

## Poems that read themselves

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Schlegel's aphorism, 'the work of criticism is superfluous unless it is itself a work of art', is often taken as a formal announcement of a new Kantian 'age of criticism' in which theory becomes the metagenre that goes beyond both literature and philosophy. Thus, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest, all later prescriptions—we might instance Oscar Wilde's critic as artist, or Roland Barthes' performative 'let the commentary itself be a text!'—repeat the parameters set up at the very beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> If only more critics would follow Schlegel, imagine how much more art there would be. My concern here, however, is not with criticism as art but with the altogether more radical concept of art as criticism, that is, with art that is preoccupied with itself both as an object and as a process of reading. In this perhaps rather curious enterprise, which directly contradicts Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that 'no poem is intended for the reader', I will focus on a number of Romantic texts whose main activity seems to involve the reading of themselves, or, more disturbingly, the inclusion of strategies designed to prevent themselves from being read at all.

My example of a poem that reads itself was first published in *The Examiner* of January 11 1818, to be found between notices that the Queen had been to Bath again, of the state of affairs in New Guinea, and of the current operation of the Poor Laws. The poem is concerned with an act of iconoclasm:

### OZYMANDIAS

I met a Traveller from an antique land,  
Who said, 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone,  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
No thing beside remains. Round the decay

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Absolu littéraire. Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away’.

## GLIRASTES

This is a very complex poem that develops many of the characteristic preoccupations of Romanticism. At some level you could say that its subject is Romanticism itself, to the extent that it begins by setting up a distinction between the present and the ‘antique’, a difference mediated by the traveller who has, as it were, journeyed from the past, the antique land, to the present of the narrator. The effect of this is to allow the poem to have one foot in both, thus itself becoming a metaphor of the two legs that stand in the desert. This contrast between the antique and the present is a standard trope through which many Romantics characterised their situation; what it really does is to historicise Schiller’s dualism of the ‘naive’ and ‘sentimental’ by redefining self-consciousness as history.

At first glance ‘Ozymandias’ might in fact seem to be an example of the naive rather than the sentimental: unusually, for example, the poet himself refrains from expressing any point of view whatsoever. As we now know, even the name of the poet who signs the poem ‘Glirastes’, a curious mimicry of the poem’s title which is also made up of a single name, is a mask that conceals its actual, absent author. With the exception of that important marker word, ‘antique’, the poem begins with perhaps the most banally objective opening possible: ‘I met a traveller from an antique land / Who said...’. Everything is then distanced through the speech of the traveller, whose words comprise the rest of the poem. Even here, at a second remove, the traveller himself appears merely to record dispassionately what he saw. No interpretation is offered. This means that it is left to the reader to do the work of interpreting the poem, of pursuing its implications. But this is not so straightforward for, paradoxically, there are so many interpreters around already.

The traveller does in fact offer some comment in those curious lines in the middle of the sonnet, which, however, are so compacted as to be almost unreadable:

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;

The subject of these lines is a fragment, a fragment of a representation of a face, both shattered and half sunk. Surprisingly, perhaps, something more than the material remnants of the sculpture survives, namely, the result of an act of reading: the sculptor ‘read’ the passions visible on Ozymandias’ face and performed what rather amounts to a gesture of writing than of sculpting, ‘stamping’ or impressing the signs on the stone. Whereas Ozymandias’ enormous statue lies ‘lifeless’ in ruins, and both

the sculptor and Ozymandias are long dead, the sculptor's reading continues to live on, so that the passions of Ozymandias endure through the still discernible writing. These destructive passions, in the ambiguity of the syntax, seem themselves almost to be identified with the stamping which in turn has shattered the statue, as well as rendering the mocking hand and the feeding heart lifeless. The passions thus become as iconoclastic as the poem itself. The traveller's unambiguous comment, in these complicated lines, amounts to the observation that it is the sculptor's act of reading that alone survives intact. Despite the physical degeneration of the statue, the representation persists in its original meaning, still 'tells'. If only the writing survives, what is remarkable is that its original meaning is nevertheless preserved intact. Perhaps this form of representation can be contrasted with literal writing, which the poem then goes on to show does something very different.

So far the poem could be said to be a piece of criticism, concerned to analyse the sculptor's act of reading performed over three thousand years ago. That reading has been reread by the traveller, and judged to be still effective. Short though the poem may be, it does not stop there, but goes on to perform another act of reading, this time not of a representation that has been stamped on lifeless stone but of an inscription that has been carved on the statue's pedestal:

'My name is OZYMANDIAS, Kings of Kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Unlike most inscriptions at the base of statues, here we are given an act of self-naming, and a challenge, attributed to the statue's subject, Ozymandias. But his command, it turns out, has two incompatible meanings.

These meanings are not made apparent this time through an interpretation of the traveller, who makes no comment on the words as such although he is the (unintended but de facto) addressee of Ozymandias' statement. Rather they are brought out about by a juxtaposition of the words with a description of the surroundings in which they can be found. The mediation of words with their context is thus effectively transferred on to the addressee of the traveller's account, that is the narrator of the poem, the 'I' of the opening line who is presumably to be identified with the Glirastes who signs the poem. Glirastes, however, himself or herself effectively transmits the burden of interpretation on to the reader by retelling the story exactly as he or she heard it. If any one of these readers were to consider the inscription historically in the context of its moment of production, without any contemporary mediation and according to its original intention, they could deduce that it meant something like this:

My name is Ozymandias. I am King of Kings—the greatest king of all. Any other king or military ruler who has any pretension to greatness, just look at

my works, the size of my statue, the extent of my cities, armies, etc.— and despair. You will never be as great as I am.

Now this was undoubtedly something like the originally intended meaning of the inscription. It is significant, however, that even that meaning did not work in isolation. The second line is both an imperative and a performative: it requires the reader to look at Ozymandias' works in order to produce the required effect of despair. What the poem demonstrates however is that meanings, like kings, change with the course of history, and that however powerful Ozymandias was, he could not prevent his original statement being put, as a citation or quotation, into a different context—Shelley's poem—with the effect that it now also means something very different.

