Erecting “Pencil-mark-memorials”:
Coleridge’s *Biographia* and the Intricacies of Plagiarism

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In the Preface to my Metaphys. Works I should say—Once & for all
read Tetens, Kant, Fichte, &c—& there you will trace or if you are on
the hunt, track me. Why then not acknowledge your obligations step
by step? Because, I could not do in a multitude of glaring
resemblances without a lie/ for they had been mine, formed, & full
formed in my own mind, before I had ever heard of these Writers,
because to have fixed on the partic. instances in which I have really
been indebted to these Writers would have [been] very hard, if
possible, to me who read for truth & self-satisfaction, not to make a
book, & who always rejoiced & was jubilant when I found my own
ideas well expressed already by others [...] Much of the matter
remains my own, and [...] the Soul is mine. (CN II 2375)

When Coleridge dictated the philosophical chapters of the *Biographia
Literaria* to his “amanuensis” John Morgan in September 1815, he
irrevocably collapsed into the mode of composition that was to be termed
plagiarism by future commentators. Thomas De Quincey was among the first
do so, revealing shortly after Coleridge’s death that his fellow opium-eater’s
practice of “stealing from other people”1 had begun as early as 1797 when he
tacitly incorporated some lines from Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* into his “France:
An Ode”. Other famous examples of Coleridgean textual appropriations
include his unacknowledged translation of Friederike Brun’s “Chamounix
beym Sonnenaufgange”2 and the Shakespearean lectures of 1811/12 which
were more than loosely based on A. W. Schlegel’s *Vorlesungen über dramatische
Kunst und Literatur*. However, by far the most severe case of “barefaced
plagiarism” (DeQ 292) occurs in chapter XII of the *Biographia*3 in which
Coleridge quotes page after page from Schelling’s *System des transzendentalen
Idealismus* without once directly indicating his source. But why?

Even though biographical circumstances alone cannot account for
Coleridge’s literary-ethical “deterioration,” it seems worthwhile to briefly
reconsider them as a starting point. For more than a decade he had been
experiencing much emotional turmoil, coping with events like the death of his
second-born son and the separation from his wife, with his unrequited love for
Sara Hutchinson and the estrangement from the Wordsworths, who had
(according to Basil Montagu) declared him “an absolute nuisance” and a

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3 In their introduction to Volume 7 of the “Collected Coleridge,” James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate provide an impressive list of all the “borrowings” in the *Biographia*, inclusive of all relevant passages from the respective original works. In the following, all quotations from “BL” in the text refer to Engell and Bate’s two volume edition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
hopeless case. Coleridge’s public life had likewise not always been a success. His poetical output had declined after 1800, and his aspirations as an essayist were still somewhat frustrated by the failure/shortlivedness of The Friend, to name just two examples. As a consequence, his reputation had seriously suffered, culminating ultimately in Hazlitt’s harsh verdict that he had done “little or nothing” with his many talents. Last but certainly not least there was the problem of Coleridge’s addiction to opium, triggered by and in turn triggering such blows and partly attenuated only after he moved in with the Gillmans in 1816, subsequently profiting from their more solid lifestyle.

Circumstances do matter, and if biography provides the general, in Coleridge’s case rather unfavourable, framework of any creative activity, it is the events accompanying the act of creation itself that can (partly) be held responsible for decisions made during this process. With regard to the genesis of Coleridge’s “Literary Life,” the following aspects ought to be remembered:

What was to become the Biographia was originally conceived as merely a preface to a collection of Coleridge’s poetical works (later published as Sibylline Leaves).

The entire substantial manuscript (which at one point was intended to be published in two separate volumes) was written in approximately three and a half months.

The philosophical chapters (V-XIII), arguably the most ambitious part of the Biographia, were written in approximately six weeks.

There was considerable pressure exerted by Coleridge’s printer, Gutch, as to the prompt completion of the work. Such reasoning surely cannot absolve Coleridge from his plagiatory “sins”, and, it needs to be said, scholars should generally refrain from assuming the role of a priest in the booth (or a courtroom prosecutor, for that matter). But, as Engell and Bate maintain, there is a difference between an absolution “and a mere explanation of circumstances that could seduce or frighten Coleridge into acts against which the cushions of leisure, financial security, calmer (or firmer) temperaments, or even sheer moralism would preserve others” (BL I lviii).

