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## Imagination Disconnected

### On Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*

#### WITHDRAWALS

While partly writing, partly dictating from his notebooks, *Biographia Literaria* to John Morgan in the summer of 1815, Coleridge reduced his dosage of laudanum and suffered from heavy withdrawal symptoms.<sup>1</sup> His compulsion to talk and write, as well as his frustration, was increased by the deadline: he had to finish the work by September. The book therefore became a symptom of withdrawal.

The *Biographia*, intended as a preface (or prelude) to the two-volume book of poetry, *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), has long been interpreted as Coleridge's version of the "Growth of a Poet's Mind." The collection of poems opened with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* already supplemented with the metafictional glossary, and included, for the first time in print, the later canonised version of *Effusion XXXV: The Eolian Harp*.<sup>2</sup> It also contained several other conversation poems, such as *To William Wordsworth*. Though the collection of poems "has been entitled SIBYLLINE LEAVES, in allusion to the fragmentary and widely scattered state in

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1 Cf. J. Engell and W. J. Bate's preface to *Biographia Literaria*, in: *The Collected Works Of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds. J. Engell & W. J. Bate (London: Princeton UP, 1983), Vol. 7, p. lii. All further references to *Biographia Literaria* (henceforward *BL*) concern this edition, unless otherwise noted.

2 For the analysis of *Effusion* and the changes turning it into *The Eolian Harp*, see my "Conversing Signs: Coleridge: Effusion XXXV," in *The AnaChronisT* (2001) 19–38.

which they have long suffered to remain,"<sup>3</sup> it tellingly *excluded* the three most famous of Coleridge's 'fragment poems,' *Kubla Khan*, *Christabel* and the *Pains of Sleep*, despite the fact that they had already been published in a 1816 volume.

In my article in the 2001 issue of *The AnaChronisT*, I followed the general critical trend in explaining the subsequent modifications of the 1798 version of *Effusion XXXV* into its 1817 version, *The Eolian Harp*, by arguing that without the most relevant excisions (that of the footnote) and insertions (that of the "one Life" theme), the poem would have even more ostensibly subverted the aesthetic and/or moral principles it was supposed to declare. As a general assumption, we even ventured the claim that in poetic practice the withdrawals were commonly carried out surreptitiously, with the complete effacement of their mark of excision, the trace of their past existence.

In this paper, I will follow an opposite path: investigating a *false* mark of withdrawal, I will endeavour to examine a passage that deliberately subverts the theory it is supposed to ground: the letter, written by a fictitious friend, which precedes the definition of Imagination at the end of chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*.

Since in the most celebrated chapter, "On the imagination, or esemplastic power," the "author" interrupts himself in the middle of his philosophical disquisition and introduces a letter recommending him to *suppress* the whole chapter from the book:

Thus far had the work been transcribed for the press, when I received the following letter from a friend, whose practical judgement I have had ample reason to estimate and revere...

[the letter follows]

In consequence of this very judicious letter [...] I shall content myself for the present with stating the main result of the chapter, which I have reserved for that future publication, a detailed prospectus of which the reader will find at the close of the second volume.

The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary...<sup>4</sup>

We know from Coleridge's personal correspondence that the letter was written by himself and that the part of the chapter which "*cannot, when it is printed, amount to so little as an hundred pages*" had never existed. As he remarks

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<sup>3</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols., ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (1912).

<sup>4</sup> *BL*, p. 304.

to Thomas Curtis, "that letter addressed to myself as from a friend, at the close of the first volume of the *Literary Life* [...] was written without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the inkstand."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the definition of *Imagination* has remained groundless, or else, *abstracted* from its alleged but actually missing ground.

The reason why this chapter is so idiosyncratic in the Coleridge canon is twofold: on the one hand, though we are accustomed to a self-editorial work erasing the changes, the withdrawal of the pages refers to a self-editorial process presenting a non-existent change; and on the other hand, though Coleridge has the most often been charged with plagiarism,<sup>6</sup> or the unacknowledged appropriation of someone else's voice, the introduction of the fictitious friend can be interpreted as the disappropriation of one's own. Consequently, although the letter, as well as Coleridge's plagiarisms, has "often been glossed over in the interpretation of the *Biographia* as a device of deferment or *dissimulation* [of lack],"<sup>7</sup> we may endeavour to interpret the intrusion of the letter as a *simulation* or counterfeit creating the effect of some hundred pages that are and have always been absent.

Critical writings making any comment on the intrusion of the fictitious friend tend to deal either with the function and the structural necessity of the letter in the *Biographia*, as a whole, or attempt to "identify" the persona created in and by the letter.

One of the most thought-provoking analyses of Chapter XIII was offered in 1977 by Gayatri Spivak who, in her Lacanian reading of Chapters XII–XIII, shows the gaps and logical slippages in Coleridge's argumentation in order to demonstrate that "the letter as a whole is the paradigm of the 'symbolic' [...] a mark of castration [...] that allows the Law [the final definition of *Imagination*] to spring forth full-fledged."<sup>8</sup> With this analysis, she opened the space for subsequent critics who interpreted the friend as the intrusion of some "male Will balancing the spontaneous effusions in the *Biographia*."<sup>9</sup> Though Nigel Leask himself does not specifically allude either to the letter or to the friend, his overall comment on

5 *BL*, p. 300, editor's note 3.

6 The implications of Coleridge's plagiarisms in the paradigm of Romantic Irony, as well as Coleridge's relation to the Romantic Ironists or the similarities between his writing practice and that of Friedrich Schlegel do not constitute the central issue of this paper.

7 David S. Ferris, "Coleridge's Ventriloquy," *Studies in Romanticism* [*SiR*] 24 (Spring 1985), p. 71.

8 Gayatri Spivak, "The Letter as a Cutting Edge," *Yale French Studies* (1977), p. 220.

9 Nigel Leask, "Shelley's Magnetic Ladies," p. 61.

the *Biographia* could typify the prevailing critical opinion concerning the letter. Leslie Brisman, for instance, identifies the friend with the “person from Porlock” of the Preface to *Kubla Khan*, arguing that he is “the natural man who keeps getting in the way of the poet.”<sup>10</sup> Following Moore’s remark that “Coleridge perceived his inadequacies, his procrastinations, and what he called his ‘diseased volition,’ as particularly feminine traits which made him a lesser man, and not so manly a poet, as say, John Donne or Wordsworth,”<sup>11</sup> we might even claim that Kenneth R. Johnston, in endeavouring to demonstrate that the fictitious friend is Wordsworth himself; “albeit a Wordsworth who speaks in playful Coleridgean ironies”<sup>12</sup> (?!), is completely in line with his predecessors. Johnston’s argumentation itself, however, is worthy of consideration, since it does not only allude to the manifold relationships between Wordsworth’s *Recluse* and the *Biographia* itself as whole, but also makes a thorough inter-textual analysis to demonstrate that “several parts of the letter can be regarded as a Coleridgean complement to the ‘gothic church’ in the preface to *The Excursion*.”

Richard Holmes, the biographer, also follows the beaten path, since he identifies the friend with Sara<sup>13</sup> (Coleridge’s wife), who, as our previous analysis has shown,<sup>14</sup> can also be considered as the personification of masculinity, of some castrating power, contrasting not only Asra (Coleridge’s love) but the imaginary maids or Mme Roland from *Effusion* as well.

There are two readings which seem to stand out from the critical trend. The first is Jerome Christensen’s<sup>15</sup> who, contradicting Gayatri Spivak, interprets the letter as the return of the repressed from the unconscious “structured like language,” while through the close reading of the *Biographia* and its marginal method he demonstrates Coleridge’s anxieties to become “merely a man of letters.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, “not by argument or revelation is Coleridge delivered to the imagination, returned to himself, and rescued from the fate of becoming merely a man of letters,” Christensen writes, “he is saved by a blank counter [i.e. by the

10 Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978).

11 J. Moore, “Land of the Giants,” in *Beyond Romanticism*, p. 158.

12 Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (London, New Haven: Yale UP), pp 341–359.

13 Richard Holmes, *Darker Reflections* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 400.

14 Cf. Timár, “Conversing Signs.”

15 Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge’s Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), pp. 161–175.

16 Cf. *BL*, Ch. I, p. 229.

letter of the 'man of letters'] which the fancy alights on and letters into a man."<sup>17</sup> The second analysis that can hardly be put in line with the others is Kathleen M. Wheeler's,<sup>18</sup> who places the *Biographia* in the paradigm of Romantic Irony. In a hermeneutic reading, she argues that the reader's imaginative activity is required to create unity from the fragmentary text.

