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# Visions of Reading<sup>1</sup>

Armando Colombo

Coleridge burdens his reader with the heaviest task possible: reading. What may seem pretentiously obvious, since any reader's occupation is *per definitionem* reading, denotes on the one hand a subtle relationship between author and reader and on the other the reader's delicate duty to respond once he or she understands what Coleridge has to say about what kind of "reader response" he expects. The relationship is actually more intricate; it should read *author – implied author – narrator – narratee – implied reader – reader*.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between the writer and his reader mediated by the text is not one of Coleridge's inventions, nor is it a specific Romantic concept, although of considerable interest to the Romantics. *Tristram Shandy*, for example, continuously stresses its awareness of the presence of an implied reader – even of implicated readers; Fielding addresses his reader, too, so does Boccaccio. However, no one before Coleridge and no one for decades after him assigns responsibility and power to his or her reader; not, at least, in the manner that Coleridge does. Yet, as it turns out, the sword that cuts the Gordian knot cuts both ways; it undoes its overconfident wielder and is blunt in clumsy hands. But unlike the Gordian knot that can simply be severed, reading poetry requires a subtler skill. Coleridge is wary of assigning the sword too lightly. Since the champions must first be carefully chosen, he finds it necessary to define first what a reader is and what his competence ought to be. With a wink Coleridge then suggests that he could even be turned into a writer.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented to a research colloquium at the University of Zurich, as part of a work-in-progress. It has grown out of a thesis on Coleridge and Vico as autobiographers, "The Translucent I: Autobiography and Theory in Giambattista Vico and Samuel Taylor Coleridge," and has been growing toward a dissertation on Coleridge's relations with the reader. What follows has been revised in the light of criticism made in our colloquium, but it remains an exploratory essay.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

The formation of his ideal reader is Coleridge's most urgent requirement. One method of choosing the reader is that of a test based on what seems self-evident. Coleridge was well aware that the more obvious something is, the more difficult it is to detect it. If it *is* noticed, it is usually misread or underrated because it seems so self-explanatory that its full implication is not perceived. Even when we have identified its meaning *in* the narrative, we still need to interpret it. The very fact that a clue is exposed in the text makes it look commonplace and of little import. In chapters 14 and 15 of the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge defines poetic skill as representing what is common and everyday in such a way that it becomes new and unfamiliar, bound to astonish and delight. There are many examples where Coleridge twists an ordinary setting or event into a nightmarish experience – *Christabel*, *The Ancient Mariner*, *The Solitary Date-Tree*, *Frost at Midnight* – to name just a few. His other main method is the opposite of the one just mentioned. It is the enigma, the code, the allusion, the setting of traps, etc. – anything that may mislead the reader.

When we read Coleridge's Notebooks and letters, we realize that one of his great interests was also one of his greatest fears: writing. But if we read the *Biographia* in this light, we soon realize that there is another aspect which is bound up with and indeed more important than the question of what good poetry is. It is the issue of how we read good poetry, and if we can make sense of it. Coleridge's fascination with writing is fuelled by his obsession with reading, although the two obviously remain inseparable. He was not only one of the greatest poets but one of the most attentive and prolific readers and commentators of his time. The truth of this statement is known to all those who have tried to trace the sources of Coleridge's endless allusions in his poetry. To the others the accusation of plagiarism that has been repeatedly raised against him should point out the fact that before you can use somebody else's productions, you must have read them first. I will not raise the vexed question whether he did or did not plagiarise other writers' ideas. I will instead take it as positive and unarguable evidence for his being widely and well read, something his letters and notebooks bear witness to.

The subject of reading is an aspect which has been either forgotten or barely touched upon by his critics, in part because Coleridge either hides it or makes it so blatantly obvious that it has been overlooked. This neglect is apparent even (or especially) in obtrusive subjects like imagination *versus* fancy, understanding *versus* reason, genius *versus* talent, and so on, which constantly imply a reader and which, as the

*Biographia Literaria* states, have to be understood as parts of a larger design. If we read his *Biographia Literaria* carefully, we find out that this is exactly how he presents the topics just mentioned, as things to be explained and understood before his main concern can be dealt with. The *Biographia Literaria* could be summarized as follows: the work proceeds from a description of the first intellectual and spiritual influences on its "author" to an attempt to solve the controversy about poetic diction that existed in Coleridge's time. In order to resolve the controversy, he needs first to define this diction. But what poetry is and what language it uses is inseparable from the question of how it should be read. The distinction between writing and reading is at the core of his many attempts to reconcile opposites, which is a characteristic underlying his entire work. Opposites in Coleridge's view meet, and so writing and reading are neither active nor passive, but creative.

Most of Coleridge's later work thrives on this oscillation, this movement from one pole to the other. Such a pulling together of part and counterpart, of perfectly opposed forces, is the stuff of his writing, its structure and language, its rhythm and pace. They are the poles that characterize his very being, which is torn between indolence and discipline: they embody the expansive tale teller and the secretive writer.

