

READER AND AUDIENCE IN COLERIDGE'S BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA

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IN
COLERIDGE'S BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA

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Abstract

The thesis concerns the question of Coleridge's readership as it pertains to Coleridge's prose and specifically to Biographia Literaria. The introduction presents the question of Coleridge's reader as it has been applied in recent scholarship, where, in relation to the problem of the Biographia's integrity, the Biographia's digressions and tropes have been construed as ironic gestures inviting participatory reading. Chapter one discusses Coleridge's views on readers and reading and introduces Coleridge's attacks on the reading public. The chapter points out that Coleridge's views on readers and reading are essentially authoritarian; there is no room in his view for participatory reading and the role of the reader is largely marginal. In the context of the conclusions of this chapter, Coleridge's treatment of the reader in the Biographia is a strategy for asserting the author's authority over the reader and for consolidating a suitable audience. Chapter two points out the overtly political authoritarianism of Coleridge's concern with readers and the reading public. Despite his insistence on the recognition of rational critical consensus, Coleridge's views function on behalf of established political power. In the context of the conclusions of this chapter, Coleridge's treatment of the reader in the Biographia is reactionary.

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Contents

Introduction: Reading Coleridge.....1
Chapter One: Coleridge on Reading and Readers.....35
Chapter Two: Coleridge and Some Readers.....70
Conclusion.....86
Works Cited.....89

Introduction: Reading Coleridge

To assign a feeling and a determination of will as a satisfactory reason for embracing this or that opinion or belief, is of ordinary occurrence, and sure to obtain the sympathy and the suffrages of the company. And yet to me this seems little less rational than to apply the nose to a picture, and to decide on its genuineness by the sense of smell. (Aids To Reflection, 69, n.)

Some recent criticism¹ of Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, in an effort to make apparent some integrity in the Biographia's fragmented and digressive "miscellany," has pointed out that what Coleridge does in this text is as much a matter of certain rhetorical manoeuvres and strategies as it is a matter of consecutive critical argument or transcendental deduction. The Biographia in particular, though this is to a lesser extent true of some other of Coleridge's prose works, has attracted a body of criticism which, simply put, argues that while the "written text" is indeed fragmentary, its arguments aborted or incomplete and its promises apparently unfulfilled, the "work" (what the reader must, or is invited to, actualize in his engagement with the text) is held together in a kind of imaginative, virtual unity.² Thus, it is argued, the various gaps, digressions and incompletions are not lapses from an unaccomplished purpose, but significant formal elements, aspects of a design that works to encourage the sympathetically engaged reader to supplement, through an imaginative act of his own, the ellipsed or

unrealized connections and closure. As Catherine M. Wallace has contended, for example, in the Biographia Coleridge's "dual design enacts its principle idea to a far greater extent than one commonly finds. The form is to make us think: the content is to tell us what thinking is -- which is to say, render us conscious of what we are doing as we ponder the issues Biographia Literaria raises" (14). The written text of the Biographia becomes in such arguments symbolic of an anterior unity, and points ahead to the fulfillment of the unity in the Coleridgean dictum, "Know Thyself."

Thus, the Biographia's prevarications and incompletions have been taken to figure "a display of authorial autonomy and an invitation to participatory reading" (Levinson, 17). The reader is to participate as co-producer; the authority of the text is made indeterminate. This focus of the recent construals of Biographia Literaria is aptly stated by David Simpson, who sees the Biographia as speaking from "a context highly suspicious of authoritarian discourse, whether political or textual, [which] involves a negative...corollary in the tendency towards complete abandonment of an authorial control over the limits of possible interpretation" (166). The discontinuities of the Biographia are, Simpson urges, deliberately "designed to make us confront the question of authority especially as it pertains to the contract between author and reader" (xi).

In what follows, I shall take issue with this tendency to see in the Biographia particularly, and more generally throughout Coleridge's prose, "an invitation to participatory reading," a questioning of textual authority, and a loosening of authorial control. The claim here,

with respect to Coleridge's prose, is that for Coleridge there is no intrinsic problem of communication, no intrinsic aspect of the author-reader transaction, which would suggest the sort of symmetry between author and reader, or the questioning of authority, whether authorial, textual, or political, that some have argued are figured in Biographia Literaria. An examination of some common threads in Coleridge's scattered discussions of reading, readers and the reading public reveals that Coleridge does indeed concern himself with the question of authority, "especially as it pertains to the contract between author and reader," but this is a concern to consolidate and make clear the operation of authority, not to cast suspicion upon it. It is submitted that what underlies all of Coleridge's concern with readers and reading can be summed up as a concern with consensus, that is, with the established authority and the critical consensus which solidifies the authority of the writer, which defines who is a competent reader, and which defines the right of the reader to judge and the means by which he judges. What Coleridge points to is a failure to reckon with this consensus, an inversion of the contract between author and reader. The figure cut by the reader in this contract is one where any genuinely supplementive or recuperative role for the reader is simply redundant. In other words, that readers should take interpretive liberties, and that authors should comply with this, are terms excluded from Coleridge's author-reader contract.

Moreover, the recent recuperative readings of the Biographia that see figured in that work an invitation to participatory reading and a questioning of authority present an instance of what Jerome

McGann points to in his argument that "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by...an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (1). McGann has contended that "one basic doctrine which Romanticism works are continually presenting for reader consumption is that they are innocent of moral or doctrinal commitments" (66). This "doctrine" is indeed manifested most plainly, for instance, in Coleridge's case in his insistence on acknowledgement of the authority upon which his judgements are formed, in attacks upon unprincipled critics who write from resentment or party spirit, and in the presentation of "Coleridge the author" as disinterestedly setting right alien and unfounded controversies with honest reference to established principles. M.G. Cooke has remarked that "the coercive charm of the Coleridgean conversation..., [is] revealingly used in the Biographia for a process of discursive reasoning. Manifestly... the operation of personality cuts in on the expression of ideas..." (210). This substitution of "coercive charm" for discursive reasoning is precisely what is so curious about the Biographia. To posit a virtual work behind the written text of the Biographia as something ever to be realized in the inward crucible of imagination and idea, to exonerate Coleridge and give complete credence to his philosophical authority, is to fall under the spell of Coleridge's coercive charm without questioning on behalf of what this charm functions.

The claim here is that Coleridge's concern to consolidate and to have recognized textual authority implies an appeal on behalf of established political authority. His discussions of readers and the reading public have certain definite political filiations which are

manifested where, for example, intellectual distinctions made by Coleridge between competence and incompetence fall in with economic distinctions in the social hierarchy. As intellectual justification merges with economic justification in Coleridge's argument, his doctrinal innocence vanishes in the mist. The political slant of Coleridge's concern with readers and reading is manifested, for example, in the well-known fact that, in order to counteract the difficulties presented by the reading public, Coleridge envisioned the creation of a small élite class of learned readers. In the early essays of The Friend Coleridge expresses a hope for a small audience that will welcome the abstruse subject-matter and the absence of matters of a merely diversionary or amusing nature in the publication. He also counts upon a somewhat larger group, who, having the means, will support the publication out of a sense of duty, though too busy to struggle through it (Friend, II, 273-274). This hope materializes in the Lay Sermons as Coleridge's famous address ad clerum, "to men of clerkly acquirements, of whatever profession" (Statesman's Manual, 36):

I appeal exclusively to men, from whose station and opportunities I may dare anticipate a respectable portion of that sound book learnedness. (Statesman's Manual, 39)

Coleridge makes a metaphorical connection between knowledge and competence on the one hand, and wealth or property on the other, into a connection in fact, where he advocates this elite clerical class based upon property, rank, and the availability of leisure (Statesman's Manual, 170). In the

end, a reading of Biographia Literaria that sees the work as a kind of gesture of freedom cannot easily be brought to accord with such political affiliations.

The claims made here, however, do not entail a claim that there are not figured in the text of Biographia Literaria and in other of Coleridge's prose works rhetorical strategies that aim to engage the reader in certain ways or that these strategies are irrelevant. Indeed, Coleridge's manoeuvres are quite evident and have been noted by a number of critics. Throughout the Biographia Coleridge takes aim at the habits of a reading public befuddled by the notions of popular philosophy, too inclined to read passively for mere amusement, and too easily duped by empty poets and shallow critics. From the devotee of Bowles's sonnets, to the principled critic of Wordsworth's poetry, Coleridge presents to his reader an exemplary picture of a fair, disinterested man searching earnestly after truth. As more than one critic has noted, the portrait Coleridge draws evokes the sympathies of the potentially intransigent reader, so that, as the narrative meanders forward, matters that might otherwise remain mere "matters of personal biography are raised into a metaphysical principle, and the reader's sympathetic response consolidated into a conviction" (Cooke, 214). Richard Malette concurs with this opinion when he points out that

Our response to the ideas [Coleridge] sets forth cannot be dissociated from the manner in which he chooses to represent them in this peculiar work.... [A]s the narration proceeds on its circuitous path, Coleridge...steps forth at every juncture to shape and mold an experience of his text. He rarely leaves us alone with the pure ideas he wishes to expound, but stands over his progeny almost tyrannically, directing his reader's encounter

by means of the various poses and tones of voice he chooses to assume. The total effect...lends to the Biographia an imaginative unity that would otherwise be lost. (Malette, 32)

Coleridge does strain beyond polite evocation of his reader's sympathies and patience. As Malette indicates by the use of the word "tyrannically," at certain points in the text, Coleridge adopts strategies that seem calculated to coerce his reader into making a conscious choice. The reader seems to be bullied into giving credit to Coleridge's authority, or, at the very least, is nudged into a state of "suspended judgement."

The most noted instances of Coleridge's manipulation of his reader's expectations in Biographia Literaria do, as Cooke notes in his observation on the substitution of coercive charm for discursive reasoning, occur at points in Coleridge's argument that bear, or that seem as if they ought to bear, the greatest logical weight. At the end of Chapter Six, for example, where Coleridge is ostensibly in the midst of showing why Hartley's system of associationism is untenable, he breaks off the argument with a quotation from Plotinus, and declares, in a mystical and prophetic way, that

not now dare I longer discourse of this, waiting for a loftier mood, and a nobler subject, warned from within and from without, that it is profanation to speak of these mysteries

To those whose imagination it has never been presented, how beautiful is the countenance of justice and wisdom; and that neither the morning nor the evening star are so fair. For in order to direct the view aright, it behoves that the beholder should have made himself congenerous and similar to the object beheld. Never

could the eye have beheld the sun had
its own essence been soliform...neither
can a soul not beautiful attain to an
intuition of beauty. (B.L., I, 114-115)

With the quotation from Plotinus, Coleridge at once hitches his wagon to an ancient tradition and forces the reader to consider whether he is one to whom the mysterious remainder of the argument must not be presented; Coleridge thereby bolsters his own authority and also forestalls final judgement upon his argument and its apparently sublime implications. The reader is obviously urged to doubt his own capacities for comprehending the argument and its implications.

There are, indeed, more famous examples of this pattern in the Biographia. Coleridge opens Chapter Twelve, for example, with the following comment:

In the perusal of philosophical works I have been greatly benefited by a resolve which, in the antithetic form with the allowed quaintness of an adage or maxim, I have been accustomed to word thus: "until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding." (B.L., I, 232)

Three paragraphs later, Coleridge writes:

The extent of my daring has been to suggest one criterion, by which it may be rationally conjectured before-hand, whether or not a reader would lose his time, and perhaps his temper, in the perusal of this, or any other treatise constructed on similar principles. But it would be cruelly misinterpreted, as implying the least disrespect either for the moral or intellectual qualities of the individuals thereby precluded. The criterion is this:

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. (B.L., I, 234-235)

What reader accepts these notions as indemonstrable and is able to "analyse all other notions into one or some of these general notions"? Perhaps the philosopher-critic who has spent years in a library thinking all these notions through to their simplest elements (that is, a reader may safely speculate, Coleridge himself) or the complacent man of common sense who is either adverse to, or incapable of, abstract thought. Clearly, the tone of this passage is subtly ironic, and the effect is complex: the urbane and apologetic manner, along with the ponderous list of abstract terms artfully presented in a labyrinthine sentence, both maintains the sense of Coleridge's earnest fairness and enlists respect for his authority, while the gesture of respect for the reader's intelligence tends both to disarm hasty judgement and to urge the reader on to question whether his capacities are up to the task that Coleridge has apparently mastered. As M.G. Cooke notes, in such passages "Coleridge continually places the burden of proof, indeed the burden of guilt, on the reader. Where Wordsworth, in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads leads the reader to consider that he may misapprehend the writer who displeases him, Coleridge

makes him fear that he is probably doing so. The standard of 'principled' criticism puts a positive obligation on the reader, and this obligation is rendered explicit in Coleridge's 'golden rule'" (215). Before the reader ever has the opportunity of understanding the author's ignorance in matters philosophical, Coleridge urges the reader to believe in the probability of his ignorance of the author's understanding.

The most infamous, and perhaps the most obvious, example of this tactic is the puzzling 'letter from a friend' in Chapter Thirteen, which breaks off the promised demonstration of the nature and genesis of the imagination. It has been established that Coleridge himself created the letter and its author,³ and this fact, speculations about specific intention aside, points out some kind of motivation for the breakdown of the argument. Coleridge states that he has received the letter "from a friend, whose practical judgement [he has] had ample reason to estimate and revere, and whose taste and sensibility preclude all the exercise which [his] self-love might possibly have prompted [him] to set up in plea against the decision of advisers of equal good sense, but with less tact and feeling" (B.L., I, 300). He writes that the letter had been received when "the work" was being "transcribed for the press," while the alleged friend purports to reply to Coleridge's request for an opinion concerning the "Chapter on the Imagination" (B.L., I, 300). The friend estimates that the entire printed Chapter "cannot...amount to so little as an hundred pages" (B.L., I, 303). In consequence of the letter, Coleridge writes, only "the main result" of the Chapter will be stated. The Chapter itself will be "reserved for [a] future publication" (B.L., I, 304) on "the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and

Deity" (B.L., I, 302), a "detailed prospectus of which" Coleridge promises to append to the Biographia, although the reader finds that the prospectus is not appended. Thus, throughout the episode, not only the chapter itself, but a lengthy and authoritative philosophical argument in connection with it, are offered up as completed texts the communication of which is given up only at the urging of the alleged friend.

The truth and necessity of the argument are clearly not in question in the letter; these seem to be (quite literally in this case) a foregone conclusion. Coleridge maintains absolute control over what he has ellipsed from the text, and relieves himself of all responsibility for the reader's dismay or confusion. In effect, Coleridge apologizes for the incompetence or disinclination to intellectual endeavour in what he implicitly characterizes as his potential audience, while the gestures of esteem for the prudent friend have the somewhat ironic effect of making Coleridge appear to accept part of the blame for the gap in the argument. The friend is more familiar with the peculiarities of the book trade and the propensities of the average reader, and, it seems, Coleridge ought to have taken these matters into account. This friend reputedly tells Coleridge that

your opinions and method of argument were not only so new to me, but so directly the reverse of all I had ever been accustomed to consider as truth, that even if I had comprehended your premises sufficiently to have admitted them, and had seen the necessity of your conclusions...I should have felt as if I had been standing on my head.

