



The Intermundium of S. T. Coleridge's Genius in *Biographia Literaria*

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The focus of this article is on the peculiar space that S.T. Coleridge constructs for his own genius in Chapter II and Chapter IX of *Biographia Literaria*. Specific attention is devoted to some rhetorical ploys that Coleridge uses to accommodate his own figure among paragons like William Shakespeare and William Wordsworth. The text then explores Coleridge's attachment to and detachment from the figures of Friedrich Schelling and Jacob Böhme. In the conclusion, a statement is made on the *intermundium* between enthusiasm and metaphysical reasoning in which Coleridge's genius is located.

Keywords: S.T. Coleridge, genius, *intermundium*, enthusiasm, metaphysics.

In this article, my purpose is to describe the liminal space that S.T. Coleridge constructs for his own genius in *Biographia Literaria*. My assumption is that he seeks a niche between the insightful comprehensibility of figures he perceives as geniuses, like Wordsworth and Shakespeare, and the incomprehensible insightfulness of an enthusiast like Jakob Böhme. Coleridge's quest is motivated by what Lucy Newlyn has aptly dubbed “the anxiety of reception” (50).

In Chapter II of *Biographia Literaria*, after identifying the distinctive characteristics of fanaticism, Coleridge goes on to provide a psychological definition of *genius*, which has to substantiate his claim that people who possess this quality cannot be irritable. One could expect that if fanatics do not possess imaginative power, people of genius will have it, and that will exhaust the definition. The matter is not as simple as it might seem, however, since there is a finer distinction within the sphere of genius.

There are “those who possess more than mere talent ... yet still want something of the creative and self-sufficing power of absolute genius” (BL 164).¹ Coleridge dubs this deficient category “commanding genius.” What prevents these men from crossing the gap between talent and genius is exactly the inability to fully rely on the creativity of their minds: they “must impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality” (BL 164). Swift's scatological metaphor in *The Battle of the Books* could accurately visualize part of the mechanism of these men's mental activity “if the materials be nothing but dirt spun out of your own entrails, ... the edifice will at last conclude in a cobweb ... the duration of which could be imputed to [its] being forgotten, or neglected, or hid in a corner” (20). Like the inefficient brains of Swift's Moderns, the brains of people of commanding genius posit their own preconceptions as the origin of thought. Unlike them, however, they verify their mental constructs by superimposing them upon the real world, which performs the function of a mirror returning the mental constructs to the mind with added authenticity. It is exactly the need for verification that constitutes the weakness of this type of genius. These minds are not totally unproductive, however. Their activity does not end in forgotten cobwebs; “in tranquil times” they can produce “a perfect poem in palace or temple or landscape garden; or a tale of romance in canals that join sea with sea” (BL 164). At this point, the speaker carefully manipulates his metaphors to represent the limitations of commanding genius: the settings of their creations lack the freedom that Coleridge, as well as Kant and Schelling, associate with the imagination;

¹ Throughout the text *Biographia Literaria* is abbreviated to *BL*.

their settings are, as it were, constrained by the demands for order and structure imposed by the understanding; they are, to use Pope's phrase, "nature methodized."

"In times of tumult," however, these men's constructive creativity goes astray and they "come forth as the shaping spirit of ruin, to destroy the wisdom of ages in order to substitute the fancies of a day, and to change kings and kingdoms, as the wind shifts and shapes the clouds" (*BL* 165). It is a whimsical fancy, rather than a creatively free imagination, that generates destructive impulses when an objective historical setting is available. In other words, history gives these men's minds the wrong kind of freedom, or rather, a freedom that they use for the wrong purposes. According to the speaker of the *Biographia*, what is particularly objectionable about this ruinous streak of genius is the pursuit of arbitrary and shapeless novelty, which upsets the balance between permanence and progression.² It would be obvious to any reader of Coleridge's prose that he envisages here the intellectual engineers of the French Revolution, Voltaire, Rousseau, and a few Jacobin minds.³

Interestingly, if commanding genius exhibits a destructive political tendency, are we to think that people of absolute genius remain blithely apolitical, whatever the call of history? Or is it that their politics are never revolutionary? Does geniality, or lack of irritability, preclude the revolutionary spirit? Given the fact of Coleridge's early political involvement with the Jacobin cause, and his later political "apostasy,"⁴ are we to assume that his genius evolved into absolute genius when he adopted the conservative views that inform his later work?

All these questions deserve attention, but my concern in this article is whether, and to what extent, Coleridge identified his genius with absolute genius. Let me approach this question with a close reading of the clause that defines absolute genius in Chapter II of the *Biographia*: men of absolute genius "rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an *intermundium* [italics in the original], of which their own living spirit supplies the substance, and their imagination the ever-varying form" (*BL* 164). It turns out that absolute genius inhabits a happy world between spirit and matter. One could assume that this space lies at equal distances from the two ends. The phrase "rest content" emphatically conveys the sense of equipoise and equanimity. Their absolute status absolves, as it were, these men from all tensions and contradictions experienced by those of us who live in the world of the flesh, to which the spirit comes, as Shelley puts it in his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," "for some uncertain moments lent."

What challenges this seemingly imperturbable balance is the claim that the *intermundium* is a purely mental construct: "their own living spirit supplies [its] substance." To paraphrase Coleridge's sweeping statement, the spirit of men of absolute genius has a life of its own, which makes it capable of creating a substance, to which the imagination adds the variety of its manifestations. But if the *intermundium* originates in the mind, how could it be that this world of genius lies between thought and reality? Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the *intermundium* is itself a reality of thought? If this were true, in what sense is it a world between worlds? What is the role of reality as we know it in the formation of the *intermundium*? In what sense is the *intermundium* different from Coleridge's world of "abstruse researches"? Do the *intermundia* of his paragon differ from one another? If they do, what makes them different? In an attempt to answer these questions, I will take a short detour away from the *Biographia* to examine closely three other texts which feature Coleridge's versions of the genius of Wordsworth and Shakespeare.⁵

Excursus on Wordsworth's *intermundium*

"To William Wordsworth," a poem written in 1807, is designed as a panegyric of the bard's exceptional powers. The poem represents Wordsworth as a poet daring to probe into, and reveal, the deepest recesses of the human mind, which Coleridge's persona perceives as

² See, for instance, S. T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, 45–6.

