

Coleridge's *Biographia*: When is an Autobiography Not an Autobiography?

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I start from the premise that Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is one of the wonders of Western literature and a gold-mine for students of autobiography. Here, I know, I lose a number of potential readers, but since this essay is dedicated to probing and, so to speak, attacking the work from various angles, it seems to me important to establish at the outset my admiration of it and my respect for its author. Age cannot wither it, nor custom stale its infinite variety: after almost thirty years of close acquaintance, the *Biographia* continues to surprise and fascinate me. This essay aims not to rob Coleridge's work of its mystery but to explore some of the features that make it as interesting as it is, and in the process to add a little to our understanding of the history and definition of autobiography in general.¹

The reception of the *Biographia* has been bedeviled from the beginning by questions of form and genre. What is this chaotic thing? Coleridge himself, anticipating objections as always, refers to it as an "immethodical . . . miscellany" (*Biographia* 1:88). Reviewers of his own period agreed, describing it as "wayward and capricious," an "endless maze," "a strange medley" (Jackson 328, 323, 376). The most forceful of them, William Hazlitt, wished that Coleridge had produced the autobiography that his title appeared to promise, and gave an exasperated—and very funny—summary of the actual contents (Jackson 295). At the end of the century Leslie Stephen observed mildly that the book was "put together with a pitchfork" (3:355).² And in our own time a distinguished Romanticist has situated it in the category of "rubble-heap works" (McFarland 21). Probably the most widely shared view in the twentieth century, and certainly

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the one that has governed the way the *Biographia* is excerpted and taught, is the idea that it is not an autobiography at all, but a pioneering work of literary criticism. By turning a blind eye to seventy percent of the text, commentators are able to present Coleridge as an astute critic of the contemporary critical scene, as a theorist second only to Aristotle, and as a practical critic *avant la lettre*. It must be obvious, however, that a solution that requires us to ignore most of the book is not ideal. I shall eventually come back with a different answer to the question as to what kind of work the *Biographia* is; for the moment I propose to give it a new name, and to consider it in the first instance as a conundrum.

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The puzzle presents itself straight away on the title page, which announces in a mixed set of typefaces that what we have in our hands is *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions. By S. T. Coleridge, Esq.* The echo of Sterne's much-loved *Tristram Shandy* (its full title *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*) has been pointed out before, notably by Donald Reiman, who also comments shrewdly on the class indicators—the “Esquire” and the Latin title—that subtly warn off unsuitable readers such as women and the undereducated. But I want to take up another matter by drawing attention to the very first word. The original title seems to have been “Autobiographia Literaria,” for Coleridge described the work while he was writing it as “an Autobiographia literaria, or Sketches of my literary Life and opinions” (*Letters* 4:578–9). Why should he have changed his mind and called it a biography—“biographia”—instead, confirming and compounding the paradox by adding the tautological word “biographical” to the subtitle? Or rather, since I do not presume to deal with cause or intent, what is the effect of his having done so? Answers to this question may be found in the historical conditions under which the *Biographia* was published; in distinctive features of Coleridge's project; and in the conventions of autobiography at large.

The term “autobiography” is itself so familiar that it takes some effort to realize that there must have been a time when it was not; but in fact it was new and awkward when the *Biographia* appeared in 1817. The *Eighteenth-Century Short-Title*

Catalogue lists only one eighteenth-century work under the title of “autobiography,” namely Benjamin Franklin’s; but that, we find, acquired the title only in 1849, having been published originally as his *Life . . . Written by Himself*. The first example of the word “autobiography” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is Southey’s use of it in the *Quarterly Review* in 1809, the second Carlyle’s in 1828. Setting aside diaries and journals and confining ourselves to continuous narrative, we discover that earlier writers chose to describe autobiographical works, whether fiction or nonfiction, as “memoirs,” “apologies,” “confessions,” “histories,” or (like Franklin) simply “lives,” and that this practice persisted well into the nineteenth century: so we have Colley Cibber’s notorious *Apology for his Life, Written by Himself* (1740), Defoe’s *Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe . . . Written by Himself* (1719), Hume’s *Life . . . Written by Himself* (1777), Smollett’s *Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822), Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and so on. This is not to say that Coleridge could not have led the way and hazarded the word “autobiography”—nor indeed that he did not, for at one point in the text he describes “the ludicrous effect of the first sentence of an Autobiography” (2:237). The reviewers soon used the word, or its derivatives “autobiographer” and “autobiographical,” fairly unselfconsciously (Jackson 327, 295). But on a title page it would have been a novelty, and the *Biographia* exhibits some sensitivity on the score of linguistic innovation (1:168–72).

