

Return to Sender, Address Unknown?—
The Self-conscious Nature of the Address in
France: An Ode and Constancy to an Ideal Object

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I would make a pilgrimage to the burning sands of Arabia, or &c &c [.] to find the man who could explain to me [how] there can be oneness, there being infinite Perceptions—yet there must be a *oneness*, not an intense Union but an Absolute Unity, for &c—¹

In this notebook entry of November 1799, Coleridge seeks to find someone else to explain the idea of inexplicable oneness to him. The desire to delegate the responsibility of answering this question can also be conferred from the fact that ‘The Recluse’ was originally to be written by Wordsworth, as the book on language was to be written by Godwin - according to a Coleridge letter of 1800.² And so it is that Coleridge calls out for others in order to come to terms with this his own self-conscious preoccupations. Accordingly, the English ode seems to be a genre that suited Coleridge’s needs: a genre whose chief characteristic is a calling out for an ideal or object and, accordingly, a dominant self-reflexive tone.

This paper will investigate the nature of the address in *France: An Ode and Constancy to an Ideal Object*. I shall posit that the purpose of the address is either to establish a relationship with the Other, thus providing an idealist escape from subjectivity, or as an indication of a form of radical interiorization or solipsism. The central mark of the address—the apostrophe—serves then, no stable function; it merely thematises referentiality. Hence, when the address constitutes a clear reference to the world outside it is *constative*, but when it conveys various possible references inside or outside the text it is *performative*.³

The address of ‘Liberty’ in *France: An Ode* performs a process of gradual disillusionment with liberty as it denies its readers the possibility to read liberty in a constative way with reference to the French Revolution. Hence, a constative reading becomes increasingly obsolete in this poem as, through the course of the poem, liberty is reduced to nothing more than a hollow name: ‘In mad game/ They burst their manacles and *wear the name/ Of freedom*, graven on a heavier chain!’ (ll. 86-88).⁴ The irony of the poem lies in the fact that such criticism—such as that found in Coleridge’s sonnet about Pitt ‘who with proud words of dear lov’d Freedom came!’ (l. 5)⁵, could be equally applied to the

¹ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, (New York, 1957), 1, 556.

² Letter to William Godwin 22 Sept. 1800, in: *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, (Oxford, 1966) 1, 351-53, 352.

³ Cf. Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism*, (Stanford, California, 2003), 1-21.

⁴ ‘France: An Ode’ in: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works I (Part 1)*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, (Princeton, New Jersey, 2001), xvi, 174 - 76. My italics.

⁵ ‘Sonnets on Eminent Characters Nos 1-11’, in: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works I (Part 1)*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, (Princeton, New Jersey, 2001), xvi, 89-99.

speaker himself, who admits in the ode: 'O Liberty! with profitless endeavour/ Have I pursued thee, many a weary hour' (ll. 89 f.). Coleridge laments his private failure as much as the political 'failure' of the French Revolution. His commitment to the French Revolution proves to be slavish in hindsight; he is one of the 'slaves by their compulsion' (l. 86) lacking critical, and independent thought.

The tension between the initial idea, 'the spirit of divinest liberty' (l. 21) the speaker worships, and the hollow name of liberty is enhanced in the ode through both its generic and historical context. The Pindaric Ode in ancient Greece was always performed in public with music and dance as equal components; its characteristics in *France: An Ode* become discernable by the regular form of each stanza (an acknowledged Pindaric criteria since Congreve 1706).⁶ The stanzas follow the strict argumentative pattern of the Pindaric ode, namely strophe, antistrophe, epode, strophe, antistrophe, which can roughly be conferred from the synopsis of the poem. Coleridge added this outline of the argumentative arrangement of the stanzas to the beginning of the poem when it was reprinted in 1802.⁷ There seems to be no other reason why the first stanza in *France: An Ode* should be read as an 'introductory epode'⁸, as Curran suggests, than to evade an antistrophe as the conclusion of the poem due to the uneven number of stanzas – a question to which I shall return later. Moreover, the Pindaric form entails a ceremonial, public 'illocutionary force' to employ the terminology of Austin and Searl's speech act theory.⁹ 'Illocution' accounts for the force of the spoken word, whereas the locution designates the spoken word itself.