³ See, for instance, S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, 115.

⁴ On the issue of the complex evolution of Coleridge's political beliefs, see, for instance, Charles Mahoney "Irony and Clerisy: The Multeity of Coleridgean Apostasy."

⁵ For an insightful discussion of the relationship between Coleridge's, Shakespeare's, and Wordsworth's genius in Chapter II of the *Biographia*, see Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language*, 131. Christensen claims that Coleridge has deliberately used as an example of Shakespeare's genius his "Sonnet 81 . . . wherein Shakespeare's greatness is proved by his ability to make immortal his *friend* [italics in the original]." According to Christensen, "Coleridge impresses on the page the distinguishing marks of his own genius: the authority to determine genius and the power to communicate its truth to the world." As will become clear, my reading of the Coleridge-Wordsworth-Shakespeare triangle is quite different.

Theme hard as high!
 Of smiles spontaneous, and mysterious fears
 (The first-born they of Reason and twin-birth),
 Of tides obedient to external force,
 And currents self-determined, as might seem,
 Or by some inner Power; of moments awful,
 Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,
 When power streamed from thee, and thy soul received
 The light reflected... (*Poetic Works* 311–13)

The uniqueness of Wordsworth's poetic impact consists in the indeterminate scope and genesis of his poems. There is a quality of doubleness both in what they are aimed at and what they are made of. As far as their thematic range is concerned, the poems of Coleridge's paragon give precedence neither to superficial manifestations ("smiles spontaneous") nor to the arcane profundity of the spirit ("mysterious fears"). It is not quite clear what the revelations of this poetry originate in either – nor could it be clear, since there is no clarity about the motivating power behind either smiles or fears.

In fact, they seem to be both, and at the same time, motivated by external and internal powers. The personal pronoun "they" ("The first-born *they* [italics mine] of Reason and twin-birth") is even more mysterious than the fears themselves. If the parallelism of the preceding line is assumed to extend into this line, then "they" refers to both "smiles spontaneous" and "mysterious fears." Under this economy, the former would be "the first-born of Reason," whereas the latter would be the product of "twin-birth." This would mean that smiles, no matter how spontaneous they seem, are rooted in the spirit. Fears, on the other hand, which seem to be internally grounded, would be partly generated by external causes. However, if reference is based on proximity, "they" refers to "mysterious fears," which would mean that the latter are born in the womb of reason ("the first-born of Reason"), but their birth is at the same time made possible by whatever lies without the mind. Such a reading would leave the "smiles spontaneous" out of the equation. In this case the outward manifestation, the smile, would be of even more mysterious origin than the psychological reality of fear. Yet if we once again assume that smiles and fears converge in the referential scope of the pronoun "they," there might be a third interpretation. One could be led to believe that both facial manifestations and spiritual realities are born in the undecided space between reason and the material world. In fact, this marginal pronoun (it appears in an embedded line meant to clarify rather than develop an argument) represents rhetorically an indeterminate space (an *intermundium*) of absolute correspondence between mind and Nature.

However, one of the next lines undermines this sense of balance. The intrusion of "moments awful/ Now in the inner life, and now abroad" adds an element of instability to the picture. One wonders if this economy is the same as the *intermundium* described in Chapter II of the *Biographia*. The *intermundium*, it will be remembered, is a happy space "between thought and reality" where men of absolute genius "rest content." If I could afford a more light-hearted sentence, I should say that being an absolute genius is a sedentary occupation. The case with Wordsworth seems somewhat different. It is true that his greatness rests on a balance between the inward and the outward, but this balance is volatile. The poet's mind vacillates between the "inner life" and the life "abroad." It does not "rest content" between the two. Wordsworth's conscious self spends some moments here and some moments there. Moreover, the poem refers to the moments of vacillation as "awful." One wonders if these moments inspire awe only in the outside observer (Coleridge's persona) or in the poet himself, too. If the latter were true, the question arises whether the awe arises in the inner world or in the world without. Also, one could assume that the awe, i.e. the sense of these moments' being beyond the self's control, has to do with the poet's inability to attain a peaceful relationship between the two dimensions. One would then be entitled to think that Wordsworth's experience is a reverse image of Coleridge's painful introspective tendency. In other words, Coleridge has difficulty focusing on the world "abroad," and this brings about mental discomfort. Conversely, what makes for a suffering consciousness in Wordsworth's case is his drive to shift his gaze outwards.

If this Wordsworthian bias towards the external is only subtly implied in the poem, in Chapter XXII of the *Biographia* Coleridge takes issue with it quite explicitly. Of the five defects of Wordsworth's poetry – "inconstancy of the style," "matter-of-factness in certain poems," "predilection for the dramatic form," "repetition, and eddying, instead of progression, of thought," and "thoughts and images too great for the subject"

(BL 550) – the second one is most relevant to our discussion. According to Coleridge, one of the manifestations of “matter-of-factness” in his friend’s poetic works consists in “a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects and their positions, as they appeared to himself; secondly, the insertion of accidental circumstances, in order to the full explanation of his living characters, their dispositions, and actions” (BL 555). This circumstantial dimension runs counter, Coleridge argues, to Aristotle’s statement about poetry as “the most intense, weighty, and philosophical product of human art; adding, as the reason, that it is the most catholic and abstract” (BL 555)⁶