Moreover, and more interestingly, the fact that a separate name was only just emerging indicates something about prevalent attitudes towards this kind of writing, and hence other reasons for Coleridge’s preference for “biography.” Biography and “Self-biography”—the latter a word that appears in one of the *Biographia* reviews (Jackson 322), and that we can see creeping back into fashion today—were as yet virtually indistinct. Samuel Johnson, the great authority of Coleridge’s youth and the colossus that loomed over his maturity, had expressed the opinion that the best person to write a biography was the subject of it. Boswell reminded readers of this assertion in the opening lines of his own monumental biography (1:25). First plainly declaring that “Those relations are therefore commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story”

(*Idler* 262), Johnson goes on to consider some of the objections to that position, in a passage that deserves close attention:

The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another. (263)

Johnson's essay had begun by articulating the idea, now a truism, that biography falls between fiction ("romance"), which is entirely imaginative or make-believe, and history writing, which deals with the hard currency of documented fact.³ In the sentence I have quoted, however, he chooses to emphasize common ground rather than difference: the biographer is a sort of "historian" from whom we expect "truth" and "impartiality." Though these assumptions may seem naive, they were the assumptions of the age and they persist to this day. Biographies and autobiographies still get written because someone thinks it necessary to set the record straight with new evidence or new perspectives. Readers have always been alert to signs of authorial bias, though now we may be quicker than Johnson and his contemporaries were to question the reliability of the historian as well as of writers further along the spectrum that has fantasy as its opposite end. Both writers and readers tend even now to believe that the aim of biography, however imperfectly it may be achieved, is truth as the writer sees it, "truth" at least with regard to the record of events and their apparent causes that is, as the context makes clear, the limited realm that Johnson was concerned with. So his dictum wears better than might have been expected. His final remarks bring the reader into the biographical or autobiographical enterprise in a strikingly up-to-date way: ". . . he that speaks of himself has no motive to falshood or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed, that all are on the watch against its artifices" (*Idler* 264).

Truth, impartiality, and setting the record straight are conspicuous themes in Coleridge's work, and the supposed proximity of the biographer to the historian may have been a factor—I do not say, a conscious one—in his choice of "biographia" over "autobiographia." From the very start,

Coleridge represents himself and his friends Southey and Wordsworth as the victims of malicious reviewers in “this AGE OF PERSONALITY, this age of literary and personal GOSSIPING” (1:41).⁴ As an alternative to the arbitrary and prejudiced detraction of anonymous reviewers, he offers not only a positive account of his friends’ moral characters (especially Southey’s) that has greater claims to authority than the reviewers’ versions because of Coleridge’s personal acquaintance and his willingness to put his name to his work, but also an account of their writings (especially Wordsworth’s) that appears to be more judicious because it is careful to discuss both strengths and weaknesses, and because it is ostensibly based on an impersonal critical system, “fixed canons of criticism, previously established and deduced from the nature of man” (1:62). Impartiality and impersonality are explicitly avowed goals:

by impartiality I mean an honest and enlightened adherence to a code of intelligible principles previously announced, and faithfully referred to in support of every judgment on men and events; not indiscriminate abuse, not the indulgence of an editor’s own malignant passions, and still less, if that be possible, a determination to make money by flattering the envy and cupidity, the vindictive restlessness and self-conceit of the half-witted vulgar. . . . (1:214)⁵

This passage is not often quoted, and it is easy to see why. It does not show Coleridge in a particularly favorable light, for although the sentence begins by praising the lofty ideal of impartiality, it goes on to display quite vehement class bias and “indiscriminate abuse.” In fact it represents another aspect of the *Biographia* seen as a conundrum in which self-contradictions are so thick on the ground that Donald Reiman proposes “the art of equivocation” as a principle of unity in the work. Coleridge inveighs against gossip and then purveys it; fulminates against plagiarism, and then commits it; deplores self-indulgence and then exhibits it. He advocates system and produces chaos; declares himself a democrat and at the turn of the page casts aspersions on the mental capacities of the rural poor. This habit of self-contradiction has a positive function that I shall return to later. For the moment, I simply maintain that no one capable of reading the *Biographia* has ever failed to notice some of these transparent inconsistencies, or to take warning from them. The common response seems to have been

to consider them more or less charitably as a sign of weakness arising, as Johnson had said it might, from that traditional enemy of impartiality, self-love.

