period—a truly mammoth machine of production and consumption. Even Byron's satirical gaze at the city and commercial book culture has a bitterness never quite dissolved by humor as in Pope. Gone were the days when a Daniel Defoe or Addison and Steele, shrewd businessmen and writers, vilified but also celebrated money and commodities in centralized circulation. Many nineteenth-century writers, successful or not, who saw their own writing increasingly absorbed into that circulation, tended only to vilify. But whether writers bemoaned huge literary consumption or saw its power in rebellion or reaction, as commodity circulation increased, they began fictitious dialogues with those who laid down their money for books.

In these dialogues, implicit or direct, setting distances or defining an imagined common ground with the reader, the reading audience is shaped and a personality accorded to it. Authors shaped "audiences" out of the actual expanding audience of readers commonly sensed as driving all literary values down to the lowest level. Romantic creation, under the shadow of vast numbers, of an imaginary audience and even its appropriate literary taste is an important and generally neglected process of literary culture during the industrial revolution.⁴ This process can be seen particularly in the *Biographia*. Unceasing commodification running up against Coleridge's Christianizing of all things is a central antagonism in this, the canonized text of high Romantic tradition. Coleridge's works were certainly not sought-after commodities. Only his theatrical hit, *Remorse*, earned a respectable return for its author who was for most of his life, despite generous benefactors, harassed by money problems. Successful or not, Coleridge wrote with constant consciousness of the making of newspaper and book publishing fortunes in a market where authors like Sir
Walter Scott were to produce not simply novels but European publishing booms. In this world, the narrator of the Biographia, seems like a vulnerable visitor, and this vulnerability is one of his generally unrecognized but prominent dramatic themes. Much of this work is made with the tension of a text as a poetic and religious voice, passing self-consciously through the book as commodity, a transitory existence grudgingly accepted by the aspiring text, the soul within the body, the I AM of the filial word within commodified words. Even manuscript padding like the review of Bertram, necessary to the fabrication of the "book" of the Biographia is about the degenerate audience that reigns in the marketplace of art, where the Biographia seeks its proper higher place among the stalls, but where it must certainly seek its place.

Timeless text and consumable book confront each other mostly in volume 1, though an important theme of these passages surfaces, as we shall see, in his critique of Wordsworth. Coleridge devotes chapter 2 to the question of the "Irritability of Men of Genius" and the relation of author and audience. Here is Coleridge first of all on the situation caused by the levelling down of literature to a commodity attainable by the many:

... alas! the multitude of books, and the general diffusion of literature, have produced other, and more lamentable effects in the world of letters, and such as are abundant to explain, tho' by no means to justify, the contempt with which the best grounded complaints of injured genius are rejected as frivolous, or entertained as matter of merriment. In the days of Chaucer and Gower, our language might... be compared to a wilderness of vocal reeds, from which the favorites only of Pan or Apollo could construct even the rude Syrinx; and from this the constructors alone could elicit strains of music. But now... language, mechanized as it were into a barrel-organ, supplies at once both instrument and tune. Thus even the deaf may play, so as to delight the many. Sometimes... I have attempted to illustrate the present state of our language, in its relation to literature, by a press-room of larger and smaller stereotype pieces, which in the present anglo-gallican fashion of unconnected, epigrammatic period, it requires but an ordinary portion of ingenuity to vary indefinitely, and yet still produce something, which, if not sense, will be so like it, as to do as well. Perhaps better: for it spares the reader the trouble of thinking; prevents vacancy, while it indulges indolence; and secures the memory from all danger of an intellectual plethora. Hence of all trades, literature at present demands the least talent or information; and, of all modes of literature, the manufacturing of poems. The
difference indeed between these and the works of genius, is not less than
between an egg, and an egg-shell; yet at a distance they both look alike.
(1:38–39)

The shell of literature, easily fabricated and easily consumed, as distin-
guished from the authentic poetic voice and the holy text is clear enough
here. As Coleridge goes on, however, defending genius against vicious
critics and manufactured art, he invokes a more complicated and tenden-
tious idea of property, reaching towards mean-spirited reviewers and the
reading public in terms they might understand:

