

Coleridge and the Fears of Friendship, 1798

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This paper focusses on the slim quarto volume produced by Joseph Johnson in autumn 1798, *Fears in Solitude, written in 1798, during the alarm of an invasion; to which are added France, an Ode, and Frost at Midnight*. My aim is to reconstruct some of the structures of dialogue inside and outside the volume, the correspondences and conversations surrounding and shaping the poems. These poems form, in themselves, part of a public speech act: they construct and defend Coleridge's position in 1798, as he began to reconsider his role as a patriot. 'France: an Ode' was, after all, entitled 'The Recantation' when it was first published in the *Morning Post* on 16 April 1798, and Erdman has shown that here Coleridge was mirroring the oscillations of the editor, Daniel Stuart, as he moved away from sympathy with France. The volume is thus in dialogue with national preoccupations: it also reflects heightened local tensions and patriotic feeling. On a personal level, it intersects with Coleridge's own statements of intent, forming a kind of commentary or companion piece to radical articles such as the January 1798 'Queries', reprinted in the *Morning Post* from the 'Watchman' two years previously:

1. Whether the wealth of the higher classes does not ultimately depend on the labour of the lower classes?
2. Whether the man who has been accustomed to love beef and cleanly raiment, will not have stronger motives to labour than the man who has used himself to exist without either?
3. Whether extreme poverty does not necessarily produce laziness?
4. Whether, therefore, to provide plentifully for the swinish multitude be not feeding the root, the juices from which will spring upward into the branches, and cause the top to flourish?
5. When the root yieldeth insufficient nourishment, whether wise men would not wish to top the tree, in order to make the lower branches thrive?
6. Whether hungry cattle do not leap over bounds?
7. Whether there might not have been suggested modes of employing two hundred millions of money to more beneficial purposes than to the murder of three millions of our fellow-creatures?¹

The reference in the fourth query is drawn directly from *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: 'Learning will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude'.² Coleridge's allusion neatly inverts Burke's own language, as he attempts to demonstrate that feeding and

¹ From the *Morning Post* for 9 January 1798, reprinted and slightly revised from *The Watchman*, no 3; *Essays on His Times*, ed., David V. Erdman, 3. vols. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. III (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), I, 11-12.

² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), 117.

educating the poor will naturally benefit the rich. He treads a thin line, here, between conciliation and opposition, and this is echoed by 'Fears in Solitude', which continues and modifies these ideas of what 'wise men', as in query number 5, may do in order to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the 'murder of three millions of their fellow creatures', whilst, crucially, remaining patriotic.

Fears in Solitude is, clearly, part of a wider literary and ideological discourse, and I want to begin by showing the importance of different sorts of language within the poem itself. I then want to show how, running alongside this public speech act, there is a private dialogue of self-defence, an overlapping narrative of private anxiety. Both Paul Magnuson and Michael John Kooy have demonstrated the dialogic importance of the volume, the multiple voices which may be heard at work within it.³ I want to further this idea by placing these complex public poems in the context of Coleridge's domestic and friendly life at the time, reading them through the unspoken anxieties, fears, and preoccupations of his private relationships in 1797 and 1798.

The volume itself worries at the boundaries of public and private speech: each poem questions the response of the individual poet in the context of wider social engagement, and this questioning is reflected in the very structure of the volume, where the two overtly political poems are answered by the meditative domesticity of 'Frost at Midnight'. The importance of listening and response is immediately foregrounded in 'Fears in Solitude', with its intense attention to types of sound:

A green and silent spot amid the hills!
A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place
No singing skylark ever pois'd himself!

The sound of the skylark, heightened by stillness, becomes identified with the way in which the dreaming poet may find 'religious meanings in the forms of nature'. This sympathetic movement, recalling the epiphany of 'This Lime Tree Bower', is then echoed later in the volume by 'Frost at Midnight', where again the idea of listening in the stillness—that stillness reinforced by the cry of the owlet at the beginning of the poem—is paramount. Yet in 'Fears in Solitude' this divine comprehension is destroyed by the contrasting noise of 'undetermin'd conflict';

What uproar and what strife may now be stirring
This way or that o'er these silent hills—
Invasion, and the thunder and the shout
And all the crash of onset...

