

Several Hundred Pages of Promise:
The Phantom of the Gothic in Peacock's
Nightmare Abbey and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*
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Of the extensive critical tradition surrounding the poetry and prose of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Love Peacock's 1818 satire *Nightmare Abbey* offers a present-day critic an acute, if not fully articulated, insight into Coleridge's critical master work, the *Biographia Literaria*. Peacock's Mr. Flosky, *Nightmare Abbey's* send up of the post-war Coleridge, makes a claim that can only refer to the *Biographia* when he states that the 'distinction between fancy and imagination is one of the most abstruse and important points of metaphysics. I have written several hundred pages of promise to elucidate it'.¹ Clearly, *Nightmare Abbey* is calling attention to the famous omission of the philosophical deduction of the imagination in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*. Beyond identifying the site of the perennial debate about the unity of the *Biographia*, what is truly remarkable about *Nightmare Abbey's* view of Coleridge is the way it identifies the persistence of certain Gothic tendencies in his post-war publications. Perhaps realizing the hubris in Coleridge's anonymous August 1794 review of Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a review which claims, 'Curiosity is raised far oftener than it is gratified; or rather, it is raised so high that no adequate gratification can be given', *Nightmare Abbey* suggests that the charge of unfulfilled promises is equally applicable to the *Biographia*.²

More specifically, *Nightmare Abbey's* emphasis on the Gothic's low culture sensationalism as somehow bound up with Coleridge's high Romanticism seems poised to exploit the *Biographia's* own ambivalence on the issue. How, for instance, does one reconcile the *Biographia's* denunciation of Charles Maturin's Gothic drama *Bertram*, which comprises the second volume's penultimate chapter, with Chapter 14's defense of Coleridge's own 'Christabel' as an exemplar of the imagination, a poem which, as Michael Gamer has noted, Wordsworth rejected 'in order to purge the second volume of the gothicism that had provoked such a negative response to the *Lyrical Ballads's* first edition'?³

Pairing *Nightmare Abbey's* comic insight into the persistence of the Gothic in Coleridge's *Biographia* and the publication of his famous fragment 'Christabel' in 1816 with the insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis as treated by Slavoj Žižek, this paper explores both the psychoanalytic and the ideological implications of the *Biographia's* claims. In Peacock's satire, Mr. Flosky asserts that

the French Revolution has made us shrink from the name of philosophy, and has destroyed, in the more refined parts of the

¹ Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*. (London: Penguin, 1969): 83.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Mysteries of Udolpho', in *A Wiltshire Parson and His Friends*. Ed. Garland Greever (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1926): 168. Originally published anonymously in *Critical Review* NS XI (August 1794) 361-72.

³ Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 126.

community (of which number I am one), all enthusiasm for political liberty. That part of the *reading public* which shuns the food of solid reason... lived upon ghosts, goblins and skeletons (I and my friend Mr. Sackbut served up a few of the best), till even the devil himself... became too base, common, and popular, for its surfeited appetite.⁴

At once, *Nightmare Abbey* portrays Flosky/ Coleridge as a former enthusiast for a philosophy that promised political liberty and as a sometime practitioner of the Gothic. Moreover, in delineating his ideological about-face, it shows Mr. Flosky as disparaging both the Gothic, in its thoughtless desire for extreme sensations and its social Other, enlightenment reason. For Mr. Flosky the phantoms of the Gothic and illusion of political liberty in the early years of the French Revolution have become equally untenable.