At the very beginning of his work the supposed author of the *Biographia* states his intentions:

It will be found, that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally. I have used the narration chiefly for the purpose of giving a continuity to the work, in part for the sake of the miscellaneous reflections suggested to me by particular events, but still more as introductory to the statement of my principles in Politics, Religion, and Philosophy, and the application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism. But of the objects, which I proposed to myself, it was not the least important to effect, as far as possible, a settlement of the long continued controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction: and at the same time to define with the utmost impartiality the real *poetic* character of the poet [WORDSWORTH], by whose writings this controversy was first kindled, and has been since fuelled and fanned. (1: 5)

The astonishing claim that the narration of this life gives continuity to his work is one he hinted at earlier in an equally striking Notebook entry: "Seem to have made up my mind to write my metaphysical works, as *my Life, & in my Life* – intermixed with all the other events/ or history of the

mind & fortunes of S. T. Coleridge.”<sup>3</sup> Apart from this claim, he clearly says that his interest is poetry and criticism, which is to say, writing and reading. What will be at the centre of his work, will be concerned as much with literary criticism as poetry. In this light – the analysis of poetry and its true diction as one of the purposes – the book gains a unity which otherwise might seem to be lacking. Coleridge is aware of the fictional character of his literary autobiography and therefore he equates the personal account with narrative and so with fiction. If we interpret “literary life” with this statement in mind, it gains an additional meaning to that of the work as the biography of a man of letters. *Literary life* also suggests that this is the life of a figure from literature, the life of a fictional character. The creation of a character in a literary work is the topic that accompanies the objective mentioned above.

And yet we are meant to beware of confusing implied author with narrator. To be able to keep the two authorities apart is also a stage in the reader’s education. Coleridge admonishes us not to forget the distinction between the two. One of the several occasions on which he does this is the following:

I am well aware ... a high degree of talent, ... will acquire for a man the name of a great genius; though even that analagon of genius, ... would be sought for in vain in the mind and temper of the author himself. Yet even in instances of this kind ... What is charged to the author, belongs to the man ... . (1: 37)

The topic of genius and the irritability attributed to men of genius, which is the context of the quotation, is also a discourse on the distinction between author (the authority outside and behind the text) and narrator (the authority in the text). If we clear up the confusion of expressions, we understand the relation. Coleridge calls “author” what I term “narrator,” hence our fictional author of the *Biographia*, and he uses “man” to render the idea of the “real” and “implied author” respectively. The narrator’s characteristics are not necessarily the author’s. Each exists in a reality of his own, and in *his* world of reference each is real and true. When the narrator talks of personal matters, they must not be seen as actual experiences of the author, but as those of the narrator, as a character of the implied author’s narration. Outside the text they may have no existence at

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<sup>3</sup> *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 1 (1794-1804) of a Complete Edition of Notebooks, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon, 1957), September – October 1803, 1515.

all, but in the world of fiction they are real. If we put the two worlds together and contemplate each system from the perspective of the other, they are both fictions. This means also that what we regard as reality is a fiction when seen from the angle of the narrative, which again is partly a discourse on opposites that he draws together.

The letter in Chapter Thirteen is a further proof of this connection between fiction and reality. This is the letter which presumably was sent by a friend of Coleridge's who apparently comments on his chapter on the imagination – an event which in the story must be accepted as a fact, whereas in reality it is a device concocted by the implied author. There never was such a thing as this friend's letter; Coleridge wrote it himself. In the story the narrator pretends to interrupt his narration at exactly the moment he receives it: he marks it off and includes it in his work. The letter is a masterpiece of irony, a stylistic device often underrated in the *Biographia*. On the one hand it mockingly anticipates the criticism and advice of readers. On the other it communicates a serious concern precisely because of its ironic tone. Its writer compares the *Biographia* to the stairs in a tower:

*... I see clearly that you have done too much, and yet not enough. You have been obliged to omit so many links, from the necessity of compression, that what remains, looks ... like the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower. (1: 302-303)*

The winding steps exist only as fragments and yet they render the idea that they still lead somewhere. The omission of the many links suggests that there are some links which must be restored. This is the reader's task. He may tread the steps, but without his active and creative participation the way is perilous and the outcome highly uncertain. For the design of the whole stairway to emerge and thus to guarantee a secure ascent, the steps must be reconnected.