And as for the effect of the undisclosed metaphysical chapter especially

upon the public, the friend urges that it

will of necessity greatly increase the expense of the work; and every reader who, like myself, is neither prepared or perhaps calculated for the study of so abstruse a subject so abstrusely treated, will, as I have before hinted, be almost entitled to accuse you of a sort of imposition on him. (B.L., I, 303)

Here, as in the other instances brought forward, Coleridge offers his reader a choice, a dual perspective. Tilottama Rajan succinctly delineates the position of the reader in the letter:

The aim of the letter is to shift the onus for the disintegration of the text onto the insensitive reader, and thus to persuade him to atone by willingly suspending his disbelief in the existence of a treatise which his intellectual flaws have forestalled the author from producing. But this ingenious bullying may well alienate the reader and cause him to look with skepticism at the two paragraphs Coleridge did print, instead of seeing them as a fading coal left when inspiration gives way to composition or composition to publication. (579)

The reader who looks with skepticism on the prevarications of the letter renders himself guilty of a kind of bad faith. This choice aligns him with an incompetent multitude, the public, and the forces of the book trade. The alternative makes the reader a friend, a confidant of the author and aligns him with a select group of knowledgeable readers who might plausibly pass over Coleridge's philosophic chapters.

One can see this strategy of exclusion employed at the end of

the discussion of the association of ideas where Coleridge breaks off the argument with the quotation from Plotinus. There, Coleridge alludes to certain enormously important implications to his discussion that cannot be produced because his readers are not initiated into certain mysteries. In the example of Coleridge's list of abstract terms, Coleridge anticipates his readers' prejudices, not to offer assurance or clarification, but to urge that any misunderstandings and difficulties that arise in the perusal of the chapter are, or are at least likely to be, a matter of his readers' ignorance. Again, the effect is that the reader who looks with skepticism on Coleridge's back-handed caveat may condemn himself of the very prejudicial ignorance of which Coleridge warns. In each case Coleridge creates a situation where the possibility of the reader's own prejudices and incompetence threaten the coherence of the argument and the author-reader transaction, until finally argument gives way before his audience's misunderstanding and the prejudicial weight represented by the public and the book trade alluded to by the 'friend' in Chapter Thirteen. By means of the letter, Coleridge can enact the breakdown of argument rather than impute directly and entirely to his audience responsibility for the breakdown. Instead, two perspectives or positions are offered: the reader can stand with Coleridge the author, watching the argument give way before the prudent and worldly voice of the friend, or, after having made his way already through Coleridge's lengthy digressions and the abstruse difficulties of Chapter Twelve, the reader can alienate himself from Coleridge's virtual treatise and take up the friend's position of common-sense dismay.

In these examples, then Coleridge employs a subtle strategy for

making his argument clear and cogent, where misunderstanding and broken argument become the fault of the reader, or at least the fault of certain prejudiced readers. At the same time, the strategy functions to make an appropriate reader, to build an appropriate audience, where a perspective is created that brings the reader into sympathy with the authorial voice. It appears that Coleridge has succeeded to a considerable degree. The criticism that has concerned itself with the reader in Coleridge's prose, and in the Biographia particularly, has tended to sympathize with Coleridge and to see these strategies as aspects of a specialized indirect method of communication that works to effect an engagement with the text that is self-consciously productive of meaning. These arguments locate motivation for the Biographia's formal peculiarities in what they describe as certain epistemological problems.

In general, the claim is based on the view that there is in Coleridge's writings some notion of an epistemological 'gap' between thought and expression on the one hand, and expression and reception on the other. The form, or lack of an explicit or easily definable form, of Biographia Literaria, it is argued, is somehow symptomatic of Coleridge's dissatisfaction with the capacities of language to convey meaning.⁴ Coleridge's "problem," as it is called, is neatly summarized, again by Rajan:

The problem is most obvious in many Romantic texts that are fragments, where the "text" does not coincide with what we may call the "work", the essential meaning of which Romantic hermeneutics discovers through a reading which is psychological and divinatory rather than grammatical and structural. (...) To bring the [discourse] to its conclusion we must leave the text, which de-realizes its conclusion, for the work. (573)

With this "disappearance of actualization," says Rajan, the text becomes more "like the script for a film or the score for a piece of music rather than the film or music itself. It becomes a signifier which points to a meaning not embodied in the text" (574-575). Hence,

though the work behind the text is assumed to be unity, the written text is no longer required to be an autonomous formal unit. The text as signifier becomes the trace, the representation, of a signified that precedes it in the creative process. Or it may become an intent of consciousness, the catalyst for a signified to be produced in the reading process...in a hermeneutics which sees the reading process as a corrective which recovers the separation of signifier from signified that occurs as the creative spirit submits itself to the process of composition. (575-576)

Again, in this view, the reader's role is active, performative, and recuperative. The 'letter from a friend' is thus construed as a sort of "parody of a deductive method, in that what is dealt with is not discursively explicable but only 'presentable'; that is to say, it cannot be provided as a body of objective information, but only communicated as a...process wherein only participation will produce meaning" (Simpson, 96).

Thus, the Biographia's formal peculiarities are taken to answer Coleridge's "problem": the form, it is claimed, is self-reflexive. Kathleen M. Wheeler, for example, claims that "The effort to stimulate experience constitutes [Coleridge's] method, while a view of knowledge as experience defies the closure involved by definition in any system" (3). Thus, Wheeler argues, "a situation is created in which the reader is required to act as a kind of author in order to complete the

structure" (81). M.G. Cooke has also argued for a self-reflexive view of the form of the Biographia: "Coleridge is involved in the twofold, paradoxical task of applying and at the same time getting a clear grasp of the imagination" (225). Cooke also sees the famous letter from a friend in Chapter Thirteen as "an example of the familiar but always dismaying awareness that, while we think we know what we want to say, we don't know how to say it" (223). It becomes, again, a kind of repudiation of closure, an incredible rhetorical trope.

In a similar vein, Lawrence Buell argues that Coleridge consistently employs "a strategy of deformatization" (409) throughout the Biographia. Coleridge's theory of a creative process based on instinct, Buell claims, leads to a critical practice also based on instinct, and the demand for coherence is given over to a faith in the synthesizing power of the imagination (408, 413). In a still more exonerating reading, Donald M. Reiman argues that in the Biographia Coleridge works in an ironic "Shandian" tradition, and has "created an antiphilosophical work that undermines all the theories of inevitability deriving from closed systems of thought" (339). Frances Ferguson presents a still more extreme view when she claims that the thrust of Coleridge's "golden rule" is to point out that "No knowledge or virtue or imagination on the part of the author...is susceptible of revealing itself to a reader who does not already believe that such qualities inhere in a work. (...) 'Understanding ignorance' and being ignorant of an understanding are merely techniques through which a reader adjusts his demands to accord with his beliefs" (632). "It seems that a reader can only read texts that say what he already knows" (684). Coleridge has indeed been

exonerated.

Now, in the examples brought forward above from the Biographia, Coleridge's strategies do evince a concern with how the reader understands the text, that is, the strategies are directed toward producing a distinct material effect upon the reception of the text. The justification of the Biographia's strategies and fragmented texture as a "parody of a deductive method" or an indirect method does point this out. There are, however, some initial difficulties with justifying Coleridge's equivocations in this way. In the first place, Biographia Literaria, inasmuch as it promises arguments that it does not present and appears so formally indeterminate, is the only one of Coleridge's published prose works that is at all in any obvious way fragmented and incomplete--no matter how the promises and the indeterminacy are interpreted. The Philosophical Lectures, very large parts of The Friend, Aids to Reflection, and parts of The Statesman's Manual are devoted to equally specialized discussion of understanding, reason, and imagination. Nevertheless, although certainly they are often difficult and obscure, these texts lack the digressive texture and the infamous gaps that have become characteristic of the Biographia, nor has criticism made difficulty and obscurity as distinctly significant for these texts as it has for the Biographia. Hence, it is hard to see why the hypothesis of a more global epistemological problem, a more global view of language and reading, should motivate the Biographia's quite singular equivocations, that is, why it should provoke such a degree of formal idiosyncrasy in the Biographia but not in other of the prose texts.

With its peculiar combination of abstruse philosophical, political

and historical subject-matter in a popular periodical essay form, The Friend is explicitly experimental and formally daring, and in that text Coleridge is quite concerned to confront objections against, and to justify, the experiment:

Either, says the Sceptic, you are the Blind offering to lead the Blind, or you are talking the language of sight to those who do not possess the sense of Seeing. If you mean to be read, try to entertain and do not pretend to instruct. To such objections it would be amply sufficient...to answer that we are not all blind, but all subject to distempers of "the mental sight," differing in kind and in degree; ...each may therefore possibly heal the other.... But in respect to the entertainingness of moral writings, if in entertainment be included whatever delights the imagination or affects the generous passions, so far from rejecting such a means of persuading the human soul, my very system compels me to defend not only the propriety but the absolute necessity of adopting it, if we really intend to render our fellow-creatures better or wiser.

...it is with dullness as with obscurity. It may be positive, and the author's fault; but it may likewise be relative, and if the author has presented his bill of fare at the portal, the reader has himself only to blame. The main question then is, of what class are the persons to be entertained? (Friend, I, 10)

The experiment introduces concerns about the reception of the work, and such concerns are evident in the examples from the Biographia. But here, the concern has to do with the more material and practical matter of procuring a suitable audience and of maintaining interest in the periodical against competing interests. This kind of justifying and guiding "meta-commentary" on the formal idiosyncracies of the endeavour, on its subject-matter, and on its reception is introduced at every juncture in the text, and the text is structured in stages, with "landing places"

and diversionary matter interspersed with argument and instruction so as to keep dullness at bay. Thus, even if in any case The Friend's experimentation, for example, be said to derive from the same more global problems that are said to have informed Biographia Literaria, the experimentation moves in a direction that is formally explicit and complete, and this explicitness is not immediately reconcilable with the Biographia's equivocal absences.

There is something curiously ad hoc, curiously circular in reading the Biographia's equivocation as an ironic gesture. In this view, criticism is left for the most part with using as the main piece of evidence the very text the peculiar structure of which it seeks to justify as constituting a special method. As Paul Hamilton argues,

the possibility of an ironic reading is parasitical upon the knowledge of a philosophy which would be a reasoned alternative to a transcendental deduction. As a model of philosophical argument the transcendental deduction obviously derives from Kant. It is against the standard of Kant's Critiques that Coleridge's deduction is found wanting....

Which philosophical model might the deductive failure gesture towards as an alternative? Above all it is a philosophy which Coleridge never wrote. (...) Coleridge always, and not just in Biographia, envisages his main philosophical project as a transcendental deduction of sorts, and nowhere gives us grounds for thinking he had in mind a radically different philosophical stance from which he could parody the deductive method of Kant and Schelling. Coleridge sells Biographia as a system, even if it is not systematic. (16-17)

The claim that the Biographia finds its integrity in irony, that its closure is virtual, simply defers the problem (i.e., the integrity of

the text's structure) it seeks to answer to the level of the oeuvre.

Readings such as Rajan's and Simpson's place Biographia Literaria alongside a diverse range of works such as poems by Keats, Shelley, and texts from Hegel and Kierkegaard in order to subsume the text under the theme of irresolution and irony, which theme appears to be supported by an inductive generalization from the diverse series of works examined, and which in turn is read back into the Biographia and into remarks abstracted from other of Coleridge's works. In these arguments instance and generalization are mutually supportive; the principles of selection are nowhere explicitly stated, and the Biographia becomes a pretext for the critic's own programme. The impression of objectivity left by the method of these readings obscures the absence of a consideration of the specific circumstances of the Biographia's genesis and production.⁵ As Hamilton suggests in his remark on the standard against which the Biographia's proposed deduction is found wanting, the reading of the Biographia as indirection and irony requires a frame a reference, a set of conventions, that will enable the construction of such a reading. Such a frame of reference, such a reading, does not seem to have been apparent to the earliest readers of the Biographia. For example, in his infamous review of Biographia Literaria, Hazlitt writes that

Mr. Coleridge has..., from the combined forces of poetic levity and metaphysic bathos, been trying to fly, not in the air, but under ground - playing at hawk and buzzard between sense and nonsense, - floating or sinking in fine Kantian categories, in a state of suspended animation 'twixt dreaming and awake, - quitting the plain ground of "history and particular facts" for the first butterfly theory, fancy-bred from the maggots of his brain, - going up in an air-balloon filled with fetid gas from the writings of Jacob Behmen and the mystics, and coming

down in a parachute made of the soiled and fashionable leaves of the Morning Post, - promising us an account of the Intellectual System of the Universe, and putting us off with a reference to a promised dissertation on the Logos, introductory to an intended commentary on the Gospel of St. John. 6

Hazlitt reads Coleridge's equivocations as mere incoherence and, more importantly, as somehow deriving from Coleridge's preoccupation with German metaphysics, not as an oblique commentary on a philosophical method. Hazlitt's criticism points to the sort of expectations the Biographia's metaphysical promptings would have set up for its readers, that is, to the way in which the transcendentalist aspirations would have determined the way the text would be read, and hence points to conditions which would have determined the text's construction. The ironic construal of the Biographia introduces a frame of reference that is divorced from these more specific conditions.

It should also be pointed out that much of the criticism that construes the Biographia ironically tends on the one hand to base itself largely on argument related entirely to the philosophical chapters (Chapters Five to Thirteen), while on the other hand it largely ignores the history of the Biographia's composition. It is known that Chapters Six to Thirteen, part of Five, and part of Four were composed (and composed in a great hurry) after Chapters Fourteen to Twenty-one, One to Five, and the first 13 pages of Chapter Twenty-two.⁷ In light of this knowledge, D.M. Fogel has observed in his study of the Biographia's compositional history that

such recent statements as M.G. Cooke's that Coleridge "balked" at the end of Chapter XIII, "accidentally turning to Wordsworth and opinions about poetry" and away "from the proper subject of the nature and function of the imagination" ought now, at best, be taken figuratively; after all, it appears most likely that Coleridge turned from Wordsworth and opinions on poetry to the "subject of the nature and function of the imagination." (233)

It is by no means clear just where Coleridge's discourse "balks". The attempt to read the Biographia as a response to an epistemological problem assumes for the philosophical chapters a central position, an overriding authoritativeness, while it is not clear from the history of the Biographia's composition that the chapters occupy this position. Moreover, to argue with Simpson, for example, that the 'letter from a friend' which ends the philosophical chapters is a "parody of a deductive method, in that what is dealt with is not discursively 'presentable'," a parody wherein what is dealt with "cannot be provided as a body of objective information," or to call the Biographia "an antiphilosophical work" with Reiman, does assume a turning away from "proper" philosophical subject-matter, a "balk" to which these arguments give priority and much meaning. Surely before the infamous break in Chapter Thirteen is construed as a turn from a philosophical method in the name of some alternative, before it is invested with such great explanatory power, one ought at least to consider more closely the context which produced it.