³ Paul Magnuson has shown how these poems are part of a 'shared and public discourse'; an ongoing dialogue with both Coleridge's own work and that of Wordsworth; Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp.67-94. Michael John Kooy, also, has pointed out the ways in which its negotiations with concepts of benevolence and self-love are in dialogue with Coleridge's own reading of Butler's sermons; Michael John Kooy, 'Disinterested Patriotism: Bishop Butler, Hazlitt, and Coleridge's Quarto Pamphlet of 1798', *Coleridge Bulletin*, 21, 2003, p.55-65

These two forms of noise are the dramatization of the two forms of speech within the volume, as Coleridge struggles with the idea of two contrasting types of language. The singing skylark, like the redbreast in 'Frost at Midnight', or even the creaking rook which unites Coleridge and Lamb in 'This Lime Tree Bower', becomes identified with an 'eternal language', a divine equivalence of shapes and sounds. The 'thunder and the shout', on the other hand, are linked to the false language of war, the 'dainty terms for fratricide' which conceal true meaning. Language has become separated from thing; words have become

Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
We join no feeling and attach no form!

These dissonant sounds cannot be united into harmony: no intelligible language can emerge, as it does in 'Frost at Midnight'. Although in that poem Coleridge himself cannot interpret the 'lovely shapes and sounds', Hartley, like Charles Lamb in 'This Lime Tree Bower', becomes the translator of the scene. In 'Fears in Solitude', this movement of understanding or translation is denied the poet. Indeed, Coleridge's anxiety here over the separation of word and meaning, theory and practice, calls all acts of understanding into question.⁴ Even the 'sweet words of Christian promise' have become corrupted, muttered and gabbled and perjured:

O blasphemous! the book of life is made
A superstitious instrument, on which
We gabble o'er the oaths we mean to break...

The insistent emphasis on blasphemy and perjury recalls the repeated references in 'France: An Ode' to 'blasphemy's loud scream'; 'factious blasphemy's obscener slaves'. Particularly striking is the use of the owlet image here—

Forth from his dark and lonely hiding-place
(Portentous sight!) the owlet, ATHEISM,
Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,
Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,
And hooting at the glorious Sun in Heaven,

⁴ As Olivia Smith and Tim Fulford have pointed out, this specifically connects with Horne Tooke's interest in language as a public form of expression, open to abuse. Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp.210-216; Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 22. Tooke's insistence on the political importance of etymology rests on the way in which he sees it leading, as he explains in *The Diversions of Purley* (1798 and 1805), 'to a clear understanding of the words we use in discourse. For, as far as we 'know not our own meaning,' as far as 'our purposes are not endowed with words to make them known;' so far we gabble like things most brutish.' (*Diversions*; 2, 121) Coleridge mirrors Tooke's emphasis on ways of speaking, gabbling, muttering, preaching, pleading and lying, and similarly explores the fault-lines between public and private discourse, the natural symbolic language of the secluded dell versus the falsehoods of the 'college and wharf, council and justice-court'.

Cries out, “Where is it?”

In direct opposition to the skylark, singing ‘like an angel in the clouds’, the hoot of the owlet mocks the divine language of nature—again, we return to these two different sounds, representative of two different types of language, one clear, natural and sincere, the other a hypocritical obscuring of the truth. This collision of discourses is mirrored in the uneasy rhetoric of the poem itself, which presents no clear idea of how to deal with the immediate problem of war. Instead, Coleridge emphasises the importance of domestic, private affection as a way of overcoming this symbolic and linguistic confusion, and, simultaneously, of emphasizing his own patriotism. At the close of ‘Fears in Solitude’, Coleridge returns to his ‘beloved Stowey’, ‘my own lowly cottage, where my babe/ And my babe’s mother dwell in peace’, and this return is emphasised by placing ‘Frost at Midnight’, the earlier poem chronologically, at the close of the volume, so that a vision of domestic harmony is superimposed upon the rhetorical confusions of ‘Fears in Solitude’.⁵ And yet even ‘Frost at Midnight’ betrays concern over the intelligibility of natural language: in particular, the presence of the owlet in ‘Fears in Solitude’ introduces a troubling element to our reading of the first lines of ‘Frost at Midnight’: ‘The owlet’s cry/ Came loud—and hark, again! Loud as before’, reinforced by the way in which the ‘extreme silentness’ ‘disturbs and vexes meditation’. Even within the private, domestic sphere, anxieties over understanding may creep in.⁶