Coleridge undoubtedly worked very hard on the Biographia, being “confined [to his] study from 11 to 4, and from 6 to 10” (CL IV 579) for the better part of the summer of 1815. His principal motivations were earning fast

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5 Qtd. in Coleridge: The Critical Heritage, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 205. Earlier criticisms in the same vein had included an anonymous article in the Edinburgh Annual Register of 1808 in which Coleridge was described as “deficient in the perseverance and the sound sense […] necessary to turn his exquisite talents to their proper use” (ibid., 72), and a contribution by J. T. Coleridge who conceded (in the Quarterly Review in 1814) that his uncle had “acquired a reputation for ability proportioned rather to what he is supposed capable of performing, than to any thing which he has accomplished” (ibid., 188).
money (in order to be able to pay off debts and support his family) and fighting against the “rumour of having dreamt away [his] life” (BL I 272) which had so severely harmed his reputation. Also, he felt freshly challenged by Wordsworth who had misconstrued his position on the distinction between Fancy and Imagination in the recent reprint of his Poems. All of this had the accumulated effect of putting great pressure on Coleridge—but the main problem was in fact the tight working schedule determined by Gutch: When he decided to include the philosophical chapters (the last ones to be written except for chapters 23 and 24 which were added much later) he was already running short of time. When he got to chapter XII, the prime locus of plagiarism in the Biographia, manuscript-delivery was almost due, and a reworking of the Schelling material seemed no longer an option. When he arrived at chapter XIII he was forced to abruptly interrupt himself in the midst of the oft-announced passage on Imagination vs. Fancy, scribbled the dubious “letter from a friend”, and promised that everything else would be dealt with in a future work, the Logosophia.

The damage was done, and although the Biographia was not published until 1817 Coleridge never got the chance to undo it. The bulk of Chapter XII, as reviewed by De Quincey some 14 years later, remained “a verbatim translation from Schelling, with no attempt in a single instance to appropriate the paper, by developing the arguments or by diversifying the illustrations!” (DeQ 292). What baffled De Quincey the most was the apparent lack of necessity in Coleridge’s deeds—which led him to imply a general disposition to steal:

Had then Coleridge any need to borrow from Schelling? Did he borrow in forma pauperis? Not at all—there lay the wonder. He spun daily and at all hours, for mere amusement of his own activities, and from the loom of his own magical brain, theories more gorgeous by far, and supported by a pomp and luxury of images, such as Schelling—no, nor any German that ever breathed, not John Paul—could have emulated in his dreams. With the riches of El Dorado lying about him, he would condescend to filch a handful of gold from any man whose purse he fancied … (ibid.)

Further accusers as well as ardent defenders soon entered the debate and, interestingly, the majority of them followed De Quincey in focusing on Coleridge’s personality in their attempts to make sense of his plagiarisms. While a host of mainly Scottish Victorian critics blatantly condemned Coleridge’s behaviour in psychological terms—J. M. Robertson characterised him as “precociously intellectual” and “lacking anchorage [and] judgment”; J. H. Stirling called him a “hollow nature”—an advance to restore the dead poet’s honour was undertaken by members of his family and close acquaintances who tended to trivialise the plagiarisms by portraying them as

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little more than the natural product of Coleridge’s essentially amiable habits. Thus his daughter Sara speaks of him as “a mixture of carelessness and confusedness,” and Julius Hare apologetically declares:

The only way I can see of accounting for [STC’s plagiarisms] is from his practice of keeping note-books, or journals of his thoughts, filled with observations and brief dissertations on such matters as happened to strike him, with a sprinkling now and then of extracts from the books he was reading. If the name of the author from whom he took an extract was left out, he might easily, years after, forget whose property it was, especially when he had made it in some measure his own, by transfusing it into his own English. (qtd. in McF 18)

Another favourite line of argument is already foreshadowed in Hare’s remark, namely the claim that Coleridge somehow plagiarised in an acceptable manner because he managed to make the borrowings “his own”. This form of reasoning was already employed by De Quincey (concerning the “Hymn before Sun-Rise” and other “minor” plagiarisms; cf. DeQ 290-291), and we also encounter it in conceptions like McFarland’s “mosaic organization” (McF 27 ff.) or in Gillman’s metaphor of the bee “which flies from flower to flower in quest of food [...] but digests and elaborates it by its own native powers”.9