The putative reason why the speaker of the *Biographia* dwells on Wordsworth’s artistic shortcomings is that he wants to establish his friend’s authority as a great poet in a largely hostile environment. In contrast to the multitude of anonymous reviewers who revile the bard without bothering to provide any sound foundation for their claims, Coleridge adopts an approach that puts the content and the form of particular verses under his critical scrutiny, which supposedly remains unaffected by any personal affinities or animosities. In Chapter XV of the *Biographia* he claims that his method is designed “to discover what the qualities in a poem are, which may be deemed promises and specific symptoms of poetic power” (BL 453). For Coleridge, the obvious epitome of these qualities is young Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. Its strengths seem to be a reverse image of Wordsworth’s poetic flaws. The “power displayed in varying the march of the words without passing into a loftier and more majestic rhythm than was demanded by the thoughts” (BL 453) finds its negative equivalent in Wordsworth’s “inconstancy of the style.” The second quality that Coleridge sees as a promise of genius in Shakespeare’s work – “subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer himself” (BL 454) – is almost precisely mirrored by Wordsworth’s “fidelity in the representation of objects and their positions, as they appeared to himself.” Furthermore, the Romantic poet exhibits a tendency to fall victim to “repetition, and eddying, instead of progression, of thought,” whereas the Elizabethan bard’s poetry is “proof of original genius” as long as its images “are modified by a predominant passion” (BL 456).

Coleridge’s Wordsworth in Chapter XV and Chapter XXII is a figure that makes room for himself in the layout of the space of genius by copying, without much recourse to the imagination, a world which is readily, but also randomly, available to his senses. It is the randomness of the world “abroad” that makes for “the insertion of accidental circumstances,” and, one could assume, for the “eddy” and the lack of “progression.” Besides, this is a Wordsworth squeezed into the straitjacket of a subjectivity that depends exclusively on its own versions of reality, which, interestingly, inscribes him within the sphere of commanding genius and its preconceptions. This exclusion of alternative representations has to do with the mimetic underpinnings of the relationship between mind and nature. Let me reiterate, then, that Wordsworth’s *intermundium*, unlike Shakespeare’s, and unlike Coleridge’s, for that matter, is lopsided outwards.

Excursus on Shakespeare’s *Intermundium*

In his *Lectures Upon Shakespeare*, Coleridge proclaims the Elizabethan bard the pioneer of “a different genus” of drama, which “may be called romantic dramas or dramatic romances” (32).⁷ What characterizes Shakespeare’s plays is that unlike Ancient Greek drama, which “referred to an existing reality” and “accommodated itself to the senses,” they “appealed to the imagination rather than to the senses, and to the reason as contemplating our inward nature, and the workings of the passions in their most retired recesses” (32). In other words, Shakespeare is praised for having trained his poetic eye on the hidden, the inward, and the

⁶ It is interesting to note that what Coleridge sees as a fundamental weakness of Wordsworth’s poetry, Leigh Hunt perceives as its fundamental merit. In his *The Feast of the Poets* (1814), he writes: “[Wordsworth] appears to me to have made a mistake unworthy of him, and to have sought by eccentricity and by a turning away from society, what he might have obtained by keeping to his proper and more neighbourly sphere” (90). Coleridge and Hunt are, as it were, engaged in a tug-of-war, pulling Wordsworth from opposite ends. While Coleridge wants to represent him as a poet of the imagination, whose power lies in exploring “the life within us,” Hunt wants to construct a poet of a “more neighbourly sphere,” in accordance with the more sensuous poetics of the fancy, which, as Hunt would have it, characterized the new “Cockney school.” In other words, Wordsworth figures here as a symbolic watershed between an “old” and a “new” Romanticism.

⁷ The word “romantic” is derived here from “the Romance, or the language formed out of the decayed Roman and the Northern tongues.” According to Coleridge, compared to Latin, this language is “more rich, more expressive and various, as one formed by more obscure affinities out of a chaos of apparently heterogeneous atoms.”

profound rather than on the materiality of the mundane. His works address and engage the reason, i.e. the higher faculty in the Kantian sense of the word. However, this constitutes only part of Shakespeare's greatness.

Further on in the *Lectures*, Coleridge comes up with an aphoristically summarizing statement about the exceptionality of the great poet's talent: "Shakespeare, possessed of wit, humour, fancy and imagination, built up an outward world from the stores within his mind, as the bee finds a hive from a thousand sweets gathered from a thousand flowers" (*Lectures* 85). Sara Coleridge (the poet's daughter), who edited the volume, has added a note here, saying: "There must have been some mistake in the report of this sentence, unless there was a momentary lapse of mind on the part of the lecturer" (*Lectures* 85). Having in mind the oral origin of the text, as well as Coleridge's tendency to intersperse his talks and writings with *non sequiturs*, this option seems plausible. The more intriguing alternative, however, would be to presume that Coleridge did say and mean what was transcribed. The editor's note is actually attached to the phrase "as the bee finds a hive," which shows that what probably irked Sara Coleridge was the conspicuous inaccuracy of the predicate "find": the bee does not "find" a hive by gathering pollen from flowers; the hive is already there, waiting for the pollen to be brought in. Yet the phrase could have been a deliberate catachresis, designed to highlight the fundamental complexity of the situation it seeks to depict.