Self-love, egotism, or (in its mildest form) vanity has always been a recognized hazard in autobiography, and the conventions of the genre dictate that sooner or later, the writer has to address the problem and justify the work on other grounds—generally by an appeal to some higher motive. Readers may or may not accept this justification: some of Coleridge's reviewers commented on the exhibition of "self-importance" or "inveterate and diseased egotism" in the work (Jackson 322, 329). But approaches to the issue vary. Colley Cibber had defied convention to the extent of cheekily acknowledging the motive of vanity (3), but he was promptly satirized by Pope in the revised *Dunciad* (especially 257–65) and by Fielding (18–19). Hume began his autobiographical memoir with the statement, "It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself without vanity; therefore, I shall be brief" (1). Like most of his predecessors, Coleridge sought by various means to avoid the appearance of egotism.⁶ He declares in his very first page that "the least of what I have written concerns myself personally" (1:5). He reprints a satirical sonnet designed to make fun of "doleful egotism" (1:27), mocks the Fichtean *Egoismus* or "I itself I" (1:158–9), and returns the charge of "irritable" vanity on the critics themselves by asserting that real genius is indifferent to reputation and only fakes and failures are not (1:38). Egotism, then, is the mark of a minor talent. He also simply denies being motivated by self-love (1:219) or self-importance (2:237)—though this is one of those flagrant cases of contradiction that I have mentioned before, a protest that draws attention to its contrary, for at many points we find him gratuitously preening himself: "In this biographical sketch of my literary life I may be excused, if I mention here, that I had translated the eight Hymns of Synesius from the Greek into English Anacreontics before my 15th year" (1:247). Erasing himself from the title page by choosing "biographia" rather than "autobiographia" is one of the subtler ways in which Coleridge may have been trying to avoid the imputation of egotism.

Returning to the title page, we might pause over another historical consideration in Coleridge's decision. Some of the implications of his giving a classical title to his English text have

already been mentioned: it would link his work to heavyweights such as Milton's *Areopagitica* and serve as a caution to unsuitable readers. But it is also noteworthy that there is a tradition of such titles in autobiographical literature, for example in Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643), Dryden's *Religio Laici* (1682), and Baxter's *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696). Later there would be Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864). Furthermore, there had been an earlier *Biographia Literaria*, though we do not know that Coleridge was familiar with it.⁷ The first and only published volume of John Berkenhout's *Biographia Literaria; or a Biographical History of Literature: containing the Lives of English, Scottish, and Irish Authors, from the Dawn of Letters in these Kingdoms to the Present Time, Chronologically and Classically Arranged* appeared in 1777. It was, as its title indicates, a biographical dictionary, providing brief accounts of writers born up to the end of the sixteenth century (later volumes would have been dedicated to later figures), organized according to categories of writer—historians and antiquarians, divines, lawyers, travellers, poets, and so on. Many reference books of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries adopted Latin titles, the encyclopedias—*Britannica*, *Londinensis*, *Metropolitana*, etc.—being the most obvious example. The encyclopedias, however, are easily outnumbered by the biographical dictionaries. Between 1740 and 1789, for example, Robert Watt's 1824 *Bibliotheca Britannica*, itself a case in point, includes the *Biographia Classica*, *Biographia Britannica*, *Biographia Dramatica*, *Biographia Evangelica*, and *Biographia Medica*. In 1805 there was a *Biographia Scotica*. Coleridge's first readers would have associated his title with the factual solidity of this reference-book tradition. Watt does not list "autobiographia" at all.

It is moreover a striking feature of the *Biographia* that it is concerned with more than one literary life, and that the one life with which it is principally concerned is generalized so as to become an example to other, especially younger, writers. In the course of the *Biographia*, Coleridge builds up a composite portrait of "literary life" that is based partly on his own experience and partly on that of others, including the reader.⁸ Indeed the two sources are intertwined, for Coleridge often describes himself when he appears to be writing about others, and sometimes speaks for writers as a class when he appears to be telling his own story. He was, as Plutarch puts it (though

his subject was love) "as skilled as ivy at self-entanglement" (43). The portrait may be thought of as a triptych, for it has, like many of Coleridge's ideas, three parts or aspects, the first of them ideal, the second comic and antiheroic, and the third pragmatic. Coleridge himself, as the subject of the narrative, flits in and out of all three parts, and is most conspicuous, in his Shandean mode, in the second. But literary biography is also an important resource, for Coleridge is able to appeal to the record of other lives to reinforce the lessons that he has to teach out of his own. On this count too, *Biographia Literaria* makes an appropriate title.