Thus, though it may well sound obvious to claim with the biographer that by the insertion of the letter, and by the allusion to the withdrawal of a hundred pages, Coleridge only "acknowledged his inability to ground his theory of imagination" and betrayed his frustration at the approaching deadline,<sup>19</sup> we may still remark that the letter remains unnecessarily long for this function. Furthermore, the fact that this elaborate literary composition possesses, as its reception suggests, much more of the traditional (though undoubtedly undefinable) characteristics of a piece of art than the *Biographia* itself might make us ask further questions.

What is the role of the false mark of withdrawal? Why does a potential writing which, considering its "effects," cannot be simply bad has to be withdrawn? What is the power that would make a posited reader "standing on his head"? What is the "orphic tale," the "tale obscure" to be suppressed? And eventually, what role do the two parts of the letter play?

The critical reception of the letter will be as important to our analysis as the letter itself: both the letter and its reception speak around the gap we are interested in. The emphasis put on the "effect" of a missing original is not only in line with post-structuralist literary theories but also with 19<sup>th</sup> century hermeneutics. As Tilottama Rajan claims one can

trace through the eighteenth century the decline of the idea that literature should approximate to painting in order to summon up its subject before our eyes, and its replacement by a Burkean aesthetics of the sublime that makes us feel the experience instead of painting it for us. Presence comes to be located not in depiction but in an effect, something that happens in the consciousness of the reader...<sup>20</sup>

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17 Christensen, pp. 172–173.

18 Kathleen M. Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1980).

19 Holmes, *Darker Reflections*, p. 385.

20 Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), p. 17.

## APPROACHES

How to approach a text that does not exist and has never existed? Firstly, we may assume that the missing passage covered by the letter is similar to the preceding ones (cf. "Thus far had the work been transcribed for the press, when I received the following letter from a friend."). Interestingly, however, the intensity of the response it provokes ("*the effect on my understanding*" and "*feelings*") outdoes by far anything that we might have expected after having read the previous twelve and a half chapters: as if the first part of the letter, at least, was an answer given to something completely different.

It has already been remarked that critics who have analysed in detail chapter XIII of the *Biographia* generally interpret the letter either as a hermeneutic model recommended by Coleridge or as the intrusion of the conscious will ("the male Will") in an unmasterable stream of associations. But in acknowledging that with the fictitious friend Coleridge introduces a second self, they fail to remark that this second self actually enacts two kinds of reading: while in the first part of the letter describing the effect of the chapter on his *own* "feelings," the friend compares the missing chapter to one of "*our largest Gothic cathedrals in a gusty moonlight night of autumn,*" in the second part, describing its possible effects on the "public" for whom the chapter would be "utterly incomprehensible," he presents it as the "*fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower.*" These two "illustrations" are far from being the same, despite the friend's insistence: "*and what remains look (if I may recur to my former illustration) like the fragments of the winding steps...*"

Kathleen M. Wheeler argues that Coleridge asks for the reader's imaginary activity to reconstruct the "unity of the *Biographia*" from the "fragments of an old ruined tower." Conspicuously however, though the common reader can indeed see nothing else but fragments, "the very judicious" friend himself does not *reconstruct* the cathedral *from* the fragments, but "feels" ("*the effect on my feelings*") as if he *was placed* in a gothic cathedral. His being somewhat possessed by the pages is further emphasised in the example given to illustrate its "effect" on his "understanding": as the reference to a previous footnote suggests, in this state of mind "man feels as if he were standing on his head, though he cannot but see that he is truly standing on his feet. This [is] a *painful* sensation," men feel "an *involuntary* dislike towards their physician" who "*restored*" them "from derangement."

The identification of the two interpretative models which could permit the imaginary reconstruction of at least some characteristics of the passage allegedly withdrawn obviously poses some insoluble problems: not knowing the "original text," we cannot decide what kinds of hermeneutics (the study of the relations between textuality and reading) are practised, that is, to what extent we should count with the necessary imaginary activity involved in (self-)reception. As a result, even if we accept that it is the first part of the letter which can be considered as the creative hermeneutic model offered by Coleridge,<sup>21</sup> we can still draw a scale moving away from text to reading according to the *degree* to which the friend creates his meaning out of the missing text. Although Coleridge's hermeneutics as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper, three brief examples, taken from Coleridge himself, may serve to illustrate the many degrees of the necessary creative involvement of a critic who, unlike the "public" apparently despised, engages in a dialogue with the text.

"Higher Criticism," the endeavour "to unite the insulated fragments of truth, and therewith to frame a perfect mirror [from] a higher point of view,"<sup>22</sup> is intended as a model for the hermeneutics of history, the ability to correct the false assumptions of the past eras from a supposedly detached vantage point. The definition, however, deliberately taken out of its context, can also be regarded as the ideal of a reconstructive hermeneutics which requires the reader to synthesise and "elevate" into a higher unity the scattered parts of the absent whole. It is practised by Wheeler, for instance, who tries to reconstruct the "Unity of the *Biographia*,"<sup>23</sup> while considering it as the metaphor of its own reading.

At the other end of the scale, that is, the further away from the "letter" of the text is the production of a completely new meaning out of a text considered as a mere source of inspiration. This kind of experience is described, for instance, by the speaker of the Preface to *Kubla Khan* who falls half-asleep upon Purchas's Pilgrimage under the "effects" of an anodyne. The friend's words, however ("Only I will not promise [...] to make the sparks and figured flashes which I am required to see") apparently contradict the assumption of his being the inspired reader par excellence.

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21 Wheeler, in *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*, argues that Coleridge's works exhibit their own reading and explicitly offer a hermeneutic model requiring the imaginary activity of the reader.

22 T. Ashe, ed., *The Table Talk and Ommiana of S. T. Coleridge*, (London, 1923), pp. 138-139; quoted by McGann in *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 6.

23 Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods*.

The principle of “Genial Criticism” (1814), the ability “to judge in the same spirit in which the Artist produced or ought to have produced”<sup>24</sup> might be regarded as an example of the “sympathetic” reading that recognises “the difference between the letter and the spirit of [...] writing.”<sup>25</sup> It interestingly anticipates Schleiermacher’s *Compendium* (1819)<sup>26</sup> which, distinguishing between a “grammatical” and a “psychological” reading, claims to understand the author better than he himself does. Though the distinction between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the text was part of the English theological disputes of the time and represented, first and foremost, an approach to the Bible, Coleridge considered it as a fundamental approach to all texts. In Chapter IX of *Biographia Literaria*, for instance, he says the following on Kant:

in spite therefore of his own declarations, I could never believe, it was possible for him to have meant no more by his *Noumenon*, or THING IN ITSELF, than his mere words express [...]. I entertained doubts likewise, whether in his own mind, he even laid *all* the stress, which he appears to do on the moral postulates. / An IDEA, in the *highest* sense of the world, cannot be conveyed but by a *symbol*; and, except in geometry, all symbols of necessity involve an apparent contradiction, and for those who could not pierce through this symbolic husk, his writings were not intended.

This separation of form from meaning has obviously two important practical implications. On the one hand, it tends to project on the work the reader’s expectations coming either from a familiarity with other works (by the author or from the era) or from his own “ideology”<sup>27</sup> of reading. These expectations are obviously unavoidable in any kind of interpretation but Coleridge, despite his insistence on the necessity of trying to understand the author’s “own mind,” seems to be well aware of it:

I shall not desire the reader to strip his mind of all prejudices, not to keep all prior systems out of view during his examination of the present. [...] Till I

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24 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), Vol. II, p. 223.

25 Cf. the title of Chapter IX: “The difference between the letter and the spirit of Kant’s writings.”

26 Though Tilottama Rajan, in *The Supplement of Reading*, claims that “the separation of form from meaning seems to begin with Schleiermacher’s sense of the need for a ‘psychological’ as well as a ‘grammatical’ or literal reading of texts” and that “this need is first articulated in the 1819 *Compendium*” (p. 37), Coleridge’s sense of “Genial Criticism” clearly anticipates Schleiermacher’s ideas.

27 I call ideology, now in line with Gayatri Spivak, the imposition of a theory on a text.



have discovered the art of destroying the memory *a parte post* [a parte prius], without injury to its future operations, and without detriment to the judgement, I should suppress the request as premature.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, by putting the emphasis on the “spirit” of the work instead of its “letter,” “Genial Criticism” also recognises that writing (the “letter”) might threaten (“dissolve, diffuse and dissipate”) the identity of meaning to such an extent that it has to be “recreated” in a sympathetic reading...<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, we may bear in mind that given the absence of the “primary” text, the attempt to analyse the hermeneutics practised by and in the letter has to remain practically groundless.