For the traveller's account ironises the quotation, by putting it within the context of a description of the fragmented statue, and the completely empty desert wastes which surround it. Here we move into the realm of mutability. Ozymandias has been brought down not by any earthly rival but by the sands of time. The poem suggests a great distance between the past when the statue was built and the present, a remoteness enforced by the irony of the Christlike phrase, 'King of Kings'—an irony that is especially strong if we recall that Ozymandias, as Ramses II, was the Pharaoh with whom Moses contended during the Exodus. What is interesting is that Ozymandias' statement continues to work, still produces a meaning, but that that meaning has changed because neither act of reference still refers to the same thing as it did originally. In the context of the traveller's description, the first line— 'My name is Ozymandias'—now merely gives us a name for the absurd sight of two legs standing in the desert, with a broken head half sunk at their feet. The proper name now names an improper body. The second line that assumes an altogether different meaning:

Those of you who are mighty, powerful, present day kings, look on my works—now almost completely destroyed—and despair: for however mighty you are, your earthly achievements will eventually end in nothing—they will decay and disappear into dust. No conqueror, however powerful, can defeat time.

In the context of the traveller's account, this second contemporary meaning has become the more dominant of the two—even if it wasn't the original, intended meaning of the author of the inscription. And, in the context of the poem's publication in 1818 one could go on to discuss the poem's relation to Napoleon, who may well have found himself the addressee of the inscription on the pedestal during the course of his Egyptian campaign, though if he had, he would not (yet) have been able to read it. Given that the Rosetta Stone was only completely deciphered by Champollion in 1821, then strictly this is true of the traveller too—the poem is founded on an impossibility, for in 1818 Thomas Young could only read the proper

names in hieroglyphics. This Napoleonic (im)possibility highlights the paradox that the message to those who are strictly speaking its intended addressees, other kings, has the same effect whether taken in its original or its contemporary meaning. The point would ultimately have been the same for Napoleon whether he despaired at the possibility of ever surpassing Ozymandias' greatness, or at the fall of even the greatest of kings, the form of whose shattered statue uncannily anticipates the guillotined bodies of the French Revolution. But even for Napoleon its two meanings would not have been undecidable.

Contrary to certain deconstructive arguments, therefore, it seems that in this case no reader is at any time faced with an undecidable aporia between the conflicting meanings, for the two are clearly separated by a certain temporality. Time has turned what for Ozymandias was a self-evident truth into a narrative of Socratic irony, which suggests that the distinction with which the poem opens, between the contemporary and the antique, first and foremost marks an identification of Romanticism with history. The poem demonstrates that meaning, like power, is not stable or fixed, and that even power cannot guarantee a tyranny of meaning: although authors may have intentions when they write, once they have written they cannot control and fix the meaning of any reading of what they have written thereafter. This is not so much because the unreliability of language is something intrinsic to language itself but rather because history renders the proper improper as well as ensuring the fall of tyrants. At the same time, although the context can never be fixed it can never be excised either. The poem shows that both meanings require a certain referential act in order to take place. But whereas Hegel would take the fact that the deictics 'here' or 'now' could equally well refer to day or night as an indication of the unreliability of sense certainty, 'Ozymandias' shows the problem to be rather that linguistic meaning is an historical effect.

Interestingly enough, the idea of the ironising of writing through its historicisation is discussed elsewhere in Shelley's writings, and presented (contra Hegel) not as a disadvantage but rather as an overriding strength. In the *Defence of Poetry* (1821), for example, he writes that Dante's

very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to

share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.<sup>2</sup>

Poetry, according to Shelley, partakes of the infinite not so much because it reaches out towards the beyond in a metaphysical impulse of yearning but rather because it can never be made finite in the sense that it can never be contained or reduced to one definite, fixed, or 'correct' reading by its readers. Each generation of readers will read and interpret anew, but the poem can never finally be read.

If 'Ozymandias' is concerned with a succession of acts of reading, the changes of meaning which the poem presents are arbitrary and inadvertent, the effects of history. Except, perhaps, the first act of reading which the poem presents, that of the sculptor: for all the face's enduring meaning the poem also suggests an equivocal intention on the sculptor's part: this is the effect of the use of the word 'mocked' which implies, even before what seems to be its primary meaning of imitation here, an act of derision. The sculptor ridicules Ozymandias by imitating and counterfeiting his passions. Paradoxically, then, while the imitation at one level is almost perfect and repeats its original exactly ('Tell that its sculptor well those passions read') at the same time it is described as an act of mockery, an 'absurdly inadequate representation; a ludicrously or insultingly futile action'.<sup>3</sup> The act of reading has been absolutely accurate, but the act of constituting Ozymandias as a form of writing has opened him up to a different meaning, a form of mockery that is now emphasised by the very fact that the writing has survived—in contrast to the statue on whose base it is written.

Apart from the possibility that any representation will necessarily mock, that is betray, its original, there is also the suggestion here that the sculptor in fact anticipated his sculpture's change of state, that indeed, as the syntax almost suggests, it was his reading of Ozymandias, an annihilating iconoclastic artistic gaze, that was responsible for the latter's downfall. The present ironising simply brings out a potential that had lain concealed there from the very beginning. This coincides with Shelley's description of Dante's poetry as being great because it continues to produce new meanings throughout history which it always seems to have anticipated. Such a process can be thought of in two ways: either it operates inadvertently, as for Ozymandias, whose absolutism is shifted into a relativism by history, or, in the case of the knowing artist, it constitutes part of artistic genius itself. In a discussion of Shakespeare, Schlegel calls the latter possibility 'the irony of irony':

Irony is something one simply cannot play games with. It can have incredibly long-lasting after effects. I have a suspicion that some of the most conscious

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<sup>2</sup> P.B. Shelley, 'Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 500.

<sup>3</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

artists of earlier times are still carrying on ironically, hundreds of years after their deaths, with their most faithful followers and admirers. Shakespeare has so infinitely many depths, subterfuges, and intentions. Shouldn't he also, then, have had the intention of concealing insidious traps in his works to catch the cleverest artists of posterity, to deceive them and make them believe before they realise what they're doing that they are somewhat like Shakespeare themselves? Surely, he must be in this respect as in so many others much more full of intentions than people think.<sup>4</sup>

After all the assaults in the twentieth century on the notion of intentionality, it seems that Schlegel had already foreseen a more radical possibility, that is the ironisation of intentionality, the positing of the possibility that poets are full of intentions, and that these intentions can take the form of concealing insidious traps in their works to catch their cleverest readers.