Why, in particular, is Coleridge so exercised by these fears of correct interpretation, listening and response in 1798? In part, it stems from an anxiety over how his own actions might be viewed: his struggle with public and private discourse forms part of that ongoing oscillation between self and society, retreat and engagement, which characterises poems such as ‘The Eolian Harp’ and ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement’. On the one hand, his Stowey move signalled his faith in the reforming power of the domestic ideal. Refuting Godwin, Coleridge maintained that personal affection could unlock universal benevolence, thus investing the language of private, domestic attachment with political force. Yet, simultaneously, his move might also have been seen as a withdrawal from political engagement: as critics such as James Chandler argue, Coleridge’s early insistence on domestic retreat, and the language of familial affection he uses to describe it, might offer ‘proof of

⁵ This characteristically Coleridgean movement may also be seen in his song to Domestic Peace in *The Fall of Robespierre*, reprinted in the 1796 and 1797 editions of *Poems on Various Subjects*, where the image of the peaceful ‘cottage vale’, ringing only with the sound of ‘Sabbath bells’, is set against ‘the rebel’s noisy hate’. Ironically, we may also detect, in the background of *The Fall of Robespierre*, the growing domestic dissension between Coleridge and Southey, as their views of Pantisocracy began, slowly, to diverge. *Poetical Works III, Part I, Plays*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), III, 22

⁶ As Peter Larkin has pointed out, the dell of ‘Fears in Solitude’ is itself a contested site, a scene of ambivalence, and so too is the domestic space of ‘Frost at Midnight’ when it is read as part of the larger volume. Peter Larkin, “‘Fears in Solitude’: Reading (from) the Dell”, *The Wordsworth Circle* 22, 1991, pp.11-14

his covert acceptance of Burkean conservatism'.⁷ This ambiguity meant that Coleridge's own domestic relationships took on immense symbolic significance: the private language of the 'lowly cottage' bore a weight of political intent.

This anxiety was fuelled by a particular instance of misinterpretation within this charged domestic space: a quarrel which centred around particular words, and the way in which they had been deployed in Coleridge's friendship circle. The immediate provocation for this quarrel was the publication of *Edmund Oliver* by Coleridge's former tutee, Charles Lloyd. Like Coleridge, Lloyd had been an enthusiastic early reader of *Political Justice*, but had gradually become disillusioned with Godwin, coming to believe that what he termed 'the pure ardour of universal benevolence' could only be distilled through private attachment, namely, his domestication with Coleridge.⁸ He had met Coleridge when he was visiting Birmingham to drum up support for the *Watchman*, and by September 1796, was living with the Coleridges in Nether Stowey, paying £80 a year for board, lodging and tutoring.⁹

Coleridge introduced Lloyd to Charles Lamb, and the second edition of *Poems On Various Subjects* was made up of contributions from all three, dedicating their work to one another, writing poems of friendship, conversation and sympathetic response. Graeme Stones wonderfully describes their friendship as 'a shrunken, Stow-ic form of pantisocracy'.¹⁰ Yet, by mid-1797, when the collaborative volume actually appeared, the creative community which it celebrated had already broken down. The tutoring scheme had collapsed, after Lloyd began to suffer fits, nightmares, and depression: he had to leave Nether Stowey in early summer 1797, to be treated by Erasmus Darwin. At the same time, Coleridge, as he grew closer to Wordsworth, was withdrawing from Lamb, letting letters and poems go unanswered. A direct rebuff of their friendship, and their collaborative creativity, came in November 1797, when Coleridge published his 'Nehemiah Higginbottom' sonnets in the *Monthly Magazine*, mocking the simplicity of their early poetry, along with that of Southey, and dissociating himself from their work. Lloyd responded with *Edmund Oliver*, published in April 1798, which offered his own version of the friendship with Coleridge, his own response to Coleridgean language. The novel uses incidents drawn from Coleridge's own life, probably passed on by Southey, and transfers them onto the autobiographical Lloyd figure in the text. Although the intent of the novel is not parodic, Coleridge saw it as a direct attack: 'calumny and ingratitude from