There are as well certain comments Coleridge makes which suggest that discontinuity and unsystematic presentation are, for Coleridge, simply faults, and are to be avoided. In Chapter Twelve of the Biographia, for

example, Coleridge attacks "certain immethodical aphorising Eclectics, who [dismiss] not only all system, but all logical connection" (B.L., I, 92). In The Friend Coleridge attacks what he calls an "asthmatic" style in prose meant for those with a "short-winded intellect":

It is true that these short and unconnected sentences are easily understood: but it is equally true, that wanting all the cement of thought, ...hooks and eyes of memory are as easily forgotten. (Friend, I, 20-21)

In the Biographia again, Coleridge makes his well-known critical remarks on the disjointed epigrammatic "Anglo-Gallic" style in poetry as well (B.L., I, 18-19). The Biographia's own "immethodical miscellany," its lack of explicit formal integrity, seems to be at odds with Coleridge's insistence upon the integration of parts in an organic whole, and it is difficult to see in these attacks any justification for reading the Biographia as an indirect method. To read Biographia Literaria's lack of integrity as indirection and irony is again to posit some alternative to the stylistic imperatives Coleridge sets out in these attacks on un-systematic presentation.

It should, finally, be pointed out that nowhere in any of his comments on readers and reading does Coleridge indicate that he was confident enough about most readers to have left to them the sort of creative, productive role that more recent critics have hoped to bestow upon them. Coleridge writes in Chapter Twelve of Biographia Literaria, for example, that "it is neither possible nor necessary for all men to be PHILOSOPHERS."

A system, the first principle of which is to render the mind intuitive of the spiritual in man...must needs have great obscurity for those, who have never disciplined and strengthened this ulterior consciousness. (B.L., I, 243)

The warning is surely not offered from some shady uneasiness over the exigencies of a philosophical method or of language itself, but in support of a proposed systematic endeavour that, despite its perspicuity, may nevertheless be misunderstood by uninformed readers. Again, Coleridge's prose is full of bitter commentary on the state of readers and reading. One such apt comment appears in a note in Aids To Reflection, where Coleridge remarks upon the audience to which some authors pander:

as the sine qua non of their patronage, a sufficient arc must be left for the reader's mind to oscillate in - freedom of choice,
 To make the shifting cloud
 be what you please,
 save only where the attraction of curiosity determines the line of motion. (Aids To Reflection, 221, n.)

Here, interpretive liberties are something to be reviled, not something to be encouraged. The concern in the complaint is that in general readers are simply not listening, that they misuse what they read. Inscribed in such remarks are expectations of, and an assertion of the author's authority over, an uninformed or incompetent reader; they do not anticipate the subtle and highly sympathetic response required by an ironic reading of the Biographia.

The reading of Biographia Literaria as a mode of indirection, as

somehow directing its readers to an implicit alternative unity, is, I think, unsatisfactory: the reading raises as many difficulties as it attempts to resolve. As I have said, however, I do not think that the Biographia's peculiar means of directing its reader is irrelevant, and the reading of the Biographia as indirection goes a good way to pointing out Coleridge's designs upon his reader. This is important particularly in view of the fact that in the Biographia the reader and the reading public are figured so largely, as in the case of the 'letter' of Chapter Thirteen that halts the transcendental deduction of the imagination, wherever the discourse seems most obscure and incomplete. The reader takes the blame for the incoherence of the discourse. What is required, however, is a discussion of Coleridge's dealings with his reader that is less sympathetic to Coleridge's coercion, one that does not obscure the historical context of that coercion and mask its interests in Coleridgean terms of imagination and symbol.

Such a discussion has been opened most notably, for example, by Marilyn Butler. Butler has argued that "Coleridge means to use his writings to find out an élite, and to help remould it in better accordance with his ideal. The style of his writings helped him to his audience, since the strangely specialized tone made a compact with the reader, flatteringly promoting him to membership among the elect" (91). Butler has argued further that the Biographia, among other of Coleridge's works, exhibits the pressures of "an art marketed rather than an art commissioned, [which] imposed upon the artist-intellectual the symptoms of disorientation. The necessity to communicate with a large public to which no individual could relate created large problems" (72). It is possible in this

context, she contends, to view the theories of imagination as a somewhat reactionary consolidation of the writer's distinction and power (200-201). Similarly, Paul Hamilton has stated that Coleridge "presents difficulties in Biographia as a means of enhancing his own philosophical authority, not as an incentive for the reader to take over and start producing his own text" (21). Hamilton contends that "Coleridge asks for his reader's faith in his enterprise by defining reader-expectations. The suggestion is that even if the reader gets lost in the obscurities, he can believe in the ultimate rationality of what he is reading: Coleridge, at least, is in control" (22).

Butler and Hamilton both see Coleridge's author-reader relationship as an authoritarian one where the strategies Coleridge employs in the Biographia serve to consolidate and make evident the author's authority. I concur with this view. In the next chapter, Coleridge's views on readers, the reading public, and the act of reading are examined in order to point out the authoritarian nature of the author-reader relationship in Coleridge's prose. The aim in this discussion is ultimately to show how Coleridge's "ingenious bullying" of his reader in the Biographia may be viewed simply as an aspect of, or rather, a reaction to, the demands of the reading public, and what he depicts as an inversion of the author-reader contract. For instance, in a remark on the interpretation of scripture, Coleridge writes,

I do not mean to condemn the exercise or deny the right of individual judgement. I condemn only the pretended right of every individual, competent and incompetent, to interpret Scripture in a sense of his own, in opposition to the judgement of the Church, without knowledge of the originals or of the languages, the history, the customs, opinions, and controversies

of the age and country in which they were written; and where the interpreter judges in ignorance or contempt of uninterrupted tradition, the unanimous consent of Father and Councils, and the universal faith of the Church in all ages. It is not the attempt to form a judgement, which is here called in question, but the grounds, or rather the non-grounds on which the judgement is formed and relied upon. (Aids To Reflection, 272, n.)

It is just such "ignorance or contempt" of which Coleridge writes here that forms the object of his attacks on readers and the reading public. Here Coleridge reasserts the claims of the authority of tradition and critical consensus over every author-reader transaction and over every individual critical judgement. The same assertion is made in Chapter Twenty-one, where Coleridge is criticizing the conduct of critical journals:

Let a communication be formed between any number of learned men in the various branches of science and literature; and whether the president and central committee be in London, or Edinburgh, if only they previously lay aside their individuality, and pledge themselves inwardly as well as ostensibly, to administer judgement according to a constitution and code of laws; and if by grounding this code on the two-fold basis of universal morals and philosophic reason, independent of all foreseen application to particular works and authors, they obtain the right to speak each as the representative of their body corporate; they shall have honor and good wishes from me, and I shall accord to them their fair dignities...not less cheerfully than if I could enquire concerning them in the herald's office, or turn to them in the book of peerage. (B.L., II, 110-111)

The couching of the criticism in terms of law and legislative bodies points

out Coleridge's insistence that valid judgement upon what we read must conform to an acknowledged legitimizing authority.

More specifically, Coleridge writes here of a knowledge of language or linguistic practice, history, customs, laws and reason in light of which communication must proceed, and which author and reader must to some extent acknowledge and share in order for communication to be possible. The reader who possesses such knowledge can read competently; the mishandling and misunderstanding of texts is simply a result of what Coleridge calls the reader's "insufficient knowledge," that is, his incompetence. In other words, one cannot, for example, successfully read a metaphysical treatise on the imagination without, at the very least, some knowledge and an acknowledgement of the practices of metaphysical discourse. What is important for Coleridge is the recognition of the requirement that readers have knowledge sufficient to understand a particular utterance. The failure of readers to recognize the requirement, and the creation or discovery of an audience that does recognize it, is Coleridge's problem of communication. What is essentially an epistemological or hermeneutic principle becomes a positive demand or obligation. A failure to recognize the demand violates or inverts the contract between author and reader.

The pressure of this concern with authority and the author-reader transaction is exhibited all over Biographia Literaria. Coleridge complains of his treatment at the hand of uninformed readers and reviewers and of the power of the reading public from the opening paragraph, where he laments that it "has been [his] lot to have had [his] name introduced both in conversation, and in print, more frequently" than he can explain

(B.L., I, 5), through Chapter Ten, where he attacks the book-trade and imagines a literature free from market-forces and the demands of a public, to his discussion of Wordsworth's poetry, where he distances himself from the controversy surrounding Wordsworth's Preface, a controversy he settles -- unlike other critics, he takes care to emphasize -- "with the utmost impartiality" (B.L., I, 5). Coleridge's strategic bullying of the reader in the Biographia is one aspect of this concern inasmuch as Coleridge simply blames his reader for incoherence and misunderstanding; Coleridge's strategies point out to the reader the question of requisite knowledge, the ignorance of which, he claims, excludes the reader from the author-reader transaction.

Coleridge's treatment of his reader in Biographia Literaria is also a reaction to his concern with reader and audience inasmuch as it is a symptom of what he calls the anxiety of the author's address to the unknown reader (B.L., I, 23). In other words, Coleridge's devices seek to make an appropriate audience and an appropriate response. For instance, in another text Coleridge discusses the problem of addressing his work to an appropriate audience:

I dare not flatter myself, that any endeavour of mine, compatible with the duty I owe to truth and hope of permanent utility, will render the Friend agreeable to the majority of what is called the reading public. I never expected it. How indeed could I, when I was to borrow so little from the influence of passing events, and when I had absolutely excluded from my plan all appeals to personal curiosity and personal interests? Yet even this is not my greatest impediment. No real information can be conveyed, no important errors rectified, no widely injurious prejudices rooted up, without requiring some effort or thought on the part of the reader. But the obstinate...aversion to all intellectual effort is the mother evil of all which I had proposed to war against, the Queen Bee in

the hive of our errors and misfortunes, both private and national. To solicit the attention of those, on whom these debilitating causes have acted to their full extent, would be no less absurd than to recommend exercise with dumb bells, as the only mode of cure, to a paralytic in both arms. (Friend, I, 22)

Coleridge forms the comment as a sort of apology, as a reply that heads off the incredulity of an implied interlocutor who, notwithstanding Coleridge's remarks, already sees any appeal to the public as hopeless. Inscribed in the text is a clear picture, an anticipation of the expectations of a competent or appropriate audience. That the very notion of an appeal to the public is a species of arrogance, a violation of duty, is presented as something taken for granted by both author and interlocutor. In such a situation any actual reader is offered a perspective on a circle of shared expectations; in failing to acknowledge the expectation, a reader is excluded from the circle. The tactic directly addresses, clears a space in the text for, a competent response. As I have pointed out, the infamous 'letter from a friend' in Chapter Thirteen of the Biographia relies on just such an anticipation of the reader's expectations. The manoeuvre relies for its plausibility on what is implied in the letter concerning an appropriate response in the play between the perspective of the friend's prejudicial ignorance and the perspective of the author's philosophical authority.

If Coleridge's strategies are a reaction, they are also reactionary. The aim of Chapter Two of this work is to point out the political filiations of Coleridge's views on readers and reading. There is a disturbing formal coincidence between these views and Coleridge's argument for

political conservatism. Coleridge is evasive about just what and whose laws, principles, and standards of competence need to be acknowledged. I point out in Chapter Two that, whatever else these are, they are for Coleridge part of the property of established property owners. Coleridge's concern over the ungoverned multiplication of authors, books and readers is very much a concern over a "democratization" of the republic of letters, that is, a concern over the circulation of books and the way they are received. In view of the political dimension of Coleridge's discussion of readers and reading, his assertion of the claims of legitimizing authority over all critical judgement is an attempt to control the consumption of literature and who may consume it. The point of this Chapter is a negative one as well, inasmuch as, again, I point out the political baggage the all-too-sympathetic ironic reading of Biographia Literaria requires the Biographia's readers to accept implicitly and uncritically.

Endnotes - Introduction

1. For the views which I am summarizing and, for the most part, with which I take issue, see the following:

Lawrence Buell, "The Question of Form in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria," ELH 46 (1979): 399-417.

Jerome Christensen, "Coleridge's Marginal Method in the Biographia Literaria," PMLA 92 (1977): 928-940.

M.G. Cooke, "Quisque Sui Faber: Coleridge in the Biographia Literaria," Philological Quarterly 50 (1971): 208-229.

Timothy J. Corrigan, "Coleridge, the Reader: Language in a Combustible Mind," Philological Quarterly 59 (1980): 76-94.

Frances Ferguson, "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'," Georgia Review 21 (1977): 617-635.

Richard Malette, "Narrative Technique in the Biographia Literaria," Modern Language Review 70 (1975): 32-40.

Tilottama Rajan, "The Supplement of Reading," New Literary History 17 (1986): 573-594.

Donald H. Reiman, "Coleridge and the Art of Equivocation," Studies in Romanticism 25 (1986): 325-350.

David Simpson, Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry (London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, 1979).

Catherine M. Wallace, The Design of the Biographia Literaria (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1983).

Kathleen M. Wheeler, Sources, Processes and Methods in the Biographia Literaria (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980).

2. Many of the critics I quote in this Introduction gesture toward Iser's distinction between the material text and the work which remains virtual unless it is actualized in the reading process. See, for example, Corrigan, 78. For Iser's distinction, see Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1974), 274-294. Rajan states that she borrows the distinction from Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," Image, Music, Text, tr. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977) I am aware that this distinction is problematic; I employ the distinction here, only for the purposes of an introductory summary, with the meaning given to it in the work of these critics whom I discuss here.

For examples of how other of Coleridge's prose works have entered into this line of argument, see the references throughout C.M. Wallace's Design of the Biographia Literaria. Wallace makes much use of Coleridge's metaphor of the attentive and competent reader's having chosen "a Chamois-hunter for his guide" from The Friend, I, 54. Indeed, in the work of these critics who see Coleridge's prose operating in a "heuristic" mode (Simpson's term), The Friend, with its step-by-step structure and its experimental presentation of abstruse subject-matter in a popular periodical essay form, has attracted most attention after the Biographia. Corrigan has employed Coleridge's phrase "combustible mind" from The Friend, I, 52 as a rallying-point in his essay. Simpson has used thematically Coleridge's claim "not so much to shew [his own] Reader this or that fact, as to kindle his own torch for him, and leave it to himself to chuse the particular objects, which he might wish to examine by it" (Friend, I, 16): see Simpson, Chapter 2. These metaphors of reading have all been extracted from essays "On the Communication of Truth" from The Friend.

