

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817)

*Biographia Literaria*, like many works of the romantic period, frustrates attempts at generic classification. A two-volume prose work of considerable intellectual range and ambition, it combines Coleridge's ideas on theology, philosophy, literary theory, the nature of the imagination and poetic genius with practical criticism and personal reminiscence. Written between April and September 1815, it marks a difficult period in Coleridge's life, as he struggled to overcome his addiction to opium and bouts of suicidal depression. This turmoil partially explains the digressive and patchwork topography of *Biographia*, the composition of which began as a form of literary convalescence (Coleridge dictated much of it to his friend John Morgan). Originally, Coleridge conceived the work as a preface to his collection of poems, *Sybylline Leaves* (1817), and as a reply to William Wordsworth's preface to his own 1815 *Poems*. As the horizon of one ambition gave way to another, however, the task of prefacing his poetry expanded to incorporate a history of the poetic imagination, which in turn was succeeded by the project of writing a critical history of modern philosophy. Shifting objectives made for an ungainly structure, as Coleridge returned to interpolate philosophical material written in August and September (Chapters 5-13) into the autobiographical / literary sections completed in July (Chapters 1-4 and 14-22). The resulting convolution in *Biographia's* narrative and discursive threads is augmented by the remarkable variety of mood and register in Coleridge's prose, ranging from the light-hearted anecdote and ambitious system-building of the early sections to the more energetic poetry criticism and aesthetics of the later chapters. Compounding this, miscalculations by the printer forced Coleridge hurriedly to graft extra material onto the end of the work before it was finally published in two volumes in July 1817 (volume I containing Chapters 1 to 13, with volume II housing Chapters 14 to 22, as well as the hastily added "Satyrane's Letters" and the "Critique on *Bertram*").

If *Biographia* is typically romantic in playing fast and loose with conventional literary genres, it is equally representative in helping to fashion a new one: autobiography. Like other texts from the period, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-89), Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), the narrative of *Biographia* is based primarily in *self*-exploration. Wary of perceived self-indulgence, however, Coleridge insisted that memory and introspection could only ever be a means to an end. As he writes in the first chapter, "[i]t will be found, that the least of what I have written concerns myself personally. I have

used the narration [...] as introductory to the statement of my principles on Politics, Religion, and Philosophy, and the application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism" (Coleridge 1817, I 5). As this opening declaration reveals, *Biographia* combines an extraordinary intellectual ambitiousness with hesitancy over using the personal as a basis for the philosophical.

This tension between private and public voices further echoes Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, a text which shares *Biographia*'s marriage of introspection and philosophy. Indeed, both works emerged from a literary dialogue between the two writers that dates back to their joint endeavours on *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): Wordsworth's great poem initially took shape as the "Poem to Coleridge," which Coleridge hoped would become part of "the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHIC POEM" (Coleridge 1817, II 156). The presence of Wordsworth reverberates throughout *Biographia*, the result of Coleridge's belief that his friend embodied the principle that "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher" (Coleridge 1817, II 25-26). Correspondingly, he insisted, no theory of poetry or criticism could be sound without the kind of firm philosophical underpinning that *Biographia* would establish. This raises the complicated issue of *Biographia*'s relation to his projected but never completed philosophical *magnum opus*, the *Logosophia*, in which Coleridge planned to set out a "total and undivided philosophy" in which "philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become inclusive of philosophy" (Coleridge 1817, I 282-83). Like *The Prelude*, which Wordsworth saw merely as the ante-chapel to the cathedral of the never-written epic poem *The Recluse*, *Biographia* was conceived as a preamble to (and as an attempt to apply to criticism and aesthetics the principles of) an even grander work. That *Logosophia* was never completed (although its fragments have recently been published as part of the *Opus Maximum*) was largely due to the overreaching ambition behind its "total and undivided philosophy," which promised no less than the synthesis of centuries of critical, philosophical and theological inquiry into a new and dynamic system of thought that would reconcile art, philosophy, and religion. *Biographia* betrays Coleridge's difficulty in fulfilling this undertaking in two ways.