### FRAGMENTARITY

“In Coleridge, fragmentation is not so much a phenomenon of *lack* but rather something brought about by *addition* confirming and, as it were, replacing the notion of loss,”<sup>32</sup> Fritz Gutbrodt claims in his analysis of the Preface attached to *Kubla Khan*. His remark may also apply to Chapter XIII: through the addition of the letter, Coleridge both pretends to hint at and to cover a “lost original.” Though *Biographia*, as opposed to the Preface of *Kubla Khan*, fails to perform the self-effacement so characteristic of prefaces, the “Literary *Sketches*” also prove to be fragmentary despite their avowed autobiographical “narration [used] for the purpose of giving a continuity to the work.”<sup>31</sup> Hence, as Christensen observes, the *Biographia* “takes as its subject the possibility of the unified book: the fundamental stability of the grand chiasmus that the text is unified because it is the product of an integral consciousness and that consciousness is unified because it produces integral texts.”<sup>32</sup> It therefore exhibits the narcissistic, specular relationship between the speaking subject, the “I” and the text – completely in line with the autobiographical tradition. The *Biographia*, however, still remains fragmentary and, in Christensen’s words, “flirts recklessly with the idea of the book, as though unity was not an anchoring reality but a floating object of

28 *BL*, Chapter XII, p. 234.

29 “The Secondary Imagination [...] dissolves, diffuses and dissipates in order to recreate” (*BL*, p. 304). In what follows here, this idea will be expanded further.

30 Gutbrodt, *Fragmentation by Decree*, p. 86.

31 *BL*, Ch. I, p. 1.

32 Christensen, p. 120.

desire"<sup>33</sup> – as if the achievement of a narrative identity was a task impossible to perform.

Literature on the fragmentary nature of Romantic writing is endless, such as literature on the fragmentariness of Coleridge's poems, prose works, and especially the *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>34</sup>

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33 Christensen, p. 120.

34 Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthes in *L'absolu littéraire* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1978) give the most comprehensive account on Romantic Fragment, though they focus on the fragments of the German Romantic Ironists, especially Friedrich Schlegel, which, unlike the Coleridgean ones, are "intended" to be fragments and are presented as the only effective mode of art. It is undeniable, however, that both the Coleridgean and the German Ironists' fragments are incomplete works representing the eternal progress, the unfulfilled project always to be fulfilled, the process (the becoming) as opposed to being. They are endless potentialities never to achieve actual fulfilment: "the awareness of the always-already-lost naiveté make absolute art an always-yet-to-appear". (see also: Mellor: *English Romantic Irony* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980], pp. 1-25). According to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthes, fragments have an essentially dialogical nature: on the one hand, there is an active dialogue between the text the reader which later has the task to complete the fragment, while on the other hand, there is a tension, a dialogue between the part and the series of parts which do or do not amount to the Whole. As far as English Romanticism is concerned, MacFarland (in *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), together with the majority of other critics of Romanticism, such as Jerome McGann (in *The Romantic Ideology*), tend to emphasise the inherently fragmentary nature of Romantic Writing. According to McGann "What distinguishes romantic forms from the systematic representations of those forms [i.e. Hegel's] is that the former's aspirations (and dissatisfactions) are preserved at the most radical level. Dissatisfaction cannot produce satisfactory accounts of itself, only – as with Coleridge – a perfect account. Coleridge's theory of Romanticism is the archetypal Romantic theory – brilliant, argumentative, ceaseless, incomplete, and not always very clear (47). MacFarland, who claims that "the reflexive pressure of the magnum opus made the whole of Coleridge's actual prose achievement provisional" (p. 343), draws on Coleridge's symbol-allegory distinction, in order to point to the always hypothetical nature of the whole that of which the realised fragment is the representative or the symbol (27). Kathleen Wheeler (cf. *Sources, Processes and Methods*) seems to share MacFarland's views, while completing it with the requirement of the "supplement of reading" (see also Tilottama Rajan) or the activity of the imaginative reader being able to see symbol in the fragment. Others, mainly post-structuralist theorists, however, following Walter Benjamin's ideas on the ruin and its relationship with the fragment according to which "[a]llegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (*The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne [London: New Left Books, 1977], p. 178), argue that the fragment is the allegory par excellence, since it reveals man's temporal predicament, the essential disjunction between the idea and its representation, the world and the word, the inscribed sign and its material embodiment, etc. In spite of these, it seems to be obvious that whether a part is a symbol or an allegory is mainly a question of reading.

As already mentioned, the friend's letter, by a curious *mise-en-abyme* effect, mirrors the missing pages back not only as "*the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower*," thus laying bare the insufficiency of the pages to reflect back an integrated self, but also as a "*Gothic cathedral*" – triggering a response similar to the intuition of the sublime.

The effect of mathematical sublime illustrated by Kant as "the bewilderment or sort of perplexity which, as is said seizes the visitor on first entering St. Peter's in Rome"<sup>35</sup> also implies fragmentarity. As Neil Hertz argues, it arises out of "sheer cognitive exhaustion [...] the mind blocked by the fear of losing count – with no hope of bringing a long series or vast scattering under some sort of conceptual unity."<sup>36</sup> And the friend's account on the possible public reception of the missing pages is clearly reminiscent of the description of the mathematical sublime: "*you have done too much, yet not enough... , you have been obliged to omit so many links... , cannot amount to so little as a hundred pages...*" However, as Kant argues, "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging Subject," that is, not in the outward object that occasions it. The friend himself, unlike the common readers, is also able to surmount the difficulty: the state of mind in which he has "*the distinct connection between two conceptions, without that sensation of such connection which is supplied by habit.*"<sup>37</sup> and which provokes a "*chilly sensation of terror*" (!) is followed by a sudden positive movement, "*then suddenly emerging into broad yet visionary lights.*" The process is clearly analogous to the experience of the sublime "brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful."<sup>38</sup> Or, as Hertz explains, by the mind's "blockage" at a "vast scattering"(its awe

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35 Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 100. (Henceforward referred to as *CJ*.)

36 Neil Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime," in: *The End of the Line* (New York: Columbia, 1985), p. 40; cf. Kant: "To take in a quantum intuitively in the imagination so as to be able to use it as a measure, or unit for estimating magnitude by numbers, involves two operations of this faculty: *apprehension* (*apprehensio*) and *comprehension* (*comprehensio*) [...] if the apprehension has reached a point beyond which the representations of sensuous intuition in the case of the parts first apprehended begin to disappear from the imagination as this advances to the apprehension of yet others, as much, then, is lost at one end as is gained at the other, and for comprehension we get a maximum which the imagination cannot exceed." (*CJ*, p. 99)

37 The footnote the friend refers to will be quoted under the heading: "The Missing Part: Standing on One's Head."

38 Kant, *CJ*, p. 91.

mingled with terror)<sup>39</sup> is followed by a positive mental movement, “the mind’s exultation in its own rational faculties, in its ability to think a totality that cannot be taken in through the senses.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, the introduction of the fictitious reader, this *scriptor* (or rather: editor) *interruptus* effect which imposes an artificial image of synthesis, or else, totality, on the supposed heterogeneity of the text rescues the writer from the dangers of being lost in the “eternal mobility,” the “chaos” of signifiers. (Later, we will also consider how this excess, this abyss, as well as the totality become thematised in the letter.)

However, as the primary text itself is nothing but an *as if*, the sheer lack of self-representation, the sublime trickery with the letter – though consolidating indeed the idea of the self as a whole – also serves as the most effective means to simulate, to create the *effect of* a non-representable, always-already-lost “original” which, on its turn, would suggest an always-yet-to-appear “wholeness.” Since what the letter shows up the most conspicuously is the inherent incompleteness, the endless deferral of the “Work”: “*as for the public, I do not hesitate a moment in advising and urging you to withdraw the Chapter from the present work, and to reserve it for your announced treatise on the Logos or communicative intellect of Man and Deity,*” writes the fictitious friend to “Coleridge.”

Interestingly, apart from pointing to the gap between the Eternal Idea (the whole) and its temporal textual manifestation (the part), the letter, covering a fragment from the part, suggests the unrealisability of a *textual* whole (the “treatise on the Logos”)<sup>41</sup> which would be in a synecdochic relationship with the Idea. Thus, the reason why this false mark of withdrawal is so idiosyncratic is the fact that *neither* the part, *nor* the whole exist – as if the trace of absence was in

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39 François Lyotard, explaining the Kantian sublime (in *Lessons in the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. E. Rottenberg [Stanford University Press, 1994], p. 112), explicitly connects the “momentary check of the vital forces” to the Burkean horror “beyond this absolute of presentation thinking encounters the unrepresentable [...] and what Burke calls horror, takes hold of it.”