For another, albeit very brief, treatment of the reader in Coleridge's critical prose, see also Robert DeMaria, "The Ideal Reader: A Critical Fiction," PMLA 93 (1978): 467-474.

3. See Engell and Bate, eds., Biographia Literaria, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1983), I, 300, note 3 and also lvii. For the most recent and comprehensive treatment of the compositional history of the Biographia, see Daniel M. Fogel, "A Compositional History of the Biographia Literaria," Studies In Bibliography (Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the U. of West Virginia) 30 (1977): 219-234. For a recent consideration of the letter in terms of post-structuralist theory, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Letter as Cutting Edge," In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 3-14.

4. See, for example, Simpson, 169:

What has happened, in terms of the sign-referent relation, is that the sign itself (the word) has taken on an untenanted or partially 'free' status. This loosening of control does not operate simply between speaker and hearer, but [also] between speaker and sign.

See also Corrigan's assertion that, as far as reading is concerned, Coleridge is a relativist (87-88).

The summary here is of course, as a summary, necessarily somewhat reductive. The arguments are widely divergent on a number of points. Wheeler, for example, argues from a connection she makes between Coleridge's views and those of certain German ironists, while Wallace's argument is limited largely to conclusions she draws from Coleridge's philosophical texts. For a detailed interpretation of the philosophical background, particularly to Wallace's views, see also Owen Barfield, What Coleridge Thought (Middletown: Wesleyan U.P., 1971), especially 71-78 and 99-120.

5. For this critical practice, see also Thomas McFarland, Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1981). See also Marjorie Levinson's critical remarks on the "abstraction of 'the fragmentary' - a semantic value - from a set of historical phenomena, and the postulate of this abstraction as the essence of Romanticism" (9) in this view. Levinson argues that

Irresolution is represented by this method as a generic deviation from some generic norm...that is assumed to be obvious, timeless, and universal The particular contexts of the deviation (a poem, a poem by Coleridge, a poem by Coleridge written in 1798 but not printed until 1816 and with provocative revisions), and the meaning of the particular norm projected within those contexts, are not considered. Irresolution is thematized...and totalized without benefits of analysis as a formal effect and one that is historically and ideologically constituted. (8)

6. Cited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, eds. Biographia Literaria by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1983), lxvi.

7. See Fogel, esp. 230-232. As Fogel points out,

Coleridge was under fierce pressure from Gutch and Morgan to send the Biographia to press. Surely it was this pressure, as he sped to complete Chapters XII and XIII - the last of the Biographia he produced in 1815 - that forced Coleridge to plunder Schelling's Abhandlungen as he did in Chapter XII. The anxiety about having fallen so far behind his deadline may also account, in part at least, for the odd, evasive letter to "C." in Chapter XIII. Since Chapter XII refers to the date "this morning (16 September 1815)" and since Coleridge sent the Biographia manuscript "complete," as he then thought, "to my printer" on 19 September, we can be sure that Chapters XII and XIII were turned out at white heat. (231-232)

Chapter 1 : Coleridge on Reading and Readers

Whom should I choose for my Judge? the earnest impersonal Reader who in the work forgets me and the world and himself. (Notebooks, entry 3220)

In Chapter Three of Biographia Literaria there is found a note in which Coleridge pours vitriol upon a sort or habit of reading that ought to be transferred "from the genus, reading, to that comprehensive class characterized by the power of reconciling the two contrary, yet co-existing propensities of human nature, namely; indulgence of sloth, and hatred of vacancy," in which class, "in addition to novels and tales of chivalry in prose and rhyme," one also finds such activities as "gaming, swinging or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge, smoking, and snuff-taking" (B.L., I, 48-49; n.). In the same chapter, Coleridge laments that

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. (B.L., I, 57)

In the same place there is Coleridge's well-known contention that "The same retrograde movement may be traced, in the relation which the authors

themselves have assumed towards their readers":

From the lofty address of Bacon: "these are the meditations of Francis of Verulam, which that posterity should be possessed of, he deemed their interest:" or from dedication to Monarch or Pontiff in which the honor given was asserted in equipoise to the patronage acknowledged...there was a gradual sinking in the etiquette or allowed style of pretention. (...)

Poets and Philosophers, rendered diffident by their very number, addressed themselves to "learned readers;" then, aimed to conciliate the graces of the "candid readers;" till, the critic still rising as the author sunk, the amateurs of literature collectively were erected into a municipality of judges, and addressed as THE TOWN! And now finally, all men being supposed able to read, and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism. But, alas! as in other despotisms it but echoes the decisions of its invisible ministers, whose intellectual claims to the guardianship of the muses seem, for the greater part, analogous to the physical qualifications which adapt their oriental brethren for the superintendence of the harem. (B.L., I, 58-59)

There is on one hand, Coleridge claims, a growing number of consumers of written matter who read for mere amusement and who are disinclined to intellectual endeavour. There is on the other hand a group that is growing in direct proportion to the increasing size of the former group, a number of authors and critics of dubious reputation who are inclined to appeal to the whims of the "reading public" for ignoble ends. This state of affairs, very simply put, is the object of Coleridge's concerns about readers, reading and his audience.

Yet these comments from Biographia Literaria introduce a number of themes, or more specific aspects, of this concern. The remarks clearly

suggest the character of the audience with which Coleridge thought he had to contend when he was writing the Biographia, and thus suggest what he probably expected from a member of this reading public -- a point that surely deserves some consideration with respect to the question of Coleridge's granting greater interpretive responsibilities to readers. Moreover, Coleridge also portrays an inversion of the proper relationship, or a violation of the contract, between reader(s) and author(s) that is the result of an absence of any acknowledged consensus about who is entitled to judge what works, on what grounds or under what conditions, and about who shall be permitted the name of author. The degradation of books of which Coleridge writes, for example, has been brought about, he claims, largely by the weight unjustifiably accorded to the opinions of unqualified, that is, incompetent, judges. Thus, the remarks introduce the themes of readerly competence and critical consensus. Finally, the remarks point to a basic question concerning the locus of authority between author, text, and reader. Elsewhere, for example, Coleridge writes that the public "is at present accustomed to find itself appealed to as the infallible Judge, and each reader is complimented with excellencies, which if he really possessed, to what purpose is a reader, unless perhaps to remind himself of his own superiority" (Friend, I, 125). In such statements Coleridge is not merely displaying the presumption of certain readers, but is pointing indirectly to the position of the reader, which is not here one of superiority in any sense, in the circuit of authority between reader, text and author. This basic concern is certainly evident in the quotation that traces the "retrograde movement" in the position that authors have assumed toward readers, particularly both in the image of degradation

from on high, and implicitly in the metaphors of 'political' organization or supervision.

One might at this point object that it is surely a mistake to grant such attention and weight to such passing remarks, to what may be the normal and simple, but perhaps urgent, concern of a writer to find "fit audience though few." The ubiquity¹ of the concern, as well as its thematic direction, are demonstrable even in a prima facie way. In the Statesman's Manual (which appeared in 1816 while Biographia was at the printer's) there is another of Coleridge's remarks on the reading public:

among other odd burs and kecksies, the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity, we have now a READING PUBLIC - as strange a phrase, methinks, as ever forced a splenetic smile on the staid countenance of Meditation; and yet no fiction! For our Readers have, in good truth, multiplied exceedingly, and have waxed proud. It would require the intrepid accuracy of a Colquhoun to venture at the precise number of that company only, whose heads and hearts are dieted out at the two public ordinaries of Literature, the circulating Libraries and the periodical press. But what is the result? Does the inward man thrive on this regime? Alas! if the average health of the consumers may be judged of by the articles of the largest consumption; if the secretions may be conjectured from the ingredients of the dishes that are found best suited to their palates; I utter my Proffacia with a desponding sigh. From a popular philosophy and a philosophic populace, Good Sense deliver us! 2 (Statesman's Manual, 43)

Coleridge appears to have considered the notion of a reading public to be a mere contradiction in terms, since the greater part of this public is, according to Coleridge, disinclined to intellectual endeavour, and thus, to read. From the reference here to the vast number of readers and the reference to the statistician, as well as from Coleridge's remark on the

public (quoted above) as "nominal despot," what is very obvious is that the point of the objection to the reading public lies largely in the fact that such a notion is only an abstraction. The abstraction is built up merely through the multiplication of individuals, as a kind of statistical average, and operates, as the census-taker's picture of public opinion operates, extrinsically, as an illusory image of consensus, where in fact no critically justified consensus exists. The abstraction functions falsely with the power of a standard or measure, where mere acceptance or rejection by the public becomes decisive. The questions of competence and authority are evident as well in the reference to the libraries and popular press as vulgar inns, and in the couching of the conjecture concerning the response (that is, the "secretions") to the matter consumed in terms somewhat excremental.

The concerns are evident also, for example, in Aids To Reflection. Here Coleridge assigns a cause for the splenetic reaction of anonymous critics and the reading public to a work of genius:

And as the first, I would rank the person's not understanding what yet he expects to understand, and as if he had a right to do so. An original mathematical work, or any other that requires peculiar and (so to say) technical marks and symbols, will excite no uneasy feelings - not in the mind of a competent reader, for he understands it; and not with the others, because they neither expect nor are expected to understand it. The second place we may assign to the misunderstanding, which is almost sure to follow in cases where the incompetent person, finding no outward marks (diagrams, and arbitrary signs, and the like) to inform him at first sight, that the subject is one which he does not pretend to understand, and to be ignorant of which does not detract from his estimation as a man of abilities generally, will attach some meaning to what he hears or reads. (Aids To Reflection, 220, n.)

Again, what is at the root of the situation is an absence of a recognition of some standard of competence, competence which enables correct understanding and grants the right to judge.

There is, finally, a comment of 1816 from Coleridge's notebooks that discusses quite clearly the question of competence and authority. The notebook entry is valuable also because these concerns are set out in the context of an answer to those who would place some cause for misunderstanding in what they see as an intrinsic incapacity of language to convey meaning. Too often this passage is quoted in truncated form in order to demonstrate that Coleridge was himself concerned about language in this way, whereas the passage as a whole shows that he categorically denied such notions.

It is a common remark - in medical books for instance - that there are certain niceties which words, from their always abstract & so far general nature, cannot convey. Now this I am disposed to deny, that is, in any comparative sense - In my opinion there is nothing which being equally known as any other thing, may not be conveyed with equal clearness - but the question & the source of the Remark, is - to Whom? If I say, that in Jaundice the skin looks yellow - my words have no meaning for a man who has no sense of colours. Words are but remembrances - tho' remembrance may be so excited, as by the a priori powers of the mind, to produce a tertium aliquid[.] (...) But the defect is not in words, but in the imperfect knowledge of those, to whom they are addressed. - The proof is obvious - Desire a metaphysician, or a Lawyer, to mention the most perspicuous Book in their several Knowledges - Then bid them read that Book to a sensible Carpenter or Shoemaker - and great part [sic] will be as unintelligible as a technical Treatise on Carpentry to the Lawyer & c. who had never been in a Carpenter's Shop, or looked at his Tools.

I have dwelt on this for more reasons than one - first, because a remark that seems at first sight the same - namely - that everything clearly perceived may be conveyed in simple common language without thinking on - to whom? is the disease of the age. - an arrogant pusillanimity - a hatred of all information that cannot be obtained with-

out thinking - second, because on the other side the pretended disguise of muddy Thoughts - & thirdly, because to the mind itself it is made an excuse for indolence, ... what the fact or truth is which is the premise - secondly [sic], whether there does or does not exist a term in our present stock of words significant thereof - if not a word must be made/ and indeed all wise men have so acted.

The sum therefore is this: The conveyal of Knowledge by Words is in direct proportion to the stores and faculties of Observation (internal or external) of the person who hears or reads them. And this holds equally whether I distinguish the green grass from the white Lily and the Yellow Crocus which all who have eyes understand because all are equal to me in the Knowledge of the facts signified, or of the difference between the apprehensive, perceptive, conceptive, and conclusory powers. (Notebooks, entry 2086)

Coleridge's question "to whom?" unequivocally removes the problem with readers and reading from within the ambit of a strictly epistemological interrogation of language and the communicative situation. Coleridge writes that "there is nothing which being equally known as any other thing" that cannot be conveyed. Misunderstanding is merely a case of "the imperfect knowledge of those to whom [our words] are addressed." Misunderstanding is a sign of the absence of shared meaning or consensus about the subject-matter of a discourse and competence regarding that discourse. The example of lawyers and carpenters is an appeal to common sense for a recognition of the competence and authority that defines the adequate or "perfect" knowledge, which in turn defines adequate understanding.

In order for the lawyer to understand the carpenter's treatise, for example, he will require some foreknowledge of the tools and practices

of carpentry in order to construe the referents of a discourse. Equally, with respect to the lawyer's "most perspicuous Book," there will exist a consensus about what counts as perspicuous, upon principles of argument, certain legal axioms and rules of usage for legal discourse, as well as a body of common law and statutes. And presumably, as the last paragraph of the note alludes, this "perfect" knowledge will be circumscribed by the innate capacities of "the conceptive and conclusory powers," that is, by the powers and principles of understanding and reason that belong to the reader in some degree of development. The note suggests, then, that with a clear and distinct use of language and of the principles and techniques relevant to the subject-matter at hand, an author's meaning will be perfectly clear to those readers (but only to those readers: "to whom?") who endeavour to master, or who, innately or otherwise, have mastery over, those principles, techniques, and matters of linguistic usage. This view is seconded by a remark from the Table Talk (July 3, 1833):

The words in prose ought to express the intended meaning, and no more; if they attract attention to themselves, it is, in general, a fault. In the best styles...you read page after page, understanding the author perfectly, without once taking notice of the medium of communication; - it is as if he had been speaking to you all the while. (518)

In Coleridge's simple example, understanding the meaning of the statement "in jaundice the skin looks yellow" requires that one have prior knowledge of the extra-linguistic item yellow in order to construe the referent of "yellow." Adequate and prior acquaintance of yellow is

the condition of understanding "yellow." And so it is suggested that to understand a text is to have knowledge of those states of affairs referred to by the author. Whether a text is understood adequately must be a question determined by the degree to which a reader's reproduction or re-presentation of the extra-linguistic states of affairs referred to approximate what is referred to by the author, so that reading is a matter of mirroring what is intended. The communicative situation roughly outlined in this note fits in with Hans Frei's description of early eighteenth-century hermeneutics. Frei's description draws out the main thrust of Coleridge's question "to whom":

Words and larger combinations were thought to be accessible because they refer to, or represent states of affairs which one perceives, or else ideas which one grasps regardless of their linguistic embodiment.