It is quite possible, of course, that Coleridge, in the process of composition, sometimes confused his own ideas with those of others—with the effect that his works mirrored this “mixed heritage”. After all, he was known to be extraordinarily capable of memorising passages he had read. And who is to say whether he did or did not notice when a snippet from another person’s discourse entered his own. Unfortunately, however, the fact remains that in the final analysis such rationalizations simply cannot explain the (page-long and entirely “undigested”) plagiarisms in the Biographia.11

Nevertheless it seems not altogether inappropriate to take a brief look at “Coleridge as reader.”12 That he was extremely erudite is well-established, and

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8 Qtd. in G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 216.
10 My thanks are due to Graham Davidson who, while I was in the process of revising this paper, reminded me of Charles Le Grice’s account of Coleridge’s remarkable ability to remember the content of political pamphlets while at Cambridge (see Le Grice’s obituary in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 157 (1834), 605-607, 606), and who called my attention to the anecdote that Henry Cary (son) related about STC reciting whole pages of Dante verbatim; cf. *Coleridge the Talker*, ed. Richard W. Armour and Raymond F. Howes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1940), 126.
11 Cf. De Quincey’s verdict on the “mad professor” assumption: “[N]o excess of candour the most indulgent will allow us to suppose that a most profound speculation on the original relations *inter se* of the subjective and the objective, literally translated from the German, and stretching over some pages, could, after any interval of years, come to be mistaken by the translator for his own.”; qtd. in Tilar J. Mazzeo, “Coleridge, Plagiarism, and the Psychology of the Romantic Habit”, *European Romantic Review* 15 (2004) 2, 335-341, 338. A longer version of Mazzeo’s essay forms chapter 2 of her *Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), reviewed by the author of this paper in the last *Bulletin* NS 33 (2009), 150-156.
12 Cf. H. J. Jackson’s paper of this title in the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 271-287. The Handbook also includes some other interesting contributions relevant to the present context, such as (obviously) Andrew Keanie’s on “Coleridge and Plagiarism” (pp. 435-454) and Christoph Bode’s on “Coleridge and Philosophy” (pp. 588-619).
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the renown he earned among his contemporaries as one of the most impressive “talkers” of the age clearly relied on the range of his knowledge and interests. His passion for books also becomes apparent when envisioning how deeply his own work depended on the writings of others. Even when he did not plagiarise he oftentimes turned to material he had recently discovered for inspiration—that much Messrs Lowes and Nethercot have taught us. While “influence” is certainly an important factor in anybody’s creative endeavours this very process of ceaselessly juggling with sources and adopting ideas could indeed be called Coleridge’s “own poetic modus operandi”.13

His synthetical mode of working ought to be seen in a larger context, though, since it is merely one instance of his general obsession with the concept of unification. His aesthetic ideal of “unity in multeity” comes to mind, as well as the famous definition of the Secondary Imagination which also stresses the significance of true synthesis. In his personal life, as has frequently been observed, Coleridge likewise aspired for “amalgamation”14: his relationships with men in particular call forth the notion of a transgression of the self’s borderlines. Examples of this are his friendships with Thomas Poole, to whom he expressed his desire “to be mingling identities” (CL I 249), and with Wordsworth who was the probable addressee of the unsettling notebook entry reading “[M]y identity might flow into thine, & live and act in thee, & be Thou” (CN II 2712). Coleridge’s “cuckoo-like invasion of other people’s households”15 and his notorious “chameleonlike ability to alter his own tone to conform to that of his [correspondents]”16 are comparable phenomena. Even as a traveller, he usually “tr[ied] to find himself in what is alien, to such an extent […] that all alterity is ultimately annihilated”.17

It is, therefore, tempting to regard the plagiarisms as just another symptom of this deep-felt need for identification, as the consequence of “the lonely darkness of his solitary study and the endless, sometimes desperate, ‘night-conversations’ with his fellow authors”.18 Coleridge himself seems to support this assumption when writing that he finds it hard to trace his literary debts because he “always rejoiced & was jubilant when [he] found [his] own ideas well expressed by others” (CN II 2375; see above). Here we have the

13 Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 331. Further quotations from *Damaged Archangel* will be acknowledged in the text, using the abbreviation “Fru”. Fruman’s legendary attack on Coleridge studies and the controversies it provoked were reconsidered by Andrew Keanie some years ago; see *Essays in Criticism* 56 (2005) 1, 72-93.


same confusion about interpersonal boundaries, the same inclination to absorb the other into the self.