We could think of the sculptor's representation of Ozymandias as a kind of trap, insofar as he both imitates and mocks his unknowing subject. But the operation of the irony does not stop even there, for the precise reason that the poem is written in the form of a putative dialogue in which we are given no account of the narrator's, Glirastes', response to the traveller's story. For this reason the contrasts that Glirastes sets up remain in play, producing more and more layers—or sparks—of possibilities. For example, the indeterminacy of the name Glirastes, which sounds almost as exotic as Ozymandias, Latin to his Greek, makes the telling of the traveller's tale, and the writing of the poem, altogether indeterminate in terms of time or place, putting it potentially in an altogether different time or place from that of the reader, just as today we are belated in relation to the poem's first readers. More significantly perhaps, although the processes of reading have produced several ironic perspectives on Ozymandias, the poem also presents him in a completely different way by reversing the irony altogether, ironising the position of both Glirastes and the traveller, nobodies who remain totally insignificant in relation to the ruler of three thousand years ago whose name still endures. In spite of the levelling effects of time, they are overwhelmed by him, still dwarfed by his vast legs and face that remain as the 'Colossal Wreck'. Even as a ruin Ozymandias remains a giant, standing astride both his empire and history itself. The difference of scale is suggested by Glirastes' own name, which suggests the Latin *gliris*, meaning a mouse or dormouse (an unreadable in-joke—dormouse was Shelley's pet name for Mary). If a mouse may look at a king, both Glirastes and the traveller are positioned as finite beings faced with a still overwhelming sublimity, in a belated relation to antiquity. Ozymandias' strength, then, is that even as a set of shattered fragments his power still works according to the model of the Burkean sublime, an infinity that produces a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, 'On Incomprehensibility' (1800), in Kathleen Wheeler, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: The Romantic Ironists and Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 37-8.

terror and awe in his insignificant present day observers. A tension is thus set up between the godlike boundlessness of Ozymandias' creative power and the very different endlessness of the historicising and ironising readings that the narrator and traveller bring to bear upon him while being unable even to aspire to his lost divinity. Perhaps at this point the two incompatible meanings of his inscription do in fact become undecidable, for the 'legend', as an earlier manuscript draft describes it, continues to lay claim to his mightiness at the same time as it shows how it has disappeared.

The readings do not, however, stop there. For the very month after Shelley's poem appeared, the following notice can be found in the same newspaper:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE EXAMINER

SIR,—The subject which suggested the beautiful Sonnet, in a late number, signed 'Glirastes', produced also the enclosed from another pen, which, if you deem it worthy of insertion, is at your service. H.S.

OZYMANDIAS

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,  
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws  
The only shadow that the Desert knows:—  
'I am the great OZYMANDIAS' saith the stone,  
'The King of Kings; this mighty City shows  
'The wonders of my hand.'—The City's gone,—  
Naught but the Leg remaining to disclose  
The site of this forgotten Babylon.

We wonder,—and some Hunter may express  
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness  
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,  
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess  
What powerful but unrecorded race  
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.<sup>5</sup>

This poem is by Shelley's friend, Horace 'Horatio' Smith, who in fact wrote it in a contest with him. What is particularly interesting about this second 'Ozymandias', apart from the curious loss of a leg and a face when compared to Shelley's, is the way it rereads or rewrites Shelley's sonnet by emphasising one aspect to be found in the first 'Ozymandias', that is of historical relativity and change. Like Shelley's poem, Smith's sets up a series of readers, both within the poem and even between the two

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<sup>5</sup> *The Examiner*, February 1, 1818. The poem was later reprinted as 'On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below', thus further emphasising its subject to be that of mutability rather than Ozymandias himself.

poems, now revealed as recent compositions. Unlike Shelley's poem, however, this succession involves a structure of repetition in which each reader finds the same unchanging meaning. It is no longer the mighty alone who are called upon to despair: the inscription does not demand a specific addressee. Now the speaker is not Ozymandias himself but simply the surviving piece of stone, and Ozymandias' greatness depends solely on the survival of his city. In the context of its disappearance, every present day reader is invited to see a possible identity between the fate of Ozymandias and his or her own. For Smith's poem suggests that the empire of Britain may also disappear, as indeed it already has, though it is not yet completely unrecorded. If the nineteenth century invented history, as Flaubert claimed, here it is a history as eternal recurrence that has moved out of history into the sublime.

I would like now to contrast the polarised structure achieved through the layering of readings which Shelley's and even Smith's poems set up within themselves as a series of prompts for the reader to continue, with three texts of Coleridge's: 'Kubla Khan', the *Biographia Literaria*, and 'The Ancient Mariner'. In doing so I want to suggest that what we are dealing with amounts to something more than mere depths or parameters discoverable in individual poems. In Coleridge's case, we find not a set of incompatible interpretations but rather a series of barriers to reading. In the first of these, 'Kubla Khan', the Orient, which Schlegel identified with the highest Romanticism, has replaced antiquity as the site of sublimity, but works to a similar effect, except that space takes on the function of time. 'Kubla Khan' has certain obvious connections to the poem of Shelley's that I have been discussing: instead of Ozymandias the Pharaoh, we have the Khan the oriental emperor, also described as the godlike creator of vast works, here centred round a mighty fountain that seems to anticipate Shelley's description of a great poem as 'a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight'. As in 'Ozymandias', the sublimity of the Khan's achievements seems to be predicated on the vulnerability of time and destruction: 'Ancestral voices prophesying war!' But that temporality and mutability is only hinted at, and the poem leaves the Khan's creations intact, shifting suddenly to an analysis of the poet's or speaker's own relation of belatedness to the Khan's creativity: look on his works, ye poets, and despair. Although the poet here is not presented as being as powerless as the speaker in 'Ozymandias', we are nevertheless given only the aspiration, in the conditional tense, rather than the creation itself: 'Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song...'. And it is significant that, at best, the poet yearns only to repeat the Khan's achievements, not to go beyond them. Creativity becomes a question not of originality but of repetition, of mimicry like that of the sculptor in Shelley's poem.