The figure portrays Shakespeare's mind as self-sufficient since it holds a copious stock of materials (whose origin, we can assume, is in the world without the mind) that can cater for the creation of "an outward world," which is actually a world within the mind. One could distinguish between two meanings of the attribute "outward" in this context. For one thing, it suggests that Shakespeare's creation is a successful representation of the world out there. At the same time, it implies that Shakespeare, like Coleridge's Luther of *The Friend*, is capable of detaching himself from his imaginative products. Yet this economy of creativity is different from the workings of Luther's mind in the episode with the Devil because the Elizabethan keeps a firm grip on the natural, which his imagination enriches without falling prey to the vagaries of unwarranted vision.⁸

As a matter of fact, what approximates Shakespeare's world to material reality is the analogy between the workings of his mind and the workings of Nature: the great poet's mind works like a bee that goes from flower to flower, and in the process "finds a hive." The semantics of the predicate "find" triggers, *mutatis mutandis*, associations with creation. In other words, Coleridge's phrase could suggest that Shakespeare's mind, just like the bee, creates an abode rather than passively inhabiting an already available home. Bringing in the pollen gathered outside, the bee stores it and then transforms it into a new substance, which informs the hive with a new quality. In a similar manner, the outward world that the mind creates will at the same time resemble and differ from the world outside the mind. Like the hive, which is fertilized by "a thousand sweets from a thousand flowers," Shakespeare's outward world is fertilized by his "wit, humor, fancy, and imagination."

Shakespeare's *intermundium* is, then, located in a precarious zone: the liminal space between representation and whatever lies beyond it. On the one hand, the intermediacy of this *intermundium* depends on a balance between the world within and the world outside. This balance, in turn, is premised on the mind's ability to imitate nature in imaginative ways that go beyond mere copying. But daring as this imagination may be, it knows its bounds: it "finds a hive" and never reaches beyond its confines. At the same time, as long as "the stores within the mind" are used to make up a paradoxically inner "outward world," the creator's mind follows the logic suggested to him by his spirit. In other words, Shakespeare's *intermundium* appears to correspond more closely to the picture of the peculiar middle space constructed in Chapter II of the *Biographia*.

What matters to my inquiry, however, is whether the Shakespearean *intermundium* is the one that the poet Coleridge has always craved. Or does the speaker of the *Biographia* mean to imply that Shakespeare's *intermundium* is the one where his own self-suppressed poetic genius resides? I would like to suggest that Coleridge's world between two worlds is of a slightly different hue. To describe it, we will have to turn to the precarious concept of enthusiasm.

⁸ For Coleridge's interpretation of Luther's vision, see S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, 113–23.

Chapter IX: The Genius of “the Enthusiast in the Strict Sense of the Word”

What is impressive about Chapter IX of the *Biographia* is the apparent simplicity of its design and its message, which, on closer inspection, turns out to hide mind-boggling conundrums. The chapter opens with a brief overview of the history of the speaker’s philosophical affiliations. This opening statement could be perceived as a summary of Coleridge’s intellectual journey away from Hartley’s associationism, which is the focus of Chapters V to VII. Apart from Coleridge’s misgivings about crudely empiricist explanations of the workings of the human mind, there is another reason for his alienation from and dissatisfaction with associationist doctrines. The rhetorical questions at the beginning of Chapter IX present us with a quest for the unity of principle that lies beyond the haphazardness of historical phenomena:

After I had successively studied in the schools of Locke, Berkeley, Leibniz, and Hartley, and could find in none of them an abiding place for my reason, I began to ask myself; is a system of philosophy, as different from mere history and historic classification, possible? If possible, what are its necessary conditions? (*BL* 254)

Subsequently, the dead metaphor called upon to visualize and substantiate Coleridge’s renunciation of the empiricist position draws an analogy between making “bricks without straw” and building up a philosophical system premised on the idea that “we learn all things only by *occasion* [italics in the original] of experience” (*BL* 255), as Locke would have it. Radical empiricism robs the building of philosophy of the substance that will make it stand. The occasional character of whatever occurs in the material world entails the philosophical pursuit of an immutable ground. The latter consists in transcending experience and assuming that the intellect should also be involved in constituting the world and our perception of it. In Coleridge’s formulation in Chapter IX, this metaphysical assumption involves positing that “intelligence and being are reciprocally each other’s substrate” (*BL* 256). The statement echoes the Schellingian version of the Absolute (the initial and ultimate ground of what Schelling dubbed “positive philosophy”) as an identity of the ideal (intellect or consciousness) and the real (nature in the sense of *natura naturans*, i.e. the underlying eternal principle of the natural world).

After this implicit reference to Schelling’s idealism, the German philosopher’s figure re-emerges a few paragraphs further down when the speaker of the *Biographia* puts forth his apologia of the seventeenth-century German mystic Jakob Böhme. Böhme’s name appears at the end of a long line of influences (Plato and Plotinus among them) that have helped wean the speaker’s mind from the empiricist fallacy. Interestingly, the appropriation of the mystic as a source of enlightenment is associated with an overcoming of shame: “... how dare I be ashamed of the Teutonic theosophist...?” The next sentence makes it clear that the avowal is potentially disgraceful because “the triumph of the learned over the poor ignorant shoemaker,”⁹ whose delusions were “many and gross,” (*BL* 256) could well descend upon the speaker and ruin his reputation of a *litteratus*. Actually, Paola Mayer has suggested that for similar reasons, Schelling, who liked to “present himself as rectifier of previous misconceptions,” never mentions Böhme as a key source of his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809). According to Mayer, Schelling’s essay owes some of its constitutive concepts to Böhme’s mystical theology, and this indebtedness goes unacknowledged. As Mayer puts it, “[Böhme’s] work may be mined for expedient concepts or terms, but he is not an acknowledged partner in philosophical debate” (186). Unlike Schelling, Coleridge has the valiance to express a “feeling of gratitude ... towards these men” (*BL* 262).¹⁰ He even makes a point of mildly rebuking Schelling for not doing so.

I will return to Coleridge’s valiance and to the role he assigns to Schelling in this triangle. Before that, let me say that what lies in the margins of Coleridge’s broad gesture of recognition of Böhme is a rhetorical tightrope walk between identification with and detachment from the mystic’s ignorant visions of divinity. On the one hand, the legacy of inspired illiterati like Böhme has prevented the speaker’s mind from sticking in the rut of abstract thought, as they have added a layer of emotion to his reflections:

They contributed to keep alive the heart in the head; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere reflective faculty partook of death,

⁹ Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) was apprenticed to a shoemaker in his adolescence.