40 Hertz, p. 40.

41 Claire Miller Colombo, in her analysis of this much debated passage of *The Statesman’s Manual* (“the symbol [is] the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal”), already points to the fact that Paul de Man, in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” has left out of consideration the fact that the symbol-allegory distinction was part of Coleridge’s *exegetical* theory. “The paragraph following the famed Statesman’s Manual passage [...] explains how the finite and the infinite are consummated in scripture” (Claire Miller Colombo, “Coleridge’s Animation of the ‘Dead Letter,’” in: *SiR* 35 [1996], p. 32).

itself the “part” referring both *back* to an always already lost “original” and *forward* to a never to be attained textual “wholeness.”

It seems therefore that we may also regard the letter, the allusion at the missing part of the missing whole (the hole in the whole) as a hint at some “deep Romantic chasm.”

#### *THE SECRET BEHIND THE LETTER*

Thus, the readers’ desire and curiosity are aroused not only by a fragment seducing them into an imaginary completion, not only by the charm of the “symbolon” requiring the other half, the receiver’s imaginary response to be able to signify, but also by the simulation of some hidden, yet unavailable knowledge.

Meanwhile, Coleridge’s “friend,” or persona (mask), by seemingly covering a hundred pages does not only point at an existent but hidden knowledge, but by commemorating (murdering) the “voice,” he also creates the effect of a “voice” that he, by the same token, saves from the self-murderous power of writing. Thus, though the omniscient Author becomes indeed nothing else but an effect of signifiers (the letter), this “nothing else” is in fact the most effective means to suggest “presence” and “knowledge” where there is but a gap, a lack and, ultimately, absence.

In what follows, I will try to show through close reading of the letter that the withdrawal of the passage is not merely a necessary means to create the effect of a “lost original.” We will examine what “knowledge” the missing pages imply and whether the “conversion” they entail can be connected to the concluding definition of Imagination, generally considered as an act of faith taken in the Symbol.

#### *The missing part: standing on one’s head*

The friend compares the effect of the chapter on his understanding to a state of mind which is the antithesis of that in which man is, when “he makes a bull.” The “bull” is defined by Coleridge, in a footnote attached to Chapter IV, as “the bringing together of two incompatible thoughts, with the *sensation* but without the *sense* of their connection.” As an example, he gives the sentence, “*I was a fine child, but they changed me*”; and explains:

the first conception expressed in the word "I," is that of personal identity – *Ego contemplan*s: the second expressed in the word "me" is the visual image or object by which the mind represents to itself its past condition. Now the change of one visual image to the other contains in itself no absurdity, and becomes absurd only by its immediate juxtaposition with the first thought, which is rendered possible by the whole attention being successively absorbed in each singly, so as not to notice the interjacent notion, "changed" which by its congruity with the first thought, *I*, constitutes the bull. Add only that this process is facilitated by the circumstance of the words "I" and "me," being sometimes equivalent, and sometimes having a distinct meaning; sometimes, namely, signifying the act of self-consciousness, sometimes the external image in and by which the mind represents that act to itself, the result and symbol of its individuality. Now suppose the direct contrary state, and you will have the distinct connection between two conceptions, without that *sensation* of such connection which is supplied by habit. The man *feels*, as if he were standing of his head, though he cannot but *see*, that he is truly standing on his feet. This, as a painful sensation, will of course have a tendency to associate itself with the person who occasions it; even as persons, who have by painful means restored from derangement, are known to feel an involuntary dislike for their physician.<sup>42</sup>

As Wheeler remarks, the footnote, being a bull in itself, "plays out the drama which it describes." On the one hand, it can indeed be regarded as the metaphor of itself and, we may add, that of the *Biographia* as well: the sample sentence exemplifying the problem of self-knowledge, the relationship between the subject and the positing of the subject thus objectified, is both one of the central issues of Romantic thinking and the problem of autobiography itself.

On the other hand, the footnote also makes a comment upon the poetics of genius. Firstly, attached to Chapter IV ("The Lyrical Ballads with the preface..."), it explains reviewers' opposition to Wordsworth's theories, who, unlike the friend, refuse the remedy of their "physician." In their "opinion of long continuance," they do not let themselves persuaded either by the Preface, nor by the *Lyrical Ballads* themselves that

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;  
in other words that they had been all their lives admiring without judgement,  
and were now about to censure without reason.<sup>43</sup>

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42 *BL*, Ch. IV, pp. 72–73.

43 *BL*, Ch. IV, p. 72. Note the allusion to *Macbeth*.

These critics stand therefore in contrast with the friend, who writes: "*Those whom I had been taught to venerate as almost super human... , I found perched in little fret-work niches, as grotesque dwarfs, while the grotesques, in my hitherto belief, stood guarding the high Altar with all the characters of Apotheosis.*" Thus, apart from the fact that the analogy between Wordsworth's poetry and the withdrawn pages is anticipated well before the quotation, "*with a few of the words altered,*" from *To William Wordsworth*, the direct contrast between critics responding to Wordsworth and the friend responding to the missing pages makes it clear that the fictitious friend cannot be Wordsworth himself – not even a Wordsworth "who speaks in playful Coleridgean ironies"<sup>44</sup> – and that Kenneth Johnston's analysis contains a logical slippage.

Secondly, we may contrast the state of mind of the one who "makes a bull" – his "attention being successively absorbed in each [image] singly," to the "middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the *imagination* than any other when it is hovering between two images." Coleridge spoke of Milton's poetry in his 7th Lecture (1811) with these words, quoting the same passage from *Paradise Lost* as the fictitious friend does in his letter: "If substance may be called what shadow seem'd, for each seemed either!" In the 7th lecture, after quoting Milton, Coleridge goes on to say:

the grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is still repelled, and again creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely the substitution of a *sublime* feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, in the greatest kind of poetry, imagination provokes a sublime effect and its "hovering" or "wavering" between images contributing to the sublime contrasts both "understanding" where the mind is "fixed on one image"<sup>46</sup> and the

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44 Cf. Johnston. "The Recluse and the Biographia Literaria," pp. 333–363.

45 Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London: Everyman's Library, 1960), Vol. 2, pp. 103–104.

46 Cf. Kant, p. 90: "The sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form so far as it immediately involves, or by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a superadded thought of totality," and p. 107: "The mind feels itself *set in motion*... This movement can be compared with a vibration, i.e. with rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction produced by one and the same Object."

surprise provoked when, "making a bull," the "attention [is] being successively absorbed in each [image] singly."

This "hovering," this state of *betweenness* emerges many times in the *Biographia* in connection with the poetic genius. The Absolute Genius, for instance, characterised by a "sanity of mind *between* superstition with fanaticism on the one hand, and enthusiasm with indifference and a diseased slowness to action on the other," "rest content *between* thought and reality as it were an intermundium"<sup>47</sup> It seems therefore that the "sanity of the mind" of the genius (such as Milton's or Shakespeare's) contrasts both Coleridge's youthful "bewilderment with metaphysicks"<sup>48</sup> (sic!), this "mental disease" proper to some "abstruse research"<sup>49</sup> (see also: *Dejection, an Ode*, line 89), and the "derangement" or blindness of those (such as the friend's) who have later become, "by painful means restored" by "their physician."<sup>50</sup>

Unsurprisingly, though the friend refers indeed to the missing pages as a remedy against some illness, his "practical judgement," "taste and sensibility preclude all excuses." For "negative faith,"<sup>51</sup> or "the willing suspension of disbelief"<sup>52</sup> must be triggered both by the work of art (hovering between images, "without either denial or affirmation of their real existence"<sup>53</sup>) and the attitude of the reader himself: the sublime does not result from the object of perception (the text) but from the mind, the reason's response to it. That is, the kind of reading which renders the sudden "illumination" (cf. "*suddenly emerging into broad yet visionary lights*") and the mind's conversion ("*Those whom I had been taught to venerate as almost super human...*") possible requires first an attitude of openness, a readiness similar to the one which permits the reception of some divine grace.

However, despite the fact that the image of the "*cathedral*" where the friend has been "*placed*" could constitute a claim for the presence of the divine in the withdrawn pages, a closer analysis reveals that the "pharmacon" does not possess a soothing effect. Although the friend is standing on his head knowing that he is truly standing on his feet, the mirror keeps bringing about bewilderment.