The first is the work's philosophical allusiveness. For Coleridge, overthrowing the dominant aesthetic and critical theories of the past century in Britain meant dismantling the philosophical foundations upon which they rested. In place of the empirical tradition of John Locke, David Hume and David Hartley, Coleridge offered a philosophy of art based on a mixture of scripture, Neoplatonism, and (more controversially) the transcendental idealism of German thinkers, principally Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller and F. W. J. von Schelling. The bulk of this edifice is constructed in Chapters 5-13 of the first volume of *Biographia*. Chapters 5-8 find Coleridge on the

offensive, attacking empiricism (the theory that all human knowledge is based on experience derived from our senses), materialism (the theory that all existence is reducible to matter), and the theory of association, which, in the work of Coleridge's erstwhile mentor, Hartley, proposed that ideas have their roots in neurological connections, or associations, formed in the brain. Deploying arguments he found in Kant, Coleridge accuses Hartley and others of confusing the mechanical "conditions" of knowledge with its "essence," or principles of possibility (Coleridge 1817, I 123). In Chapters 9-13, he acknowledges his debts to Kant and Schelling and, amid digression, anecdote and apology, lays the foundations for his new "constructive philosophy" (Coleridge 1817, I 302), which combines the Neoplatonic mysticism of Plotinus with some of the methods of German transcendentalism. More specifically, it combines the Plotinian idea that absolute reality can be grasped only intuitively with the transcendentalist claim that this grasping must be understood as the unification of knowing and being and thus as the basic precondition of all thought. The first volume culminates with the ten philosophical-theological "Theses" of Chapter 12, which prepare the ground for the account of creative-intuitive Imagination, the cornerstone of *Biographia's* aesthetic theory, in Chapter 13.

This brings us to the other feature that suggests that *Biographia* was beginning to bend under the weight of Coleridge's varied and ambitious objectives: the hiatus in the argument between Chapters 12 and 13. Rather than extending the Theses of the earlier chapter into the definition of Imagination, Coleridge abruptly introduces a "letter from a friend" (Coleridge 1817, I 300), in which the author is advised to reserve such a daunting task for the *Logosophia*. This intervention echoes that of the "person on business from Porlock," whose call prevents the completion of "Kubla Khan." Like the person from Porlock, the "friend" is almost certainly Coleridge himself, whose intrusion at this point hastens the definition of imagination, severing it from the philosophical exposition of the previous eight chapters. In the three short but hugely influential paragraphs that follow, Coleridge makes two critical distinctions: first, between the Imagination taken as "primary" and taken as "secondary" (Coleridge 1817, I 304), and second, between Imagination generally and "Fancy" (Coleridge 1817, I 305). Of these, the second is more fundamental to Coleridge's aesthetics. Coleridge designates as mere "Fancy" what eighteenth-century theorists had generally seen as imagination, i.e. the capacity of the mind to receive, represent and reassemble images gained from experience. For Coleridge, however, Imagination is not passive before the world, but helps to shape it, both on an ontological and a psychological level. This brings us to the distinction between Imagination as "Primary" and as "Secondary". Coleridge sees Imagination in a twofold way: first, in ontological terms (the Primary Imagination) as the principle of divine creativity in human beings, the "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Coleridge 1817, I 304) that connects humanity to God, and unifies knowing and being, subject and object; second, in

psychological terms (the Secondary Imagination) as the expression of the same unifying, creative power in the human mind as it “struggles to idealize and to unify” (Coleridge 1817, I 304) its welter of experience. As a productive, unifying and “*vital*” power (Coleridge 1817, I 304), Imagination is more philosophically fundamental for Coleridge than the reproductive, passive and mechanical faculty of Fancy, which “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Coleridge 1817, I 305).

Coleridge leaves it to his readers to connect this truncated account of Imagination to both the philosophical Theses that precede it and the literary criticism that follows in Volume II. Nonetheless (and despite the tendency of many readers since to treat the literary-critical chapters of the second volume as freestanding), the philosophy of Imagination is crucial to what follows. Chapters 14-16 prepare the ground for the critique of Wordsworth by outlining what Coleridge, with hindsight, sees as the principal idea behind *Lyrical Ballads*, namely “the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination” (Coleridge 1817, II 5). For Coleridge, the poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* was to embody the imaginative synthesis of world and mind, object and subject. This would be achieved by reconciling, through style and content, the natural and the supernatural, with Coleridge endowing supernatural subjects with “a semblance of truth sufficient to procure [...] that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (Coleridge 1817, II 6), while, conversely, Wordsworth endeavoured “to give the charm of novelty to things of every day” (Coleridge 1817, II 7). However, Wordsworth’s decision to present the volume in his “Preface” as containing, in Coleridge’s words, “the language of *real* life” (Coleridge 1817, II 8) did not fit this picture. Writing *Biographia* provided Coleridge with an opportunity to set the record straight.

Coleridge embarks on this task towards the end of Chapter 14 by introducing further “philosophical” definitions: of a poem, and of poetry. He tackles the poem first:

<BLOCKQUOTE>A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species [...] it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part. (Coleridge 1817, II 13)

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A poem ought to have truth as its “*ultimate end*” (Coleridge 1817, II 12), but since it is a creature of Imagination, not reason, its approach must be intuitive rather than logical or inductive. In accounting for the function of metre, Coleridge is influenced by the new German theory of organic

form, according to which the relationship between the parts and the whole of any artwork should, as in a plant, be mutually sustaining. On this picture, metrical form should not only grow naturally from the seed of a poem's content; it will also, in turn, affect the essential meaning of that poem.