. . . suppose a Review set on foot, the object of which was to criticise all
the chief works presented to the public by our ribbon-weavers, calico-
printers, cabinet-makers, and china-manufacturers; a Review conducted
in the same spirit, and which should take the same freedom with per-
sonal character, as our literary journals. They would scarcely, I think,
deny their belief, not only that the “genus irritabile” would be found to
include many other species besides that of bards; but that the irritability
of trade would soon reduce the resentments of poets into mere shadow-
fights . . . in the comparison. Or is wealth the only rational object of
human interest? Or even if this were admitted, has the poet no property
in his works? . . . is the character and property of the individual, who
labours for our intellectual pleasure, less entitled to a share of our fellow
feelings, than that of the wine-merchant or milliner? . . . (1:38–45)

Property here should not be confused with commodities. Coleridge asso-
ciates property and poetry at a noble level, and with nineteenth-century
“high seriousness” against the reproduceable, the saleable, the “barrel-
organ” of mass-constructed art designed by and sold by the deaf to the
deaf. In defending genius, he implies a criterion he could expect his “lit-
ery republic” to understand. Ideal readers, republican and Christian,
knew nothing of themselves if not that their political rights depended
on transforming, by means of property, personal into constitutional exis-
tence. Rampant commodification of art undermines this mythical constitu-
tional republic—the republic not simply of rights but of culture, which
circumscribes both property and poetic taste.

Later on, he invokes this same sense of property in criticizng Words-
worth's theory of poetry, asserting that Wordsworth errs in attributing a
privileged sense of language to “rustic life in general.” He argues that
“manners truly republican” and by implication the power to speak wisely,
are produced only in those countries where rural populations (as in Swit-
zerland) "live under forms of property" appropriate to pastoral life (2:44–45). What he has in mind are small familially defined holdings. Wordsworth thought the same, as we see in poems like Michael. But his supposed theoretical error was, for Coleridge, fraught with disturbing political implications. To dissolve them, he arms his critical vision of commercialism with idealized property. This property is republican without being Jacobin; it implies possession with personal identity; and it makes for the cohesive link in a traditional hierarchy of minds and social classes to counter indiscriminate consumption. When Coleridge speaks of the writer's property, he implicitly claims that for which Dickens would fight so hard a few decades later—rights in a commodity. But Coleridge is less concerned with market rights than with the right not to be abused in one's person by the abuse of one's writing. He uses the word property as with an ancient English aura and charges into the market of literary commodities with the insignia of the constitution. The word property used to defend literary genius resonates here as it does in sanctioning poetic taste in rural populations. Whether property is a small plot of ground or a sonnet, real estate or literary labor, he suggests it is self-defining property. This archly conservative and yet republican combination of constitutionality and property thus produces a social ideal consonant with the ontological I AM THAT I AM of poetic genius. All this is only touched on in the Biographia. But from this point on and ending with On the Constitution of the Church and State (1829–30) Coleridge elaborates associations between aesthetic imagination, Hebraic-Christian constitutional continuity, and a Lockean sense of property that has been called possessive individualism.

Or is this political individualism the ground of this romantic I AM? Coleridge would obviously not say so, for he traces an ideological one over the hermeneutical circle of the psychological subject, the I AM out of which all creation flows so that, for him, the two circles blend. Genius, individuality, originality, possessive individualism and organic communality all come together. The political dissolves into the religious and the original textual "voice" of the psychological subject, the I AM of which all self-consciousness, all the order of constitutional property, and finally the immediate voice by which that Godly voice is rejoined in the ultimate symbol of the complete circle—those poems written by poets filled with the "faculty divine." Property, then, provides him with a local and a universal concept, applied to visionary texts and the works of genius as they exist in books. The implied contrary of poetry as commodity property or goods cannot
do this, for commodities carry no such definitional power, no organically constituted social base. Since they can only be exchanged or “consumed” they can never enter into organicism, transcendentalism, or constitutionalism as parts of an inseparable whole. Commodities work against that social whole as merely signs of a sign, things exchanged that stand for new forms of wealth, then validated only by turning it into other commodities or signs of wealth to be exchanged in greater accumulation. Use value, of course, was for Coleridge out of the question when it came to cultural commodities and, of course, he had no theory of mass psychology. The mass, or to use the contemporary term, the multitude, swinish or otherwise, was a social formation without a psychology, a constitutional and cultural vacuity.