The words and larger linguistic combinations of given texts were thought to have a discernible, usually equivocal sense, at least when the writers performed well. The meaning of words and statements is a matter of convention, the conventions being governed by the author's intention..., the aim discernible in the text, the common usage given words ...and finally the logical rules governing the meaningful use of language. Between specifications of intention and usage there is no problematical distance; no matter what an author wanted to say, the treasury of words was there, preformed, inexhaustible, and at his disposal. Intrinsically there was no problem of communication. Likewise, there was no final problem of distance between the words of texts and their reiterative rendering by the interpreter. The prime principles and rules for interpretation are at the same time demands or requirements that are fulfillable... through a continuation of training and practice with native capability. (108-109)

Thus the weight of Coleridge's concern with readers and reading in the

question "to whom?" is thrown onto the need to recognize such demands or requirements. This is noted succinctly by David Simpson, who, in another context, states that "Coleridge's move...to a sophisticated discourse appealing to a small enlightened class of dispensers of knowledge and information, is closer to the more familiar problem of shared meanings, the ideas of consensus based on contract and on proven competence" (177).

Clearly, then, what underlies Coleridge's concern with readers and reading is the problem of consensus, the consensus that solidifies the authority of the author and which grounds the competence of the reader and his right to judge and the canons by means of which he judges. And this concern can be summarily described as a concern over the violation of the contract between reader and author, an inversion of the proper relationship between author, reader, and text. Even in the loosest possible construal of the term "structure," it is clear from what has been brought forward so far that for Coleridge the structure of the relationship between the reader on the one hand, and author and the text on the other, is not such that the reading process can or should function as a productive complement to the text and author. Where, for example, Coleridge remarks upon the principle of granting to readers excellencies that they do not appear in fact to possess and asks "to what purpose are they readers," the implicit point is that a reader, qua reader, is more like a receptor of meaning than a supplementor of meaning, and is not in a position of superiority with respect to the text or author. Furthermore, the point of Coleridge's note in which he eschews any notion of an intrinsic problem of communication is that an author's meaning lies open in a text and that the means for retrieving

it are readily available. This amounts to an insistence upon the stability of the discourse, on the fitness of language as an instrument of communication. The notion of reader as co-producer is here simply redundant, as is the notion of the meaning of the text needing somehow to be actualized. The point of Coleridge's remarks on the decline of books and of the position authors have assumed toward readers also clearly points to the authority of the authorial position. The matter is made somewhat more explicit in another of Coleridge's diatribes from The Friend:

To a sincere and sensible mind, it cannot be but disgusting to find an Author writing on Subjects, to the investigation of which he professes to have directed the greater portion of his Life, and yet appealing to all his Readers promiscuously, as his full and competent judges, and thus soliciting their favour by a mock modesty....For what can be perceived as more presumptuous, than for a man to write and publish Books for the instruction of those who are wiser than himself, more learned, and more judicious. (...) And why should that be declared a mark of self-sufficiency in an Author, which would be thought only common sense in a Musician or Painter, namely, the supposition that he understands and can practice those arts, to which he has devoted his best faculties during life, in consequence of a particular predilection for them, better than the mass of mankind, who have given their time and thoughts to other pursuits? (Friend, II, 278)

Again, the complaint is against the inversion of the relationship between author, reader and text. To be an author is implicitly to assume a position of authority; to be a reader is implicitly to submit to and recognize this authority.

In Chapter Twelve of the Biographia, Coleridge introduces what

has been called his "golden rule": "until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding" (B.L., II, 232). The rule, aside from being a sort of caveat, is clearly an implicit claim about the relationships in question as Coleridge sees them. The rule is also offered as something to guide the reader through the proposed philosophical deduction, in a chapter in which Coleridge offers other such "requests and premonitions," in which Coleridge is throughout concerned to guide and anticipate the reactions and expectations of the reader. The rule thus issues both as a claim about the nature of the reader's relation to the author and text, and as a response to a concern about that relationship.³

The rule is both useful and interesting because of its similarity to other formulae concerning the understanding of an author's ignorance that are historically proximate to the Biographia. H.G. Gadamer has pointed out Schleiermacher's statement that the object of hermeneutics is "to understand a writer better than he understood himself" (169). Gadamer points also, for example, to a similar formulation of Kant's from the first Critique: "it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject,...to find that we understand him better than he understood himself" (Kant, A314; Gadamer, 171 and 517, n. 39). If the meaning that Coleridge gave to this "better understanding" can be isolated in contradistinction to these other formulations, then again, Coleridge's understanding of the relationship between author, reader and text will also be clarified.

Gadamer points out that at the root of Schleiermacher's formulation is the notion of the free expressive act of creative genius; in

this context, reading becomes a process of bringing out meanings and implications of a text of which the creator was not necessarily conscious (168-169). Understanding becomes "ultimately a divinatory process, a placing of oneself within the mind of the author, an apprehension of the 'inner origin' of a work, a recreation of the creative act. Thus understanding is a reproduction related to an original production, ... a reconstruction that starts from the vital moment of conception, the composition's point of organization" (164). Understanding is a "reconstructive completion of the production," and in this sense the reader's understanding is called better (169).

This view has some peculiar consequences that have provided the means for linkage with the Biographia. The first is the importance of the activity of reading as an activity that generates or completes the sense of the text. The approach "makes it possible for both [reader and author] to be placed on the same level, insofar as it is...the unconscious meaning of the author that is to be understood" (170). There is a kind of symmetry posited between author and reader. Second, as Richard E. Palmer points out, "Ultimately, ...the task of [understanding comes] to be that of transcending language in order to get at the inner process," so that there is introduced a split between thought and expression, inasmuch as the text becomes merely "something given up to the empirical exigencies of language" (93). Among the critics who see the Biographia in the context of an epistemological anxiety over the problems of communication, Tilottama Rajan has seen the discontinuities of the Biographia as a reaction to this "shift in Romantic aesthetics from a concern with the text as a finished product and its mirror image, the reading process

as loci of meaning" (575).⁴ Rajan sees, for example, the curious 'letter from a friend' in the Biographia as a response to the realization that "introducing the reader into the literary equation problematizes the relationship between signifier and signified [i.e., expression and thought]" (529). A similar connection to this construal of "better understanding" is attempted by A.J. Harding, where he argues that the reader's task for Coleridge is ultimately to enter the mental life of the author, to comprehend not only "what the author chose or was able to say -- his or her 'understanding' -- but also seeing why that author might not have said something else -- his or her 'ignorance'" (11-12).

Coleridge's examples of how he means the rule to be applied fit with what Gadamer distinguishes as the meaning given to "better understanding" in Kant's formulation:

It is not, with [Kant, for example], a principle of criticism, but a philosophical claim to move, through greater conceptual clarity, beyond the contradiction of a given theory. Thus it is a principle that, entirely in the spirit of rationalism claims, solely through thought, through the development of the implications of an author's ideas, to achieve insights that correspond to the real intention of the author - insights that he would have to share if his thinking had been clear enough. (...) Thus the disputed formula makes no claim beyond that of philosophic critique of the subject. Someone who is able to think his way better through what the author is talking about will be able to see what the author says in the light of a truth that is still hidden from the author. (171-172)

Meaning here is located in the author's reference to an object, that is, in knowledge of the object, as governed by the rules of language, logic, and reason. Thus the notion of understanding a writer's ignorance or

being ignorant of his understanding points back to Coleridge's claim that misunderstanding is a case of the receptor's imperfect knowledge, or again, to his comment upon the incompetent reader, who is ignorant of the subject-matter of a text, and yet expects to understand it, and so attaches some other meaning to the text than what it truly conveys.

(This concern with what an incompetent reader expects to understand can account for the fact that the rule, as caveat, has been set out at all; this is a point substantiated by the subsequent list of abstruse terms Coleridge provides as a criterion for whether a reader should finish a chapter). The superiority of the reader who understands an author's ignorance, the symmetry between reader and author, is only apparent here, inasmuch as the author's intention still functions as the standard of whether one has, in fact, understood his ignorance. This better understanding of the reader is not an intrinsic aspect of the relation of reader to text; it is simply a limiting case that stands opposite to, at the other end of the spectrum from, the case of the incompetent reader who cannot understand, or misunderstands, a text because of his "imperfect knowledge." Thus the question of whether one has understood an author's ignorance or is ignorant of his understanding is located in the concern with proven competence, consensus, and authority. As a kind of rule of reading, the function of Coleridge's maxim is to make clear the operation of these matters, and thus to delineate to the reader his position with respect to author and text.

Coleridge begins his elucidation of his maxim with an examination of a treatise of a "religious fanatic:"

I see clearly the writer's grounds, and their hollowness. I have a complete insight into the causes, which through the medium of his body had acted on his mind; and by application of received and ascertained laws I can satisfactorily explain to my own reason all the strange incidents, which the writer records of himself. And this I can do without suspecting him of any intentional falsehood. As when in broad daylight a man tracks the steps of a traveller who had lost his way in the fog or by treacherous moonshine, even so, and with the same tranquil sense of certainty, can I follow the traces of this bewildered visionary. I UNDERSTAND HIS IGNORANCE. (B.L., I, 232-233)

Coleridge then turns to Plato's Timaeus, which he has been re-perusing:

Whatever I comprehend, impresses me with a reverential sense of the author's genius; but there is a considerable portion of the work, to which I can attach no consistent meaning. In other treatises of the same philosopher intended for the average comprehensions of men, I have been delighted with the masterly good sense, with the perspicuity of the language, and the aptness of the inductions. I recollect likewise, that numerous passages in this author, which I thoroughly comprehend were formerly no less intelligible to me, than the passage now in question. It would, I am aware, be quite fashionable to dismiss them at once as Platonic Jargon. But this I cannot do with satisfaction to my own mind, because I have sought in vain for causes adequate to the solution of the assumed inconsistency. I have no insight into the possibility of a man so eminently wise, using words with such half-meanings to himself, as must perforce pass into no-meaning to his readers. When in addition to the motives thus suggested by my own reason, I bring into distinct remembrance the number and the series of great men, who after long and zealous study of these works had joined in honoring the name of PLATO with epithets, that almost transcend humanity, I feel, that a contemptuous verdict on my part might argue want of modesty, but would hardly be received by the judicious, as evidence of superior penetration. Therefore...I CONCLUDE MYSELF IGNORANT OF HIS UNDERSTANDING. (B.L., I, 233)

In the case of the fanatic's text Coleridge refers to a body of "received and ascertained laws" that he has applied to the text in order to understand the incidents related by the author. Although Coleridge does not name either the author or the book, presumably the author relates experiences which he proposes to explain as religiously significant. In order better to explain what is claimed by the author, Coleridge refers, perhaps, to the discourse of psychology or physiology, and particular laws of experience in conformity to general rules of logic and reason. And, because the author is not mentioned except as a "religious fanatic," he seems to be a writer whose work does not speak from established tradition, around whose work there is no consensus. In dealing with the problem of understanding the meaning of Plato's Timaeus, Coleridge makes the same references to the relation of the text to matters outside the text. He comments of the "good sense," the "perspecuity of the language, and the aptness of the inductions" that have been demonstrated in other works of Plato. Coleridge refers, finally, to Plato's reputation in established tradition, among a community of competent readers (cf., "the series of great men"; "would hardly be received by the judicious").

In both cases, understanding the text is presented as a matter of bringing "sufficient knowledge" and conceptual equipment to the text. The "better understanding" exemplified in the comment on the fanatic's treatise fits exactly with Gadamer's construal of Kant's statement, right down to Coleridge's metaphor: with the "broad day-light" of knowledge of the subject-matter the reader tracks the author who is lost in the moonshine of ignorance, without suspecting the author of any intentional falsehood. The examination of Plato's Timaeus revolves around the question

of whether the problem of understanding has arisen because the passage in question is just jargon and has no consistent meaning or because the reader has insufficient knowledge. The latter conclusion is reached, first, because other of Plato's works have accorded with accepted rules of reason and language; second, because passages as unintelligible as the one in question now are clear, and so, presumably, with some increased capacity and knowledge on the part of the reader the meaning of the passage will reveal itself; and finally, because of the established authority from which the Timaeus speaks. Again, such proven competence and established authority is absent in the case of the fanatic's text; in that instance, however, Coleridge's understanding of the author's ignorance is grounded upon "received and ascertained laws," that is, upon knowledge and principles upon which there is a consensus and which are validated by established authority. Thus, the point of the maxim is to relate the position of a reader's understanding to this consensus or validating authority. The effect of the maxim is to place the onus upon the reader, where a problem of understanding has arisen, to demonstrate that the cause is assignable to the author and not to himself: "until you understand a writer's ignorance." Indeed, the proviso implicitly makes the claim that the authorial position is a position of authority, that the author's understanding is implicitly a voice that speaks with authority.

The overt statement of the "golden rule" is not an isolated instance. The same moves are made, the same claims are clear where, in a passage from Aids To Reflection, Coleridge examines a section from the work of Jeremy Taylor. Again, the discussion begins with the perception

of some incoherence in the passage in question; specifically, the discussion arises with the problem of finding some consistent meaning in Taylor's use of the term "original sin." Coleridge remarks that, as a pedagogical rule, "The first question we should put to ourselves, when we have read a passage that perplexes us in a work of authority, is; What does the writer mean by all this? And the second question should be; What does he intend by all this? In the passage before us, Taylor's meaning is not quite clear" (Aids To Reflection, 245). What follows the remark is an explication of the phrase "original sin" in an attempt to understand its use in the text in question. Although the discussion does not concern readers and reading explicitly, its procedures and assumptions are instructive, so that it must be quoted at some length. The explication proceeds through a definition of terms, with respect to standards of accepted usage in philosophical-theological discourse, rules of logic, and laws governing experience:

A sin is an evil which has its ground or origin in the agent, and not in the compulsion of circumstances. Circumstances are compulsory from the absence of a power to resist or control them: (...) So likewise of the word origin, original, or originant. The reader cannot be too early warned that it is not applicable, and, without abuse of language, can never be applied, to a mere link in a chain of effects, where each, indeed, stands in the relation of a cause to those that follow, but is at the same time the effect of all that proceeds. For in these cases a cause amounts to little more than an antecedent. At the utmost it means only a ... never-ending regress to each several link.... But this is nature: and no natural thing or act can be called originant, or be truly said to have an origin. (Aids To Reflection, 245-246)

Thus Coleridge concludes, concerning the use of the term in the passage, that

In this sense of the word original, and in the sense before given of sin, it is evident that the phrase, original sin, is a pleonasm...the eloquent Bishop, while he admits the fact as established beyond controversy by universal experience, yet leaves us in the dark as to the...principle question - why he names it Original Sin. (Aids To Reflection, 248-249)

Where the use of the term cannot be brought to accord with more widely accepted standards of usage and rules of logic, Coleridge then attempts to find in the words a wider sense for which there is some precedent:

Let it be supposed that the Bishop uses the word in a different and more comprehensive sense, and that by sin he understands evil of all kind connected with or resulting from actions. (...) Or if this sense, though not unknown to the mystic divines, should be too comprehensive and remote, I will suppose the Bishop to comprise under the term sin, the evil accompanying or consequent upon human actions and purposes: - though here, too, I have a right to be informed, for what reason...sin is thus limited to human agency? And truly, I should be at no loss to assign the reason. But then this reason would instantly bring me back to my first definition.