Distancing himself from his associations with both the radical politics of the early 1790's and the Gothic, Mr. Flosky portrays himself as a metaphysician and social theorist for whom the only hope for the future, paradoxically, lies in a return to the social order of the feudal past. In a fine irony, *Nightmare Abbey* suggests that Mr. Flosky and 'the more refined parts of the public' who now eschew enlightenment philosophy and 'political liberty' have failed to make a similarly clean break with the Gothic. Moreover, *Nightmare Abbey* suggests the displacement of Mr. Flosky's penchant for the Gothic from his poetry to post-war politics, a displacement enacted under the aegis of Kantian metaphysics. *Nightmare Abbey's* narrator summarizes Mr. Flosky's contention

that the overthrow of the feudal fortresses of tyranny and superstition was the greatest calamity that had ever befallen mankind; and that their only hope now was to rake the rubbish together, and rebuild it without any of those loopholes by which the light had originally crept in. To qualify himself for a coadjutor of this laudable task, he plunged into the central opacity of Kantian metaphysics.⁵

The very sort of irrational desire for terror, to which Mr. Flosky's previous Gothic creations catered, now reappear in the metaphysical 'opacity' Mr. Flosky seeks in Kantian philosophy, the vehicle through which he aspires to reinstitute political 'tyranny and superstition.' Here, *Nightmare Abbey's* humorous conflation of the anti-enlightenment Gothic and post-enlightenment Kantian metaphysics accurately identifies the conservative inflection Kantian philosophy received in post-war England.⁶

Further, the passage provides the basis for reading the explicitly

⁴ Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*: 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek observes, 'Kant's criticism took shape by refuting Swedenborg's phantasmagoria about seeing ghosts, communicating with the dead, and otherwise having immediate (that is to say: intuitive) contact with the suprasensible realm of spirits. Kant's 'original insight' concerning the parallel between such fanatical 'ghost-seeing' and the Leibnizean rationalist metaphysics is more than a matter of the contingent historical origins of his philosophy... the delusion of the fanatical ghost-seer remained for Kant to the very end the model for the Ideas of Reason.' Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993): 89.

ideological status of the reality described by both Gothic literature and Kantian philosophy as fantasy formations that can be recognized as inadvertent testaments to the Lacanian Real as the impossible object of desire and, paradoxically, ‘that which always returns to the same place’.⁷ Thus, *Nightmare Abbey* provides a point of view from which Coleridge’s Kantianism is a fantasy formation veiling the Real, much as Kant’s own critical project depends upon the fantasmatic realm of the supersensible. The Real itself is an absence, refusing to enter into the symbolic order of reality as constituted by language and ideology. At the same time, ideological reality depends upon this void, which, as Žižek observes, is ‘the lack around which the symbolic order is structured’.⁸ The Real both transcends ideological reality and grounds it. The Real is thus the common ground of the supernatural forces of the Gothic and the supersensible thing-in-itself of Kantian metaphysics. In this way, *Nightmare Abbey* provides the basic observations necessary for understanding the fantasmatic nature of the ideological reality constituted by the *Biographia’s* missing deduction of the imagination in Chapter 13. For this chapter, the missing deduction functions like a Gothic effect and serves as the rhetorical bridge to Chapter 14’s invocation of Coleridge’s own ‘Christabel’ as an exemplar of the imagination’s activity. While in the *Biographia* the Coleridgean imagination is intended to represent ‘the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception’ (BL I 304), to constitute what it perceives as reality, it is instead a performance of the centrality of Lacanian Real for ideological reality as such.

To pursue the critical implications of the way the *Biographia* deploys the Gothic in terms of the Lacanian Real, as the fantasmatic support for the totalizing ideological structure articulating its ‘principles in Politics, Religion, and Philosophy, and the application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism’ (BL I 5), this paper examines the sudden appearance of the friend’s letter as a Gothic moment in two distinct ways. First, the friend’s letter is a Gothic moment in itself insofar as the friend suddenly and anonymously appears as a mysterious spectral reader that Coleridge himself later admits to having created in lieu of having written the deduction at all. And, second, the friend’s account of the deduction of the imagination possesses many of the generic markings of the Gothic.