According to Coleridge, the ideal literary life is that of the acknowledged geniuses who get on with their work in the sort of Olympian self-sufficiency that is the subject of Chapter Two. There Coleridge calls upon the examples of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton to prove his contention that only hacks are anxious about contemporary reactions to their work, the great writers being superior to criticism:

The records of biography seem to confirm this theory. The men of greatest genius, as far as we can judge from their own works or from the accounts of their contemporaries, appear to have been of calm and tranquil temper, in all that related to themselves. In the inward assurance of permanent fame, they seem to have been either indifferent or resigned, with regard to immediate reputation. (1:33)

Though Coleridge is ostensibly defining a standard of perfection, he is also obliquely representing (and congratulating) himself, for "a tried experience of twenty years, has taught me, that the original sin of my character consists in a careless indifference to public opinion" (1:44). Similarly, when he tells us that Shakespeare was always ready "to praise his rivals, ore pleno" (1:35), he is demanding admiration for a quality of magnanimity that he himself has just exhibited in his praise for the poetry of William Lisle Bowles, and will display again in his defense of his own rivals, Southey and Wordsworth.

But even the opposite pole of literary life, as it is represented in the account of his own faults and failures, draws upon other biographical materials besides his own and tends, like Wordsworth's account of the development of imagination in the *Prelude*, to turn itself into a typical or representative

experience. When Coleridge describes his literary education, he describes one face in a crowd. He and his schoolfellows all submit themes to their master and are all alike subject to his power. The first person is plural: "He sent us to the University excellent Latin and Greek scholars, and tolerable Hebraists" (1:11). Even when he has to admit that his first publications were justifiably criticized for "a profusion of new coined epithets," he makes this into a general point by maintaining that the early work of Shakespeare and Milton had the same defect, so that it appears to be a common weakness of youthful authors as well as another bond between Coleridge and his twin idols (1:6).

Finally, the pragmatic middle ground of the literary life contains perhaps less specifically Coleridgean biography than either of the others (unless it be considered as a form of fantasy or wishful thinking that reveals the mental life). It does, however, depend upon a knowledge of other literary lives. In Chapter Eleven Coleridge sums up his advice to aspiring writers in capital letters: "NEVER PURSUE LITERATURE AS A TRADE" (1:223). The recommendation that young writers should seek their livelihood in a salaried profession and let writing be a by-product of it is reinforced both by the counterexample of Coleridge's personal struggles and by reference to "the biography of literary men" over the centuries, from Cicero and Xenophon to Herder, Erasmus Darwin, and William Roscoe (1:229).

There has been some debate as to whether the *Biographia* should be interpreted as a cautionary or an exemplary narrative.⁹ On the one hand we find Coleridge presenting his own experience as an example of what not to do. The advice against pursuing literature as a trade supports this reading, as do the beginning and end of the text, the introductory epigraph from Goethe ("He wishes to spare the young those circuitous paths, on which he himself had lost his way") coming round again in Coleridge's final claim of having at least "earnestly endeavoured to kindle young minds, and to guard them against the temptations of Scorners" (2:247). All the Shandean jokes in which the author comes on stage as a buffoon—being held up to ridicule by his schoolmaster, trying to sell a subscription to a tallow-chandler in Birmingham, or travelling with a seasick company to Germany—likewise suggest that this figure is not for emulation. On the other hand, the predominant tone of the

book is serious and the author is at pains to exhibit his achievements as well as his failures; besides, as McGann is the latest to point out, the book itself is an achievement, and "the story he tells reveals a person whose work was steadfast in its principles" (236). That is to say, the work visibly practices what it preaches, and it can therefore be described as exemplary in effect.