Coleridge then expands upon the first explication of the term that leads to the conclusion that the term as used by Taylor is a pleonasm, and concludes that

Thus, then, the sense which Taylor attaches to the words, Original Sin, needs only be carried to its next consequence, and it will be found to imply the sense which I have given - namely that sin is an evil having an origin.

Such...would be the inevitable conclusion, if Taylor's

sense of the term was carried on to its immediate most eloquent Treatise makes it certain that Taylor did not carry it on: and consequently Original Sin according to his conception, is a calamity which being common to all men must be supposed to result from their common nature; in other words, the universal calamity of human nature. (Aids To Reflection, 250-251)

With this complete explication of the inconsistency, Coleridge is able to understand certain peculiarities of Taylor's attacks upon some tenets held by other writers on religion:

That Taylor, therefore, should have striven fervently against the Article so interpreted and so vindicated, is ...a subject neither of surprise or complaint. It is the doctrine which he substitutes; it is the weakness and inconsistency betrayed in the defence of this substitute. (Aids To Reflection, 253)

Thus, Coleridge understands Taylor's ignorance; the procedure here echoes exactly the discussion of the religious fanatic's treatise. The problem of understanding is resolved in the text's relation to the normative rules and standards that govern the reference of all language to states of affairs, through the reader's mastery over these rules and his knowledge of the subject-matter.

When Coleridge introduces the discussion of the inconsistent meaning he finds in Taylor's treatise, he offers two questions that a reader should ask: one concerning an author's meaning, and the other concerning an author's intention. Thus, an author's intentions are treated as something logically separable from the sense his words may in fact carry. The

same claim is made implicitly, though perhaps less clearly, in the discussion of the fanatic's treatise, where the explication of the experiences related are given an import different from that which is proposed by the author. Where an author has not used words with sufficient clarity, where he has not sufficiently determined the meaning of the words he employs, or where his knowledge of the subject-matter is deficient, the sense of his words may not finally agree with his intentions. Such disagreement is what Coleridge makes clear in his discussion of Taylor; the reader who discovers such disagreement has understood the writer's ignorance. Again, this situation is simply the reverse of the situation where the incompetent reader who is ignorant of the subject-matter and does not in fact understand the text nevertheless gives to it some meaning. All of this implies the independent meaning of the text, as a particular aspect or part of language, as governed by the rules, conventions, and standards that govern the employment of all language:

I would lose no opportunity of impressing on the mind of my youthful readers that language (as embodied and articulated spirit of the race, as the growth and emanation of a people, and not the work of any individual wit or will) is often inadequate, sometimes deficient, but never false or delusive. We have only to master the true origin and original import of any native and abiding word, to find in it, if not the solution of the facts expressed by it, yet a finger-mark pointing to the road on which this solution is to be sought.
(Aids To Reflection, 230, n.)

Thus, the object of the reader's activity is not the supplementation or actualization of the text's sense. In every instance, the claim to understand the writer's ignorance has been a claim to uncover some inconsistency

or incoherence in the text that defeats the intentions of the author, or some lack of knowledge that is betrayed in the text. The object of the reader's activity is to understand what is said in the text itself; the meaning Coleridge gives to the claim to understand a writer's ignorance can only make sense if this is the case.

Coleridge also discusses the nature of the reader's relation to the author and text in a number of passages that allude to the mechanics of understanding a written text. The remarks concern largely the intellectual demands that a competent reader must fulfill in order to understand. And, again, the remarks are for the most part offered as prescriptive corrections to the misguided multitudes. Two points are demonstrated: first, that the reader's activity is not productive or supplementary of meaning, and second, that the emphasis upon the demands of competence are themselves created by the nature of the reading process. "In order to learn," writes Coleridge, "we must attend: in order to profit by what we have learnt, we must think" (Aids to Reflection, 69).

By THOUGHT I here mean the voluntary production in our own minds of those states of consciousness, to which, as to his fundamental facts, the Writer has referred us: while ATTENTION has for its object the order and connection of the Thoughts and images. (Friend, I, 16)

In attention we keep the mind passive: in thought we rouse it to activity. In the former, we submit to an impression - we keep the mind steady, in order to receive the stamp. In the latter...we ourselves make a copy or duplicate of his work. (Aids To Reflection, 69, n.)

Here the activity of reading is described as an act of making a duplicate or copy of the author's ideas from or through the text. This view is presented quite explicitly in a number of places, such as in the following remarks concerning the use of punctuation:

the necessity of arranging the words of a sentence... in the order of syntax far less frequently stands in the way of the writer's arranging his words in the order of the corresponding thoughts and feelings, and likewise placing them so as to express the connection of the sentence either with the preceding or the following, in respect of the dependency or similarity of the thoughts. Consequently, it enables the Writer to render his language more impassioned, more expressive of continuity, dependency, retrospection and logical, psychological, and sentimental order of the thoughts and feelings, which by means of words he wishes to transfer or (as it were) copy off, from his own mind to the minds of his Readers. (Letters, VI, 638)

Punctuation, therefore is always prospective: that is, it is not made according to the actual weight & difference or equality of the logical connections, but to the view which the Speaker is supposed to have at the moment, in which he speaks the particular sentence. Therefore I call them not symbols of Logic, but dramatic directions, enabling the reader more easily to place himself in the state of the writer or original Speaker. (Notebooks, entry 3604)

The notion of "copying off" a writer's ideas from a text is particularly telling. As is well known, the word "copy" is a loaded term for Coleridge. As distinguished from an imitation, a copy presupposes an isomorphic correspondence between the copy and the item copied. In an imitation, "a certain quantum of difference is essential...; while in a copy it is a

defect, contravening its name and purposes" ("Shakespearean Crit.," 499). "The impression on the wax is not an imitation, but a copy, of the seal; the seal itself is an imitation" ("On Poesy," 492). It is quite clear from the use of the word "copy" that the reading process is in no way genuinely productive of meaning; the reader is like the wax in Coleridge's metaphor: the text and author are ground and centre of meaning.

Coleridge's use of the phrase "copy off, from his own mind" might at first glance appear to point to some mysterious detour into the mental experience of the author. However, his more technical discussions of how words are understood point out that this, so strongly put, is a misconception.⁵ Moreover, such discussions show that the notion of "copying off" an author's thought from the text, as much as anything so far discussed, points to the centrality of the concern for consensus and competence. According to Coleridge,

when a person speaking to us of any particular object or appearance refers to it by means of some common character to a known class (which he does by giving it a name), we say, that we understand him, that is, we understand his words. The name of a thing...expresses that which...we place (or make to stand) under it, as the condition of its real existence, and in proof that it is not an accident of the senses, or affectation of the individual.... (Aids To Reflection, 220-221)

In like manner, in a connected succession of names, as the speaker passes from one to the other, we say that we understand his discourse (discursio intellectus, discursus, his passing rapidly from one thing to another). Thus, in all instances it is words, names, or, if images, yet images used as words or names, that are the only and exclusive subjects of understanding. In no instance do we

understand a thing in itself; but only the name to which it is referred. Thus...[one] sees The colour, and had seen it before in a vast number and variety of objects; and he understands the word red, as referring his fancy or memory to this his collective experience. (Aids To Reflection, 222)

And Coleridge explains how the sortal distinctions or classes to which words, modelled on the function of a name, refer are built up:

Among the various component parts [of any total impression], we direct our attention to such as we recollect to have noticed in other total impressions. Then, by a voluntary act, we withhold our attention from all the rest to reflect exclusively on these; and these we henceforward use as common characters, by virtue of which the several objects are referred to one and the same sort. (Aids To Reflection, 217)

The proper functions of the understanding [are] that of generalizing the notices received from the senses in order to the construction of names: of referring particular notices (that is, impressions or sensations) to their proper names; and, vice versa, names to their correspondent class or kind of notices. (Aids To Reflection, 222)

These sortal distinctions, or concepts, are mental items that arise, through an act of generalization, from an experience of a public and shared reality. A word that has no such reference to a common character, or that is used in such a way that this reference is completely obscured, must be nonsense, in fact, cannot, according to Coleridge's logic, be a word. The words of a text must, as signs employed by the author's under-

standing, refer to concepts or sortal distinctions in the mind of the author. Understanding a text is an operation whereby a reader produces the concepts or sortal distinctions that correspond to the words, with reference to his own recollections of experience. Thus, when Coleridge writes of a reader copying the thoughts of the author by means of the words of the text, he cannot be supposed to point to some divinatory leap into the mental life of the author. This notion of copying refers only to the "voluntary production" in the mind of the reader of the corresponding concepts on the one hand, and on the other, expresses both the ideality of the referent and the consequence that the adequacy of the reader's understanding of a text must be determined by the degree to which the reader's "voluntary production" matches the referents intended by the author. But, as Coleridge describes, words by their very nature express public and shared reality; a reader understands a text with reference to his knowledge of the world. Thus, it follows that only the words of the text, as an expression of this shared reality, are "copied," not the mind of the author.

It has been pointed out that, for Coleridge, a word's meaning is its (indirect) reference to a common, public, and shared reality, and that any word that has no such reference or is used in such a way that this reference tends to be obscured must be mere nonsense. It has also been pointed out that the understanding of a discourse takes place with reference, simply put, to the reader's knowledge of the world. It is then clear that where this shared knowledge is lacking, communication will be disabled. It is also clear that this view places very particular demands both upon reader and author. Both the coherence of the author's performance

and the adequacy of the reader's understanding will obviously depend upon, and be measured against, knowledge of a shared reality. This is expressed quite explicitly by Coleridge's question "to whom?", as well as in his treatment of the fanatic's text, Plato's Timaeus, and Taylor's treatise. What makes both understanding and communication possible is a command of some knowledge shared by both reader and author. The purpose of Coleridge's question "to whom?" is to point out that misunderstanding is due to the insufficient knowledge, that is, the incompetence, of the reader. Again, what is at issue in Coleridge's "golden rule" is the question of the reader's and the author's competence with respect to whatever consensus and established authority exists concerning the subject-matter in question. In his discussion of the understanding and formulation of words, the ground of the concern with competence, consensus, and authority is made clear; the logical requirement that understanding operate with sufficient knowledge of a publicly sanctioned and shared reality is in the end a practical demand for the recognition of consensus, authority and some standard of competence.

In a great number of places, Coleridge points to the more specific aspects of the demand. These specifications begin to draw into sharper focus the attacks on critics, readers, and the reading public that were presented at the beginning of this chapter. Near the beginning of The Friend, for example, there are a number of essays entitled "On the Communication of Truth." The essays are concerned largely with the moral obligations that writer and reader must fulfill, and which arise out of the nature of the communicative situation as Coleridge describes it. "Whatever is...foreseen as preventing the conveyance of our thought, makes the attempt an act of self-contradiction: and whether the faulty

cause exist in our choice of unfit words or our choice of auditors, the result is the same and so is the guilt. We have communicated falsehood" (Friend, I, 48-49). Thus, Coleridge claims, he is not "an enemy to free enquiry of the boldest kind, ... provided only, the enquiry be conducted with that seriousness, which naturally accompanies the love of truth, and that it is evidently intended for those only, who may be presumed to be capable of weighing the arguments" (Friend, I, 42). Conversely, there are certain demands to be made upon readers:

A lazy, half-attention amounts to a mental yawn. Where a subject, that demands thought, has been thoughtfully treated, and with an exact and patient derivation from its principles, we must be willing to exert a portion of the same effort, and to think with the author, or the author will have thought in vain for us. It makes little difference for the time being, whether there be an hiatus oscitans in the attention, or an hiatus lacymabilis in the author's manuscript. (Friend, I, 25)

What is involved in the notion of "thinking with" an author, in copying his thoughts, has already been shown. Clearly, these kinds of demands and strictures are based upon Coleridge's view that a reader can only get at the meaning of what he reads through his foreknowledge of a reality shared with the author and through an adequate knowledge of the rules and conventions governing, guaranteeing the understanding of, both the subject-matter at hand and the employment of language as a whole. The practical demand, or what Coleridge phrases as a moral imperative, enters in consideration of this view with respect to the context and consequences of an utterance: this is the point of Coleridge's question

"to whom?", where problems of communication arise because of the imperfect knowledge of those to whom our words are addressed.

To put the matter another way, it was stated above that, in its most general terms, the object of Coleridge's concern with readers and reading is an inversion of the proper relationship between reader, text, and author, that is, a violation of the contract between reader and author. His comment on the communication of falsehood through a failure to recognize what will interfere with the communication is a specification of a term of the contract that is based upon the principles of all understanding. He who utters something to those who do not have knowledge sufficient to understand the utterance has failed to locate his statement with respect to the principles that make all understanding possible, and thus has misled his listeners by effectively obscuring the reliable means for understanding the utterance: the act contradicts itself. Where a reader cannot assume that a statement is governed by the relevant rules and conventions, or where the author cannot assume that he will be understood in light of such rules and conventions, the possibility of communication is undercut. As Barbara Hernstein Smith writes, the assumption that readers and writers need to make here operates

very much like the one shared by both buyers and sellers that paper or metal currency has a specific economic value exchangeable, according to a relatively stable system of equivalences, for valued goods and services. When this assumption is violated by the speaker... when he palms off counterfeit linguistic currency - we say that he is lying, and lying is a social transgression because it undermines the community's confidence in that verbal medium of exchange so basic to social transactions.

Smith's discussion also brings out Coleridge's insistence that readers are obliged to "attend":

We do not have a simple term like lying for the converse violation of that assumption by the listener, though it is important to recognize its existence, and the situation is familiar enough in everyday transactions. (...) [An] utterance constitutes, for the listener...an obligation, to respond to the speaker. When we "listen" to someone, as distinguished from merely noticing or overhearing what he says - in other words, when we identify ourselves as his audience - we implicitly agree to make ourselves available to that speaker as the instrument of his interests. (...) Most simply,...we agree to understand what he means, that is, to infer the motives and circumstances that occasioned his utterances, and to act in accord with the information thereby obtained. (100, 104)

Such mutual obligation and mutual recognition of consensus is what we mean by "contract". These obligations and the view that authors and readers have "lied" in the way Smith describes here, are behind the images of inversion, descent, and deceit in Coleridge's attacks on readers and the reading public.