France: An Ode conveys an intrinsic contrast between the spiritual, inner illocutionary force, and the ceremonial, public one—typical of the Pindaric Ode. Although the vocabulary in this poem is remarkably secular, even military in comparison to *Fears in Solitude*, the biblical allusion to misguided worship, similar to that of the golden calf, is evoked in the end of the first stanza:

Bear witness for me, wheresoe'r ye be,
With what deep worship I have still ador'd
The spirit of divinest Liberty. (ll. 19-21)

The biblical implications are further elaborated at the beginning of the third stanza: 'tho' blasphemy's loud scream/ With that sweet Pæans of deliv'rance strove!' (ll. 43-44). On the other hand, the public illocution becomes mainly a political one. First published in the *Morning Post*, on 16 April 1798 (under the title, *The Recantation: An Ode*), the poem represents Coleridge's response to the

⁶ *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1993), 856.

⁷ Cf. *Romanticism An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, (Oxford, 2004), 463.

⁸ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, (New York, Oxford, 1986), 74.

⁹ Cf. Esterhammer, *Romantic Performative*, 1-21.

suppression of the Swiss cantons by the French government, which was the first time that the French government betrayed the principles of the Revolution.

The self-reflexive implications of *France: An Ode* emerges more clearly by way of contrast with Collins' *Ode to Liberty*. Collins' poem seems merely self-reflexive because the poet questions his own ability to express his topic adequately: 'How may the poet now unfold/ What never tongue or numbers told?' (ll. 113 ff.).¹⁰ Besides that, the constative significance of liberty remains unchallenged in Collins' ode as liberty is clearly allegorised at the end of the poem:

Our youths, enamour'd of the fair,
Play with the tangles of her hair
Till in one loud applauding sound
The Nations shout to her around,
How supremely art thou blest
Thou, Lady, thou shalt rule the West! (ll. 139-44).

By contrast, the constative meaning of liberty and freedom in *France: An Ode* is dismissed in the final stanza.

In mad game
They burst their manacles and *wear the name*
Of Freedom, graven on a heavier chain! (ll. 86-88, my italics)

The constative meaning of liberty is lost here, in so far, as the word 'Liberty' seems no longer to reference the political ideal of liberty for the masses in the French Revolution. Due the betrayal of the ideal of 'Liberty' by the Revolutionaries, the word liberty thus loses its point of reference in the real world; and so the French Revolution entails a sacrilege against 'Liberty', through which liberty and freedom are rendered equally arbitrary as any 'name' or signifier. Indeed, 'Liberty' and 'Freedom' in the last stanza of *France: An Ode* become completely illusive ideals that are, strictly seen, unattainable both in cognitive and linguistic terms, as the ideal of 'Freedom' can only be *felt*:

Yes, while I stood and gazed, my temples bare,
And shot my being through earth, sea and air,
Possessing all things with intensest love,
O Liberty! My spirit felt thee there. (ll. 101-5)

Ideal 'Liberty', indeed, "the divinest Liberty" (l. 21) as opposed to liberty as a hollow signifier can only be gazed upon in nature through a moment of sublime insight when one's own 'being is shot through earth, sea and air' (ll.

¹⁰ William Collins, 'Ode to Liberty', in: *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, (Oxford, 2004), 374-76.

103). In such sublime moments, the antithesis between interior and exterior is abolished, as inner being dissolves into external nature. As a result of this unity in which the outer being is no longer demarcated from the inner one 'the spirit of liberty' (l. 21) the ideal is fleshed out by nature. And so it is that liberty is no longer a hollow name, but can be addressed freely without the danger of targeting merely the shadow of the substance: 'O LIBERTY! My spirit felt thee there.' (l. 105). Nature is rendered into a medium; indeed the only medium through which ideal 'Liberty', which is a manifestation of the divine, becomes accessible for the human mind. Thus nature is the only solution in the face of the lamented insight in *France: An Ode* that ideal Liberty lies ontologically beyond the scope of any finite means of representation.