⁷ Chandler, James, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and the Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984); this view connects with Marilyn Butler's account of Coleridge 'the reactionary' in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981)

⁸ Coleridge told John Prior Estlin: 'His Joy, & gratitude to heaven for the circumstances of his domestication with me, I can scarcely describe to you'; *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), I, 245.

⁹ 'The original arrangement was that Charles was to pay £80 a year in return for board, lodging, instruction, and the companionship of his friend and mentor', from E. V. Lucas, *Charles Lamb and the Lloyds*, (1898), 20

¹⁰ Graeme Stones, 'Charles Lloyd and *Edmund Oliver*: A Demonology', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 95, 1996, p. 111

men who have been fostered in the bosom of my confidence!'.¹¹

His letter of response, in early May 1798, is a masterly piece of self-justification and excuse. Coleridge, himself accused of disloyalty, turns this accusation against Lamb and Lloyd:

I have been unfortunate in my connections. Both you & Lloyd became acquainted with me at a season when your minds were far from being in a composed or natural state & you clothed my image with a suit of notions & feelings which could belong to nothing human. *You* are restored to comparative saneness, & are merely wondering what has become of the Coleridge with whom you were so passionately in love. Charles Lloyd's mind has only changed its disease, & he is now arraying his ci-devant angel in a flaming Sanbenito—the whole ground of the garment a dark brimstone & plenty of little Devils flourished out in black. O me! Lamb, 'even in laughter the heart is sad'—¹²

As in 'Fears in Solitude', we see in this extract an emphasis on ways of interpreting: the angelic vision Lloyd had previously entertained of Coleridge is set against his new appearance in 'a flaming Sanbenito'. The words of Proverbs 14, 'even in laughter the heart is sad' further refute this devilish image. Proverbs 14 deals particularly with the nature of fools and false witnesses: the citation carries an implied rebuke. Lloyd's wrongness is further demonstrated by the incontinence of his language, his inability to read Coleridge's true nature: significantly, Lamb is urged to read Coleridge's letters as a means to direct his own friendship with Lloyd:

My kindness, my affectionateness, *he* deems wheedling, but if after reading all my letters to yourself and him you can suppose him wise in his treatment and correct in his accusations of me, you think worse of human nature than poor human nature, bad as it is, deserves to be thought of...

So great was Coleridge's desire to have his words witnessed and read properly that he employed Dorothy Wordsworth to make a copy of the letter. His fear of misinterpretation here looks back to the way in which word and emotion become dangerously separated in 'Fears in Solitude'. It also finds a parallel in the poetry of Lamb and Lloyd, particularly their collaborative volume, *Blank Verse*, published in May 1798, itself a reproach to Coleridge for having separated himself from his former friend. Pointedly, it is dedicated to Southey, another outcast from the Coleridge circle.

Whilst paying homage to Coleridgean ideas, such as the 'godlike' Pantisocratic scheme, *Blank Verse* insistently returns to the failure of friendship

¹¹ Letter to John Prior Estlin, May 14 1798; Griggs, I, 245

¹² Griggs, I, 243

ideals, or words of friendship, railing against, as Lloyd puts it in a poem of August 1797:

Hollow friends,
Ye worldly ones, on whose unfaithful lip
The vacant smile sits ever...

Like Coleridge, Lamb and Lloyd distinguish between two types of discourse, public hypocrisy and abstraction versus a private figurative language, but they reveal an increased anxiety over means of understanding and communicating this. Their figures in solitude are usually solitaries, as in Lamb's 'The Old Familiar Faces', shut off not only from nature, but also from friendship, unable to find refuge in affection.