¹⁰ The other mystics Coleridge includes in his selection of influences are Thaulerus and George Fox. The note that Sara Coleridge, who edited the 1852 edition of the *Biographia*, attached to the name of Thaulerus sheds an ironic light on Coleridge’s erudition concerning ignorant visionaries: “I have ventured to substitute ‘Thaulerus’ for ‘De Troyas’ in the text, having reason to suppose that the latter name was a mistake or a misprint for the former” (*BL* 259).

and were as the rattling twigs and sprays in winter, into which a sap was yet to be propelled from some root to which I had not yet penetrated... If they were too often a moving cloud of smoke to me by day, yet they were always a pillar of fire throughout the night, during my wanderings through the wilderness of doubt, and enabled me to skirt, without crossing, the sandy deserts of utter unbelief. (*BL* 262)

On the face of it, in these lines of Chapter IX (a chapter known as one of the “philosophical” chapters of the *Biographia*), the voice of the poet has displaced that of the philosopher or the thinker. For all the audacious Romantic claims (from Schlegel to Shelley) about poetry being philosophical and philosophy being poetic, the passage is so intensely metaphorical that even a poetically-minded philosopher like Schelling would have twitched. Kant would have shuddered. What Kant would have found particularly irksome, I believe, is the straightforward and discrete representation of “the reflective faculty” as a synecdoche of death, and of vision as a metonymy of life (“a sap... to be propelled”).

Are we to assume, then, that in these lines of Coleridge’s chapter on philosophy, a poet, who has soaked his pen in the ink of metaphor, is praising another poet? More importantly, in terms of influences, is Böhme another Bowles, i.e. yet another poetic influence on a Coleridge, who has the inclination to stray from the path of nature? Significantly, the motif of “the heart” re-emerges here, and the careful reader of the *Biographia* will be reminded of the impact that Bowles’s sonnets had on a young and immature Coleridge: they helped him strike a balance between “the strength and subtlety of the understanding” and “the feelings of the heart.” We should also remember that according to the speaker of the *Biographia*, what awakens his feelings is “the style so natural and real” of Bowles’ poetry (*BL* 151). These feelings prove to be a bridge for a mind self-destructively removed from the real world. The balance achieved between head and heart is a balance between abstract thought and nature.

It is easy to perceive a similarity in Coleridge’s account of the German mystic’s influence, but a closer scrutiny of the phrasing in Chapter IX will also suggest a difference: Böhme’s visions have “contributed to keep alive the heart *in* [italics mine] the head.” In this case, the head and the heart, the abstract and the natural, do not co-exist in an *intermundium*. Instead, the head is given priority as a space that accommodates the heart. Hence the heart, and the feelings associated with it, is no longer a bridge to the real world. It adds something essential to the world of thought by inscribing itself in its realm. The heart that penetrates the head through the experience of mystical vision is an antidote to the uncertainties of a (self)-questioning consciousness: it spares the speaker “the sandy deserts of unbelief.” The “pillar of fire” rises within the mind to “burn” doubt and provide a direct link to a reality that Kant would call “the supersensible.” Significantly, the metaphors in the paragraph are so manipulated as to suggest that mystical images do not just provide the anticipation of “life” in the “winter” that informs “the reflective faculty,” but they also give access to the knowledge that there is an underlying area of non-knowledge beyond the grasp of consciousness: “some root to which I had not yet penetrated.”

I want to suggest that Chapter IX confronts us with a construct of (absolute) genius which differs substantially from both the Wordsworthian and the Shakespearean versions. In Wordsworth’s case, the *intermundium* seems to lean towards the world of matter. In Shakespeare’s case, poetic genius is located in a peaceful space between the subject and the object, between mind and nature, between the inner and the outer. In the Coleridgean-Böhmean case, the exceptional visionary quality is located, without any residue, within the mind. What is more, the reference to the metaphors of divine guidance in the *Book of Exodus*¹¹ highlights a peculiar combination between “a moving cloud of smoke” (the Biblical metaphor is “a pillar of cloud”) and “a pillar of fire.” Thus, the unshakable tranquility of the *intermundium* portrayed in Chapter II is here replaced by an oscillation between blindness and insight. Importantly, the fire of the vision blazes a new mental trail beyond doubt and unbelief. With its radical potential, this version of the visionary is reminiscent of Luther in *The Friend* in his moment as “a poet in its higher sense” when he acts out his “poem” and directly confronts the Devil (121–3). Besides, the impact that Böhme’s vision has on Coleridge is akin to the impact that his own unwritten chapter on the imagination will have on his fictional reader and friend in Chapter XIII of the *Biographia*.

Could we say, then, that this theosophist poetic consciousness which has access, through the fires of vision, to the resources of a peculiar type of non-knowledge, defines Coleridge’s version of his own genius? Not really. If it did, the concept of the *intermundium* would be undermined.

¹¹ See *Exodus* 13: 21–22.