Like 'Ozymandias', the poem involves a process of readings, presenting us with two visions, the first, an unmediated description of Kubla Khan himself, the second, the phantasmatic Abyssinian maid whom the poet once saw. At this point he states his

belatedness in relation to both: if only he could revive the power of the second, he claims, he could recreate the first. This is the situation within the poem, which leaves the reader unpositioned, and therefore apparently at interpretive liberty—a situation which is not as easy at it sounds, for while the meaning of the literal content is relatively clear, it is a good deal harder to establish any meaning beyond that. But in fact the reader is not given the freedom of such straightforward access to the poem-in-itself, for ‘Kubla Khan’ works very differently when it is looked at in full, that is with the title and preface that precedes it. The preface to ‘Kubla Khan’ is perhaps the most famous preface in English Literature, a fact that is not itself without significance, for it has provoked a long history of disputes regarding both its veracity, and the relation of the poem, and Coleridge’s poetry generally, to the consumption of opium. It often seems, in fact, that the poem itself is merely an appendage to the preface. This, in fact, I would like to argue, is exactly what it is designed to do. For the preface mediates the poem for the reader, and adds a characteristically ironic perspective to it, not only reflecting on the circumstances of its composition, but, more significantly, very carefully controlling the way in which we go on to read it. In short, as if the poem itself was not already difficult enough to understand, Coleridge adds a preface that makes it virtually impossible to interpret it at all.

Let us begin by looking at the opening lines:

KUBLA KHAN  
OR, A VISION IN A DREAM. A FRAGMENT.

The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and, as far as the Author’s own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits.<sup>6</sup>

Already we can detect a succession of strategies to complicate any reading: in the first place the title, ‘Kubla Khan’, whose exotic resonance is obviously comparable to that of ‘Ozymandias’ (‘Ramses II’ wouldn’t have quite the same effect), is qualified with a sub-title that immediately insubstantiates and distances him in a comparable way to Ozymandias: ‘or, a vision in a dream’. What, we might ask, is a vision in a dream? A vision is defined first, as something seen in a dream, in which case ‘a vision in a dream’ is a tautology, or perhaps suggests a vision doubly distanced; secondly, as a direct mystical awareness of something supernatural, in which case the fact that it occurred in a dream both mediates and displaces it. If, however, this prepares us for an extraordinary or prophetic revelation, this is again immediately qualified by the announcement that it is ‘a fragment’.

With hindsight, we might be tempted to associate this with the theory of the fragment that was at this time being developed in Germany, whereby the fragment includes the

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<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. E.H. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 295. Further references will be cited as PW.

potential infinite within itself and thus paradoxically achieves both incompleteness and the totality. This theory is best known in the form of the well known Athenaeum definition: 'A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog'—or perhaps, thinking of Glirastes, we should retranslate this as 'complete in itself like a dormouse'.<sup>7</sup> The fragment thus, contrary to its literal meaning as a remainder of a larger whole, works through what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call, no doubt after Freud's 'kettle logic', 'the logic of the hedgehog'. The fragment at once registers its incompleteness because it strives for an unattainable infinity but at the same time, according to the synecdochal logic of organic form, achieves a certain totality and completeness to the extent that it stands for and includes the whole from which is detached. It would be certainly possible to analyse 'Kubla Khan' in these terms.

But Coleridge does not invite such a reading, for although he sets up its possibility in the very emphasis on the poem as a fragment, he goes on to recount the story of the poem's inspiration and original production as a complete artefact, with only its transcription interrupted by the luckless person from Porlock. Thus he suggests that originally there really was more to the poem—another two hundred and fifty lines in fact, that is five times its present length—and that he could simply no longer recollect it, holding out the promise that he may well yet complete the poem one day through a deliberate attempt at composition rather than relying upon further inspiration. Now such a fragment by definition is hard to interpret because we have only been given an arbitrary part of the whole: we can never know how it is supposed to fit. The same is true of 'Christabel', which like 'Kubla Khan', Coleridge left apparently unfinished. Rather than inviting the reader to participate in its reading, the preface thus turns the poem into an event. It then puts the event into a history, distancing the poem by setting it back nearly twenty years as well as forward into an unrealised future. This historicisation leaves the reader in the position of being inexorably after the event very much as in 'Ozymandias'. We are dealing with a lost sublime that will never be made accessible.

By means of the preface, then, the reader of 'Kubla Khan' is explicitly prohibited from following the theoretical structure of the fragment and attempting to satiate its hunger for infinity, while cunningly Coleridge himself is positioned both as the striving poet with which the poem ends and also, potentially, as the successfully creative Kubla Khan with which it begins. The reader is left powerless in relation to the poem which he or she is prevented from completing, in exactly the same situation of belatedness as the traveller and Glirastes stand in relation to Ozymandias. Even the fragment of Coleridge's poem embodies a sublimity which for the reader will remain for ever out of reach. Unwittingly, then, as the reader makes his or her way through the title and the preface, he or she is already falling into a trap which determines the

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<sup>7</sup> F. Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment, 206, in *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 189.

reader's relation to the poem. At this point the logic of the hedgehog begins to comprise not so much the circularity of organic form as the defensive resistance of its bristles, presenting a series of barriers to reading. The reader, we might say, has been spiked.

As if this was not enough, Coleridge then goes on to deny that 'Kubla Khan' is a poem at all. It is only at the prompting of a celebrated poet, apparently Byron in fact, that it is being published at all: the only claim that Coleridge is prepared to make for it is as 'a psychological curiosity'—Coleridge's first use of the word 'psychological' in this sense and only the second example in English altogether (Coleridge also coined the term 'psychoanalytical' in his *Notebook* for 15 September 1805, over fifty years before its first recorded occurrence in the OED). Defined only in terms of a new piece of jargon, 'insolens verbum' as Coleridge describes the word apologetically in the *Discourse on Scientific Method*, the poem is presented as a kind of freak, a hideous progeny for the reader to marvel at, a monstrosity exhibited for scientific but not hermeneutic investigation.