Another Notebook entry is even more insightful in this respect; it is the passage from 1803 in which Coleridge, probably reflecting on his addiction, calls habit “the Desire of a Desire” (CN II 1421).\(^{19}\) Plagiarism, it could be argued, becomes another such habit because it is associated with a very basic longing. And while the original desire (for total union with the outside world) proves to be insatiable, the in-corporation of the ideas of others becomes a symbolic substitute. In psychoanalytical terms: a process of repression and displacement which results in habitual activities that refer only vaguely to the original desire—as, in Coleridge’s own words, “faint, to the consciousness erased, Pencil-mark-memorials or relics” (ibid). But in the sub-conscious the connection latently remains, and someone suffering from a “deranged volition” (CL III 489) will compulsively indulge in acts promising to recover it. In other words, whether Coleridge plagiarised or scribbled marginalia into books, whether he behaved obtrusively or opportunistically, whether he fell in love with opium or with family members of his friends (Sara Hutchinson, Mary Morgan et al.)—all these behavioural patterns might have been desperate attempts to satisfy the same primal desire. And Coleridge, the “inquiring spirit”, came quite close to understanding this.

Alas… simple answers can never do justice to a complex personality like his, and qualifying earlier conclusions in the light of further evidence seems inevitable when dealing with Coleridge. In terms of the plagiarisms it needs to be admitted that the image so far evoked of his passive indulging in habitual actions is only part of the story. Far from simply accepting his “robberies” for what they were, he frequently committed them under “circumstances of uneasiness” (DeQ 293)—to this his many contradictory statements on the topic attest. The disposition for emotional dependence was countered within Coleridge’s mind by a need to fight the threat of being overwhelmed by exterior influences, of being “possessed” and left utterly self-less.\(^{20}\)

Projection was a favourite weapon in these acts of self-defence which becomes especially evident when beholding the “unlovely spectacle”\(^{21}\) of his accusing other writers of the “sin” he himself committed: plagiarism. This particular Coleridgean habit began as early as 1796 when he alleged that Samuel Rogers had used other writers’ material in *The Pleasures of Memory* (see Fru 91). Two years later he accused James Mackintosh and M. G. Lewis of having plagiarised; later still his victims were (among others) Gray, Johnson, Erasmus Darwin, Mme de Staël, Byron, Scott, Hazlitt, and, significantly, Southey and Wordsworth (see ibid., 92 ff.). Even in the *Biographia*, the locus of his own

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19 My brief discussion of this passage is indebted to Tilar Mazzeo’s brilliant analysis of it; see Mazzeo, op. cit., 339. Paul Youngquist examines the same passage in “Rehabilitating Coleridge: Poetry, Philosophy, Excess”, *ELH* 66 (1999) 4, 885-909, 890f.


most blatant plagiarisms, he could not help himself from pointing a finger at Hume and Maturin (BL I 104; BL II 232).

The most interesting instance of such a “backlash”, however, is to be found on pages 160 ff. of the selfsame work. Here Coleridge writes:

The coincidence of SCHELLING’s system with certain general ideas of Behmen, he declares to have been mere coincidence; while my obligations have been more direct. He needs to give Behmen only feelings of sympathy; while I owe him a debt of gratitude. (BL I 161)

It is this interesting passage that offers something like an unfiltered look into Coleridge’s troubled soul where feelings of guilt are immediately transformed into a liberating gesture of self-assertion. Needless to say that nobody, and certainly not Schelling, really requested him to acknowledge his “debt of gratitude”; it is an internal moral battle that we are witnessing here.22

The ambivalence of Coleridge’s treatment of the issue of plagiarism in the *Biographia* is truly astonishing. In chapter I he tells the reader that he regards “the obligations of intellect [as] most sacred” (BL I 15), and in chapter II he laments the carelessness with which such obligations are handled by some of his rivals (“I have laid too many eggs […] to furnish feathers for the caps of others”; BL I 45-46). But in the well-known “divine ventriloquist” passage in chapter IX he suddenly implies that originality is altogether overrated, stating that it does not matter much “whose mouth” becomes the medium of “truth” after all (BL I 164). (In)Consequently, questions of precedence are negligible—there are “better tests”, Coleridge maintains, for judging the substance of a man’s creations than “the mere reference to dates” (ibid.).