In this matter the *Biographia* once more demonstrates that it is possible to be both A and not-A—not just now A, and then not-A in the gradual unfolding of a discursive text, but A and not-A simultaneously. To take another very small example, a sample from the microscopic level, the narrative proper begins, in the second paragraph of the work, not with the school years that had chronological priority and that most readers think of as first, but with this innocuous sentence: "In 1794, when I had barely passed the verge of manhood, I published a small volume of juvenile poems." It looks like—and is—a statement of fact, but the date should have been 1796, so it is also not a statement of fact. It looks modest (the volume is "small," the poems are "juvenile," the author is "barely" an adult), but it is also a boast (although he had "barely passed the verge of manhood," he had already published a volume of verse). The pattern of double and contradictory meaning is characteristic and significant.

I suppose it has not gone unnoticed that I have so far avoided those useful terms "subjective" and "objective," even though the tension between personal revelation and the author's desire to appear "objective" (i.e. distanced, impartial) could be said to account for several of the features that I have been discussing: the choice of "biographia" over "autobiographia," the link with reference books, and the reliance on historical and biographical data. The reason is that the question of the relationship between subject and object—or as modern theorists in the area of life-writing prefer to say, the concept of subjectivity¹⁰—is at the heart of the *Biographia*, but Coleridge's treatment of the issue does not disguise its complexity, and I have not wanted to cloud the issue by using key terms casually. In the brief summary that follows, I aim to bring out the relevance of this difficult part of the work to the autobiographical project as a whole. For my purposes, Coleridge's sources—the topic of much critical debate—are virtually irrelevant.

Coleridge circles round the whole mind-body problem for quite a long time before attacking it directly in Chapter Twelve;

indeed, he weaves it into the narrative and critical chapters as well as into the philosophical ones. He points out the ambiguity in the language involved: "I" or "me," for example, may be used either to refer to "the act of self-consciousness" or to "the external image in and by which the mind represents the act to itself" (1:73). He does his best to dismantle, or at least to reveal flaws in the Cartesian dualism that teaches "the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence, and the body as matter," in order to prepare the way for a more satisfactory metaphysics that will reveal body and spirit to be "different modes . . . of a common substratum" (1:129–30). He hints that the stakes are high, no less than the existence or nonexistence of God, that is, "of an infinite spirit, of an intelligent and holy will" (1:120). Then, like Descartes, he begins to work back from the multifariousness of experience to one irreducible starting point. He provides his own definitions of "subject" and "object," "subjective" and "objective," insisting that they are not mutually exclusive but correlative terms: you can't have one without the other (1:252–5). Every representation involves both a representing or "representative" subject and a represented object, and a subject cannot be known except through the vehicle of an object, in fact it "becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself" (1:273). The end of Coleridge's quest, the radical identity of subject and object and the irreducible origin of all finite subjects and objects, is the "I AM" of Exodus 3:14—in Hebrew the Tetragrammaton transliterated as "Yahweh" or "Jehovah," or as Coleridge says reverently, "the absolute self, the great eternal I AM" (1:275).

Once arrived at what appears to be an ultimate truth ("truth is universally placed in the coincidence of the thought with the thing," he has said [1:254]), Coleridge begins to move outward, preparing to build up anew the complex world of experience that he had stripped down to essentials. It is true that he aborts this part of the process in its early stages, interrupting his much heralded deduction of the human imagination with the notorious fictional "letter from a friend" (1:300), but it is quite unfair to dismiss his theory of subjectivity as a spectacular failure, as critics occasionally do.¹¹ The very attempt, had it been no more, in an autobiography consolidates the impression of the author's extraordinary self-awareness. It also elevates autobiography (or at least introspection) almost to the status of

a religious obligation as it engages and exercises "the sacred power of self-intuition" (1:241): "Only in the self-consciousness of a spirit is there the required identity of object and representation; for herein consists the essence of a spirit, that it is self-representative" (1:278). And it incidentally grants further significance to the "biographia" of the title, the figure represented in a biography being object to the representing subject. In Coleridge's work the unity of subject and object suggests the presence of a third thing, the self—or, to put it another way, readers infer a self from the display of mind at work on the materials of memory.