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47 *BL*, Ch. II, p. 32.

48 *BL*, Ch. II, p. 15

49 *BL*, Ch. II, p. 17.

50 Note Coleridge's recurring metaphors of physical and mental sickness.

51 *BL*, Ch. XXII, p. 134.

52 *BL*, Ch. XIV, p. 6.

53 *BL*, Ch. 22, p. 134.



*The Fall*

Conspicuously enough, the inter-textual references made by the friend all contain the motif of the *fall*. Firstly, though the *Biographia* has long been interpreted as Coleridge's version of the "Growth of the Poet's Mind," Coleridge refers to the *Prelude* in *To William Wordsworth* as

An orphic *song* indeed,  
a song *divine* of high and passionate *truths*  
to their *own* music chaunted!

(ll. 45–47, my italics)

whereas the "friend" refers to the missing pages as

An orphic *tale* indeed,  
a tale *obscure* of high and passionate *thoughts*  
to a *strange* music chaunted! (my italics)

Though we might claim with other critics that these lines reflect, as many others, Coleridge's "inferiority complexes" towards Wordsworth, an awareness of the fact that he is "less" than his friend, the changes from "divine" to "obscure," from "truths" to "thoughts" and from "song" to "tale" also imply the moment of fall from the unarticulated, organic and harmonious world of unity into the articulated and self-differing world of language.

Meanwhile, the adjectives "obscure" and "strange," just like the noun "tale," allude to the presence of the supernatural (ideally procuring "the willing suspension of disbelief") that, in Coleridge's poetry, generally accompanies the theme of the fall (cf. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*), the trespassing of the "line" between life and death. Chapter XIII itself, moreover, actually ends with the promise of a "critical essay of the uses of the Supernatural [...] which the reader will find prefixed to the poem of *The Ancient Mariner*." This promise, just like the treatise on the Logos of which the missing pages would be a part, remains unfulfilled.

The absence of Joy (traditionally, the inter-communion of mind and nature) is further emphasised by the fact that instead of Coleridge's characteristically "organic" or natural metaphors expressing the power of both "poetic" and "philosophic" imagination, we find the contrary extreme here, the image of a cathedral. "Architecture exhibits the greatest extent of the difference from nature

which may exist in works of art"<sup>54</sup> – as Coleridge claims in *On Poesy or Art* (1818). To the Gothic church, we may compare, for instance, Coleridge's intentions concerning the *Biographia* expressed in Chapter IV ("My friend [i.e. Wordsworth] has drawn a masterly sketch of the branches with their poetic fruitage. I wish to add the trunk and even the roots"<sup>55</sup>) as well as his famous description of the philosophic imagination.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, we may also recall Johnston's claim that "several parts of the letter can be regarded as a Coleridgean complement to the 'gothic church' in the preface to *The Excursion*." Though critics generally consider the *Biographia* as Coleridge's version of *The Prelude*, the withdrawn pages themselves are *not* part of the *Biographia*: they are announced to appear in the "great book on the CONSTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHY." As if the *Biographia* itself was merely a preface to that future work never written. Coleridge himself, in reflecting upon the *Biographia* alludes to Wordsworth's *Excursion*, intended as a part of *The Recluse* – never completed: "I earnestly solicit the good wishes and friendly patience of my readers, while I thus go sounding on my dim and perilous way."<sup>57</sup> In the Preface to the *Excursion*, Wordsworth says: "The preparatory poem [i.e. *The Prelude*] is biographical [...]; and the two Works [*The Prelude* and *The Recluse*] have the same kind of relation to each other [...] as the ante-chapel has to the body of a gothic church."<sup>58</sup> It seems therefore, that the future great book containing the missing pages compared to a Gothic cathedral, actually parallel the future *Recluse*, "a philosophical [!] poem," or Gothic church. All the more so, since while friend hints at a future *prospectus* to the "treatise on the Logos," Wordsworth presents a *Prospectus* to the *Recluse*. Consequently, if *The Recluse* parallels the future great work on the Logos, the missing pages parallel the missing part of the *Recluse*.

Yet, the image of the Gothic church does not seem to suggest "Beauty, Love, and Hope," as Wordsworth's *Prospectus* does. First of all, it is underpinned by a quotation from *Christabel*: "Now in glimmer, and now in gloom." Tellingly,

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54 Coleridge, "On Poesy or Art" (1818) in Shawcross's edition of *Biographia Literaria* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), Vol. 2, p. 261.

55 *BL*, Ch. IV, p. 88.

56 Cf. *BL*, Ch. XII, p. 242: "They and only they can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol, that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar..."

57 *BL*, Ch. 5, p. 104 (allusion to Wordsworth's *Excursion*, iii.710).

58 *The Works of William Wordsworth* (Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), p. 754.

*Christabel* was not only excluded from *Sibylline Leaves* but was also cast out by Wordsworth from *Lyrical Ballads*. It is an *obscure* tale indeed: the story of Christabel's fall. It is also a *gothic* story, the metaphor of the cathedral. The line, "Now in glimmer, and now in gloom" itself succeeds the well-known "threshold scene" of *Christabel* ("And Christabel with might and main / Lifted her up, a weary weight, / Over the threshold of the gate: / Then the lady rose again"), when Christabel and Geraldine

Steal their way from stair to stair,  
Now in glimmer and now in gloom,  
And now they pass the Baron's room  
As still as death, with stifled breath!

(ll. 168–171)

This passage through her father's room anticipates Christabel's fall, as a rite of passage from innocence to experience.

The friend's reading experience ("*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'*") might therefore be analogous to Christabel's, lured and possessed by Geraldine:

So deeply had she drunken in  
That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,  
[... ]  
And thus she stood, in dizzy trance,  
Still picturing that look askance  
With forced unconscious *sympathy*...

(ll. 601–609, my italics)

Meanwhile, both the friend's reading of the pages and Christabel's reading in Geraldine's eyes lead to the breaking of an illusion, the conclusion of which will turn out to be the same: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair."

As far as *Christabel* is concerned, Susan Eilenberg remarks, "Geraldine's evil is her phenomenological duplicity, her failure to appear as she is [...]. She makes clear what representation implies: not self-evidence, as Wordsworth wanted to believe, the natural expression of one's own being, but the subversion

of identity."<sup>59</sup> And this subversive force is unbearable. Christabel tries to send Geraldine away:

By my mother' soul do I entreat  
That thou this woman send away!  
She said: and no more she could not say:  
For what she knew she could not tell,  
O'er-mastered by the mighty spell.

(ll. 604–620)

Thus, although it is Geraldine who casts a spell on Christabel, the way the friend casts the pages out of the book rather parallels Christabel's attempt to send Geraldine away. As if the missing pages could be personified by Geraldine, the evil, female power to be cut off, by all means. But similarly to Geraldine who in fact has never left the castle (*Christabel* is unfinished), the potential evil of writing seems to be undestroyable: though some pages can be cut out from the text, texts, as the very existence of the allusions shows, cannot be annihilated.

On the other hand, the fact that the friend cannot tell *what* the missing pages actually are, and that only the "effect" of the pages can be told, from which readers of the *Biographia*, similarly to the readers of the poem, have to *conjure up* what happened, equally points to the possible analogy between Christabel and the friend.

Interestingly enough, the "phenomenological duplicity" of the pages, undermining any faith in the symbol ("the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal") emerges once again from an inter-textual reference, as if from the chaos of signifiers: while the apparent "illumination scene" of the Gothic church is undermined by the allusion made to *Christabel*, the "conversion scene" itself is rendered ambiguous by an other intertextual reference, by a quotation from *Paradise Lost*:

Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,  
For each seem'd either!<sup>60</sup>

59 Elineberg, *The Strange Power of Speech*, p. 80.

60 Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), pp. 55–56, quotes the same passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to underline his claim that "[to] make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary."

Unsurprisingly, these lines are taken from the description of the gates of *Hell*:

Before the Gates there sat  
 On either side a formidable shape;  
 The one seem'd Woman to the waste, and *fair*,  
 But ended *foul* in many a scaly fould [...]  
 [...]  
 The other shape,  
 If shape it might be call'd that shape had none  
 Distinguishable in member, joynt, or limb,  
 Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,  
 For each seem'd either; black it stood as Night,  
 Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,  
 And shook a dreadful Dart...  
 (Book II, my italics)

First of all, we may notice that there is an unexpected similarity between the wording of the witches in *Macbeth* "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" – with which Coleridge characterised, in chapter IV, the effect of Wordsworth's poetry – and Milton's description of the first "shape" at the gates of Hell. But while the witches' words, at least according to the interpretation Coleridge gives in chapter IV (see above: "Fair is foul and foul is fair, / in other words that they had been all their lives admiring without judgement, and were now about to censure without reason"<sup>61</sup>), refer to the sudden revelation of Truth leading to the subversion of habit or received opinions, in Milton's Hell, the Woman is indecipherable: she seems fair to the waste, but ends foul. Her evil consists in the dissimulation of her true nature, in the contradiction between signifier and signified.