It is well known that Coleridge was acutely aware of and anxious about the prospect of the incommunicability of radically idiosyncratic messages. It would suffice to recollect the figure of the prophet in *The Friend*, who is the only one to have withdrawn to a cavern, thus avoiding the rain that has corrupted the rest of humanity (9–11). The examples of this anxiety are scattered throughout Coleridge’s oeuvre, but I feel tempted to refer to one of his notebooks, which has recorded his fear that his “ghostly” genius separates him from his fellow men. In a typically humble Coleridgean vein, he first assumes he is unlikely to possess true genius because he has the strength of a “tropic Biennial” but wants “the power of an oak.” What follows this obscure self-effacing distinction is the equally typical ambiguous self-assertion:

And yet I think, I must have some *analogon* of Genius; because, among other things, when I am in company with Mr Sharp, Sir J. Mackintosh, R. and Sydney Smith, Mr Scarlet, &c &c, I feel like a Child – nay, rather like an Inhabitant of another Planet – their very faces all act upon me, sometimes as if they were Ghosts, but more often as if I were a Ghost, among them – at all times, as if we were not *consubstantial* [italics in the original].
(*Notebooks* 126)

What this paragraph reveals is that the sense of being made of a different substance haunted Coleridge not only when it came to verbal communication, but also on a pre-linguistic, bodily level: his reaction here is based on these people’s faces and his own face not being “consubstantial.” Besides, the self-deprecating rhetoric seems to repress the awareness that the “immaterial” substance of his face may be superior to the banal materiality of their faces.

The Böhmean scenario, however, features a ruse that allows the speaker of Chapter IX to suppress, if not to overcome, the “ghostliness” of his genius without sacrificing its idiosyncrasy. The ruse involves the figure of Schelling and a conspiracy theory.

After a number of disparaging statements about religious enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*), scattered throughout his prose¹², in 1806 Schelling responds to Fichte’s claims that he is an enthusiast with a defence of uneducated *Schwärmer*, whose inspired visions were at that time, supposedly, the only vehicle of the “true profundity of science and the actual penetration of all parts of cognition with its innermost centre” (quoted in Mayer 195).¹³

Coleridge picks up the motif and decides to “in part translate [these] observations from a contemporary writer of the Continent.” The next subordinate clause in this sentence makes it clear that the “translation” is actually a transcription from “memoranda of [Coleridge’s] own, which were written many years before [Schelling’s] pamphlet was given to the world” (*BL* 257). Norman Fruman points out that Sara Coleridge’s edition of 1847 features a note, according to which Coleridge has borrowed *verbatim* “eighty-five lines... with the exception of three or four scattered sentences” (81). The failure to attribute the text to a particular author (the “contemporary writer of the Continent” could be anyone), as well as the failure to provide any citation marks, relegates Coleridge’s gesture to the realm of indecency. Actually, Coleridge’s euphemistic prevarications around his finding a “genial coincidence” (*BL* 270) with Schelling’s ideas so that “an identity of thought, or even similarity of phrase” (*BL* 271) should not necessarily be considered a borrowing only aggravate the whole matter. This is a blatant case of plagiarism, of course, and to any strict guardian of the originality of discourse it would be a blameworthy transgression. I share this attitude.

Yet I would like to suggest that in this particular case Coleridge’s offence could be a peculiar version of one of his most typical rhetorical gestures: resorting to the support of “a better name”¹⁴ and then emptying that name of its content. In this case, I should say, he uses the ploy with even more than his usual sophistication and finesse.

¹² For an exhaustive overview of such statements by Schelling and other post-Kantian thinkers, see Paola Mayer’s already quoted book *Iena Romanticism and Its Appropriation of Jakob Böhme*.

¹³ The same text, with some minor modifications due probably to differences in translation, appears in Chapter IX of the *Biographia*. The quotation is from Schelling’s essay *Exposition of the True Relationship of the Philosophy of Nature to the Improved Fichtean Doctrine* (1806). Again, I am indebted for the source to Paola Mayer.

¹⁴ In his letter to Josiah Wedgwood of May 1799, Coleridge writes: I chose the Life of Lessing... because it would give me an opportunity of conveying under a better name, than my own ever will be, opinions, which I deem of the highest [t] importance” *Collected Letters* 519).

There seems to be no doubt that Schelling was “a better name” for Coleridge.¹⁵ In Chapter IX itself, he spares no praise for the German philosopher: Schelling is proclaimed “a great and original genius... the founder of the Philosophy of Nature, and... the most successful improver of the Dynamic System”¹⁶ (BL 272). Significantly, as with Lessing in the texts preceding the composition of the *Biographia*, Coleridge reaches towards a figure of authority that will provide him with an established ethos before he steps into the aesthetic regime. The ethos, this time, comes in the form of a conspiracy theory.

In probably the most significant paragraph of Chapter IX, Coleridge-cum-Schelling claim(s) that “there appears to have existed a sort of secret and tacit compact among the learned, not to pass beyond a certain limit in speculative science.” As a result of this limitation, (self)-imposed by the very ethos of elitist knowledge, the discovery of “the indwelling and living ground of all things” was “abandoned to the illiterate and the simple.” The rhetoric here bursts with the agonistic verve of the political. The uneducated masses are pitted against a learned elite that has circumscribed the sphere of knowledge and persecuted the inspired visionaries as “interlopers on their rights and privileges” (BL 258). The revelation that there has been a radical division in the superstructure, to use Marx’s term, seems only an inch away from the realization that it might also concern the economic base. Of course, neither Schelling nor Coleridge ever crossed that inch. Still, Coleridge’s appropriation of a scenario rife with radical politics is, to say the least, surprising on the part of a man who had left his Jacobin tendencies far behind (the days of *France: An Ode* and the pantisocracy project were long gone), who had long renounced Priestley’s rational, and potentially revolutionary, Unitarianism, and who, at the time of the composition of the *Biographia*, was drifting towards a conservative, or even obscurantist, Anglicanism.

In an attempt to unravel the motivation behind this Coleridgean tangle, let me use a chess metaphor. It appears that the move Coleridge is performing here is a double gambit, i.e. he is sacrificing two “pieces” to gain a crucial advantage. First of all, he is forfeiting, temporarily, his own genius by bowing in what many would consider a humiliating manner to the greatness of another mind. Secondly, he is making a precarious step in the direction of radicalism by lending his name to a claim that dismantles the hierarchies of learning. What are the gains?