The palpable contradictions of the *Biographia* take on a more positive aspect when they are considered in the light of the underlying philosophical idea of the continuing constructive interplay of subject and object. (Again I do not infer conscious intent.) Given his habitual ways of thinking, which are of particularly vital importance in a work such as this, Coleridge could not afford to be much bothered by inconsistency; and in fact he promoted it. "Extremes meet" was a favorite proverb.¹² The psychological analysis of oxymoron in a lecture on *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the locus classicus for the expression of his attitude: there he maintains that "there is an effort in the mind when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and to leave a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other when it is hovering between images: as soon as it is fixed on one it becomes understanding and when it is wavering between them attaching itself to neither it is imagination" (*Lectures* 1:311). The *Biographia* makes a similar point in an interesting passage about Kant. Coleridge tries to argue that Kant must have been closer to Coleridge's own religious convictions than he at first appears to be in his writings. Coleridge observes that it would not have been prudent for Kant to disclose his views, and that in such a situation a philosopher "is constrained to express himself either mythically or equivocally" (1:157). And as in the *Romeo and Juliet* lecture, Coleridge indicates that pure ideas cannot be expressed directly: "An IDEA, in the highest sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol; and, except in geometry, all symbols of necessity involve an apparent contradiction" (1:156). Self-contradiction gives the *Biographia* a dramatic and destabilizing

character that to my mind is an asset. It is one of the manifestations of a distinctive vitality.¹³ It is both consistent with and contributes to the dialectical pattern of mental progress that shapes the whole work, the pattern that Coleridge memorably images in the figure of a water-insect (1:124). Reverting to the micro-example of the sentence about the small volume of juvenile poems, we see that it can be both modest and boasting, both fact and not-fact simultaneously; that by being both, it is neither one nor the other exclusively; and that it obliges us to posit an underlying or (to change the metaphor) overriding personality capable of such complexities.

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What bearing does all of this have upon the original question about the form and genre of the *Biographia*? It must be evident by now that I believe that the *Biographia* belongs squarely in the set that we label "autobiography."¹⁴ The final impediment to this way of thinking is, inevitably, Coleridge himself, who uses the word once only, when he mildly makes fun of the author of an autobiography but promises some day to write his own—implying, as the editors point out, that the *Biographia* is not it (2:237). One of the more charitable of the earlier reviewers noticed this passage and made a sensible comment, namely that the *Biographia* does live up to its title in that it refers to "circumstances that have a relation to his literary life only . . . with respect to his birth, parentage, and personal history, he says almost nothing; these he tells us may afford materials for a separate work which he seems to contemplate" (Jackson 357). The "separate work" that the reviewer assumed Coleridge had in mind would have perhaps been closer to biography (self-biography) than to autobiography, for autobiographies are commonly more specialized and selective than biographies. The personal stake that autobiographers have in their stories generally means that they have to clear their names of some particular slurs or blow their horns for some particular successes. (Samuel Johnson's relatively recent, sharply focused *Lives of the English Poets* is a significant exception that may itself have been a model for Coleridge's literary life.) Spiritual autobiography is an example that comes readily to mind: from the Augustinian prototype through the works of seventeenth-century dissenters that Coleridge loved (Baxter's *Reliquiae* and

Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, for instance), to the Methodist testimonials in the evangelical magazines of his day, and so on through Mill (a secular version) and Newman to the likes of the ghostwritten autobiography of Malcolm X—all these conversion narratives aiming to convert others in their turn do as the *Biographia* does, suppressing other aspects of the writer's life in order to concentrate on what matters most. Augustine's *Confessions* is indeed one of the few models in the autobiographical mode to which Coleridge alludes explicitly in the *Biographia*. Citing it from memory—or at all events, not quite accurately—he gives it as an example of the way in which philosophy may support religion, at the same time invoking the conversion archetype that informs his own narrative:

Nevertheless, I cannot doubt, that the difference of my metaphysical notions from those of the Unitarians in general contributed to my final re-conversion to the whole truth in Christ; even as according to his own confession the books of certain Platonic philosophers (*libri quorundam Platoniorum*) commenced the rescue of St. Augustine's faith from the same error aggravated by the far darker accompaniment of the Manichaeian heresy. (1:205)

As Carolyn Barros has pointed out, "Autobiography is about change, about a series of transformations, and this is an expectation we bring to any autobiographical text" (1). Since it is about change, autobiography as a genre has tended to be more tolerant of inconsistency and contradiction than biography, in which authors are inclined and expected to create a coherent portrait. (That said, it needs to be acknowledged that biographers also often fall back on the coherence of paradox, making the chiaroscuro portrait one of the available topoi in their field. Pope's *Sporus*, Johnson's *Savage*, Byron's *Napoleon*, and for that matter Mailer's *Marilyn Monroe* are all classics of this kind.) Here too the Protean protagonist of the *Biographia* and his self-contradicting ways can be comfortably accommodated.