In nature, the difference between the signifier and signified, between liberty and the ideal of 'Liberty' is abolished in a way that calls to mind Wordsworth's manifesto in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, that 'the best part of language is originally derived' from the best objects of nature.¹¹ This does not come as a surprise considering the fact that the 'Preface' is, to a certain extent, the result of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's collaboration. The end of *France: An Ode* points back to its beginning. Firstly, the apostrophe addresses nature—'Ye clouds' (l. 1), 'Ye Ocean Waves!' (l. 3), 'Ye Woods!' (l. 6) and 'Thou rising sun' (l. 17)—and 'Liberty' as derived from nature in the last stanza, 'O Liberty' (l. 105). Hence, the voice calls out for nature and 'Liberty' interchangeably, whereas France with the constative reference to the nation is addressed only once, and even then, in the form of a rebuke: 'O France, that mockest Heaven, adulterous, blind,/ A patriot only in pernicious toils' (ll. 78 ff.). The argument of *France: An Ode*, according to Esterhammer, belongs in the context of the 1790s debate over the natural rights: whether natural rights precede or else depend on the forms of social order, and whether they are created, confirmed, or restricted by declarations and constitutions.¹² More specifically, Coleridge's ode engages in the linguistic aspect of this debate in an attempt to derive 'Liberty' from nature in the face of the painful awareness that freedom, as a word, may be just another arbitrary signifier. The poem has no conclusion to this dilemma. The Pindaric Ode ends with an antistrophe. Due to this formal incompleteness *France: An Ode* may be called a fragment.

As Stuart Curran states, the radical internalisation of the ode by which Collins and Gray realign the traditional form and by which it attains its fullest development among the Romantics, does not so much alter the nature of the ode as explore implications present—those traditions traced from Milton and Ben Johnson.¹³ The following lines from Ben Johnson's Pindaric Ode *To the Immortall Memorie, and Friendship of That Noble Paire, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison* would undeniably confirm such a view:

¹¹ 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in: *William Wordsworth: The Major Works including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill, (Oxford, 2000), 595-615, 597.

¹² Cf. Esterhammer, *Romantic Performative*, 150.

¹³ Cf. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 66.

He [Morison] leaped the present age,
 Possessed with holy rage,
 To see that bright eternal day;
 Of which we priest and poets say
 Such truths, as we expect for happy men,
 And there he lives with memory; and *Ben* (ll. 79-84).¹⁴

However, as I would like to show in *Constancy to an Ideal Object*,¹⁵ Coleridge reifies the self-reflexive nature of the ode, particularly, if we follow the nature of the address in this poem.

By addressing the 'yearning thought' Coleridge subverts the usual procedure of the apostrophe to refer to a specific idea, deity or object. For the subsequent question, 'that liv'st but in the brain?' (l. 4), stands as a pure rhetorical question and so demands confirmation. The poem thematises the loss of such a point of reference to which the poet could call out. This yearning for some unspecified Other points towards a love poem. However Coleridge's ode never refers explicitly either to love, or to Sara Hutchinson, the woman he was in love with at the time. Susan Wolfson reads the poems as a 'yearning for a correspondence in the figures of poetry';¹⁶ in other words, the loss of tenor for vehicle. Indeed, the particular form of constancy is to an 'ideal object'. In Chapter 12 in the *Biographia*, the *ideal* object stands opposed to any ordinary object, which 'can exist only as antithesis [between subject and object]'¹⁷, and therefore would exist independently from the subject in terms of 'immediate and original truth' (BL 265). To quote from Chapter 12,

Such a principle cannot be any THING or OBJECT. Each thing is what it is in consequence of some other thing. An infinite, independent thing, is no less a contradiction, than an infinite circle or a sideless triangle. Besides a thing is that, which is capable of being an object of which itself is not the sole percipient. (BL 271).

Constancy to an Ideal Object seems to perform such 'an infinite, independent thing' in the first lines up to line nine. Hence, the *ideal* object poses the paradox that it cannot exist without a subject perceiving it; indeed, it exists only *because* of the perceiving subject (in and through this subject). Such an endeavour would demand the subjugation of subjectivity or complete self-annihilation. Thus, 'you' becomes omnipresent up to line nine, but the figure, the *ideal* object, remains indefinite due to the absence of any perceiving 'I'. The poem voices utter desperation over this lack of orientation for the *speaking*

¹⁴ Ben Johnson, 'To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir Henry Morison', in: *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy, (New York, London, 1996), 305-7.

¹⁵ 'Constancy to an Ideal Object' in: *The Collected Words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works I (Part 1)*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, (Princeton, New Jersey, 2001), xvi, 375.

¹⁶ Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism*, (Stanford, California, 1997), 94.

¹⁷ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life*, eds. James Engell, Walter Jackson Bate, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1983), II, 273. Further reference will be indicated as 'BL pp'.

subject, for, as Mary Shelley writes in *Frankenstein*, 'nothing contributes so much to tranquilize the mind as a steady purpose,—a point on which the soul may fix the intellectual eye' (p. 8).¹⁸ In Coleridge's *Constancy*, both 'Hope and Despair' have lost their temporal co-ordinates, for they 'meet in the porch of Death' (l. 10). Self-suppression of the 'I' leads to *eternal* depression. Desperation can barely go further.