The first rhetorical benefit for Coleridge, in the guise of the speaker of Chapter IX, is that he quietly and suavely manages to undermine Schelling’s authority. Here is the almost imperceptible comment on Schelling that subtly subverts his status as an original genius: “The coincidence of Schelling’s system with certain general ideas of Behmen [aka Böhme], he declares to have been mere coincidence; while my obligations have been more direct. He needs give to Behmen only feelings of sympathy; while I owe him a debt of gratitude” (BL 272).

Significantly, the word “coincidence”, which is tautologically repeated here, is the word Coleridge uses in the same chapter to point to the similarity between his ideas and Schelling’s. His borrowings from Schelling are a “genial coincidence,” whereas the coincidence that Schelling has declared to be “mere coincidence” looks, rather, like a genuine coincidence. In the scenario that I am trying to build up, Coleridge is plagiarizing from a genius whom he knows to be a plagiarist, albeit to a different degree and in a different sense. To return to the vocabulary of chess, Coleridge, who has sacrificed a “piece” (probably as important as “the queen”), is now attacking “the king” without seeking to checkmate him. All he wants to do is muster the support of “the king” and then partly shake his position before he has castled.

Besides, it is not just about finding a powerful brother in plagiarism and about blurring the outlines of the term itself; the more significant gain is that Schelling’s conspiracy theory (“the tacit compact” of the learned against the unlearned) provides the speaker with a much wider audience than the *literati* who will understand the Latin title *Biographia Literaria*. Jon Klancher has suggested that “Coleridge sought to construct an audience that was also an institution, a body of readers and writers capable of governing the relations between

¹⁵ The extended note which Sara Coleridge attached to the 1852 edition of the *Biographia*, which I use as a source, gives us a glimpse of the ephemeral character of Coleridge’s affiliation(s). Here are the two opening sentences of the note: “In the preceding chapter Mr. C. speaks of Schelling’s philosophy as if it had his entire approbation, and had been adopted by him in its whole extent. Yet it is certain that, soon after the composition of the B.L., he became dissatisfied with the system” (BL 276).

¹⁶ Kathleen Wheeler maintains that Coleridge’s “enthusiasm for Schelling” has to do mostly with his conviction that the German philosopher has reinvented the old system of polarity, which, in Chapter IX, Coleridge refers to as “the Dynamic System,” and which he attributes to Giordano Bruno (58).

all the emerging audiences of the nineteenth century” (quoted in Bygrave 49). In Klancher’s view of the matter, then, Coleridge has attempted to create a powerful elitist circle of already educated enlighteners, efficient in disseminating literary culture among the semi-educated masses, and he has symptomatically failed in this endeavour. This involves (the gesture is to be found in both *The Friend* and the *Biographia*) reaching directly towards the minds and hearts of a body of readers whom he perceives as corrupted by a democratic print culture. Coleridge tends to adopt an uncompromisingly magisterial attitude towards this stratum. One of the famous moments comes in Chapter III of the *Biographia*, where the speaker sardonically dismisses the taste of what he refers to as “the devotees of the circulating libraries.” These wretched folks do not actually read when they read about “spitting over a bridge” or about “tête-à-tête quarrels after dinner between husband and wife”; instead, what they are involved in is “a sort of beggarly day-dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness, and a little mawkish sensibility” (BL 179). At the same time, we should remember that the speaker of *The Friend* is particularly long-winded when it comes to telling stories of pitiable poverty, betrayal and death. In the guise of cautionary tales, these stories, I believe, are designed to address what Coleridge considers “the mawkish sensibility” of as wide a readership as possible. In other words, Coleridge’s persona is not as recalcitrant in his erudite superciliousness as he is often taken to be.

I read the Böhme episode in Chapter IX as a similar direct attempt at embracing an audience that is not necessarily literate. If the speaker, who postures here as both a visionary poet and a philosopher, admits to drawing upon the visions of a shoemaker, the implication is that the uneducated strata, “men of humble and obscure occupations,” are not just a mass of corruptible small minds, but could also be, under certain circumstances, a source of “a new and vital truth” (BL 260). In other words, the genius/educator should set his sights beyond creating an educated cohort; instead, he should also be aiming at illuminating that spark of intelligence and inspiration that lies in every mind and every heart. In fact, the genius/educator’s role might be to create the right circumstances for that to happen. For Coleridge, this is education par excellence, but it does not pursue and rely exclusively on knowledge in the conventional cognitive sense of the word. Its basis and its *telos* are, rather, a form of revelation.

After this radical gesture, Coleridge, predictably, takes a step aside into his elitist shell. Enthusiasm provides a rather shaky ground and the images it generates need to be regulated. What makes the enthusiastic predisposition dangerous for the speaker of the *Biographia* is its proximity to the fanatic mindset, which Coleridge, in all his guises, definitely dreads and dismisses. It is worth remembering that in Chapter IV, he presents fanaticism and enthusiasm as the two extremes between which the sanity of the mind accommodates itself. In Chapter IV, what sets fanatics apart are a psychological and a social characteristic: they possess a coldness of the senses and tend to be inspired by and attract groups of followers. In the later *Aids to Reflection*, however, the psychological distinction is abandoned, and fanatics are represented as dangerous enthusiasts who “impose [their] faith” (383–4). It seems that in Chapter IX, only the social characteristic defines Böhme as an enthusiast: “A meek and shy quietist, his intellectual powers were never stimulated into feverous energy by crowds of proselytes and the ambition of proselyting. Jacob Behmen was an enthusiast in the strictest sense as not merely distinguished, but as contra-distinguished, from a fanatic” (BL 257).