In truth, however, Coleridge is more interested in the literary *process* (poetry, or the creative act of Imagination) than the literary *product* (the poem, or composition). Poetry for Coleridge is not an arrangement of words, but an expression of genius that "brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other" and "diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power [...of] imagination" (Coleridge 1817, II 15-16). The key distinction here is not the functional one between a poem and prose, but the epistemological and aesthetic one between poetry and science. Poetry's aim is not truth as verisimilitude, but truth as feeling, as unification, and as power.

This brings us back to Wordsworth's characterisation of poetic diction as the "language of *real* life." Coleridge's objection to this formulation is that, by implying that poetry merely replicates ordinary life, Wordsworth is in danger of misrepresenting not just poetry, but also language itself. At the core of his argument is yet another distinction: this time, between "imitation" and "copy". When Coleridge claims in Chapter 18 that "the composition of a poem is among the *imitative* arts," he means that poems *transform* rather than duplicate what they represent. Consequently, "imitation, as opposed to copying, consists either in the interfusion of the SAME throughout the radically DIFFERENT, or of the different throughout a base radically the same" (Coleridge 1817, II 72). Since, Coleridge maintains, words themselves are not copies of thoughts, but imitations, poetry is not a copy of speech, but speech raised and transformed by the creative imagination into something at once the "same" and "different": *poetic* truth. One important consequence of this is what Coleridge deems to be "the infallible test of a blameless style; namely, its *untranslatableness* in words of the same language without injury to the meaning" (Coleridge 1817, II 142). It is this idea of poetic language that Coleridge claims is at the heart of *Lyrical Ballads*: synthesising difference with sameness by interweaving nature and imagination, the ordinary with the supernatural, it cannot be paraphrased or translated into the merely literal and mechanical vocabulary of the understanding.

Throughout Chapters 15-22, Coleridge engages in a "practical criticism" (his own phrase) of Wordsworth's poetry (Coleridge 1817, II 19). This involves, among other things, quantifying Wordsworth's merits by comparing him to other great poets. In Chapter 15, Coleridge uses Shakespeare as a model for the major characteristics of "original poetic genius" (Coleridge 1817, II 18): a sense of musical delight; a sympathetic imagination; a unifying, predominant passion; and a depth and powerful energy of thought. While Shakespeare possesses all these qualities in

abundance, Wordsworth excels only in the latter two. Indeed, among the five major “defects” of Wordsworth’s poetry enumerated in Chapter 22, Coleridge includes “an undue predilection for the *dramatic* form in certain poems” (Coleridge 1817, II 135). Coleridge sees Wordsworth’s genius, like that of Milton (but in contrast to the “Proteus” Shakespeare), as fundamentally non-dramatic. Wordsworth is at his best as a poet, Coleridge argues, when he draws all things into himself through “the blending, *fusing* power of Imagination and Passion” (Coleridge 1817, II 150). In this regard, “he stands nearest of all modern writers to Shakespear and Milton; and yet in a kind perfectly unborrowed and his own” (Coleridge 1817, II 151).

*Biographia* was not greeted with much enthusiasm by reviewers, who objected to the work’s lack of organisation and to Coleridge’s metaphysics, which even philosophically sophisticated readers such as William Hazlitt found impenetrable. A second edition appeared posthumously in 1847, by which time accusations had already emerged that Coleridge had plagiarised his German sources, particularly Schelling—claims that continue to dog the work’s reputation today. Nonetheless, *Biographia*’s increasing importance and influence is attested by the appearance of two new editions around the beginning of the twentieth century: an Everyman edition, with an Introduction by Arthur Symons (1906), and a new annotated edition by John Shawcross for the Clarendon Press (1907). By this time *Biographia* had already acquired the reputation as one of the most important works in the history of English literary criticism, not just because of its revealing criticism of Wordsworth and Shakespeare, but also through introducing to an Anglophone audience the ideas of organic unity, practical criticism, the untranslatableness of poetic diction, and the “willing suspension of disbelief,” as well as radically new definitions of imitation, poetic genius, and—most influentially of all—Imagination. Even as this pre-eminence has withstood the challenge of High Modernism and postmodernism, *Biographia* has remained a focus of attention for a variety of theoretical and critical schools, from the history of ideas to New Criticism, and from stylistic approaches to attempts either to deconstruct the work’s metaphysics or to find in its self-conscious lacunae a foreshadowing of postmodern irony. Today, the work remains widely available in print in the form of the revised Everyman’s edition by George Watson (1975) and the standard, Princeton University Press edition by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (1983).

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