The process does not even stop there. For the author proceeds to disown any responsibility for the poem by describing the curious circumstances of its composition. It was not even so deliberate an act as that: as if, as he puts it, 'that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort'. Coleridge, then, tells us that as conscious agent he took no part in the creation of the poem: it was the effect of a 'slight indisposition', for which 'an anodyne had been prescribed', which brought on 'a profound sleep'. He was not so much its author as merely the agent to whom it was transmitted, or through whom it was repeated: 'On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved'. That process is interrupted, as visions characteristically are in Romantic writing—in this case by the person from Porlock. On returning to his desk after more than an hour, the totality has been reduced to illegible fragments that are emphatically not fragments that contain or point to the lost totality:

[He] found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but alas! without the after restoration of the latter!  
(*PW* 296)

The preface thus leaves both Coleridge and the reader in exactly the same position in relation to a lost totality. What is left is presented as a relic, an entirely arbitrary and random part, not containing the whole, abandoning the reader to the experience of

hungering for its lost completeness—exactly the kind of experience in fact which Coleridge himself describes at the end of the poem—which at one level could be therefore be seen as a poem about reading itself.

We are thus presented with a poem whose structure is reduplicated in advance in its preface, ensuring that the reader is positioned in the same relation to the poem as the poet to Kubla Khan. Through the series of barriers which the preface puts in the way of understanding or interpretation for any reader, the poem becomes a poem whose subject is its own reading; it achieves its effects precisely by the marginal devices through which the poet controls the ways in the poem is read and interpreted. The resulting lost possibility of sublimity leaves the reader with the illusion according to which, as Schlegel puts it, ‘every great work ... knows more than it says, and aspires to more than it knows’.<sup>8</sup>

There could scarcely be a better description than this of the effect of Coleridge’s own *Biographia Literaria*, a wandering work that moves slowly and reluctantly towards its ever promised and ever postponed definitive account of the imagination. At a crucial moment after twelve chapters, as he begins the formal philosophical argument that will lead to the definition of the imagination, Coleridge invokes a reading device which, I would argue, repeats the strategy of ‘Kubla Khan’.

For in Chapter Thirteen, after three pages or so the philosophical discourse suddenly breaks off in mid-sentence. Not this time as a result of the intrusion of a person from Porlock but because, as Coleridge explains, of the sudden appearance of a letter. Its author, a friend whose good judgement Coleridge eulogises at some length, has read the entire philosophical argument which even now Coleridge is in the process of transcribing, and has thus already written. However the letter, which Coleridge reproduces at the very moment in the writing of the book when he allegedly received it, contains a confession that it is too hard for the correspondent to follow: at the level of understanding it leaves him feeling as if he were standing on his head, as though he were Hegel after Marx’s critique, while at the level of his feelings it gives him the sensation as if, having always frequented modern, airy neo-classical chapels he has suddenly been placed all alone for the first time ‘in one of our largest Gothic cathedrals in a gusty moonlight night of autumn’.<sup>9</sup> A sublime experience, it seems, but one that should be deferred for Coleridge’s readers. The problem, apparently, is that the chapter involves both an excess and a lack:

But as for the public, I do not hesitate in advising and urging you to withdraw the Chapter from the present work, and reserve it for your announced treatise on the Logos or communicative intellect in Man and Deity. First, because imperfectly as I understand the present Chapter, I see

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<sup>8</sup> F. Schlegel, ‘On Goethe’s Meister’, in Wheeler, 69.

<sup>9</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), I, 301. Further references will be given as Volume and page number.

clearly that you have done too much, and yet not enough. You have been obliged to omit so many links from the necessity of compression, that what remains looks ... like the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower. Secondly, a still stronger argument (at least one that I am sure will be more forcible with you) is that your readers will have both right and reason to complain of you. This Chapter, which cannot, when it is printed, amount to so little as an hundred pages, will of necessity greatly increase the expense of the work; and every reader who, like myself, is neither prepared nor perhaps calculated for the study of so abstruse a subject so abstrusely treated, will, as I have before hinted, be almost entitled to accuse you of a sort of imposition on him. For who, he might truly observe, could from your title-page, viz. *My Literary Life and Opinions*, published too as introductory to a volume of miscellaneous poems, have anticipated, or even conjectured, a long treatise on ideal Realism, which holds the same relation in abstruseness to Plotinus, as Plotinus does to Plato. It will be well, if already you have not too much of metaphysical disquisition in your work, though as the larger part of the disquisition is historical, it will doubtless be both interesting and instructive to many whose unprepared minds your speculations on the esemplastic power would be utterly unintelligible.

(I, 302-03)

The chapter offers both too little, in terms of comprehension, and too much, in terms of abstruse disquisition and cost, and would thus be unintelligible to the learned and the unprepared alike. It would thus prevent understanding. Its title would mislead. And so, as a consequence of receiving this 'very judicious letter', Coleridge immediately declares,

which produced complete conviction on my mind, I shall content myself for the present with stating the main result of the chapter, which I have reserved for future publication, a detailed prospectus of which the reader will find at the close of the second volume. (I, 304)

Needless to say, such a prospectus cannot be found, and was never published. As Coleridge freely admitted to his publisher, he had in fact written the letter himself, the whole episode of its intrusion into his text 'written', he confessed, 'without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the inkstand'.<sup>10</sup> The result of this persuasive device is that the letter is immediately followed with the extraordinarily opaque definitions of the imagination which literary critics have been arguing over ever since—and probably always will. The fragment that we have seems almost entirely arbitrary, as distant in terms of the argument that allegedly produced it as Ozymandias is in time. After its two short and virtually incomprehensible paragraphs, Coleridge concludes:

Whatever more than this I shall think it fit to declare concerning the powers and privileges of the imagination in the present work will be found in

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<sup>10</sup> Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), IV, 728.

the critical essay on the uses of the supernatural in poetry and the principles that regulate its introduction: which the reader will find prefixed to the poem of *The Ancient Mariner*. (I, 306)

Naturally, the reader finds no such essay.

The effect of this famous interruption, so convincingly presented as an event that breaks into the writing of the book, is to leave the reader in exactly the same position as in 'Kubla Khan': the anticipated vastness and sublimity is generated in the grandiose definition of the imagination, but the reader is left in a position of powerlessness and belatedness in relation to it, for Coleridge is unwilling—supposedly in deference to the reader's understanding and limited purse—to supply the mediating argument by which he arrives at it. To be able to follow his logic would empower his reader and enable him or her to participate or criticise; instead the reader is presented with an unbridgeable gap both in logic and in time, mediated only through the introduction of the letter in the narrative.