Furthermore, despite the interpretation given in the *Biographia*, the notes taken at Coleridge's lecture on *Macbeth* make the remark that, according to Coleridge, the evil character of the Weird Sisters consists in their duplicity:

the exquisite judgement of Shakespeare is shown in nothing more than in the different language of the Witches with each other, and with those whom they address: the former displays a certain fierce familiarity, grotesqueness mingled with terror; the latter is always solemn, dark and mysterious.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *BL*, Ch. IV, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 2, p. 220.

Interestingly, though these words are only the interpretation of Coleridge's own words (which, on their turn, might have been taken from A. W. Schlegel), they may remind us, on the one hand, of the possible difference between the missing hundred pages and the letter covering it, and on the other, of the friend's response to the letter ("*Those whom I had been taught to venerate as almost super-human in magnitude of intellect, I found perched in little fret-work niches, as grotesque dwarfs...*"), as if the missing pages could have suddenly unveiled the "true" nature behind some false appearance, or else, to make an important precision, as if the friend's reading of the pages amounted to a sudden revelation of truth.

Meanwhile, the references to *Christabel*, to *Paradise Lost* and to *Macbeth* all show up the world of allegories: a fallen, temporal world with a fragmented, discontinuous relationship between the signifier (the word), the signified (the concept, the idea or God) and the reference (the perceivable world or the universe). Conspicuously, the friend's discourse, from a thematic point of view, seems to deny any reference to a meaning previously established, as it would be proper to allegory. The *shapes* "*all decked with [... ] mystic symbols*" point to truths not yet revealed. From a rhetorical point of view, however, these "*holy insignia*" changing the significance of certain "*names*" are in fact not brought about by a sudden divine revelation but firstly, by a new interpretation (i.e.: the missing pages) correcting previous ones, and secondly, by the reading of this new interpretation (i.e.: the letter). The relationship between the temporal ("the names") and the eternal ("with all the characters of Apotheosis") is therefore established through two acts of reading, irrevocably (re)covering the original text. Hence, the friend's letter reveals, among others, the temporal nature of meaning artificially attributed to the sign, while suggesting a possible discontinuity between the signifiers ("fair") and the signified ("foul").

Meanwhile, the shadows are indistinguishable from the substances: *each* seems *either*. In a curious way, therefore, the quotation given by the friend ("If substance may be call'd what shadow seem'd, / For each seem'd either") to support the revelational nature of the missing pages ("*In short, what I had supposed substances were thinned away into shadows, while every where shadows were deepened into substances*") has a contrary effect: though allegory itself is, in principle, unambiguous (one signifier for one well determined signified), the allusion itself points to the ambiguity or undecidability (cf. "obscurity") of the text: we cannot decide whether the signifiers refer to shadows or to substances, or whether they are themselves shadows or substances: each seems either.

Turning back to our previous reference: Geraldine and Christabel mirror each other at a certain point: “Fair is foul and foul is fair” *and* each seems either. Christabel

[...] passively did imitate  
That look of dull and treacherous hate!  
And thus he stood, in dizzy trance,  
Still picturing that look askance...

(ll. 605–608)

On the other hand, the friend’s allusion to Milton is conspicuously reminiscent of Macbeth’s “reading” of the witches, quoted by Coleridge in his notes to the lecture on *Macbeth*:

BANQUO Whither are they vanished?  
MACBETH Into the air, and what seem’d corporeal melted  
As breath into the wind.<sup>63</sup>

Apart from the evil character of the witches, Coleridge’s notes emphasise as well that Macbeth generally *misinterprets* the signs. The sentence “Before he [Macbeth] can cool, the confirmation of the tempting *half* of the prophecy arrives...” (my italics) suggests that Macbeth captures only a fragment from the whole message so as to construct a (false) meaning, while the words “Macbeth mistranslates the recoiling and ominous whispers of conscience”<sup>64</sup> clearly point to the fact that the play can also be regarded as the re-enactment of the consequences of a process of misreading.

As a result, though the friend, unlike Macbeth, proves to be a “good” reader and can endow the chaotic, equivocal signifiers with the “right” meaning, *both* the gap between the signifiers and the signified *and* the equivocal, double nature of the signifiers break the Neo-Platonic illusion of the one Life or the One Meaning.

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63 *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 1, p. 61.

64 *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 1, pp. 62, 72.

*IMAGINATION DISCONNECTED*

Though Henry Nelson Coleridge's editorial notes to Coleridge's notes are also only a reading of Coleridge's own, his summary is worthy of consideration:

Their [the witches'] character consists in the imaginative *disconnected* from the good; they are the shadowy *obscure* and fearfully anomalous of physical nature, the *lawless* of human nature, – elemental avengers without sex or kin: / Fair is foul and foul is fair; / Hover thro' the fog and filthy air (my italics).<sup>65</sup>

But if there are two kinds of “imaginative,” one connected to and one disconnected from the “good,” then the missing pages themselves, in spite of the friend's “good” reading, do *not* appear (!) to be in any way *connected* to the “Infinite I AM.” The reader's role therefore becomes of utmost importance. In order to surmount the “gulph” of signifiers, he has to make an *arbitrary* cut:

THESIS X: even when the Objective is assumed as the first, we yet can never pass beyond the principle of self-consciousness. Should we attempt it, we must be driven back from ground to ground, each of which would cease to be the Ground the moment we pressed on it. We must be whirl'd down to the gulph of infinite series. But this would make our reason baffle the end and purpose of all reasons, namely, unity and system. *Or we must break off the series arbitrarily*, and affirm an absolute something that is in and of itself at once cause and effect (causa sui), subject and object, or rather absolute identity of both (my italics).<sup>66</sup>

This paragraph underlines our claim that the “conversion” may not imply the giving up of one belief for another, but the recognition that the search for meaning may lead into an abyss with no ground. Hence, in order for the reader to “recreate” the Meaning, he “must break off the series *arbitrarily*.” Thus, while the letter is a reading or interpretation brought about by an arbitrary cut from a (missing) text, it constitutes, by the same token, the very cut by which the definition of Imagination, this act of faith taken in the Symbol, becomes abstracted from its evil and ultimately fallen ground. Meanwhile, the dialogue between the (missing) text and its reader reflects upon the workings of the Secondary Imagination, the definition of which equally implies a cut: it “dissolves, diffuses and dissipates *in order to recreate*.” Writing or the signifiers themselves might therefore be inherently diffusive, and only a “recreative” reading (“co-

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<sup>65</sup> *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 1, p. 60., n. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Ch. XII, p. 285.



existing with the conscious will") brought about by an arbitrary cut may endow them, artificially, with a signification.

On the other hand, Thesis X also alludes to a process similar to the reader's experiencing the *sublime*: the mind baffles at being overwhelmed in the chaos of signifiers ("the gulph of infinite series") but, due to its rational faculties, it is able to *detach* itself from this effusion and create an *artificial* form of synthesis or unity: a Meaning. Unsurprisingly, the antecedents of the sublime are found by Neil Hertz in the literature of religious *conversion*: "the mind [is] thoroughly 'turned round'"<sup>67</sup> – similarly to the friend's, who is "standing on his head." Furthermore, while in religious literature the difficulty (or blockage) of the mind to be surmounted is provoked by the obscurity of the figurative language of the Scripture, we have seen that the friend's conversion is brought about by some "obscure tale." The letter therefore seems to create the effect that the missing pages exemplify the Book or the divine Logos turned, after the fall, into an obscure text to be deciphered.

But if only a *leap* into the order of faith through the artificial suppression and recreation of the ground (the missing pages) can save the Idea (the Symbol) from the "gulph of infinite series," then we can not only emphasise the reader's role in the creation of the Symbol, but, completely in line with this, we may also accept Elinor Shaffer's remark that "Coleridge eradicated the distinction [between the beautiful and the sublime] by making the sublime the single aesthetic category."<sup>68</sup>

#### *THE PROSPECTIVE WHOLE: THE DARK CAVE OF TROPHONIUS*

David S. Ferris,<sup>69</sup> the only critic, as far as I know, to investigate the possible implications of the cave of Trophonius claims:

To totalize the self-reflexivity of the text [...] would require this great unfinished work of construction [i.e. the great book on constructive philosophy] which the friend compares, not without reason, to a consultation at the oracle of Trophonius. [...] From this cave, both the imagination and the supplicant would emerge speaking the authoritative truth of the author who may never reveal himself as such.