The reader as a fellow labourer is a common notion with many writers; the idea of his education from apprentice to skilled craftsman is unusual. Before the reader can understand "the true nature of poetic diction" and "the real poetic character of the poet," he has to be initiated into the rules of "poetry and criticism" via Coleridge's own "principles in Politics, Religion, and Philosophy." According to Coleridge, this is one possible way to settle "the long continued controversy" concerning poetry and to

achieve constructive criticism. An alert reader becomes for Coleridge an essential part for the functioning of the poetical mechanism.<sup>4</sup>

After stating the motives for the work, the *Biographia* continues by describing Coleridge's formation as a scholar, which goes from early erroneous influences to his "fully developed" poetry. The protagonist with whom the *Biographia Literaria* opens is the narrator when he was on the verge of manhood, and exactly because he was almost adult he had preconceived ideas about poetry. At this stage his mind is already full of lessons, most of which are wrong. Here Coleridge draws the parallel to the reader, who also has preconceived ideas when he starts reading the *Biographia* and therefore must be re-educated. Before we attain the truth, we must be able to recognize it when we find it. Before Coleridge can face the problem of poetic diction, he must define it. To succeed he must first strip the reader's mind of wrong or confusing concepts and clear the area around his point of interest. All of Volume One is an attempt to re-define words. It points out the difference between author (narrator) and man (real/implied author), talent and genius, imagination and fancy, etc., with subtler distinctions within the categories themselves. A passage in Chapter One describing Coleridge's instruction in poetry is certainly meant in addition as a warning to his reader. Coleridge intends to follow his own master's example and be a relentless teacher:

At school I enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible, though at the same time, a very severe master. ... At the same time that we were studying the Greek Tragic Poets, he made us read Shakespeare and Milton as lessons: and they were the lessons too, which required most time and trouble to bring up, so as to escape his censure. I learnt from him, that Poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes. In the truly great poets, he would say, there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word; (1: 8-9)

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<sup>4</sup> Coleridge was later to develop the necessity of the attentive reader, which Vico had seized on intuitively, in his *Opus Maximum*. Structurally the congruity of this theme with Vico's autobiography becomes apparent in the method followed at the beginning of the *Biographia*. The difference lies in the age and degree of schooling undergone by the two authors respectively. Vico begins with the protagonist's birth and childhood and the pernicious effects of mediocre teaching on his intellect, and goes on to show how he turns himself into a genius by autodidactic means. Yet both authors draw the parallel with the reader. Vico challenges us to find the truth according to our own intellectual capacity and tells us how we might succeed. Coleridge wants to re-educate the reader.

Two readers seldom read a poem alike, but poetry has a logic of its own which must be envisioned. By his willingness to let his mind be moulded, the reader establishes the fundamental qualification to understand poetry, the relation between author and reader.

Such a relation does not mean waiting for things to happen; it is active and hard work. It demands an intellectual effort. In Coleridge's analogy, there is essentially no difference between the writer's and the reader's work. In an ideal relation they both engage in composition. As the letter at the end of volume one shows, the stairs that are built by the writer have to be made treadable by the reader. The analysis of poetry in the *Biographia* appears therefore as soon as all the theories which Coleridge regards as necessary to understand poetry have been treated. It invites the reader to work minutely through the first part of the *Biographia* (which ends with the notorious letter) in order to establish the links which are necessary to understand the second book, which is their exemplification, and where the expectations raised in the first volume should be satisfied, provided of course that we are ready to admit that they are valid in concrete terms. This position is very different from the one with which the inexperienced reader and writer start. The untrained reader is bound to make mistakes and Coleridge warns us that poetry follows a "logic of its own, as severe as that of science," and that since in great poetry there is a reason for every word, it demands a high degree of attention. Whereas in the beginning the narrator is not disciplined enough to accept the authority of the others, at the end of Book One, after the implied author has educated his reader as well as his narrator, he welcomes his "friend's" judgement, given in the form of a letter.

The context in which the discussion of genius takes place shows that the discourse on author-narrator is extended to the question of good and bad poetry and to real and anonymous critics. It is a warning against confusing reality with fiction, truth with lies. At a certain point Coleridge says that it is generally believed that

... of all trades, literature ... demands the least talent or information; and, of all modes of literature, the manufacturing of poems: The difference indeed between these and the works of genius, is not less than between an egg, and an egg-shell; yet at a distance they both look alike. (1:39)

Against this carelessness about poetry he sets his wish for a conscious and active reader.