Coleridge in fact alludes to a precise description of the operation of this device when his supposed correspondent compares the effect of reading the missing chapter to the experience of not 'making a bull'. Paradoxically the letter itself could be said to 'make a bull'. This strange activity is presented in a footnote much earlier in the book, and consists 'in the bringing together of two incompatible thoughts, with the sensation, but without the sense, of their connection'. The phrase itself, explain the *Biographia's* most recent editors, is derived from the medieval French 'bouler', meaning 'to roll' (as in playing bowls) and later, 'to deceive': 'a "bull" ... is a statement with apparent congruity but with a fundamental incongruity of ideas of which the speaker is presumably unaware. This was particularly the case with "Irish bulls" (e.g. 'He said that it was an inherited trait of his family not to have children')'.<sup>11</sup> The point of making a bull is to give the sensation and effect of two unlike things being brought together without any awareness of their incompatibility, a process which quite clearly has connections with the operation of what the Germans call 'Witz', Freud a joke, or indeed that of metaphor itself. In Coleridge's case it works as an esemplastic device upon the reader, who is made to feel that the beginning and end of the chapter have somehow been joined together, while being left incapable of knowing how it was done or how the stated results of the chapter can be achieved, repeated or verified. At the same time while the reader is left behind powerless, Coleridge's own creativity is implicitly, as at the end of 'Kubla Khan', identified as a form of repetition, this time of God's: 'The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (I, 304).

If we follow Coleridge's advice at the end of this chapter and turn to the 'Ancient Mariner', we find his most complex example of a poem that holds out the

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<sup>11</sup> *Biographia* I, 72.

promise of meaning to tantalise the reader, but which controls his or her reading so as to prevent it from being definitively established. There have been many attempts to interpret this poem, the most famous of which perhaps is still Robert Penn Warren's essay 'A Poem of Pure Imagination' which offers an understanding of the poem in terms of an antithesis between the Mariner's experience of the universe as a heap of little things—symbolised by his arbitrary killing of the bird—and his subsequent discovery through the imagination of the world of harmony and love in the one life of nature.<sup>12</sup>

Penn Warren's reading, which today we might call 'the Green interpretation', is really only an extension of the poem's moral:

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell  
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!  
He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all. (610-617)

But the poem evades its own moral. The moral pretends to sum the poem up, but it isn't really enough—it's too simplistic and excludes too many things, especially the vast, the sublime, nature as terrible and terrorising, the arbitrary, the incomprehensible—and the poem escapes from it as it escapes all interpretations. The moral of the 'Ancient Mariner' does tell us something about what happens in the poem, but most people agree isn't really adequate to it.

Interestingly enough, one of Coleridge's few comments on the poem, about which for the most part he remained tantalisingly silent, concerned the question of the moral:

Mrs Barbauld once told me that she admired the Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in it—it was improbable, and had no moral.

As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or the chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion or the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination.

It ought to have no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up, and says that he must kill the aforesaid

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Penn Warren, 'A Poem of Pure Imagination', in *Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Englewood Cliffs, 1967).

merchant, because one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son.<sup>13</sup>

This is rather different from the 'spirit healed and harmonised / By the benignant touch of Love and Beauty' of the standard critical account that attempts a complicity with the moral. The arbitrariness of the crime and of the justice that is meted out in the Merchant's Tale is uncannily similar to that of the 'Ancient Mariner'; the *Arabian Nights* tale provides the closest analogue that exists to the poem.

It is significant that in discussing the 'Ancient Mariner', Coleridge should point us to a tale which seems to have no meaning—or rather which does have a meaning, after all the genie explains exactly why he is going to kill the merchant, but whose meaning seems to be an arbitrary one, as arbitrary as the act of throwing away a date stone, or the killing of an albatross. Meaning is given, but its relation to the thing it is supposed to be the meaning of is somehow indecipherable, closed up in upon itself; meaning seems as arbitrary as the game of dice between Death and Life-in-Death in which Life-in-Death wins the Ancient Mariner. We seem to be in an analogous relation to meaning as when faced with the arbitrary fragment.

It was this element of arbitrariness that Wordsworth, like many after him, found so disturbing about the poem. Believing, quite fantastically, that the presence of 'The Ancient Mariner' at the beginning of *Lyrical Ballads* 1798 was responsible for the book's poor sales—and doubtless the consequent neglect of his own poems—in the 1800 editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, he put 'The Ancient Mariner' at the back of the book, adding the following note:

The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principle person has no distinct character, either in his profession as mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the controul of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural; secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon; thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other, and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated.<sup>14</sup>

In the light of this, Coleridge's remarks to Mrs Barbauld seem splendidly defiant. But Wordsworth's comments do in fact pinpoint many of our problems with the poem. As Coleridge himself put it elsewhere: 'This riddling tale, to what does it belong?/Is't history? vision? or an idle song?'<sup>15</sup>

Critical accounts of the 1980s have emphasised the extent to which many of the activities described in the poem are presented as a problem of reading and interpretation: the sailors, for example, constantly reinterpret the significance of the albatross, which could be said to constitute an unreadable sign—an albatross that is

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<sup>13</sup> Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Murray, 1852), 86-7.

<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), 276-7.

<sup>15</sup> *PW* 485.

really a signet.<sup>16</sup> Much effort throughout the poem is expended in the attempt to read other putative signs, such as the speck which punningly turns out to be a spectre-bark. Comparable difficulties for the reader include the strange mixture of tenses in the poem, the way consequences often appear before the event—for example:

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea. (298-91)

—as well as the basic question of the Mariner's apparent complete lack of motive for killing the bird. These problems begin with the very first line: 'It is an ancient mariner': for what on earth is the 'it' here? What does it refer to? It's not 'there was' an ancient mariner, but this odd 'it' in the present tense. There's no referent for the 'it'. It remains suspended, in nothingness, giving the entire poem a groundlessness, itself enforced by the word 'ancient', which conjures up a similar resonance to the 'antique' in 'Ozymandias'. The ancient mariner is thus presented as an unknowable thing-like being from the realm of another time and place. The insecurity which the first line produces encapsulates much of the peculiar quality of the poem.

