Preface: Imprints & Re-visions

This may be the first gathering of essays on the period of Radcliffe, Wordsworth and Coleridge to leave the impression that *The Life of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, is the exemplary and enlightening text. It may also be the first to attribute this Shandean centrality to the tension between type and voice, the language of books and the language of mankind, that seemed to reach a crisis in the last two generations of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth. Rhetorical readings have long made us aware of the gap that opens between the marquetry of figured language and the underwood of speech, especially in a period embarrassed by veneer. The readings now offered here go further to show how the realities of publication and printing, like those of revision and re-vision, open poems and prose to other kinds of scrutiny and response. Most of the essays that follow were first given as papers at the University of Zurich in the context of a colloquium on Coleridge and a lecture-series on the making of the literary text. Some still bear as a result the traces of these earlier occasions and of their spoken delivery.

In the process of gathering and editing the unending texts of Coleridge's poems, in the present case *Christabel,* J.C.C. Mays shows that the poet's "manipulation of narrative point-of-view by means of typographical space ... is as calculated and successful as it is in the more celebrated instances of *Tristram Shandy* and Charles Olson's *Maximus*." What results in Coleridge is a composite or mosaic, just as the various stages of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, as Jonathan Wordsworth suggests in opening with Sterne's "Well might Locke write a chapter upon the imperfection of words!" could invite us to recognize how deep and thwarted was the poet's longing for permanence of meaning. This could only be created if "'characters' (letters, handwriting)" are impressed by ministering spirits on the "forms" and shapes of the landscape. And such a double process of imprinting and impressing reminds the poet, as it should remind us, that what lasts is always already, like a shoemaker's last, a made thing that shapes and distorts more natural parts into aesthetic patterns held together or made whole by stitching and glue.

From one end of the period to another, and in this collection from Fritz Gutbrodt's study of Young's *Conjectures* – original composition as the work of the compositor – through Stephen Copley's retracing, guide-books in hand, of the road to Tintern Abbey, and on to Bruce Lawder's closing study of Mary Shelley and coda on Walt Whitman, we find or rediscover that the matrix was material. The aesthetic implications of this vary from the Kantian sublime to the picturesque and, in *Frankenstein*, to what we might call the Golgothick. Lawder's conclusion about this most bookish romance, that "the body of literature cannot completely hide its stitches," is also a reminder that any substitution of the material for the maternal can result in the monstrous. Elisabeth Bronfen's reading of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* finds common ground with these artificers; both in Lacan's insistence on the letter and in her opening argument that what "this gothic narrative unfolds is a text of origins that are always already representations, so that the primal scene around which the entire narrative circles is not sexual but textual." This common ground or primal scene re-presents what may on the one hand be viewed as a loosening or weakening of the relation between literary creation and human action; but on the other as a tightening or turning of the screw that impresses words and images on blank paper. The printer's smock looks more and more like the shirt of Nessus.

Few writers have had their greatness at once demonstrated and deconstructed by publication as forcibly as Coleridge. When Kathleen Coburn long ago embarked on the editorial project that has since given or promised us everything extant Coleridge ever wrote or dictated, she and her editors imagined that they would deliver us a Victorian Sage, Broad Church in the morning, Idealist at noon, and Jungian at night, who would impart wisdom to later ages. What has emerged is altogether different, and Coleridge's greatness now seems to lie altogether elsewhere. More Viconian than Victorian, the Logosophist and Great Plagiarist has left us fragments, notebook entries, and marginalia that could only have been written by him, along with reams of pages that seem to an alarming extent to have been written by others. But he has also left us a renewed and more complex figure of a poet who composed and decomposed more (and more interesting) poems over a longer career.

The Coleridge that emerges in these pages is a new Coleridge, a poet who wrote more poems and revised more than we had known before and who worked at his poetry his entire life and not merely in brief periods of intense creativity. His development is more complex than anyone had imagined. The later poems are different from the earlier poems, but his best

work extends over his whole career. The later poems are very much part of the poetic tradition and had more readers than his earlier poems. Here there is only a start at relating the later poetry to the later prose, re-thinking Coleridge's development as a whole is still to come.

This new poet Coleridge, as a number of the following studies suggest and ascertain, draws closer to Coleridge the marginal genius we are coming to know from the prose works. That prose seeps into and even absorbs the verse elements of some poems, so much so that, as Timothy Fulford observes of *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree*, "different sections give no single author but only a composite and seemingly chaotic collection of texts and writers." Coleridge's evasion of the press and its pressure is the converse of what we have already seen of its power. Armando Colombo shows how insistently Coleridge seeks to create relations with a reader that will enable him to elude his own fears of publication, plagiarism, and incompletion. This elusion also leads, as Colombo notes in connection with the *Biographia Literaria*, to a different form of composition through dictation. (We might also remember Donald Rieman's half-serious suggestion that Coleridge took the idea of the form of the *Biographia Literaria* from *Tristram Shandy*.) This creative evasion of the press turns and ties back into the figure of the poet as reciter of his own otherwise unpublished or semi-published work. The earlier Coleridge, reciter of *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, continues into the monologomaniac of the *Table Talk* and the "Improvisatore" of his later life and poetry. The key to that later poetry, as Morton Paley argues in concluding his study, is personification. Significantly not the kind of embodiment he found in Gray's poetry and identified, even more significantly, with printing and publication – "mere printer's devil's personifications – persons with a capital letter, abstract qualities with a small one." Might this not be one more example of ambivalence, "the instability of the text" identified by Fulford, that strains against publication as the fate of writing?