Life-writing in general, but autobiography in particular, is a host (as opposed to a parasite) genre. This characteristic may have to do with the naturalness of autobiography: as all experience presents itself through the filters of the individual receptor, so the first-person perspective of autobiography is

open to all forms of human experience. Augustine's *Confessions* includes long reflections on time and memory, and trails off in an exposition of the Book of Genesis. Richard Baxter's *Reliquiae* will pass unpredictably from accounts of the subject's health and successive publications to a narrative of events or a collection of letters and official reports: it is a vehicle for history. Even the egregious Colley Cibber subordinates his personal history to an account of the theatre and the famous players of his day. Once the basic requirements—that they supply “narratives of the lives of particular persons,” as Johnson says of biography (*Rambler* 319), and that the name of the subject be the same as the name of the author on the title page (Lejeune 13–14)—are satisfied, it almost seems that anything goes, and that any kind of freight may be carried in this vehicle. In 1803, long before the *Biographia* made its way into print, Coleridge jotted down his idea of it in a notebook entry that places it solidly, whatever Coleridge's own later qualifications, disclaimers, or denials, in the autobiographical tradition: “Seem to have made up my mind to write my metaphysical works, as *my Life, & in my Life*—intermixed with all the other events/or history of the mind & fortunes of S. T. Coleridge” (1:1515).

NOTES

1. I wish to express my continuing gratitude to WIPE, the work-in-progress group of the Department of English at the University of Toronto, for its advice about this paper; and especially to Linda Hutcheon.
2. This phrase is quoted, along with other examples of the divided response to the *Biographia* over the centuries, in the standard edition by Engell and Bate (1:xliii). A brief summary of the scholarship devoted to the defense of the unity of the *Biographia* appears in McGann 234.
3. Johnson's other important statement about biography, *Rambler* 60, defines biography as consisting of “narratives of the lives of particular persons” (319). Like the *Idler* essay, *Rambler* 60 contrasts biography and history, though in a different way, drawing attention to the narrow focus and use of domestic detail in biography as opposed to the broad sweep and public perspective of history.

4. I use "Coleridge" in the conventional way as shorthand for the narrative persona or in Booth's phrase the "implied author." Other ways of considering Coleridge's persona are suggested by several critics, including Wallace (*Design* 11–13) and Vogler (35).
5. Other important statements about the ideally impartial critical system or "machine" appear in 2:107 and 2:110–11.
6. Stephen Bygrave, however, argues that Coleridge's attitude towards egotism was one of "ambivalence" (3) in that he thought of it as "at once a flaw in, and power of, the self" (11).
7. I am grateful to John Beer, of Peterhouse, Cambridge, who brought this work to my attention.
8. Chapter Three, for example, contains an appeal to "those, who by biography or by their own experience are familiar with the general habits of genius" (1:65).
9. These are traditional alternatives in the virtually unquestioned didactic rationale for all forms of life-writing. To cite a pedestrian version of this commonplace from Coleridge's own time and from a book that he annotated, the biography attached to *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Philip Skelton* observes that "Biography conveys very useful instruction, setting before us the lives of eminent men, that we may imitate their virtues, or avoid their vices" (1:155).
10. An intelligent guide through the complexities of the concept of subjectivity in contemporary theory (political, psychological, semiotic, autobiographical, and feminist) is Paul Smith's 1988 book *Discerning the Subject*—still, as I write in 1995, a valuable survey and critique of the literature.
11. For example Belsey (77), answered with a sophisticated deconstructionist argument by Vogler (39–40).
12. Instances are collected in Coleridge's *Marginalia* 1:518n.
13. Samuel Johnson, once again, offers a sort of defense of the humanness of self-contradiction: "'Inconsistencies,' answered Imlac, 'cannot both be right, but, imputed to man, they may both be true'" (*Rasselas* 33).
14. And though we might now be inclined to quarrel with her emphasis on "design," it should be noted that Catherine Miles Wallace came to much the same conclusion in 1981: "accept the autobiographical character of the *Biographia*, and soon its obscurity begins to resolve into an intelligible, sophisticated, difficult design" ("Function" 216).

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