In a letter to Thomas Curtis on April 29, 1817, Coleridge admits, ‘...that letter addressed to myself as from a friend at the close of the first volume of the Literary Life,... was written without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the inkstand’ (qtd in BL 300 n3). Rather than constituting a disruptive revision in the argumentative structure of the *Biographia’s* deduction of the imagination, the friend’s assessment and the rationale he offers for the deduction’s removal, constitutes the only form of presence the deduction of the imagination ever has in the *Biographia*. Because the fantasmatic friend

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (N Y: Norton, 1981): 280.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (London: Verso, 1989): 170.

claims to have read, if not fully understood, the removed deduction, the deduction's doubly fantasmatic existence is an absence that structures the ideological space of the *Biographia's* 'principles.' Thus, the absence of the deduction of the imagination is not simply an oddity of Coleridge's text which one must either sympathetically excuse or critically denounce as the failure of the *Biographia*. Instead, the fantasmatic status of the deduction constitutes the positive ontological condition of the *Biographia's* ideological and argumentative consistency.⁹

The friend's account of the feeling of terror that the deduction of the imagination evokes in him is distinctly Gothic its generic characteristics. The alienating and somehow sinister space of a Gothic cathedral at night is the friend's figure for his affective response to the *Biographia's* philosophical endeavor. Bradford Mudge goes so far as to assert that 'the persuasiveness of the friend's letter depends almost entirely upon the imagined experience in the gothic cathedral'.¹⁰ It is the Gothic effect that the deduction of the imagination has on the friend that provides the *Biographia* with the opportunity to interpellate this response into its ideological field. While the friend's presentation of his feelings might initially seem to confirm the kind of conflation of Gothic terror with an obscure philosophical procedure that *Nightmare Abbey* lampoons, what emerges from the friend's account of his feelings is actually the bridge that unites the *Biographia's* philosophical speculation with its practical criticism. In his letter, the friend writes:

The effect on my feelings, on the other hand, I cannot better represent, than by supposing myself to have known only our light airy modern chapels of ease, and then for the first time to have been placed, and left alone, in one of our largest Gothic cathedrals in a gusty moonlight night of autumn. 'Now in glimmer, and now in gloom;' often in palpable darkness not without a chilly sensation of terror; then suddenly emerging into broad yet visionary lights with coloured shadows, of fantastic shapes yet all decked with holy insignia and mystic symbols; and ever and anon coming out full upon pictures

⁹ Understanding the friend as a fantasm allows the friend's function with respect to the *Biographia's* argument to be read within a Lacanian framework. Fantasy, in Žižek's take on Lacan, 'implies and addresses some non-whole, inconsistent Other—that is to say, it is filling out a void in the Other' (Sublime 74). The friend's letter fills out this void in the Other, understood here as the totalized symbolic order or ideological consistency of the *Biographia*. The friend's letter, in its account of the deduction of the imagination, is precisely what Chapter 13 otherwise lacks: evidence that the deduction exists and a reason for its absence. Even though, or rather precisely because, the deduction of the imagination strikes the friend as an incomprehensible philosophical procedure, the friend's letter becomes a justification for the deduction's removal and it affords the *Biographia* the chance to interpret his reaction so as to actually confirm the missing deduction's philosophical soundness. Thus, the *Biographia* cannot simply be said to fail to achieve its philosophical goal, but rather it shows the necessity of its failure as the positive substance that grounds the ideological consistency it recognizes as reality, a reality/fantasy that veils the trauma of the radical psychic destitution of the Lacanian Real. Naturally, the claim that *Biographia* is in some way a 'failed' project is a contentious one in the numerous studies of the moment in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. What I mean by 'failure' in this paper is two fold. First, the *Biographia* simply fails at the formal level to complete its deduction of the imagination along the line of the argument it has established for itself. Second, the *Biographia's* failure to formally complete the deduction of the imagination suggests that it cannot support its claim to have established the coincidence of subject and object in the act of knowledge—the 'postulate in philosophy' of Chapter 12. Hence it can only support its claim through the absence of its applicability to the deduction.