Even the result of the mariner's much vaunted redemption is simply the necessity of endlessly repeating his penance. While the poem escapes its own moral, the Mariner is never in fact freed from his penance, however many times he seems to be redeemed in the story; the telling of his tale seems to leave him free, but then the agony returns—for 'agony' the 1800 edition, interestingly and tellingly, read 'agency'—& he has to tell his tale again and again and again:

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched  
With a woful agony,  
Which forced me to begin my tale  
And then it left me free.

Since then at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns:  
And till my ghastly tale is told,  
This heart within me burns.

I pass, like night, from land to land;  
I have strange power of speech;  
The moment that his face I see,  
I know the man that must hear me:

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<sup>16</sup> See in particular Frances Ferguson, 'Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"', in *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 248-63, and Jerome J. McGann, 'The Ancient Mariner: The Meaning of the Meanings', in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 135-72.

To him my tale I teach.

If this structure of agency and repetition recalls the *Biographia*'s account of imagination, the transmission seems very similar to Geraldine's transference of the 'mark of her shame, and seal of her sorrow' to Christabel, in the poem of that name whose 'Conclusion', we may note parenthetically, seems to have as little to do with the rest of the poem as the moral to the 'Ancient Mariner'.<sup>17</sup> Both 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel', like Shelley's 'Ozymandias', seem to be concerned with some sublime event located irreversibly in the past but whose power still necessitates a repeated telling of its story. Even the Mariner himself has a powerful transmission effect—the very sight of him throws the Pilot into a fit, makes the Pilot-Boy go mad, to say nothing of the effect of his tale on the Wedding-Guest:

He went like one that hath been stunned,  
And is of sense forlorn...

He is, in other words, deprived of meaning, 'of sense forlorn', and left wondering just as the ancient mariner has to keep wandering—the opposite of the moral's lesson, but very much the experience of reading the poem. The events of the poem seem as unintelligible as those of the Arabian Nights tale to which Coleridge compared it.

According to a story he relates in the *Biographia*, Coleridge far from considering the poem too difficult to understand, as Wordsworth feared, in fact thought it was too easy, and so set up still further barriers to comprehension. He recounts an anecdote in which

An amateur performer in verse expressed to a common friend, a strong desire to be introduced to me, but hesitated in accepting my friend's immediate offer, on the score that 'he was, he must acknowledge the author of a confounded severe epigram on my ancient mariner, which had given me great pain'. I assured my friend that if the epigram was a good one, it would only increase my desire to become acquainted with the author, and begg'd to hear it recited: when, to my no less surprise than amusement, it proved to be one which I had myself some time before written and inserted in the Morning Post:

To the Author of 'The Ancient Mariner'  
Your poem must eternal be,  
Dear Sir! it cannot fail,  
For 'tis incomprehensible  
And without head or tail.<sup>18</sup>

The story would be even better if it were true: though Coleridge did publish the lines, he in fact addressed them to Henry James Pye, the poet laureate. But let us take the story seriously as he recounts it and as any unwitting reader of the poem may encounter it in the *Biographia*, that is, seeing the epigram as a serious if witty

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<sup>17</sup> See Richard A. Rand, 'Geraldine', in *Untying the Text*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 280-316.

<sup>18</sup> *Biographia*, I, 28.

comment on the ‘Ancient Mariner’ as Coleridge claims it to be. When he says it is ‘incomprehensible’, in the first instance we take this to mean that it is simply meaningless. Coleridge, as always, has a source, in this instance from Lessing (1796), whose own epigram has been translated thus:

Verses such as Bassus writes  
Will remain eternal:  
For to write such stuff  
There will always be one more bungler left.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, in this account, Bassus’ poetry will be eternal not, as in the description of Dante in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* because the poem will continue to produce new meanings throughout history, but because bad poets will always continue to write bad poetry like Bassus’. Coleridge, by contrast, while repeating the ironic charge that his poem will be eternal, gives its incomprehensibility as the reason: the reader can’t make head or tail of it, just as the missing *Biographia* chapter makes his correspondent feel as though he’s standing on his head. But if we think of the phrase ‘without head or tail’ otherwise, it could mean without beginning or end, even Alpha and Omega, and we may begin to suspect that even the declaration that it is incomprehensible is also a kind of pun, playing on the other meaning of incomprehensible—that which cannot be contained within limits, or the sublime.

Coleridge in fact uses the word ‘incomprehensible’ in this second sense in his earlier poem, the ‘Eolian Harp’. After a long speculation on the relation of God to the world and the individual self, Coleridge thinks of the more simple faith of his wife and reproves himself:

But thy more serious Look a mild Reproof  
Darts, O beloved Woman, and thy words  
Pious and calm check these unhallow’d Thoughts,  
These Shapings of the unregen’rate Soul,  
Bubbles, that glitter as they rise and break  
On vain Philosophy’s aye-babbling Spring...  
Nor may I unblam’d or speak or think of Him  
Th’INCOMPREHENSIBLE! save when with Awe  
I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels,  
Who with his saving Mercies healèd me,  
A sinful and most miserable man,  
Wilder’d and dark... (PW 521, 47-52, 56-61)

Here God is the ‘incomprehensible’—which doesn’t mean that he has no meaning, or that he is meaningless, but that his divine nature is such that we humans cannot comprehend him—mentally grasp him, take him in. God moves in mysterious ways. We who are finite cannot hope to contain the infinite. We therefore should not try to understand him intellectually, Coleridge says, as Herbert had done before him and Hopkins was to after, we should just have faith and feel awe. The force of Coleridge’s

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<sup>19</sup> Idem.

little epigram can now be seen to suggest that his poem, the 'Ancient Mariner', is in fact not so much meaningless, as infinite like God: it has a meaning, but a meaning which is beyond the merely human. The paradoxes are spelt out in the poem known as 'Coeli Enarrant', a title taken from Psalm 19 which asserts that 'The heavens declare the glory of God'. In Coleridge's poem, the declaration takes a rather different form:

The stars that wont to start, as on a chace,  
Mid twinkling insult on Heaven's darken'd face,  
Like a conven'd conspiracy of spies  
Wink at each other with confiding eyes!  
Turn from the portent—all is blank on high,  
No constellations alphabet the sky:  
The Heavens one large Black Letter only shew,  
And as a child beneath its master's blow  
Shrills out at once its task and its affright—  
The groaning world now learns to read aright,  
And with its Voice of Voices cries out, O! (*PW* 486)

Here the shooting stars both insult the darkened face of heaven and tease the earthly reader by offering an illegible omen; without them the heavens are dark, taking the form of a huge black letter 'O' whose reading produces an exclamation indistinguishably of awe and of distress: 'There is neither speech nor language: but their voices are heard among them'. The blank is unending, and at the same time makes up the circular letter which stands for God's infinity.