In particular, the closing poem of *Blank Verse*, 'Lines composed at Midnight', written by Lamb in late 1797 or early 1798, deserves to be read alongside *Fears in Solitude*. Similarly, Lamb's poem opens with a solitary half-sleeping narrator: again, we have a distinct emphasis on hearing, listening and responding. Here, however, there is a 'total...privation of all sounds': no skylark, and no chance to find 'religious meanings in the forms of nature':

From broken visions of perturbed rest
I wake, and start, and fear to sleep again.
How total a privation of all sounds,
Sights, and familiar objects, man, bird, beast,
Herb, tree, or flow'r, and prodigal light of heav'n!
'Twere some relief to catch the drowsy cry
Of the mechanic watchman, or the noise
Of revel, reeling home from midnight cups.

It is significant that not even the 'light of heav'n' falls on this poet: unlike the Lamb figure of 'This Lime Tree Bower' he is cut off not only from nature but also from God, until even the dissonant noise of the watchman seems a relief. Running alongside this inability to escape the self is an emphasis on religious bigotry and hypocrisy. Mirroring Coleridge's denunciation of false preachers in 'Fears in Solitude', Lamb attacks those who corrupt the 'gospel's serious truths'. But in Lamb's version it is, significantly, not preachers who are at fault, but 'the man of parts/ Poet, or prose declaimer,' dreamily lolling on his couch, fabricating his own religious vision without affection for 'kindred or companions'. Lamb is picking up Coleridge's anxiety over the misuse of language, but here, both public and private discourse seem equally suffocating. There can be no visionary movement of empathy or understanding, as in the close of 'Fears in Solitude', or 'Frost at Midnight', or even 'This Lime Tree Bower'.

This implicit questioning of Coleridge's position is perhaps underlined by that transference of false words onto the half-sleeping 'poet, or prose

declaimer’—an idea which becomes clearer when we consider a list of satirical enquiries sent by Lloyd and Lamb to Coleridge in late May 1798, in response to his letter. They pick up the concept of the ‘angel’—‘he is now arraying his *ci-devant* angel in a flaming Sanbenito’—and use it in a sharp attack on Coleridge’s religious discourse. Whilst Coleridge is in Germany, Lamb asks him to ascertain:

1. Whether God loves a lying Angel better than a true Man?
2. Whether the archangel Uriel could affirm an untruth? & if he could, whether he would?
3. Whether Honesty be an angelic virtue?

Particularly cutting is his seventh query:

Whether the Vision Beatific be anything more or less than a perpetual representment to each individual Angel of his own present attainments and future capabilities, somehow in the manner of mortal looking-glasses, reflecting a perpetual complacency, & self-satisfaction?¹³

Through the translating medium of Hartley or Charles Lamb, Coleridge had imagined a private symbolic language; now, picking up on the idea of an ‘echo or mirror’ in ‘Frost at Midnight’, Lamb himself suggests that this is no more than a ‘mortal looking-glass’, the reflection of his own egotism. Simultaneously, these questions intersect with those earlier political queries published in the *Morning Post*, so that Coleridge’s political oscillations seem to find an equivalent in the patterns of recantation and self-justification in his friendships. In one movement, Lamb and Lloyd attack Coleridge’s public discourse, his attempt to ‘christianize’ a wider radical audience, and simultaneously criticise his private discourse of domestic affection.

Possibly, therefore, those fears over public misinterpretation and misunderstanding evident in *Fears in Solitude* may have been fuelled by a particular, private anxiety, as Lamb and Lloyd attacked Coleridge’s own discourse of friendship, suggesting he himself had been guilty of that hypocritical separation of word and thing, theory and practice. The theses marked a definitive breach of the friendship; although, after a two year silence, Coleridge resumed his friendship with Lamb, he never forgave Lloyd. Perhaps, considering those poetic dialogues of *Fears in Solitude*, we should also consider the simultaneous dialogues of conflict and anxiety in friendship.

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¹³ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., 3 vols. (Cornell University Press, 1975) I, 128.