Now, as I have pointed out, Coleridge's assertion of the claims of authority, or what he variously refers to as "uninterrupted tradition" or "received and ascertained laws," over the author-reader transaction arises out of the principles of the communicative situation as Coleridge describes it. In this relation the assertion is just what Coleridge alludes to when he writes that it "is not the attempt to form a judgement, ...but the grounds, or rather the non-grounds on which the judgement is formed" that he questions. Coleridge wishes to make clear the operation of these "grounds," or the absence of them, in what his readers make of what they read. At the same time, in the somewhat narrow confines of Coleridge's discussion of what counts as good reading, the role of the

reader in relation to author and text is largely marginal. Coleridge describes the process of reading as a process of "copying off" the meaning of words from the mind of the author, and as the discussion of Coleridge's "golden rule" pointed out, the author functions as the limit to, or measurement of, the reader's understanding of the text. Elsewhere this view of the author's function is betrayed even in the metaphors Coleridge applies to the reading process: Coleridge refers to the author as "host" at a banquet (Friend, I, 15-16), as an experienced "guide" on a journey (Friend, I, 54), and, more conventionally, refers to the author's function as "public instructor," as a public "office" purchased with great industry (Friend, I, 30-31). The author stands as ground and centre of meaning. Again, Coleridge argues that all of the reader's judgements are circumscribed by a body of publicly sanctioned and legitimizing knowledge. For Coleridge the authorial voice speaks from "uninterrupted tradition;" indeed, the whole point of his "golden rule" is to say to the reader that until the reader can show otherwise, according to "received and ascertained laws," the authorial voice is a voice of authority.

Summarized in this way, Coleridge's discussion of readers and reading is perhaps authoritarian only in a technical sense. But Coleridge's logic is suspect in a number of places. The ferocity of Coleridge's attacks on the public and the vaguely political terms of these attacks that I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter seem to be at odds with Coleridge's impartial claim that he only wishes to draw attention to the "grounds" upon which judgements are formed. What appears to be at issue in these savage attacks is not how judgements are formed, but who

is forming them. Where Coleridge employs the examples of "the religious fanatic" and Plato to clarify his "golden rule," for instance, the question of who is being judged seems to guide the logic of the discussion. In the first place, Coleridge condemns the fanatic because he sees "clearly" according to "received and ascertained laws" the faults of the argument. Coleridge nowhere specifies what these laws are, where they come from or whose 'laws' these are (are they even valid in the fanatics' discourse?); the main point appears to be that they are, according to Coleridge, "received and ascertained." On the other hand, Coleridge's reasons for refusing to impute the responsibility for obscurity to Plato seem to have largely to do with the fact that he is dealing with Plato, and not a "religious fanatic." Plato is usually right, Coleridge claims, and a great number of judicious men have praised him, and so Plato cannot be wrong. In Coleridge's argument, his insistence upon the rule of impartial and rational critical principles seems to have given way to a bare assertion of authority that is meant to hold readers at bay.

Coleridge's argument for the claims of authority frequently dissolves into vague metaphor, metaphor that is disturbing in relation to Coleridge's attacks on the reading public. Throughout his discussion of the author-reader contract Coleridge employs economic description. In The Friend, for instance, Coleridge writes that the name of "author" "is an office that cannot be procured gratis. The industry, necessary for the due exercise of its functions, is its purchase money..." (Friend, I, 30-31). Again, what is purported to be rationally founded authority ends up being expressed in terms of bare power. Coleridge expresses the concept of an author's competence as the exercise of an economic right. One can begin

to see how loaded such metaphoric expression of the claims of authority is when the metaphor is placed beside Coleridge's comments on the speciousness of an author's appeal to the mass reading public. Coleridge's question "to whom?" begins to take on a politically authoritarian significance.

Endnotes - Chapter 1

1. That these aspects of Coleridge's works have not been fastened upon more frequently seems odd. Both Marilyn Butler and Paul Hamilton point to a very distinct awareness of Coleridge's concerns in the work of at least one of Coleridge's contemporaries, Thomas Love Peacock. [See Hamilton, Coleridge's Poetics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), p. 21, note 18, and Butler, Peacock Displayed: A Satirist In His Context (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).] In Peacock's Nightmare Abbey (1818), for example, Mr. Flosky, who is a particularly biting parody of Coleridge, remarks on the present state of reading:

It is very certain, and much to be rejoiced at, that our literature is hag-ridden. Tea has shattered our nerves; late dinners make us slaves of indigestion; the French Revolution has made us shrink from the name of philosophy, and has destroyed, in the more refined part of the community (of which number I am one), all enthusiasm for political liberty. That part of the reading public which shuns the solid food of reason for the light diet of fiction, requires a perpetual adhibition of sauce piquante to the palate of its depraved imagination.

See Thomas Love Peacock, Nightmare Abbey, in Headlong Hall and Nightmare Abbey (New York and London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1961), 179.

2. The business of publishing novels, romances, periodicals, and sentimental poetry was of course becoming lucrative in Coleridge's day, and such works were more or less widely distributed in the new circulating libraries; this business-end of publishing seems to come under particularly heavy censure from Coleridge. A. Harvey, in English Poetry in a Changing Society: 1780-1825 (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), documents such changes.

3. See the Introduction, above, for example.

4. See also the last chapter of Simpson's Irony and Authority. But compare Frances Ferguson's analysis of Coleridge's "golden rule": Introduction, above.

5. These remarks on what amounts to Coleridge's views on language are of course in no way intended to be an exhaustive comment on the explosive discussion concerning that topic. For a comprehensive introduction see Catherine Miles Wallace, "Coleridge's Theory of Language," Philological Quarterly 59 (1980): 338-352.

Chapter 2 : Coleridge and Some Readers

In the previous Chapter I argued that at the root of Coleridge's concerns with readers, reading, and the reading public is what Coleridge describes as an absence of an acknowledgement of some critical consensus that will validate what a reader makes of what he reads. In other words, the concern is with the authority that legitimizes what a reader makes of what he reads. This concern is perhaps most clearly evident, for example, where Coleridge refers in Chapter Three of Biographia Literaria to the anonymous critics of the day as "despots" on the throne of criticism whose unfounded judgements are given more authority than ought to be the case. In what follows, I shall extend the discussion of Coleridge's concern with authority in order to point out the political logic behind Coleridge's discussion of readers, reading, and his question "to whom?". This political dimension of Coleridge's discussion of readers and reading is obscured by Coleridge's insistence on an impartial employment of sanctioned principles in criticism. It is the argument of this Chapter that, despite Coleridge's insistence on impartiality, his assertion of the claims of legitimizing authority in the world of letters implies, or rather, speaks on behalf of authoritarian views in politics.

This is a claim perhaps neither bold nor surprising. The claim may seem almost self-evident, particularly, for instance, in light of the fact that Coleridge, who eventually became one of Britain's best-known and best-loved apologists for conservatism, posits the "Clerisy" in his last published works as guardians "over the interests of physical and

moral science; being likewise the instructors of...the remaining more numerous classes" of society (Church and State, 43). Nevertheless, the matter seems to have been omitted, or even reversed, in the more recent view that the Biographia is an instance of a loosening of authorial control, or that its disjunctions and desultory structure work as ironic gestures of freedom. This view does not in the end accord with the political dimension of Coleridge's views on readers and reading. Even if we accept that Coleridge's texts exhibit such 'gestures,' we ought not in any case to take them at face value. As Paul Hamilton, for example, has urged, what appears to be a truly educative and progressive ideal in the Clerisy

is illusory because the Clerisy only educates people to an extent commensurate with their already existing 'rights and duties' defined in relation to the social class to which they belong. Because the Clerisy and its values exist outside the political arena, not contesting established political forms, the progress to which they contribute has no critical substance. (200-201)

Even where Coleridge's views on, and treatment of, readers and reading might be shown to derive from some emancipatory impulse, it may be that the emancipation is illusory.¹ The political dimension of the discussion of readers and reading is made quite explicit in a number of places in Coleridge's work, and is made in a way that is more overt than is suggested simply by the continuity between the concern for "guardianship of the muses" in the Biographia and the institutionalized cultural guardianship represented by the Clerisy in the later works.

This connection is suggested in a passage from The Statesman's Manual, an attack in which Coleridge juxtaposes the notion of the reading public with progressivist rhetoric in a parodic "quotation." In the Biographia Coleridge objects to the supposition, upon which the notion of a reading public is founded, that all men are able to read, and so are able to judge, and even have a right to judge, of what they read. Here, the supposition is associated with rhetoric concerning the supposition of a more general political right:

The READING PUBLIC in this ENLIGHTENED AGE, and THINKING NATION, by its favourable reception of LIBERAL IDEAS, has long demonstrated the benign influence of that PROFOUND PHILOSOPHY which has already emancipated us from so many absurd prejudices.... THE PEOPLE can be no longer duped or scared out of their imprescriptible and inalienable RIGHT to judge and decide for themselves on all important questions of Government and Religion. (Statesman's Manual, 36-37, n.)

The arguments Coleridge employs against the notion of a qualified reading public and what that notion supposes are based on the same kind of justification that obtains in his arguments against the assumption of certain political rights, arguments which work to dismantle aspirations of universal suffrage, and which side with established power, that is, with established property owners.

It was pointed out in the previous Chapter that Coleridge's question "to whom?" is an objection against "the pretended right of every individual, competent and incompetent" to interpret a text without sufficient knowledge of whatever rules, linguistic usage, established tradition, and so on, operates with respect to that text. The political dimension

beneath the logic of "to whom?" is revealed in a number of passages in which Coleridge represents the author-reader relationship in terms of economic metaphor, wherein he shifts the terms of his discussion of this relationship from intellectual to economic justification. The shift moves Coleridge's impartial claim for authority into the political arena, where the justification for what counts as good reading, "sufficient knowledge," and competence becomes ambiguous: the opposition between "sufficient" and "insufficient" knowledge, or competence and incompetence begins to look something like an opposition between political interests and an assertion of political power. Understanding, under the weight of the economic terms of the metaphor, becomes a sign of political and economic advantage. There is an equation between learning and property, for example, in one of Coleridge's notebook entries:

With the literary Republic as Authors it should be as in the State to Legislators - as in the latter Wealth of itself will not do, without Public Spirit & State-Wisdom tho' a part of the Senate may be composed of men who have only great property to recommend them, so with Authors as to Learning...all ought to have Learning, as a common qualification for sitting in the House - It should rarely be the cause; but always the condition.
(Notebooks, entry 3453)

This equation is taken up at some length in The Friend as well, in the Chapter concerning "Literature and the Public." Coleridge has been comparing passage into the world of letters with passage into a theatre. It is unfortunate, he writes, that

in the great theatre of Literature there are no authorized door-keepers: for our anonymous critics are self-elected. (...) A few extraordinary minds may be allow-

ed to pass a mere opinion: though in point of fact those, who are entitled to this privilege, are ever the last to avail themselves of it. Add too, that even the mere opinions of such men may in general be regarded either as promissory notes, or as receipts referring to a former payment. But every man's opinion has a right to pass into the common auditory, if his reason for the opinion is paid down at the same time: for argument is the sole current coin of intellect. The degree of influence to which the opinion is entitled, should be proportioned to the weight and value of the reasons for it; and whether these are shillings or pounds sterling, the man, who has given them, remains blameless, provided he contents himself with the place to which they have entitled him, and does not attempt by strength of lungs to counter-balance its disadvantages, or expect to exert as immediate an influence in the back seats of the upper gallery, as if he had paid in gold and been seated in the stage box. (Friend, I, 277)

Intellectual coin, Coleridge complains, is refused by some critics "under the pretence that it is light or counterfeit, without any proof given either by the money scales, or by sounding the coin in dispute together with one of known goodness" (Friend, I, 277-278). The immediate object of the passage from The Friend is much the same as it is in other attacks on the state of readers and reading, though in terms more stark: Coleridge desires "door-keepers" and "money-scales" in the world of letters in order to ensure that the proper exchange values are maintained in the reader-author transaction. Yet with the application of the economic metaphor, what has been an intellectual distinction between competence and incompetence merges with economic distinctions in the social order, despite the impression Coleridge leaves in his discussion of readers and reading that notion of competence, for instance, is somehow disinterested and universal.

The production of argument and truth is linked with property and power that give a right to a place in the social order. The link is supplied in the metaphor by the picture of social hierarchy inherent in the distinction between the propertied man of privilege who has a right to all the influence of the stage box and the shouting mobs confined to the back seats of the upper gallery. The effect of the metaphor is clearly to say that the disorder in the author-reader transaction is a function of what Coleridge sees as political disorder.

The content of the metaphor is expressed more concretely in a remark, already quoted in part in the previous Chapter, on the reading public from The Statesman's Manual. The remark occurs as part of an explanation of why Coleridge has addressed the "sermon" to the propertied professional class:

When I named this Essay a Sermon, I sought to prepare the inquirers after it for the absence of the usual softenings suggested by worldly prudence, of all the compromise between truth and courtesy. But not even as a Sermon would I have addressed the present discourse to a promiscuous audience; and for this reason I likewise announced it in the title-page, as exclusively ad clerum;...to men of clerkly acquirements, of whatever profession. I would that the greater part of our publications could be thus directed, each to its appropriate class of Readers. But this cannot be! For among the other odd burs and kecksies, the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity, we have now a READING PUBLIC - as strange a phrase, methinks, as ever forced a splenetic smile on the staid countenance of Meditation; and yet no fiction! For our Readers have, in good faith, multiplied exceedingly, and have waxed proud. It would require the intrepid accuracy of a Colquhoun to venture at the precise number of that company only, whose heads and hearts are dieted out at the two public ordinaries of Literature, the circulating libraries and the periodical press. (Statesman's Manual, 35-38)

The crux of the passage lies in the casual "for" in "For among other odd burs..." where the rapid growth of the reading public and, in particular, the indiscriminate circulation of texts among the lower classes, is held somehow responsible for the disequilibrium in the relation between author and audience. While the reading material made available to the masses of society is portrayed as something of dubious effect issuing from low public inns, Literature per se is presented as an object of appropriation fit only for the propertied professional class to whom The Statesman's Manual is addressed.³ The overt concern of the passage is with certain difficulties that arise in directing a work to an appropriate audience in order to effect the communication as fully as possible; the importance of doing so, as discussed in the previous Chapter, is the concern of Coleridge's question "to whom?". Again, the distinction between "imperfect" and "perfect" knowledge, between competence and incompetence, falls in with distinctions in the social order, with the clear implication that the disruptive failure to recognize the former distinctions is bound up with a disruption of the latter distinctions.

What arises in these remarks is not merely a nostalgic lament or some angst resulting from the passing away of a well-defined and cosily appreciative audience. Again, in both the argument-as-money metaphor and in the example from The Statesman's Manual the production of truth and argument is linked with property and power that give a right to a place in the social order. In The Friend, in the chapters on "Government and Reason," the link is stated quite explicitly and in a way that makes concrete the argument-as-money metaphor as well as the political aspect of Coleridge's question "to whom?". Whereas the point of the question "to

whom?" has been to make clear the matter of who is entitled to judge what works, based on the notions of established competence of "sufficient knowledge" and rationally founded critical consensus, the logic of "who is competent" is applied in consideration of political rights and entitlements.