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67 Hertz, p. 47.

68 Shaffer, "Coleridge's Revolution in the Standard of Taste," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28 (1969), p. 213.

69 David S. Ferris, "Coleridge's Ventriloquy," *SiR* 24 (Spring 1985), p. 81.

Ferris also remarks that Trophonius, with his brother Agamedes “built the temple at Delphi outside of which stands a pillar on which the heaven-descended postulate of Coleridge’s philosophy is engraved: Gnothi seauton [Know thyself].” Ferris alludes here to Chapter XII, in which Coleridge asserts: “The postulate of philosophy and at the same time the test of philosophic capacity is the heaven-descended KNOW THYSELF!”<sup>70</sup>

Investigating the connotations of the metaphor, Ferris only refers to the legend according to which “the one descending in the cave to consult the oracle must first drink the water of Lethe, that he may forget all that he has been thinking of hitherto, and afterwards [...] drink another water, the water of Mnemosyne, which causes him to remember what he sees after his descent.”<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, the experience of the cave, apart from illustrating the scene of conversion described by the friend, may also exemplify ideal work triggering ideal reading. Since, as it has been noted above, Coleridge, deeming his desire for an ideal reader premature, used the following phrasing:

I shall not desire the reader to strip his mind of all prejudices, not to keep all prior systems out of view during his examination of the present. [...] Till I have discovered the art of destroying the memory *a parte post* [a parte prius], without injury to its future operations, and without detriment to the judgement, I should suppress the request as premature.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, however, this “test of philosophic capacity” seems to gain a very doubtful connotation in the context of the cave – clearly contradicting any “authoritative truth,” most of all that of the “author.” As already mentioned, the pages making the friend feel as if he was standing on his head have the effect of a magic mirror comparable to the serpent eyes of Geraldine: the friend passes from innocence to experience, and the fall obviously implies an awareness of death. In connection with the allusion to the gates of Hell, we have also seen how this awareness is reflected on a rhetorical level. Destroying the binary oppositions of reason (fair *vs* foul, shadows *vs* substances, self *vs* non-self), and serving thus indeed as an ultimate remedy against “metaphysicks,” the oscillation between signifiers renders Meaning depending on the arbitrary choice of the reader.

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70 Cf. *BL*, Ch. XII, p. 252.

71 Ferris, p. 82.

72 *BL*, Ch. XII, p. 234.

Nevertheless, the actual encounter with death has been avoided so far: temporality has been repressed under the friend's apparently "recreative" discourse and has only kept returning from the deep chasm of intertextual references, from the abyss of signifiers. The entrance of the cave, therefore, constitutes the "line" that the friend refuses to (tres)pass. Since with the water of Lethe, the cave of Trophonius openly refers to the world of Hades. The descent would therefore parallel that of Orpheus, but we know that Coleridge's "orphic" tale, as opposed to Wordsworth's, is not "divine," but "obscure."

Furthermore, Ferris fails to mention the fact that the oracle of the cave, in contrast with the "heaven-descended know thyself," is generally associated with despair. De Quincey, for instance, uses it in a context clearly suggesting melancholy:

I, whose disease it was to meditate too much, and to observe too little, and who, upon my first entrance at college, was nearly falling into a deep melancholy, from brooding too much on the sufferings which I had witnessed in London, was sufficiently aware of the tendencies of my own thoughts to do all I could to counteract them. – I was, indeed, like a person who, according to the old legend, had entered the cave of Trophonius: and the *remedies* I sought were to force myself into society... (my italics).<sup>73</sup>

The many references found on the Internet give further proofs of the dangers inherent in descending into the cave:

Trophonius (Greek): With his brother Agamedes, legendary architect said to have built the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Agamedes was killed by Trophonius [...] and later an oracle and cult were dedicated to Trophonius, which included descending into a cave to receive revelations. *The descent was so awe-inspiring that it was said that no one who visited the cave ever smiled again.*<sup>74</sup>

Tropho'nus (Latin): He has visited the cave of Trophonius (Greek). Said of a melancholy man.<sup>75</sup>

PROSTRATION, prostration of soul; broken heart; despair; cave of despair, cave of Trophonius.<sup>76</sup>

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73 Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Wordsworth Classics, 1994), p. 194.

74 See [www.sackclothandashes.org](http://www.sackclothandashes.org).

75 See [www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com).

76 See [www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com).

Thus, the profound melancholy of the one that will never be able to laugh again is not provoked by the longing for an Ideal once glimpsed (or else, by the awareness of the unbridgeable gap between the actual and the ideal), but by the sudden revelation of a Truth which undermines any hope for a better world.

As far as the reading process is concerned, however, we could hardly assume that the friend, the sympathetic, creative reader who practised, even if it proved to be “painful” (above: “by painful means restored from derangement”) the metaphorical reading “required” from him, suddenly turned into an “indifferent,” “detached” and ironic reader refusing any further imaginary activity.

On the one hand, this sudden awakening, this refusal may simply serve as link to the next part of the letter, anticipating the attitude of the public. Or else, as an exemplification of parabasis, of the “breaking of illusion” characterising any ideal reader hovering between “enthusiasm and indifference.” In this case, the sudden detachment would parallel the act of reflection proper to Romantic Irony, which destroys the representation of the “eternal act of creation” in order to keep it alive in a potentiality evermore about to be.

On the other hand, we can also surmise that these are the possible dangers of the dark cave that the friend escapes. For the supplicant does not have to *make* sparks and figured flesh in the cave, but certain images befall on him, suddenly possess him, as if against himself. Thus, it is the state of being *overwhelmed* by images which might threaten the reader: it would make it impossible for him to recreate signification. As Coleridge claims in Chapter VI criticising Hartley’s theory of association: “If therefore we suppose the absence of all interference of the will, reason, and judgement [...] the ideas (or relicts of such impression) will exactly imitate the order of the impression itself, which must be absolute *delirium*.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, instead of the celebrated middle state of the “sanity of mind,” the experience of the cave might lead to madness, to the contrary opposite of “metaphysicks.”

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<sup>77</sup> *BL*, Ch. 6, p. 111. Interestingly, Coleridge gives the following illustration: “a young woman [...] who could neither read, nor write, was seized with a nervous fever; during which [...] she became *possessed* [...] by a very learned devil. She continued incessantly talking Latin, Greek and Hebrew, with most distinct enunciation” The solution of the phenomenon was later discovered by the physician of the girl: she was the maid of a very learned man, a great Hebraist, who used to read aloud to himself from his favourite books. The maid, unable to understand the words, could still reproduce them in a state of delirium. This example is all the more telling that the *Biographia* itself can be considered as the sum of Coleridge’s miscellaneous readings, though “blended with, and modified by” the will.

We may take *Kubla Khan* as a possible analogy: if its speaker *could have* revived the vision in which “images rose up before him as *things*,”<sup>78</sup> due to some water of Mnemosyne, he would have built “that dome in air” indeed, but he would also have fallen into the abyss of madness: “And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!”<sup>79</sup> (cf. “When a man mistakes his thoughts for persons and things, he is mad. A madman is properly so defined,” Table Talk, July 25, 1832<sup>80</sup>) That is, if the images of memory or dream become again real as things, they are considered as pathological illusion, contradistinguished from vision:

Hard to express that sense of the analogy or likeness of a thing which enables a symbol to represent it so that we think of the thing itself, yet knowing that the thing is not present to us [...] that likeness is not identity...<sup>81</sup>

Consequently, the actual writing of the poem (as well as the ideal reader-response triggered by the imaginary activity of the reader) requires a “sanity of mind”: the midway *between* “madness” and “metaphysicks.” From the moment one cannot distinguish between the real and the imaginary, he loses self-possession, and this kind of enchantment is incompatible with the workings of the imagination “co-existing with the conscious will.”

Obviously, however, one does not “drink the milk of Paradise” in the dark cave of Trophonius. These are not the “gardens of the Muses” where the inspired poet is brought to ecstasy, which ecstasy, on its turn, is recreated by the first reader, the rhapsode. Since it seems that the experience of death introduces a gap in the magnetic chain of iron rings: it allows to remember the experience but makes it impossible to recreate it. For despite the fact that absolute self-knowledge (*Gnothi seauton*) only occurs when the subject faces its own death, death itself cannot be turned into profit, the awareness of the dissolution of the self does not contribute to the recreation of its unity. Just like the state of being in ecstasy, it implies the complete annihilation of the self.