There may be a further connection between the insistent text and the unstable text that relates Coleridge to his contemporaries. As Robert Rehder has shown in his account of Wordsworth's re-visions of his passage over the Simplon Pass, this encounter with nature was meant to define the poet through his discovery of the origins of his own consciousness. But the rewriting or unwriting of his experience suggests that "these primary acts of self-definition were incomplete or somehow troubled." London, the great opposite of nature, is by contrast the scene of his self-definition. Wordsworth moving two caves, "The grotto of Antiparos" and "the den/Of

Yordas," already widely separated, from the Alps to London is engaged in an inner transaction. This is *revision* in every sense of the word. Known events in the outer world are changed to correspond to unknown events in the inner world.

Similarly, Coleridge had to over-write *Kubla Khan* through his Preface, which is itself a palimpsest of his own and other texts in verse and prose, as a way of re-visioning his biography. Peter Hughes argues that his failure to publish the work that could have made his name and fame (and contrasting success in publishing revolutionary and personal texts that threatened him with notoriety) led to the recital and re-visioning of the poem through "cryptonyms," names that hide, trying to turn the poem into the sub-text of its Preface. That is in fact precisely what happened to *Christabel*, about which Mays observes, "His poem remained for many years literally a subtext, circulating among friends and those with enough previous interest to seek it out." And yet, here and in other work of the period, this suppression and sub-pressing of one text creates another more figured and sublime. "Sublimity," as Mays reminds us, "is literally 'under the threshold.'"

Shelley tells us that "there must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded." The essays in this collection bring us closer to this "infinite combinations of circumstances" and show us that there are more things in poetry and prose than are dreamt of in our theory. Everything turns out to be more complex than we had thought and despite some hundred years of scholarly work we are still at the beginning of understanding. The circulation of *Christabel* before its publication, the number of different texts that we can trace as entering into *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree* or *Frankenstein* demonstrate that the crude oversimplifications of Bloom's notions of influence need to be discarded along with the abstract vagaries of reader-response criticism. Writing and reading are more complicated than that – and more definite.

If we take seriously, as these essays suggest that we must, the relations between the work of Edward Young (1683-1765), Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) and William Gilpin (1724-1804) and Wordsworth, Coleridge and their contemporaries at the same time that we consider the ways in which everything that is involved in their self-awareness is developed and re-

worked by Walt Whitman (1819-1892), then the conventional period boundaries erode and the very notion of period terms is called into question. Wellek's notion of periods as "systems of norms" is no longer tenable. What are the *norms*, or the *systems* for that matter, if we think, for example, of the unconscious structures of Radcliffe and Coleridge mentioned in this collection? *System* implies an organized set of definite entities, but what entities and how are they organized? We can make-do more easily with Shelley's "infinite combination of circumstances." Perhaps if we have enough details we can dispense with most of the hypothetical and hypostatic abstractions that at the moment encumber, block, and obscure literary history, and wait for theories that conform to rather than usurp the data. Abstractions are the signs of our impatience. They indicate the difficulty of suspending belief.

The basic unit of literary history is the author. The "subjection," as Shelley puts it, of authors to their historical moment is a matter of the relations between individuals – John Stoddart reciting *Christabel* to Walter Scott – and between individuals and the world – Gilpin "examining landscape by the *rules of picturesque beauty*," and, perhaps most important, the relations of the individual with himself, and in every case we have to deal with the interrelation of conscious and unconscious processes. Coleridge reading, Coleridge writing, Coleridge stealing, Coleridge revising: the more we examine any one of these activities, the more complicated they appear, as the contributors to this volume make abundantly clear. Our recognition of these complications is the result of our increasing awareness of the complexity of human behaviour, or, more simply, of a more subtle psychology, one invented to solve an immediate, practical, textual problem. Consequently, we need a theory that makes explicit our practice and its assumptions. We need to re-imagine our authors as individuals. We need a new theory of Coleridge, that will take account of the "several hundred" new poems in *The Collected Coleridge*, the finished and the unfinished work, and the incessant revision, of Mays' "deep roots of unconscious emotion," Hughes' "deeper ambivalence" and Colombo's "oscillation," that will enable us to explain the interrelations between the bad dreams recorded in the notebooks and the personification and allegory that Paley sees as the defining quality of the later poetry, as well as to comprehend the later poetry as a logical development of the earlier poetry. We need to imagine the one Coleridge who did all these different things and who contains all this complexity. Coleridge here can serve as a model for all authors. Thus, these essays both offer us new knowledge and bring us to the threshold of new

possibilities in literary history. Happily, of making many literary texts and their interpretation, there is no end and much study, we might say, is the rejuvenation of the text – and of the flesh.

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Peter Hughes
Robert Rehder

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