What Coleridge most disliked was that this new “reading public,” like all consuming “publics,” had power, or at least imaged that commodity exchange which threatened power based on traditional concepts of property. This new commercial power of great numbers of people threatened the “idea” of the Constitution. Coleridge’s elaboration of the threat was to be variously repeated in nineteenth-century English cultural thinking. The ultimate Coleridgean idea images that “one great body” of historical Christendom he speaks of in chapter 16 incorporated in the modern Christian (and, to be sure, Protestant) state, the most important social class of which is the “clerisy,” a classless class (anyone is potentially a member) of the intelligentsia, the corresponding contrary of the classless consuming public. But more about this later.

After chapters 5 through 9, where Coleridge has brought his readers through his philosophical ideas, from associationism to idealism, he returns to that reading public and to a direct dialogue with his readers as readers, those at least who have survived chapters 5 through 9. He speaks to the few about the many who now, as in the past, will never understand and never purchase what Coleridge has to say and to sell. This chapter is a farrago of stories, homilies, advice about and diatribes against the publishing trade and periodical literature. Here we read about the financial details of publishing The Friend, his journal of 1808–1809, along with the story of his pathetic attempts to sell subscriptions to his political journal of 1795–96, The Watchman, a story which Coleridge amusingly tells on himself. We see him, in unforgettable humble guise, travelling from town to town, Unitarian preacher and newspaper salesman, refused by one tradesman to whom he showed his prospectus, with the excuse that he
was “over-run with these articles” after having “significantly rubbed and smoothed one part against the other,” before putting it into his pocket and retiring into his counting house (1:182). Turning words into merchandised things, that is to say, the turning of his articles into articles and unsaleable ones at that, Coleridge narrates with touching good humor. He was nonetheless deeply affected by these experiences. Popular rejection was, of course, largely his own fault. Reluctant audiences were to be expected when we consider how Coleridge, as R. J. White says “never ceased to speak out loud, if not clear, from somewhere above” their heads. But that others may avoid this pathos, Coleridge recommends, further on, that no young writer ever “PURSUE LITERATURE AS A TRADE.” “Money,” he says, “and immediate reputation form only an arbitrary and accidental end of literary labor.” He caps his warning with a dreamy passage on the rewards of separating writing and selling; it is worth quoting at length to show how much the fantasy of escape from the marketplace could take hold of him:

My dear young friend (I would say—“suppose yourself established in any honourable occupation. From the manufactory or counting-house, from the law-court, or from having visited your last patient, you return at evening,

Dear tranquil time, when the sweet sense of home

Is sweetest——

to your family, prepared for its social enjoyments, with the very countenances of your wife and children brightened and their voice of welcome made doubly welcome, by the knowledge that, as far as they are concerned, you have satisfied the demands of the day by the labor of the day. Then, when you retire into your study, in the books on your shelves you revisit so many venerable friends with whom you converse. Your own spirit scarcely less free from personal anxieties than the great minds in those books are still living for you. Even your writing desk with its blank paper and all its other implements will appear as a chain of flowers, capable of linking your feelings as well as thoughts to events and characters past or to come; not a chain of iron which binds you down to think of the future and the remote by recalling the claims and feelings of the peremptory present.” (1:223–25)

After this idealization of the writer freed from the literary commodity, chapter 12 provides explanations of the subject and the object, preparing the way for metaphysical explanation of the I AM THAT I AM. And just as we think we are headed for another philosophical bog, there comes the
famous self-interruption that stops the text running away with itself and transforms it, the genial utterance, back into its other existence as a book.

Ironically, it is the book as commodity that Coleridge invokes to help himself out of difficulty. He allows his other self, the so-called “friend,” to remind Coleridge the genius of hard, economic reality. This fictitious friend, wise in the business of books, speaks as an alter ego to the author of a “text.” After explaining the compositional reasons why this philosophical business will never do, Coleridge recommends to himself what he previously complains of, the necessity of treating this text as a saleable item:

This Chapter, which cannot, when it is printed, amount to so little as a hundred pages, will of necessity greatly increase the expense of the work; and every reader who, like myself, is neither prepared or perhaps calculated for the study of so abstruse a subject so abstrusely treated, will, as I have before hinted, be almost entitled to accuse you of a sort of imposition on him. [He further discusses the appropriateness of all this philosophy in a book about his literary life and then writes:] I could add to these arguments one derived from pecuniary motives, and particularly from the probable effects on the sale of your present publication; but they would weigh little with you compared with the preceding. (1:302-03)

Recognizing that his text must survive as a book does not keep the author from straining past that confining shell. The sly reference to the sound economic reason for not finishing his philosophical explanations is almost immediately dismissed, for Coleridge has already put into the mouth of his double, his editorial friend, a description of what he has read to this point. This description has forever transformed the text we are never wholly to see within the book into a supernatural utterance that floats somewhere outside and above the book. The “friend” sets a distance, and shows the practical-minded consumer-reader, dazzled before a magical text with a noble inner being, dark and mysterious, difficult but also fabular, a text impossible to confuse with a commodity. Here is the reader describing what he feels, or what Coleridge would like him to feel in reading this text:

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

If substances may be call'd what shadow seem'd,
For each seem'ed either!