As a result, the descent into the dark cave of Trophonius could not engender the positive mental movement which would be proper to the achievement of a sublime effect: after the “check of the vital forces” provoked by the mind’s being

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78 Preface to *Kubla Khan*.

79 *Kubla Khan*.

80 Quoted by Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1985), p. 41.

81 Coleridge, “Anima Poetae,” quoted by Tilottama Rajan, in *The Dark Interpreter*, p. 207.

overwhelmed by the images of dissolution, the rational faculties fail, and are unable to think the totality that cannot be taken in through the senses. “The point of excess for the imagination [...] is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself,”<sup>82</sup> argues Kant while describing the effect of the sublime. The images of the cave of Trophonius, however, would not only remain excessive for the sensible but might even impede the emergence of the “rational idea of the supersensible.”<sup>83</sup> They have to be forgotten for ever.

#### READING AGAINST SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The main axis of friend's first reading is vertical: he discovers paradigmatic, metaphorical relationships (between the gothic church and the gothic story), changes between depths and surfaces (“*what I had supposed substances were thinned away into shadows, while every where shadows were deepened into substances*”), and alludes to intertexts *undermining* surface meanings. Thus, the friend's illustrations spatialise (gothic church) an essentially temporal experience (gothic story), that is, the passage from innocence to experience, from a false assumption to a true revelation and, ultimately, from text to meaning is presented as if it was a visionary experience.

The public, on the other hand, would read through a horizontal or syntagmatic axis: “*you have been obliged to omit so many links,*” it “*holds the same relation in abstruseness to Plotinus, as Plotinus does to Plato,*” “*you will be reminded of Bishop Berkley's Siris, which, beginning with Tar, ends with the Trinity.*” The latter example is all the more characteristic because, as the editor's note informs us, Berkley's *Siris* is subtitled: “*A Chain of Philosophical Reflections...*” Meanwhile, the analogy between the pages and *Siris* is based on nothing else but contiguity: since the “links” constituting any act of reading are missing, the indifferent “public” can only see that both works are about something else than what they promise to be. Furthermore, whereas the public could indeed consider the “author” of the pages as being *essentially* similar to Plotinus or Plato (and conclude themselves “ignorant of his understanding”<sup>84</sup>) they would not notice but

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82 Kant, *CJ*, p. 107.

83 Cf. Kant, *CJ*, p. 107: “[...] is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself: yet again for the rational idea of the supersensible it is not excessive, but conformable to law.”

84 Cf. *BL*, Ch. XII, p. 233: “I have been re-perusing with the best energies of my mind the Timaeus of PLATO. Whatever I comprehended, impresses me with a reverential sense of the author's genius;

a superficial analogy, the same “abstruseness” in the works. Thus, the metonymic reading (which obviously imply the lack of any suspension of disbelief) fails to engender a conversion similar to the friend’s. Instead of *feeling* the reversal of every ground, they would not *see*<sup>85</sup> but fragments. We cannot forget, however, that the unconnected, syntagmatic reading of the incomprehensive (i.e. “indifferent”) public may be *safer* than the paradigmatic reading of the comprehensive friend.

If we compare the introduction of the friend in chapter XIII of the *Biographia* to the friends evoked by the conversation poems,<sup>86</sup> we may notice that the physical absence of the imaginary other, who, in each conversation poem except *Effusion* turns out to be Coleridge’s “better self,” is more problematic in the *Biographia*: here, the other, or second self is represented by a letter. This implies, on the one hand, that he is “responsive,” or else, reflective: as if the appearance of an “esemplastic” and friendly eye could endow with an identity the fragmented, effusive writing self. On the other hand, however, the letter also introduces an “absence”: there is both a temporal and a spatial gap between the writing and the reading selves who never act simultaneously.

#### LETTEROPHOBIA

“On 17 September, 1815, urged on by a frantic Morgan, he wrote directly to John Gutch [his publisher] about the cause of the slipped deadline. He apologised for his ‘accursed Letterophobia’”<sup>87</sup>

The *Biographia* as an autobiographical narration can be regarded, following de Man,<sup>88</sup> as an extended prosopopeia (a trope ascribing a voice to the *absent*, the inanimate or the dead), a discourse of self-restoration by which one’s name is made intelligible and memorable as a face. The face is therefore not given, but is given *by* an act of language, by the figure of the prosopopeia. However,

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but there is a considerable portion of the work, to which I can attach no consistent meaning. [...] Therefore, utterly baffled in all my attempts to understand the ignorance of Plato, I CONCLUDE MYSELF IGNORANT OF HIS UNDERSTANDING.”

85 Cf. *Dejection, an Ode*: “I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!”

86 For the discussion of Coleridge’s conversation poems see Timár, “Conversing Signs.”

87 Richard Holmes, *Darker Reflections*, p. 424.

88 Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” *The Rhetorics of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 67–83.

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. [...] Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve.<sup>89</sup>

Though de Man quotes only the first part of this paragraph by Wordsworth in order to point to the dangers inherent in writing,<sup>90</sup> Wordsworth's last sentence ("to derange, to subvert... to dissolve") interestingly parallels the definition the Secondary Imagination. And if language, as it has been remarked above, "dissolves, diffuses and dissipates" in order to be "recreated" or brought to an (artificial) unity through reading, the *Biographia*, similarly to the conversation poems, also seems to point to Coleridge's insatiable desire for an ideal receiver who can rescue the Book, the autobiography or the would-be representative of an integral consciousness from the dangers of an endlessly proliferating text – even at the expense of the fact that the (re)creation of a meaning from the chaos of signifiers ("each seem'd either") cannot be but artificial ("every where shadows were deepened into substances") and clearly entails repression. We may nevertheless bear in mind that not only the "author" of the *Biographia* can be considered as a prosopopeia, but the posited reader as well: the friend himself is nothing else but a figure. And if the friend does not exist but in and by the "letter," he *is* the very language that "deranges, subverts" and, ultimately "dissolves." Hence, though the figure of the reader violates the text in order to endow it with a meaning and though this violation amounts indeed to mutilation and, eventually, to the effacement of the chaos of signifiers, reading itself still remains a text which "diffuses, dissolves and dissipates," waiting for other readers to recreate (violate and mutilate) it – as we did.

As a result, though the asking for the "friend's" opinion, as well as his fictitious response addressing "*Dear C,*" dramatises the image of the self – the responsive "I" (cf. eye) necessarily implies the existence of a "you" ("*You ask my opinion concerning your Chapter*") – textuality, or the succession of effusive (or "diffusive") writing and "recreative" reading fails to amount to the potentially

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89 Wordsworth, "Essays Upon Epitaphs III," in: *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W. J. B. Owen & Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), Vol. 2, pp 84–85.

90 Cf. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," p. 81: "as soon as we understand prosopopeia as the positing of a voice or face by means of language [we conclude that] it deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores."



synthetic power of the Secondary Imagination: *correspondence*, in its literal sense, fails to yield (self-)identity. Since although the fact that the relationship between the two selves cannot be but *dialogical* could well imply (self-)knowledge (“the heaven-descended know thyself”), the predicament that the succession of the two selves, instead of turning into an endless alteration, oscillation or else, into the celebrated state of the “hovering between,” actually leads to the effacement of one party seems to render the attempt at (self-)understanding impossible. Furthermore, the fact that the dangerous passage to be repressed in the *Biographia* is nothing else but the potential “other” or “stranger” *in oneself*, an “other” clearly challenging the belief in the “Infinite I AM,” reveals, similarly to the conversation poems, that the Coleridgean texts do not propose to resolve the interrelated problems of textual hermeneutics, of self-knowledge and the possibility of understanding an other human being by simply declaring “there is One life within us and abroad.”<sup>91</sup>

#### EPILOGUE

Coleridge himself has never written the pages to be withdrawn “in consequence of this very judicious letter.” Neither did he mean the insertion of the letter ‘seriously,’ nor did he take the figure of the friend literally. Is not it nonsensical to analyse a passage that does not even exist?

By way of conclusion, we shall re- evoke Socrates’s mask:

Socratic irony is the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation. [...] It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.

(Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragments*, 108)<sup>92</sup>

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91 Cf. *Effusion*.

92 K. M. Wheeler, ed., *German Aesthetics and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), p. 43.