The chapters on "Government and Reason" are specifically an attack on Rousseau's theory of government, but they are more generally an attack on the current democratic ideals which were flowing from the Enlightenment tradition⁴ and are a sustained argument in support of the established order of the state. Briefly put, Coleridge is opposing the view that, since all morality or knowledge of right and wrong is based on reason, and since in respect of the faculty of reason all men are equal in kind, the reason of each man individually is the sole competent judge of right and wrong, and, by extension, of "all important matters of Government." Thus, the view states, the only legitimate constitution is one that accords entirely with the reason of each man, and one where the individual in according his actions with the laws, the constitution, and the will of the state maintains the independence that is his right in respect of the exercise of his reason. Obligatory laws, in the view opposed, proceed only from reason which is one and the same in all. It is the function of government to ensure that all its citizens enjoy the same sphere of rights and that without distinction are subject to the same duties in accordance with the free exercise of reason. As something creating disproportionate influence and a state of dependence of one citizen upon another, unequal distribution of property is to be avoided.

In reply, Coleridge attacks the linchpin of the view, and

writes that

in every country where property [has] prevailed, property must be the grand basis of government; and...that government [has been] best in which the power or political influence of the individual was in proportion to his property... (Friend, I 223_

[W]here individual property exists, there must be inequality of property... But to suppose the Land the property of the State and the labour and produce to be equally divided among all the Members of the State, involves more than one contradiction: for it would not subsist without gross injustice, except where Reason of all and each was absolute master of the selfish passions of sloth, envy &c. (Friend I, 223)

Coleridge's reply revolves around the argument that reason "dwells in every man potentially, but actually and in perfect purity is found in no man and in no body of men" (Friend, I, 196). The view he opposes, according to Coleridge, is a mere abstraction in which "it is not the actual man, but the abstract Reason alone, that is the sovereign and rightful lawgiver" (Friend, I, 96). The point is that reason in fact exists in each man only in varying degrees of development.⁵ All men are not equally rational and moral, so that social inequalities are not only inevitable and natural, but desirable:

Children are excluded from all political power - are they not human beings in whom the faculty of Reason resides? Yes? but in them the faculty is not yet adequately developed. But are not gross ignorance, inveterate superstition, and the habitual tyranny of passion and sensuality, equal impediments to the rightful exercise of Reason, as childhood and early youth? Who would not rely on the judgement of a well-educated English lad, bred in a virtuous and enlightened family, in preference to that of a brutal Russian ...? Again: women are likewise excluded....Is Reason

then an affair of sex? No! But women are commonly in a state of dependence, and are not likely to exercise their Reason with freedom. Well! and does not this ground of exclusion apply with equal or greater force to the poor, to the infirm, to men in embarrassed circumstances, to all in short whose maintenance, be it scanty or be it ample, depends on the will of others? How far are we to go? Where are we to stop? What classes should we admit? Whom must we disenfranchise? (Friend, I, 195-196)

To whom then will political power be given? Abstractly, Coleridge argues, the right of free agency, that is, the independent exercise of reason, implies a right to a sphere of action, that is, property. Hence Coleridge argues that property is "the grand basis of government." But, as reason is more perfectly developed in some than in others, unequal distribution of property and greater political influence in proportion to property seem to follow, and this is not only most natural, but is most just, according to Coleridge, inasmuch as this situation arises from the rational/moral differences between each man. The capacity of each man to recognize and to produce truth, that is, the development of the reason of each man, is made to function as a means of naturalizing the established order of the state. Intellectual differences between men -- the sort of differences brought to bear in Coleridge's discussions of competence and incompetence, "perfect" and "imperfect" knowledge in his discussions of reading and the reading public -- are employed here as a principle of exclusion from political power.

There is a formal coincidence, then, between Coleridge's complaints, for example, against the incompetent reader who, not understand-

ing something, still expects to understand it "as if he had a right," and Coleridge's arguments against the current democratic ideas. In both cases the objection is against the assumption of a sort of right. On the one hand, the objection is against a prima facie assumption that anyone can legitimately judge any text, that anyone can "understand a writer's ignorance"; on the other hand, the objection is against the assumption that anyone has a right to political power and influence. Coleridge's reply in each case is the same. In both cases Coleridge points to differences between men with respect to their rational/moral capacities. Thus, the "promiscuous," incompetent reader or critic reads for mere amusement or personal curiosity, judges from spleen or personal motives, and lacks the intellectual capacity from which follows the "sufficient knowledge" that enables understanding. The politically disenfranchised are so because they lack the rational/moral capacity from which political power and property follow. Again, both of these concerns are brought together in the argument-as-money metaphor where sufficient knowledge/property buys the right to a front-row seat in the Great Theatre of Literature.

The suggestion of this coincidence between the political argument and the discussion of reading is in the first place that the problem with readers, reading, and the reading public discussed in Chapter One is a political problem. In Coleridge's attack in Biographia Literaria, for example, on the rise of the reading public and the sinking of books and authors, the hierarchical social terms of reference are quite evident. The "descent" of books is traced through the address of authors to "Monarch or Pontiff," to "the Town," and finally to "the multitudinous

Public" (B.L., I, 58-59). What is at issue in the image of descent and in these hierarchical terms is a growing subjection of books and authors to the interests and demands of the lower orders of society. And again, this is the import of Coleridge's complaint against the press and the circulating libraries. Elsewhere Coleridge writes that the "enormous multiplication of Authors & Books" acts to flatter basely "the imaginary Word, Public -- which is yet of pernicious effect by habituating every Reader to consider himself as the Judge & therefore the Superior of the Writer who yet if he has any justifiable claim to write ought to be his superior."⁶ Thus, again, the line of distinction between the incompetent and the competent reader appears coincident with social distinctions.

In the remark quoted above, the very notion of the reading public is connected with what Coleridge parodies as a kind of liberal rhetoric. The reason for this juxtaposition is probably due partly to Coleridge's contention, against the liberal ideals, that all men are not rational equals, that such an idea is mere abstraction, since on the same ground Coleridge objects to the notion of a "philosophic populace" or a reading public. Neither "Philosophy or Theology in the strictest sense of the words," Coleridge claims, "can be said to have even a public existence among us" (Statesman's Manual, 170-171). In the same place, however, Coleridge has his speaker claim that "the Dark Age yielded at length to the dawning light of Reason and Common-Sense at the glorious, though imperfect, Revolution" (Statesman's Manual, 37). In another place, Coleridge writes that "our fathers ought to have felt from 1700 -- or rather 1680 -- the birth of our Constitution, the death of our philosophic mind!"⁷ Though Coleridge is nowhere precise about the con-

nection between the revolution, "the death of the philosophic mind" and the rise of the reading public, the latter remark occurs in connection with a comment on "popularness in Literature" (B.L., I, 165-166), so that the rise of the reading public appears to be for Coleridge an aspect of seditious republican forces born in 1680. From the context of both remarks, it is evident that the point of coincidence between them is an objection against the appeal to the masses of society and the view that the masses are capable of judging for themselves.

It is very difficult, to say the least, to see any logical relationship at all between one's rational or moral capacities and one's ownership of property or political influence, and it is just as difficult to see what either of these has necessarily to do with being a competent reader. The casting of the problem of readership in political and economic terms puts the discussion of the competent reader, the application of "received and ascertained laws," and the reader-author relationship into an ambiguous position. Where Coleridge writes, for example, of the "uninterrupted tradition" that must circumscribe good reading, the "grounds" of a good reader's judgements, he implies that the content of this tradition, the "grounds" of good judgement, are somehow obvious and universal. Yet, in view of the economic and political terms of the problem of readership, where Coleridge asks "who would not trust the judgement of a well-educated English lad, bred in a virtuous and enlightened family," he gives to his concept of the competent reader gender, social class, nationality, and a set of values, and he sets this reader in opposition to women, the poor, and all those in "a state of dependence," in other words, presumably, in opposition to what is comprised under the

term "the public." This "competent reader" is viewed in Chapter Eleven of Biographia Literaria where Coleridge advises those readers who would become authors, and urges them to live in retirement from the book trade:

From the manufactory or counting house, from the law-court, or from having visited your last patient, you return at evening...to your family, prepared for its social enjoyments, with the very countenances of your wife and children brightened.... (B.L., I, 224-225)

The addressee of this homily is clearly something like one of Coleridge's "well-educated English lads."

In some of his works, Coleridge follows through on his emphasis of knowing to whom a work is addressed and attempts to make clear his intended audience. In these clarifications Coleridge not only tackles the problems involved in his question "to whom?", but is openly offering a solution based on economic grounds. Coleridge sides with established property and power. In a passage from The Friend Coleridge describes his intended audience as quite small:

I was not so ignorant of mankind as to expect that my Essays would be found in the hurry and struggle of active life. All the passions, which are there at work, it was my object to preclude: and I distinctly foresaw, that by rejecting all appeals to personal passions, and party spirit, and all interest grounded wholly on the cravings of curiosity, and the love of novelty for its own sake, I at the same time precluded threefourths of the ordinary readers of periodical publications, whether Reviews, Magazines, or Newspapers. I might however find dispersedly what I could not hope to meet collectively. I thought it not improbable, that there might be individuals... to whom the very absence of such stimulants would prove a recommendation of the work. (Friend, II, 273)

In the Statesman's Manual Coleridge is more specific concerning the identity of the competent audience:

I am to imagine for myself a very different audience. I appeal exclusively to men, from whose station and opportunities I may dare anticipate a respectable portion of that "sound book learnedness," into which our old public schools still continue to initiate their pupils. (...) And here, ... I can announce one favourable symptom. The notion of our measureless superiority in good sense to our ancestors...is out of fashion. ... among men of influence and property we have more reason to apprehend the stupor of despondence, than self-confidence not bottomed on principle. (Statesman's Manual, 39)

The least, that can be demanded of the least favoured among you, is an earnest endeavour to walk in the light of your own knowledge; and not, as the mass of mankind, by laying hold on the skirts of custom. Blind followers of a blind and capricious guide, forced likewise (though oftener, I fear, by their own improvidence, than by the lowness of their estate) to consume life in the means of living.... (Statesman's Manual, 121-122)

Coleridge's answer to the question "to whom?" is clearly based on property and the availability of leisure. The remarks tie together the concern with an acknowledgement of critical consensus or authority and the political concerns discussed in this Chapter. What Coleridge has called "sufficient knowledge" and "received and ascertained laws" is manifested here as the "sound book learnedness" of a public school education:

Coleridge's consensus is found among "men of influence and property."

It seems that where Coleridge writes in The Friend that he means "not so much to shew [his] Reader this or that fact, as to kindle his own torch for him" (Friend, I, 52), the light of this torch shines only for a very privileged few.

Endnotes - Chapter 2

1. See the discussion with respect to Jerome McGann's contention in the Introduction, above.
2. See also the terms Coleridge employs at B.L., II, 110.
3. See Statesman's Manual, 121-124 and 170 ff, where the assertion that the address is to the propertied class is substantiated very particularly.
4. For a useful compendium of Coleridge's political views, see David P. Calleo, Coleridge and The Idea of The Modern State (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1966). See also Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries, 87 ff.
5. According to Coleridge,

the sophism is as great as if [one] should say -
The Souls of all men have the faculty of sight in
an equal degree - forgetting to add that this
faculty cannot be exercised without eyes, and that
some men are blind and others short-sighted & c. -
and should then take advantage of this...omission
to conclude against the use or necessity of spec-
tacles... or of chusing the sharpest sighted men
for our guides. (Friend, I, 160)
6. S.T. Coleridge, Lectures 1808-19: On Literature, ed R.A. Foakes (in MS). The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. 5. Cited by Engell and Bate in B.L., I, 57, note 3.
7. Notebooks, entry 3951. Cited by Engell and Bate in B.L., I, 165, note 1. See also Statesman's Manual, 170 ff, B.L., 165-166, and The Friend, I, 23-24.

Conclusion

People who write books and imagine that their readers are the public and that they must educate it soon arrive at the point not only of despising their so-called public but of hating it. Which leads absolutely nowhere. Friedrich Schlegel, "Critical Fragments" (1797).

In the context of his discussion of the problem of reading and readership, and particularly in the context of the political terms of his discussion, Coleridge's "ingenious bullying" of his reader in Biographia Literaria doesn't look much like a felicitous "invitation to participatory reading." In the discussion of the examples from the Biographia brought forward in the Introduction, I emphasized the divisive or exclusive nature of Coleridge's strategies. The strategies construct a dual perspective, where, on the one hand, the reader can align himself with the author's authority, or, on the other hand, can align himself with the faceless and befuddled public. It is possible to see inscribed in the terms of opposition in these anticipations of the reader's response Coleridge's problem of readership, complete with all the political baggage of that problem. Coleridge's coercive charm looks more like a way of dividing his audience down the middle, a way of controlling the consumption of his text, a way of delimiting the appropriate response of the competent and privileged few.

To see Biographia's gaps and equivocations as indirect invita-

tions to the reader involves a kind of historical leap of faith. Where critics of Coleridge read the Biographia's formal idiosyncracies as signposts pointing to a higher kind of reading, they ought to consider more closely just what reader they create in doing so. What reader, for example, is posited by Catherine M. Wallace's claim that in Biographia Literaria "The diversity of [Coleridge's] experience supplies the illustrations that progressively reveal the idea of imagination: the stages of the reader's intuition of this idea correspond to the stages of Coleridge's intellectual life" (8)? Wallace's "intuitive" reader, in view of what I have pointed out concerning Coleridge's problem of readership, seems hopelessly abstract, and divorced from the historical and ideological ground across which Coleridge seeks to construct his reader. Moreover, the kind of relationship pointed between author and reader in a view such as Wallace's seems to duplicate the terms of Coleridge's discussion of the relationship. Coleridge sees the author's function as being that of the "guide," the "public instructor," the voice of authority, while the reader "copies off" the thoughts of the author. I have pointed to the political dimension of the author-reader relationship. There is no critical distance in a view like Wallace's; without such distance, we simply accept the ideological baggage of Coleridge's argument.

The question of whether the 'gaps' in Coleridge's texts are really 'gaps' or are something else is, I think, not a very useful or relevant question. We ought instead to consider, for example, how a 'gap' like the insertion of the 'letter' into Chapter Thirteen of the Biographia works, why it blames Coleridge's reader for the failure of the argument, and what it presupposes about Coleridge's reader. The

question of Coleridge's readership engages these subsequent questions. The strategy of the 'letter,' for example, takes on coherent and meaningful form only as a strategy, that is, as a means for making a reader, and this is something that must be viewed in the wider context of Coleridge's presentation of his public. More emphasis needs to be placed on Coleridge's historical engagement with his reader and audience and on what is at stake in that engagement in order to see more clearly the claims Coleridge makes on critical reflection upon his work.

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