[Milton] (1:300-01)

There is more than a touch of good humor in this accomplished and generally neglected passage of High Romantic Irony. Preserved in this majestic gibe is the presence of the *Biographia* as a text flawed by abstruseness and Gothic intertwining in which the reader, as Coleridge well knows, will easily get lost. Saved in this passage, indeed shrewdly and ironically *aufgezogen*, is the text as a supersensual power, presented metaphorically as a Gothic Cathedral, translating shadow into substance and substance into shadow. This is the word as transforming power, not as reproduceable thing, the word in its spiritual textuality, not in its commercial book-ness.

This playful but earnest antagonism in the *Biographia* between text and book, the Word and mere words, the genial utterance and the saleable commodity is one narrative result of Coleridge's Christian politics. As I have already suggested, one of the influential social ideas Coleridge left to English nineteenth-century thought is that of the *clerisy*. The word did not survive but the idea thrived in the line of Matthew Arnold all the way down to T. S. Eliot, in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and throughout the cultural criticism of that American critic most valued by the British, Lionel Trilling. While much has been written about this idea, and despite the valuable work of Raymond Williams on the ideology of "culture" as a principle, it is not always clearly understood. To call the idea elitist—which it is—is not enough. The clerisy or National Church, a class of the learned who would guide the many, is a notion formed from what
Coleridge sensed to be an important social conflict, which would develop through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I refer to that borne alongside the classically defined conflict of proletarian and bourgeois, and which in advanced technological societies is substituted for it—the conflict between educated and mass culture. Two overlapping but distinguishable oppositions are at work here—the opposition between social classes and the opposition between the system of social classes and classlessness. Coleridge may have, as Olivia Smith argues, invoked the politics of language in the *Biographia* to insist upon a "firm, binary division between social classes." But just as important in affirming such a division is the struggle to oppose the wrong kind of classlessness with the right kind. Both oppositions, in other words, are of similar political import, though it is the opposition between the classlessness of culture and that of industrial production that will determine cultural discourse from Coleridge on. Classlessness invited by the commodity always remains a political mirage, no matter how huge the consuming audience becomes. Still, it is a powerful mirage and Coleridge realized that there was no traditional "social" class to act as its proper adversary, since commercialism had begun to seep through all traditional social orders—hence his idealized clerisy. The idea of a clerisy is, of course, both reactionary and explained by that necessity Marx implies in *The German Ideology* of all dominant classes to universalize themselves. But it is just as important to see that Coleridge sets the terms of Romantic engagement with a society of limited but increasing consumption that are still current and that once deeply affected modernist and avant-garde engagement with even more pervasive commercialism.

When Lionel Trilling, in a discussion about mass culture, announced in the early 70s the death of the avant-garde—another historical extension, like the intelligentsia, of the Coleridgean clerisy—that avant-garde, Trilling says, died because it had lost its imaginative will.

... one of the characteristics of the avant-garde, as we experienced it in the 30's, was its continuation of the artistic effort of the 19th century. The avant-garde had a profound will to impose itself morally. It wanted to change people's sensibility, to change people's view of life. I think this can no longer be said. At the present time there is implicit in the conception of the avant-garde a certain tendency to say that we are not finally serious in the old way. Irony has come in, a devaluation of clear moralizing intention, and with it that diminution of distinction between high art and low art which we are so conscious of at the moment.
The terms of Trilling's historical description descend from Coleridge. Admittedly the will, which in Coleridge is a psychological and aesthetical faculty filtered through Arnoldian and Eliotesque patterns, reaches Trilling as an even more self-conscious social will to moral dominance. But the terms by which Romantic imagination would become central to intellectual and avant-garde struggle, and even some of the irony that Trilling takes as the sign of ultimate defeat, are already built into Coleridge's writing, from the *Biographia Literaria* to *On the Constitution of the Church and State*. If Trilling must witness a "diminution of distinction between high art and low art" Coleridge engaged in the early conflict between the two kinds. He recognized that political rights and the classical political order were being subordinated to a new order of commodification and consumption. In sensing that the only ideological response to this was equally idealized "classless" culture, he outlined for the first time what would be taken up, both on the left and the right, as an historically necessary order of intellectuality capable of standing against the new social phenomena of consumption. The secondary Imagination that arises from the ontological "I AM THAT I AM" demands a presence of will. Central to that will is the idealized self-identity common in visionary texts and impossible in the merely reproduced.