The propositions from which the *Biographia* starts can now be summarized as follows. Coleridge wants to exemplify what great poetry is, but he needs a reader prepared to walk the same intellectual path as the writer, and he must be willing to correct those ideas which along the journey will be proved to be wrong. For the education of the reader a good teacher and a good method are needed. The following quotation speaks of this necessity of good teaching, and shows what happens to the students that were badly taught:

There are indeed modes of teaching which have produced, and are producing, youths of a very different stamp; ... modes, by which children are to be metamorphosed into prodigies. And prodigies with a vengeance have I known thus produced! Prodigies of self-conceit, shallowness, arrogance, and infidelity! Instead of storing the memory, during the period when the memory is the predominant faculty, with facts for the after exercise of the judgement; and instead of awakening by the noblest models the fond and unmixed LOVE and ADMIRATION, which is the natural and graceful temper of early youth; these nurselings of improved pedagogy are taught to dispute and decide; to suspect all, but their own and their lecturer's wisdom; and to hold nothing sacred from their contempt, but their own contemptible arrogance: boy-graduates in all the technicals, and in all the dirty passions and impudence, of anonymous criticism. (1: 12-13)

Although there is no explicit statement about the wrong mode of teaching – which produces impudence and anonymous criticism – it becomes clear when we examine the examples of *good* teaching. Where the latter gives evidence of its argumentation, the former imposes its theory.<sup>5</sup> While good teaching disciplines the pupil to accept authority on the basis of evidence, bad tutors impart contempt for all wisdom but their own. It is natural to assume that the narrator's way of arguing represents the ideal, that the *Biographia* itself is the ideal example of how we should argue and at the same time teach. The fundamental division into two classes of reader belongs to the same endeavour of re-defining concepts. The group that the narrator addresses are those willing to share the experience of finding the truth with his help. The first chapter establishes the two groups of scholars

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<sup>5</sup> "Nay, where I had reason to suppose my convictions fundamentally different, it has been my habit, and I may add, the impulse of my nature, to assign the grounds of my belief, rather than the belief itself; and not to express dissent, till I could establish some points of complete sympathy, some grounds common to both sides, from which to commence its explanation" (BL 1: 52).

and students and makes it clear which of them has a chance of succeeding. If the reader is not willing to be taught, he is discarded from the ranks of readers addressed by the *Biographia*. Willingness to be taught and application in the reading are two of the methods with which the implied author selects his (implied) readers. The letter mentioned above states clearly that a selection has already occurred before the book even opens. The narratees or the readers that the book addresses are marked out clearly:

Dear C.,

You ask my opinion concerning your Chapter on the Imagination, both as to the impressions it made on myself and as to those which I think it will make on the public, i.e. that part of the public who, from the title of the work and from its forming a sort of introduction to a volume of poems, are likely to constitute the great majority of your reader. (1: 302)

It is essential that the reader should undergo the same experience as the writer did when he composed the work. The relation that works here on the extratextual level works in the book too. The I-narrator in the story is simultaneously poet (of his own poetry) and reader (of other poets' poetry), tutor and student; and, as his sarcasm proves, judge of himself, and therefore a critic, too. Even if the readers addressed in the book are not really poetical geniuses, they perform at least an act very close to writing by going through a similar intellectual effort to the one the poet went through. In a sense they become writers too, and there is the hope that if these students become tutors, they will awaken love and admiration in their pupils and abstain themselves from anonymous criticism.

The topic of teaching finds a parallel even in the design of the *Biographia*. The first part or book stores the memory with facts necessary for the exercise of judgement in the second part. The key-word for understanding the method of the work is experience. By this is meant both shared experience and self-experience. The medium through which the author creates a relation to the reader is the book, but by now it has become clear that the book is a precarious means of communication. Its message is prone to misinterpretation, since apparently all kinds of readers have access to it. No wonder Coleridge was alarmed by the wide diffusion of books. He feared that commerce and the editorial boom that had started with the Enlightenment and was continually expanding, would mean

decline and ultimate loss of the book.<sup>6</sup> He dreaded the destruction of the authority and order of author, language and reader. This fear is felt throughout the *Biographia Literaria*:

But, alas! the multitude of books, and the general diffusion of literature, have produced other, and more lamentable effects in the world of letters, and such as are abundant to explain, tho' by no means to justify, the contempt with which the best grounded complaints of injured genius are rejected as frivolous, or entertained as matter of merriment. (1: 38)

And further on:

... for as long as there are readers to be delighted with calumny, there will be found reviewers to calumniate. And such readers will become in all probability more numerous, in proportion as a still greater diffusion of literature shall produce an increase of sciolists; and sciolism bring with it petulance and presumption. In times of old, books were as religious oracles; as literature advanced, they next became venerable preceptors; they then descended to the rank of instructive friends; and as their numbers increased, they sunk still lower to that of entertaining companions; and at present they seem degraded into culprits to hold up their hands at the bar of every self-elected, yet not the less peremptory, judge, who chuses to write from humour or interest, from enmity or arrogance, and to abide the decision (in the words of Jeremy Taylor) "of him that reads in malice, or him that reads after dinner."

The same gradual retrograde movement may be traced, in the relation which the authors themselves have assumed towards their readers. (1: 57-58)

With marvellous irony he views the downfall of the book from its position as an oracle to, as it were, a delinquent. At the bottom of the fall lies literary criticism. What made Coleridge so angry was the arrogance of critics. How can you analyse a poem before you have learnt how to read it?