¹⁰ Bradford Mudge, 'Excited by Trick': Coleridge and the Gothic Imagination.' *The Wordsworth Circle*, 22:3 (1991 Summer): 179-84. Page 182.

and stone-work images of great men, with whose names I was familiar, but which looked upon me with countenances and an expression, the most dissimilar to all I had been in the habit of connection with those names. Those whom I had been taught to venerate as almost super-human in magnitude of intellect, I found perched in little fret-work niches, as grotesque dwarfs; while the grotesques, in my hitherto belief, stood guarding the high altar with all the characters of Apotheosis. In short, what I had supposed substances were thinned away into shadows, while every where shadows were deepened into substances. (BL I 301)

What the friend feels as a result of reading Chapter 13's deduction of the imagination is nothing less than a sensation of terror inspired by the sudden upheaval of his philosophical orientation, an experience which he likens to a disturbing vision in the immense, yet dark space of a Gothic cathedral. In this way, the friend's visionary experience recapitulates the *Biographia's* own autobiographical account of Coleridge's shifting philosophical allegiance from the materialism of David Hartley to the transcendentalism of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling. The ideological consequence of the Gothic transformation experienced by the friend is a transformation of his understanding of the nature of reality itself. The formerly substantial material world of Hartley is now experienced as the ghostly realm of mere appearances; 'shadows' cast by the unreachable thing-in-itself of Kant with echoes of a recuperated and Christianized Platonic idealism. At the same time, the shadow world of Kantian metaphysics, with its emphasis on the noumenal, is an impossible/Real that simultaneously grounds and exceeds experiential reality. In the same way the experience of terror provided by Gothic literature depends upon the supernatural, the friend's terror when supposedly confronted with the *Biographia's* deduction of the imagination becomes a testament to the rhetorical power of its argument. The specifically Gothic setting of the friend's terror provides a generic narrative structure that is, in fact, consistent with the *Biographia's* interest in Kantian metaphysics as the theoretical basis from which it claims to construct its deduction of the imagination.

While the letter from the friend in Chapter 13 is the fantasy frame that assures the ideological consistency of the *Biographia* at the end of its first volume, the friend's quotation from line 169 of Coleridge's 'Christabel,' 'now in glimmer and now in gloom,' acts as a bridge to Chapter 14's practical criticism that begins the second volume. The friend's quotation from 'Christabel' establishes a particular inflection of meaning for the Gothic framework of the friend's terror that is consistent with the *Biographia's* view of the imagination. The meaning of 'Christabel's' Gothicism within the *Biographia's* ideological field, finds its specific point of address in Chapter 14's discussion of 'Christabel' as a poem of the supernatural intended for the *Lyrical Ballads*. Chapter 14 retroactively interprets the Gothic moment of the friend's feelings as a spectacular vindication of Coleridge's poetry and theory.

Likewise, based upon Chapter 13's theory of the imagination, 'Christabel' in its absence from the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* becomes, paradoxically, Coleridge's most successful contribution to the collection. Chapter 14 singles out 'Christabel' as the poem in which Coleridge claims, 'I... have more nearly realized my ideal' (BL I 7). Thus in Chapter 14, the fantasy of the deduction of the imagination becomes the basis in reality of both the *Biographia's* practical criticism and justifies Coleridge's practice as a poet. In this way, the *Biographia* presents a challenge to Wordsworth's ascendancy as both poet and critic in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*.¹¹

In a tacit and belated challenge to Wordsworth's ultimate decision not to include 'Christabel' in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* because of its Gothicism, Chapter 14 positions 'Christabel's' concern with the supernatural as basic to the fundamental operation of the imagination in the experience of poetry. Chapter 14 lists the two goals of poetry that initially inspired the *Lyrical Ballads* as 'the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of the imagination' (BL II 5). In the division of labor between Coleridge and Wordsworth that was to produce the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Chapter 14 locates Coleridge's contribution, of which 'Christabel' was to have been a part, in the form of poems concerning 'incidents and agents [...] supernatural' (BL II 6). Chapter 14's careful definition of the role of the supernatural in the production of the 'poetry of nature' is essential to the *Biographia's* ideological construction of reality insofar as the 'nature' Chapter 13 explores naturalizes the supernatural as the Kantian supersensible of Volume I (BL II 5). The supernatural, for Chapter 14, is the effect of nature-in-its-truth upon human sensation in the very same way the friend's Gothic experience of the deduction of the imagination is both a testament to the Kantian supersensible and a screen for the deduction's absence.