His strategy of dealing with the anticipated charges against himself for plagiarising from the Continental idealists appears to be no less irresolute. As part of what has been dubbed his “general disclaimer” to Schelling (cf. Fru 99), he dismisses the similarities between his and the German’s works and attributes them nonchalantly to “genial coincidence” (BL I 160) or to “stud[ying] in the same school” (BL I 161; i.e. to having both read Kant and Bruno). At the same time it seems to be of vital importance to him to emphasise that “the most striking resemblances, indeed all the main and fundamental ideas, were born and matured in my mind before I had ever seen a single page of the German philosopher” (ibid.). Yet some lines later a conspicuous humility gets the upper hand again:

God forbid! that I should be suspected to wish to enter into a rivalry with SCHELLING for the honours so unequivocally his right, not only

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22 With respect to another remarkable passage, it is hard not to agree with the ridiculing remark made by J. F. Ferrier in 1840: “[S]o long as human nature and the laws of evidence remain what they are, ‘an identity of thought and similarity of phrase,’ occurring in the case of two authors, must be held as very strong proof that one of them has borrowed from the other. But in the present case it is not similarity: it is absolute sameness of phrase that we are prepared to bring forward against Coleridge”; qtd. in Fru 465 n.63.
as a great and original genius, but as the founder of the PHILOSOPHY of NATURE [...] To me it will be happiness and honour enough, should I succeed in rendering the system itself intelligible to my countrymen [... L]et whatever shall be found in this or any future work of mine, that resembles, or coincides with, the doctrines of my German predecessor, though contemporary, be wholly attributed to him ...

(BL I 161-164)

And this being said, in chapter XII he happily transcribes page after page from Schelling’s System without once citing his source.

What are we to make of all this? It is virtually impossible to pervade the strange mixture of generosity vs. small-mindedness and come up with an understanding of what was Coleridge’s “real” or “final” judgment with regard to the originality of his ideas. Ultimately, what remains is the somewhat unsatisfactory notion that both impulses, the need to confess and the need to justify, were equally strong within him.

He was clearly very much aware of what he did and must have felt that he could not simply leave the plagiarised passages uncommented upon, hoping to get away with it by relying on his countrymen’s “slight knowledge of German literature” (DeQ 292). On the other hand, Coleridge was far too ambitious to admit his fraud. After all, he was a public intellectual, a man who had “from his earliest youth, devoted his whole being to an object, which by the admission of all civilized nations in all ages is honorable as a pursuit, and glorious as an attainment” (BL I 45). He still hoped that by means of a future work he would eventually emerge as a philosopher in his own right, a “fellow-thinker” instead of a “compiler” (cf. CN II 2375), and prove himself worthy of the “predestinated Garlands” (CL I 319) he had dreamed of as a child. But he also seems to have realised that for now he simply could not do without Schelling’s words—not when he felt that these were in effect his own, not when the ideas for his Logosophia were still only partly developed, not in his miserable personal situation, and not under this pressure to publish.23

The result of all this ambivalence, forever fascinatingly recorded for his readers, is the ongoing self-censorship that can be witnessed in Coleridge’s “Literary Life”:

Self-interrupting, digressive, plagiarized, and full of discussion about plagiarism, false voices, imitations, and vocal possession, the Biographia suffers the problem that is its theme: the impossible need for identity, the irremediable compromising of the self by the other.24

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23 Cf. McFarland’s estimation that “the magnum opus, projecting hypothetically into the future, was an important teleological rationalization, a psychic cover story, for Coleridge’s borrowings” (McF 28). Bate comes to a similar conclusion in his (still very readable) Coleridge (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968): “[H]e could feel that the chore-work he was doing now – the lectures on Shakespeare given in order to make ends meet, the hastily written Biographia – were mere interim skirmishes. They would be quickly superseded once he got himself in hand. All would then be made right” (137).

24 Eilenberg, op. cit. (fn. 9), 140.