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<sup>6</sup> Other poets shared his concern. Giacomo Leopardi deplored that anyone had at least one book in print. In a letter to Francesco Cancellieri, dated 20 December 1816, he said of Milan:

A Milano si stampa quel che si vuole da chi ha la fortuna di trovarsi, e tutto a conto degli Stampatori o con sicurezza dell'esito ... Tutti stampano e solamente a noi miserabili non è concesso di stampare nulla.

(In Milan anything is printed of those that are lucky enough to be there, and everything because of the printers or the certainty of the outcome ... All are printing and only we are not allowed to print anything.)

Cf. G. Leopardi, *Epistolario*, p. 1015.

The degradation of the book, the promiscuous reader, the fanatical critic, wrong education, are all elements of the theme concerning the antagonism of author and reader. The fact that it is taken up from the very beginning and is never dropped, proves that it is Coleridge's basic worry:

I have often thought, that it would be neither uninstructive nor unamusing to analyze, and bring forward into distinct consciousness, that complex feeling, with which readers in general take part against the author, in favor of the critic; and the readiness with which they apply to all poets the old sarcasm of Horace upon the scribblers of his time: "Genus irritabile vatum." (1: 30)

And we should not let ourselves be deceived by the irony with which the narrator handles the subject. As with all irony, it denotes also an uneasiness on the part of the speaker. The more ironical the narrator becomes the more serious Coleridge becomes. The *Biographia Literaria* is a tour de force for giving back to literature, author and reader their former values. It is a demand for a literary criticism which is not based on whim, enmity or arrogance.

It is not astonishing that Coleridge is obsessed by the authority of the book. The downfall of the "sacred" book means ultimately the destruction of truth, unless the reader is taught the method for attaining knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The narrator selects readers who are willing to undertake the toil. These he leads along the path of intellectual and spiritual effort. They are made aware that there are different classes of readers and ways of reading. They learn the essential definition of certain terms; they are introduced to the narrator's and other poets' faults; they get to know philosophical theories (some of which are shown to be wrong), and finally they are led back on the right track. Along the way, the narrator keeps selecting his readers.

<sup>7</sup> In his *Scienza Nuova* Vico tells us that in books lies truth, and he tells us how to find it. But the comparative and conscious reading that Vico demands entails too much chance of misreading since the reader has been taught wrongly in his youth. For Coleridge the challenge to find the truth is not enough to guarantee a correct interpretation. What still remains is the problem that the reader when reading a book is "on the verge of manhood" and so his mind has already undergone a certain spiritual formation. Therefore Coleridge is not satisfied with simply showing the method of attaining the knowledge; he must somehow teach it:

Much however may be effected by education. I believe not only from grounds of reason, but from having in great measure assured myself of the fact by actual though limited experience, that to a youth led from his first boyhood to investigate the meaning of every word and the reason of its choice and position, Logic presents itself as an old acquaintance under new names. (BL 2: 143)

For example, he interrupts the continuity of his narration to talk about his text and to draw their attention to obstacles lying ahead. Under the guise of free choice he diminishes their number; while he states, "... I earnestly solicit the good wishes and friendly patience of my readers, while I thus go 'sounding on my dim and perilous way'" (1:105), it is obvious that he expects the conscientious reader not to wait behind but to go with him. Sometimes he sounds even firmer and says that the chapter that follows was not written for those minds that feel completely at ease about the notions dealt with therein.<sup>8</sup> At other times he writes that in the chapter to follow he will deal with a tedious subject which is of little importance, and whoever is in a hurry or not interested in it can simply skip it and continue with the next one. Yet those are snares that the implied author sets. It is another method to select his elite of readers, and whoever may choose to follow his ironic advice has no chance of advancing from a mere reader to a real critic – who has to produce an interpretation that will include and account for the missing steps without destroying those already there. The narrator does not consider the reader's education as, "... only a decent apprenticeship in logic" (1: 235). Their relation involves far more. During all these lessons, readers learn to use the tools of a conscious reading and its consequence, a conscientious criticism. In Chapter XXI in the second volume the narrator talks about the right to criticize, "... as long as the author is addressed or treated as the mere impersonation of the work then under trial, ... as long as no personal allusions are admitted, and no re-commitment (for new trial) of juvenile performances, that were published ... many years before ..." (2:108). This again makes evident that author and text belong to two separate orders of reality. The former is the mere impersonation of the latter because he has written it. As contents and the passing of time make clear however, the work does not represent its writer. Criticism must keep the two apart: "... as soon as the critic betrays, that he knows more of his author, than the author's publications could have told him; as soon as from this more intimate knowledge, elsewhere obtained, he avails himself of the slightest trait against the author; his

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<sup>8</sup> "... if a man receives as fundamental facts, and therefore of course indemonstrable and incapable of further analysis, the general notions of matter, spirit, soul, body, action, passiveness, time, space, cause and effect, consciousness, perception, memory and habit; if he feels his mind completely at rest concerning all these, and is satisfied, if only he can analyse all other notions into some one or more of these supposed elements with plausible subordination and apt arrangement: to such a mind I would as courteously as possible convey the hint, that for him the chapter was not written.