Chapter 14 locates the purpose of 'Christabel' as poem of the supernatural in its charting of a 'transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to produce for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' (BL II 6). Thus, Chapter 14 claims that the effect produced by 'Christabel' is that of a positive or 'poetic faith,' a 'faith' underwritten by the same movement of shadow into substance experienced by the friend. Chapter 14's statement that 'the practicability of combining both [the truth of nature and the imagination]' inheres in the 'accidents of light and shade' echoes the friend's

¹¹ The *Biographia* is able to claim that 'Christabel', far from being a fragment of a Gothic ballad that Wordsworth judged necessary to omit as contrary to the purpose of the *Lyrical Ballads*, is actually the ideal embodiment of the poetry the *Lyrical Ballads* was supposed to include. Similarly, the theoretical claims Wordsworth makes for the poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* are mistaken according to the *Biographia*, 'erroneous in principle, and... contradictory...to other parts of the same preface' (BL II 9-10). In particular Coleridge objects to locating the source of poetry in the 'real language of men.' Coleridge, as we have seen in Chapter 14 locates the nature of poetry in the missing deduction of the imagination that the friend advises him to 'reserve...for your announced treatises on the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity' (BL I 302).

quotation of ‘Christabel’s’ “now in glimmer and now in gloom” (BL II 5). In Chapter 14, the ‘inward human nature’ that lends ‘substance’ to ‘Christabel’s’ supernatural ‘shadows of the imagination’ as an act of poetic faith is a transfer that is structurally equivalent to the ‘semblance of truth’ produced by the Gothic experience in the friend’s letter in Chapter 13. Chapter 14 confirms this by conflating its notion of ‘the nature of poetry’ with Chapter 13’s missing deduction of the imagination, stating that ‘My own conclusions on the nature of poetry... have in part been anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination’ (BL II 15). This passage is followed by a note in the *Collected Coleridge* edition of the *Biographia* that both generously and tellingly observes that ‘Coleridge could hardly refer to the brief remarks at the close of Ch 1 [...] more likely he is referring [...] to the extended discussion he later planned to insert, in what became Ch 13’ (BL II 15 n4). Like the friend’s Gothic experience, Chapter 14’s discussion of ‘Christabel’ and the supernatural elude the discursive construction of meaning to posit an unreachable yet a priori realm of the imagination that functions as the fantasy frame of ideological, that is to say experiential, reality.

As a performance of the Lacanian Real, the missing deduction of the imagination ‘always returns to the same place’ acting as the ground of *Biographia’s* totalizing ideology of ‘Politics, Religion, and Philosophy.’ As a philosophical ground, the deduction of the imagination is paradoxically an absence that structures the effective reality the *Biographia* posits, a shadow that takes on substance only in the friend’s account of its absence. Much like the Gothic character of the imagination in the *Biographia*, the Real is, as Žižek observes, ‘something [...] missed, in a shadow, and dissolved itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature’.¹² While Lacan, and particularly the Marxist emphasis Žižek brings to Lacan, allows for a theoretical framework that articulates the centrality of the Real and the necessity of the fantasy of ideological reality to keep both subject and society from the absolute negativity and psychotic autism of the Real, it is Peacock who first discovers this in Coleridge’s interest in Kantian metaphysics in the *Biographia*. Mr. Flosky observes that his Kantian method is devoted to ‘setting up as its goal some unattainable abstraction [...] to the unspeakable benefit of human intellect. The beauty of this process is [...] that you are perfectly sure of losing your way, and keeping your mind in perfect health, by the perpetual exercise of an interminable quest; and for these reasons I have christened my eldest son Emanuel Kant Flosky’ (67).¹³

From *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 25, Summer 2005. © Contributor

¹² Žižek, *Sublime*, 169.

¹³ Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*, 67.