When Coleridge speaks of the "multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, . . . sitting nominal despot on the throne of criticism" he describes what was to become the anonymous culture of the mass to which Trilling conceded historical victory. By the 1970s, the mass audience was not only abstractly, it was so materially unified that some, especially in depressed liberal circles, were willing to say that the avant-garde's and the whole intellectual class's usefulness was at an end, their will dissolved. The importance of the intelligentsia has not, however, been given up either by conservative or Western Marxists. And it is Marxists, often popularly and incorrectly seen as cramped economist thinkers, who most seek an intellectual willfulness within dominant technological and mass cultures. From Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks* to the East German theorist Rudolf Bahro in *The Alternative*, the idea of the organic intellectual class survives, dechristianized but not dissimilar to Coleridge's clerisy, the class of interpreters of texts and the speakers of visionary ideas. It may seem strange to associate ideas nurtured by Coleridge's conservatism and those nurtured in Western Marxism's reaction to both dominant capitalist and Eastern socialist state cultures. Though the
politics in these historically separated sets of ideas are profoundly different, some of their cultural strategies are similar because of the continuing shift of the economic and material into the realm of cultural battles. The texts of Coleridge's Christian politics, then, are filled with both dying and prescient ideas. Even Raymond Williams's classic study, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950*, cannot simply describe but must also engage Coleridgean formulas, working out another oppositional and realistic sense of community to counter that overbearing cultural and political maneuver of setting classlessness against the monstrous masses.

The *Biographia* participates in the ideological contradictions of which it is a representative. It is an embodiment of the conflict it describes between text and book, mass audience and intelligentsia, the divine Romantic artist and the growing numbers of citizens that would populate what Walter Benjamin would call, though with sanguine expectations, the age of mechanical reproduction. As we have seen, language “mechanized . . . into a barrel-organ” is Coleridge's image of modern mass-produced literature. He saw the implications of this barrel-organ literature and was one of the first in Anglo-American writing to take up a self-conscious position in modern cultural politics. He elaborates, from his traditionalist point of view, a preoccupation reflected by writers who ever after skirmish in running cultural battles. The terms have not changed much, though they are both intensified and diminished in that modernist irony which replaced the transcendent High Romantic kind. Krug, in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*, for instance, looks down from a window to see two organ-grinders come upon each other “neither of them playing—in fact, both looked depressed and self-conscious,” to which he says “. . . it is a very singular picture. An organ grinder is the very emblem of oneness. But here we have an absurd duality.”14 This is the *I AM THAT I AM* fallen on hard times, wandering the streets and turning a handle on a box—the "very emblem of oneness" in modernist terms, the mechanically reproduced confronting itself as the mechanically reproduced in a shrunken circle of absurdity. The offense offered to unique poetic imagination by its mirrored image in the mechanically reproduced has a long history by now. But Coleridge's comparison of poetry to the vocal reeds of Pan and Apollo has disappeared in the increased pressure upon the "unique." Coleridge's irritable men of genius, like Nabokov, are less irritable today than musing, intensely self-conscious observers of mass culture in which their vocal reeds are only straws in the wind.
The *Biographia* is ideologically tendentious, but also instructive, a kind of writing that, as Jerome McGann suggests, we must see our continuity with and distance from. Looking for a way to the Glory of God by penning sacramental words within mere words, like all Romantics looking for the silent unitary language within language, Coleridge is of another historical moment. And yet, idealist sympathizer of the French Revolution turned imperialist reactionary, he was troubled by and had a fine sense of social contradictions in which we are still embroiled. We thus have no scholarly choice but to try to understand the strategies and the intelligence in that historical place where his holy and fantastical texts struggle with the social reality of his very real books.