Vir bonus es, doctus, prudens; ast *haud tibi spiro*" (BL 1: 234-235)

censure instantly becomes personal injury..." (2: 109). Criticism may be directed against a composition but not against its composer. It may attack the characters for their opinions but not the author, who need not share their point of view. If the critics found their arguments on theory, they perform a useful task, since author and reader can take it as a guideline. It is essential for good criticism to be founded on the "... two-fold basis of universal morals and philosophic reason ..." (2: 110).

This connection between conscious reading and writing is exemplified many times. We may refer directly to the writing of the *Biographia* itself.<sup>9</sup> While the reader learns, he goes through a similar act to that of the writer who is composing a poem. The essential difference lies in "the passive page" (1: 60) the writer is confronted with at the beginning of every creation. Creation means beating new tracks, experimenting in new directions. The poet purposely leaves the old path that leads securely to the goal. Such an approach doubtless involves dead ends, wrong turns, mistakes. The reader too, in his own way, follows and carries out the creative act. He gives meaning to the other's poetry, "... he, who points out and elucidates the beauties of an original work, does indeed give me interesting information ..." (1: 62)<sup>10</sup> What the poet does is to generate an experience for the reader which parallels his own. In doing so, he maintains the necessary condition of showing him the truth, because truth is only earned through the action of the mind.<sup>11</sup> Coleridge is serious about

<sup>9</sup> "But in promiscuous company no prudent man will oppugn the merits of a contemporary in his own supposed department; contenting himself with praising in his turn those whom he deems excellent. If I should ever deem it my duty at all to oppose the pretensions of individuals, I would oppose them in books which could be weighed and answered, in which I could evolve the whole of my reasons and feelings with their requisite limits and modifications ..." (BL 1: 54).

With an ironical sense of humour Coleridge creates a parody of his own work. The narrator pretends that he would "oppose the pretensions of individuals in books" while it is actually what he does. And there is no question about whom his prudent reader would deem excellent.

<sup>10</sup> The whole act of writing becomes a symbol of Vico's theory of *corsi e ricorsi*. The poet goes through the three ages; he starts with the blank page; experiments making mistakes and crude poetry; but genius creates something original; and in the end the poet is thrown back to a new beginning. Nevertheless, the beginning is not the same, because after every creative act, the new poetry that genius composes comes closer to perfection. The reader too, in his own way, follows and carries out the creative act. He gives meaning to the other's poetry. Thus Coleridge cannot accept the theory of association because, "... our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory" (BL 1: 111); nor can he accept its consequences where "... the consciousness [is] considered as a result ..." (BL 1: 117).

<sup>11</sup> "To find no contradiction in the union of old and new; to contemplate the ANCIENT of days and all his works with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat; characterizes the mind that feels the riddle of the world, and may help to unravel it. To carry

creating this parallel in experience between author and reader, so that the action of the mind could become one of the pen. Instead of giving his reader a completed poem to analyse, he confronts him with a fragment, suggesting thus that he must finish it before he can interpret it.

If we turn now to the Preface to *Kubla Khan*, we see how the question of writing and reading is put into practice.

Of three of his best known poems, *Kubla Khan*, *Christabel*, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, – to say nothing of *The Solitary Date-Tree* – he claimed at one time or the other that they had come to him in a kind of vision.<sup>12</sup> If this were so, it would carry the implication of the author as a kind of inspired poet, a prophet-like figure that in a moment when his senses have become so acute he experiences his dream as *things*, which is to say that the images he perceives become matter, real to the eyes and ears, and true to smell and touch. This state of the author is certainly comparable to what theologians say about the circumstances under which the visions occurred to prophets and saints. Scientific experiments have shown that both hunger and drugs can have the property of creating a receptive state which can result in hallucinations. But whereas the great world religions, Christian, Islamic, Hebrew, and Buddhist, have always regarded fasting as the common practice for cleansing the body and soul to establish a contact with God, and have officially always condemned the use of drugs, so called primitive people have usually used drugs to communicate with their gods and spirits. In Coleridge's times people knew that the savages of North America, as well as those of the once great

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on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar;

With sun and moon and stars throughout the year,  
And man and woman;  
this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talents. And therefore is it the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence. Who has not a thousand times seen snow fall on water? Who has not watched it with a new feeling, from the time that he has read Burns' comparison of sensual pleasure

To snow that falls upon a river  
A moment white- then gone for ever!