Similarly the 'Ancient Mariner' is circular but cannot be represented or contained in any way: it partakes of the eternal by being incomprehensible and also by being unending. The poem, as the epigram puts it, has no head or tail in the sense that it has no beginning or end—it just goes on and on as the Mariner compulsively continues to tell his tale. In this way it partakes of a kind of infinity, containing the eternal 'O' within itself, rolled up in a ball like Schlegel's hedgehog, a frame with no centre but an abyssal vastness and sublimity. The effect of this is to put the reader in the same unknowable relation to the poem as in 'Kubla Khan', so that it achieves the state of unrepresentability of the Kantian sublime. The poem becomes all frame with no content; its inside is already its outside and its outside its inside.

At this point we can recall the implied identification that Coleridge sets up between the creativity of the poet and that of God in the *Biographia* in the obscure definition which he gives of the imagination: 'The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'. In this notorious statement, one thing clearly stated is that human creativity is a repetition of the divine, or rather of the 'I AM'—an expression for God which just happens also to contain the acronym of the Ancient Mariner.

The 'Ancient Mariner', then, as with 'Kubla Khan', can be seen to be as incomprehensible and infinite as God himself—and as readers we are obliged to treat it with awe while at the same time being as compelled as the ancient mariner himself to find a meaning for his tale—just as Coleridge himself tries to find a meaning for God the Incomprehensible in the 'Eolian Harp'. For after all in some sense God does ask us to comprehend him intellectually—he does, for example, provide us with a written text and promise that suggests that there is a meaning to existence, and that everything has its place—it is just that for a human it is not always easy to see how, or easy to interpret the words of the Bible. As the long history of hermeneutics from St Augustine, to Spinoza, Schleiermacher and Coleridge himself suggests, the incomprehensible always at some level demands as well as refuses interpretation. And so it is with the 'Ancient Mariner', whose incomprehensibility means that it partakes of a kind of infinity in the sense that it too continues for ever to be given more and different meanings by its readers. But just as God forestalls Coleridge's attempts at understanding in 'The Eolian Harp' and in 'Coeli Enarrant', so too in the 'Ancient Mariner' the wily Coleridge has already anticipated his readers' reaction.

After all, he knows very well that we can't help but try to give a poem a meaning as we read. The more incomprehensible it seems the more somehow we want to fix it, arrest it, to comprehend it, to grasp it, to get our mind round it, to contain it. But if as readers and critics we try to frame the 'Ancient Mariner'—to pin down its effects to a meaning that will never be adequate to it—Coleridge has already got there before us. For though 'The Ancient Mariner' does not have a preface like 'Kubla Khan', its interpretive frame is more comprehensive—the marginal quasi-Biblical Gloss which Coleridge added, significantly enough, in 1817. The Gloss is written by Coleridge himself in the guise of Editor and interpreter of his own poem, a seventeenth century scholar supposedly mediating the interpretive difficulties of a medieval tale, showing that Coleridge too is caught like the Mariner, in an expiation: the salvation of his own poem from unreadability. Once again we are presented with a temporal succession of readings. As Frances Ferguson has argued, the Gloss provides a reading of the poem which is necessarily incomplete.<sup>20</sup> It literally frames the poem, interprets it, but like the poem's moral never entirely coincides with it. While the text itself remains in play, and characteristically refuses definitions and value judgements, the play of the Gloss on the text reverses this and attempts to pin it down: and in a sense therefore repeats all the interpretive criticism of the poem in advance. We could compare this strategy of the unreliable interpretation of the editor with the narrative devices of editors, alternative endings, found manuscripts, letters, multiple narratives and the like which increasingly come to characterise the Gothic novel, creating a similar kind of uncertainty—but also compulsion—in the reader. In such books, as in Coleridge's supernatural poems, the interpreting or framing process has already been begun within the text itself.

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<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, 'Coleridge and the Deluded Reader', 251-3.

At the same time, if the poems effectively read themselves, the status of the author necessarily becomes much more ambiguous: Coleridge's strategy seems to be to present himself as 'myriad-minded', as he admiringly described Shakespeare. In the three Coleridgean texts which I have taken as my examples, he in fact adopts the position of several authors in relation to the same work—the unconscious poet of 'Kubla Khan' as well as the historian who wrote its preface, the author of the letter and of the imagination definition in the *Biographia*, the author of the supposedly medieval poem the 'Ancient Mariner', the editorial author of its Gloss, and the satiric author of the epigram attacking it. In Shelley's poem too, we are, in the space of fourteen lines, given three authors—the traveller, Ozymandias himself, and Glirastes—which, as we have seen, sets the whole significance of the poem into a succession of ironic plays. Contrary to the expressive theory of language which is popularly associated with Romanticism, here the author's original intention and meaning become unknowable to the author himself, or at the very least through an ironic detachment are deliberately obscured from the reader who is forced to negotiate a virtually impenetrable set of obstacles to reading.

Yet even these difficulties seem relatively secure in comparison to a further wrinkle narrated by Borges. He tells of how twenty years after Coleridge published 'Kubla Khan', the first Western translation was published in Paris of a fourteenth-century Persian universal history: *L'Histoire générale* of Rashid-ed-Din. There, Borges remarks, one reads: 'To the East of Shang Tu, Koublaï Khan built a palace, according to a plan that he had seen in a dream and which he had kept in his memory'. Borges comments: 'In the thirteenth century, a Moghul emperor dreams a palace and has it built as in his vision; in the eighteenth century, an English poet, who could not have known that the building was born from a dream, dreams a poem about the palace'.<sup>21</sup> At this point, creativity becomes an even stranger repetition, a loop in time. It seems that while poems read themselves, dreams read each other.

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