In this distinction, the line between enthusiasm and fanaticism is rather flimsy because it is not easy to define the outlines of quietism. How quiet does one have to be so as to be a quietist? For instance, does the fact that Böhme has chosen to commit his visions to the perpetuating medium of writing undermine his abstention from proselytizing? His recorded epiphanies have attracted at least two followers: Schelling and Coleridge. Also, ironically, Coleridge’s project in *Biographia Literaria* has a pronounced propaedeutic dimension, which, by implication, means that the enthusiasm the Romantic poet has so enthusiastically appropriated, has, in his case, fanatic overtones. Coleridge is no quietist, and thus he cannot be described as “an enthusiast in the strict sense of the word.” Whether he was aware of this possible ironic reading or not, we will never know.

Coleridge had his predecessors in this attempt to codify the mystical visions of the enthusiast. Jon Mee has shown that in England the discussion of the hazards of enthusiasm dates back to the seventeenth century:

The discourse that circulated around enthusiasm from the middle of the seventeenth century developed a pathology to explain its harmful and ubiquitous presence in the body politic. Medical metaphors of infection and disease abounded to account for the transmission of an effect that seemed to owe nothing to reasoned discussion. (Mee)

In other words, there was a pre-Humean English tradition of isolating groundless vision as a socially pernicious aberration. At the same time, as Mee reminds us in *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation*, there were also endeavors to represent enthusiasm as a productive mindset, if properly checked.¹⁷ Motivated by the appearance of a “prophesying sect” in London, Shaftesbury’s “Letter Concerning Enthusiasm” opposes the policy of persecution of these unorthodox Christians. In a famous, and then controversial, claim, the Earl suggests that “good humour is not only the best security against enthusiasm but the best foundation of piety and true religion” (13). After advocating a liberal social and political attitude to mystical vision, Shaftesbury goes on to represent enthusiasm as a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, he associates it with melancholy, which, if it spreads across the community, could lead to panic; on the other hand, drawing upon ancient Greek philosophy, he asserts that “there was a good stock of visionary spirit originally in human nature” (25). Besides, he posits the visionary quality as a *sine qua non* of poetic achievement: “no poet... can do anything great in his own way without the imagination or supposition of a divine presence” (26). Yet, since enthusiasm is also a disease, there should be “an antidote against [it]”, and this is a “spirit... fit to judge ... by being sedate, free of every biasing passion, every giddy vapour or melancholy fume” (28).

Coleridge’s regime of regulation seems very close to Shaftesbury’s. According to Mee, Coleridge dissociated the poetic uses of enthusiasm from the crudely prophetic forms: “for Coleridge, paradoxically, ... ‘true’ poetic enthusiasm was defined by its disavowal of any claim to the ‘Prophet’s... eye.’”¹⁸ Only in the diseasing realms of plebeian prophets... could the claims to the powers of prophecy in such an unmediated form be made” (*Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* 133). In other words, the poet can have legitimate recourse to the well of unconscious vision only if his enthusiasm is offset by conscious reflection, which also implies systematically acquired knowledge, or erudition.

In Chapter IX of the *Biographia*, the speaker makes sure that his enthusiasm will be perceived in the context of regulation. After his explicit acknowledgment of the influence of Böhme’s ignorant inspiration, he asserts the role of erudition and reasoning in extracting the healthy core of spontaneous vision: “It has indeed been plausibly observed, that in order to derive any advantage, or to collect any intelligible meaning, from the writings of these ignorant Mystics, the reader must bring with him a spirit and judgement superior to that of the writers themselves...” (*BL* 261). The passive voice in the subordinate clause of this sentence adds to it a sense of objectivity beyond questioning. Also, compared to Shaftesbury’s version, the Romantic’s regulation rests on more elitist assumptions, since he envisages a superiority of judgement over ignorant mysticism. Shaftesbury only speaks of a “spirit fit to judge.” For both thinkers, however, enthusiasm could be a source of enlivening sentiment (“the heart in the head”) and valuable imaginative insights. Actually, Coleridge ends his discussion of Böhme on this note: he makes the broad claim that the realm of knowledge would be much richer if in all books there were “as much fulness of heart and intellect” (*BL* 261) as there is in the mystics’ volumes.

At this point, I can venture a portrayal of Coleridge’s genius, as I think it is constructed in *Biographia Literaria*. To do so, let me list again some of the exemplary figures that the speaker claims to have admired without completely following in their footsteps. Bowles’ sonnets purportedly saved him from his solipsism and from the undermining metaphysical inclinations of his mind. However, it seems that, theoretically at least, Coleridge never fully embraced the “natural and real style” of these poems; nor did he ever completely abandon the metaphysical path. Besides, the speaker of the *Biographia* is fascinated with the peaceful *intermundium*, equally absorbed in and distanced from the world of the mind and the world of nature, of geniuses like Shakespeare and Wordsworth, but he only partly embraces their “naturalism.” He is particularly wary of Wordsworth’s meticulously mimetic tendency, or “matter-of-factness,” one possible reason being that, to him, it is redolent of the empiricism of Locke, Hartley and Hume, which he vehemently dismisses in Chapters V–VIII. Finally, in Chapter IX, the speaker reasserts his abiding affiliation with metaphysics (which now takes on the more specific form of Kantian and post-Kantian idealism), but adds a new element to his “abstruse researches”: mystical vision or enthusiasm. I believe that it is in this draughty space between mysticism and German metaphysics that Coleridge’s (absolute?) genius finds an abode. This is a space that accommodates both the revelation of the enthusiast and the codifying presence of the reasoning faculty. Such a precarious settlement confers the following benefits on the speaker of the *Biographia*: a) it vindicates the abstract meanderings of his thought by lending to them the resources of emotion/affect; b) it allows him to

¹⁷ Passim.

¹⁸ Mee refers here to Coleridge’s early poem *Religious Musings*.

attach to his erudite knowledge the resources of ignorant inspiration; c) it ensures him access, albeit hypothetically, to a wider readership.

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