In poems, equally as in philosophic disquisitions, genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty, while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission" (BL 1: 80-82).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bostetter, p. 85 and the "Prefaces" to *Kubla Khan*, and *The Solitary Date-Tree* respectively.

nations of Central America, practised this method to enter into a trance for exactly that reason. If we accept what Bostetter says in *The Romantic Ventriloquists* that the earthly paradise described in *Kubla Khan* is a "... blending of the landscapes of England, especially around Nether Stowey, and of North America as Coleridge had read about in such books as Bartram's *Travels* and imagined it in his dream of pantisocracy" (86), then we should also agree that Coleridge taking laudanum and his subsequent dream strongly resemble the drug-taking savage. By noting this, what I want to point out are the following positions. First, I want to distance the vision from a Christian conception, for which there is no evidence and which read in relation to the poem is simply wrong. Instead of regarding the Coleridge in *Kubla Khan*'s "Preface" as an inspired prophetic figure, which – thanks to Thomas Carlyle's portrait of the old sage sitting on the brow of Highgate Hill – seems how critics keep reading it, we should understand him rather as a shaman or druid figure. The dream or vision would thus be a primitive, pagan experience connected to superstition; as the poem proves, this is not a Christian dream, nor is the sinful method (according to Christian parameters) of drug-taking that provoked it. And my second point supports this. Coleridge himself suffered and was fascinated by the ambiguous properties of laudanum or opium. On the one hand it calmed troubled spirits and assuaged pain, on the other whoever used it became easily addicted to it. We see that the twist which occurs in the poem, the dream of a pleasure dome that turns into a nightmare of demons, is a twist that is already implicit at the outset, in the "Preface" of the poem, which is to say in the way in which this vision has been brought on.

What Coleridge says in his "Preface" to *Kubla Khan* goes well beyond the mere suggestion that the poem has been written as the result of a vision. Thanks to its "Preface" some critics have seriously considered *Kubla Khan* as the example of spontaneous composition. Others have read it correctly as a fictional device and say that spontaneity is simply an illusion that it wants to create. But even critics who have noticed this artifice agree that spontaneity is what Coleridge wants to make a pretence of. If we read closely what the fictional author is reported of having said and take into account what vision means, we should realize that although writing is at stake, it is far from being composition and the opposite of spontaneous. The "Preface" can be seen as an allegory for the spontaneous, natural writing of poetry that many poets and especially Coleridge's contemporaries longed for, but the person from Porlock

interrupting the flow of images is a metaphor for the impossibility of this dream:

... on his [the author's] return to his room, [he] found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away ... Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for *himself* what had been originally, as it were, *given* to him ... but the tomorrow is yet to come. (Poems 163-164, emphasis added)

This has nothing to do with composition. What is actually said about the author is that he is not the author of the poem. He did not create it; he did not make it up; it was *given* to him. As so often in Coleridge, being “given” a vision is matched by being “given” or assigned a theme (as in *The Wanderings of Cain*) or being “given” a text, say *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, as an oracle. He is as little an author as the inspired writers of the Bible, who wrote what God gave unto them. He is not even a chronicler who records what he saw. He is in fact like a scribe who takes down what is dictated to him. The lines are not composed by the author since to the images he sees in his dream, he gets the words and lines of the poem, “... if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (163, emphasis added). So in the dream he is given the images directly as *things*, and he is given the correspondent words and lines that go with the *things*, and he takes them down. There is no composition involved at all, no effort. Except for the fact that the “he” (I purposely avoid the term author) takes down what is practically dictated to him, he more resembles a reader than an author. The reader too, when he takes up the poem, is given the lines and the images that go with it. If the “Preface” then is an argument against effortless composition, because in the end it cannot be creative, it also is an argument against effortless reading, because it too is not creative. Neither composing nor reading is that simple and easy. It might be true initially, as a first basic step, that a poet writes a draft of his ideas, of the *things* he sees, and that the reader sees images of what he reads. And yet if this is our way of composing and of reading, the poem necessarily remains a fragment, because only with the effort on the writer’s part can it be finished, and only through dedicated application can

the reader make sense of it. What is called composition requires hard work, and so does what can be termed interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

Even the aspect of an implied author creating the fictional "I" character of the *Biographia Literaria* finds a parallel in this "Preface." It is common among critics to take it for granted that the author mentioned in the preface is Coleridge himself and to read it therefore as an autobiographical account. There are others, like myself, who claim that the scene describes a fictional event, which means that we have a fictional Coleridge (if we persist in calling him by that name). There nevertheless still remains an incongruity even in this kind of reasoning. I have yet to find a critic who thought it worth mentioning that the preface is not written in the first person singular but in the third — a method that Coleridge uses repeatedly.<sup>14</sup> Coleridge of course could be said to follow a tradition here; it was common practice for an author to write of himself in the third person. Yet what cannot be denied is the effect it achieves: it distances the poem and its preface from its real author. We get the impression that the poem is offered and presented to us by an authority other than the authorial one. That someone knows about the circumstances in which the poem was written and tells us so in an introductory note that he adds to this poem that was in turn written by the author whom this other authority presents in the "Preface." It is as if the introduction and the poem were written by two different writers. It is not the author who says: "I have written this poem and this is how it happened." It is someone who says: "I have this poem which I now present to you, and it was written by a person I know, and this is the incident he told me about how he happened to write it." It is this someone who on account of what he had been told by the "author" calls it a *Fragment*, and it is he who practically

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<sup>13</sup> There are other instances where Coleridge precedes a poem of his with a preface very much of the kind we are faced with in *Kubla Khan*, in which he always presents each following poem as a fragment because lines that had existed in his mind had been lost in one way or the other, as in the preface of *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree*, where Coleridge mockingly invites his reader to finish his poem:

The first leaf of the MS. from which the poem has been transcribed, and which contained the two or three introductory stanzas, is wanting; and the author has in vain taxed his memory to repair the loss. But a rude draught of the poem contains the substance of the stanzas, and the reader is requested to receive it as the substitute. It is not impossible, that some congenial spirit, whose years do not exceed those of the Author at the time the poem was written, may find a pleasure in restoring the Lament to its original integrity by a reduction of the thoughts to the requisite metre. (*Poems* 395)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *The Wanderings of Cain*, *The Three Graves*, etc.

gives us the choice either to finish it or to wait for the “author” to come up with the rest, implying however that this will never happen.

Let me quote again the closing lines of the “Preface”:

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish *for himself* what had been originally, as it were, *given* to him ... but the tomorrow is yet to come.

The poem we read is what had been *given* to the “Author” (the one we are being told about in the “Preface”) by someone or by some source through a dream and he may or may not finish it; but it is only by being creative that he can write his own continuation and ending. And now someone (is it the same someone, namely the implied author?) gives the poem to us in the very same way in which it was given to the “Author” in the “Preface,” namely in lines and images, and now *we* may or may not finish it by adding *our* own end. Peter Hughes suggests that *Kubla Khan* is about writing, about coding and decoding.<sup>15</sup> So is its preface, which is not about wondrous, vision-like writing, but about the impossibility of such a naive hope. Instead of being the model of spontaneous composition, the preface and its poem become its anti-model, its negation. By suggesting that the poem is not complete the implied author puts a task to its implied reader. The fact that the “Preface” says that a great final part of it is missing piques the reader and makes him long for an end. He can react to this in two ways. Either he imagines how it could end, and if he is a daring reader he tries to complete it, or more likely, he compensates what is missing by making the most of what he has got. Yet as a fragment the poem must remain undervalued. This does not mean that any interpretation will do, rather, regardless of how many secrets the implied reader manages to elicit from the context, the poem constantly suggests that behind every unlocked door there is another locked one. There are other examples of this kind among Coleridge’s poetry.<sup>16</sup> Even his criticism and prose writings often become in this sense poetical. They require interpretation, which actually subverts the very definition of a critical, philosophical, scientific text, which shuns ambivalence and ambiguity, and where the language should be explicit and not cryptic.

To modern critics some things I have been saying about interpretation may be obvious, but Coleridge was writing at a time when poetry’s main

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the contribution by Peter Hughes, “Poet Bonaparte”: Decoding *Kubla Khan’s Decree*” in this volume, pp. 181-193.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the glosses of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

purpose was thought to be that of amusement and entertainment. Apart from this first objective, however, Coleridge makes clear poetry is also a science, and like every science it is meant to impart knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Coleridge was concerned about literary criticism at a time when still only few were aware that a literary text needed to be interpreted, decoded, analysed if the author's and the text's intentions were to be grasped. We have heard that Coleridge often deplored the careless and "promiscuous" reading of books. To make a bad situation worse, Wordsworth claimed that his poetry made use of natural language, thus giving the impression that poetry was natural, and misleading the reader into believing that what he saw was what he got. Coleridge vehemently attacked this position, arguing that natural language meant not spoken language. Natural language was poetic language, but so well chosen that it succeeded in presenting the familiar in such a way as to astonish and delight the reader. Poetical language and poetry are not a matter of less, but of more art. And I mean art not only in the sense of artifice or *Kunstgriff*, but also in the sense of what is artful. His poetry bears witness to an almost excessive use of art, so that at times it becomes heavy or even complacent. Coleridge develops intricate metrical patterns, and in his letters to friends he prides himself upon his technical virtuosity. It is as if with these excesses of his poetry, he wanted to avoid simplicity at all cost and thus ensure that it was only accessible to clever readers. Somehow his poetry works best when the implied author is mediated through voices that have a druidic quality to them. How then is he to destroy this illusion that a text means what it says? Ultimately, he can only do it by educating his readers; by selecting some and eliminating others.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. his philosophical poems.

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