In line 11, the 'I' can, however, no longer be suppressed: 'Yet, still thou haunt'st me'. Here, the 'me' is, of course, the self-reflexive declination of the first person pronoun: the 'I' that has rendered itself object to its own thinking. These lines equal the Cartesian discovery of subjectivity, the insight that even in the furthest degree of doubt we cannot doubt that we, as thinking subjects, are the origin of doubt. The poem leaves open what the 'fond thought' is, but I may speculate that it is the thought of the 'thou' to which the 'I' such as Mary Shelley's intellectual 'eye' longs to attach itself, because it *MUST* in order to justify its own ontology. However, the chiasmus 'She is not thou, and only thou art she' suggests something otherwise. The 'I' cannot relate to the thou yet. The chiasmus 'She is not thou, and only thou art she' is a self-reflexive process by its own right to which the 'I' has no access. The 'I' longs to call out for the 'Thou', but cannot do so yet because the unknown parameter 'she' stands between the 'I' and 'Thou'. 'She' is still a thought, which by its nature of abstraction prevents the direct relation between 'I' and the Other or 'Thou'. Even if the 'I' wanted to relate directly to the Other, the chiasmus performs that the limitations of subjectivity and the impossibility to become identical with the Other. All the speaker will ever attain is the thought of the fond Other, but never the fond Other itself.

The reiteration 'Still, still' (l. 13) indicates that the *I* holds onto something although it might be in vain. Moreover 'still' introduces the paradoxical image of persistent movement and stasis as inherent in the endless circuitous movement of self-conscious thinking. Simultaneously, it marks the transition to the voice's calling for help. Something is about to happen. The speaker is desperate for someone to listen to him: 'With answering look a ready ear to lend' (ll. 15). The simile, 'as though'—a device of remoteness — indicates that the unspecific 'some', but 'dear *embodied* Good,/ some living love' (ll. 12-13) is inaccessible. Only in the moment, when the dialectical relation between 'I' and 'thou', (as opposed to 'I' and 'she is not thou, and only thou art she'), is restored, can the speaker give utterance to his mourning and be recompensed with 'the meed of all my toys' (l. 17). The 'Thou' thus brings about the restoration of the 'I' within the parameters of subject and object, and so the poem descends from the reified level of self-reflexive thinking to 'An English home and thee [the loveliest friend from (l. 16)]'. However, the potential disparity between home and the addressed thought is dismissed immediately, for 'Home and Thou are *one*.' (l. 19, my italics). 'Thou' is no longer caught up in an inaccessible chiasmus, but 'Thou and Home are *one*', they are identical.

¹⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. M. K. Joseph, (London, New York, Toronto, 1969), 16.

Yet, the poem still resists a constative reading of 'Thou'.

Does 'Thou' refer to the thought or the loveliest friend? The question remains open and thus leaves us wondering. And so it is that the play of possible referents to 'Thou' forces us to experience the gradual growing together of Home and the loveliest Friend *in* the speaker's thoughts. The thought is no longer an obstacle that stands between 'I' and the fond Other, as in 'She is not thou', but the thought forms unity and oneness instead of disparity by uniting Home and friend however only implicitly. In other words, the poem performs an escape from the circuitous trap of self-consciousness, in which the thought falls back on itself rather than coming to conclusion. Moreover, 'one' is the more remarkable considering that Coleridge would walk through the burning sand of Arabia for 'oneness and absolute unity'. Now that thought no longer inflicts division and abstraction, the address to the Other becomes the means of rescue from the deadly stasis of the sea in the 'Ancient Mariner':

Without thee were but a becalmed bark,
Whose helmsman on an ocean waste and wide
Sits mute and pale his mouldering helm beside. (ll. 22-25)¹⁹

So that now, the Other can be addressed with an ever so happier turn. Well, 'And art thou nothing?' (l. 26)—the question echoes the previously so depressing chiasmus 'she is not thou and only thou art she' with a surprisingly cheerful connotation—a strong affirmation of the Other: Then 'Such thou art' and the poem ends with the beautiful lines:

as when
The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadows he pursues! (ll. 25-32)

Thus, the initial despair is resolved into the delight of an 'image with a glory round its head'. Glory is described as round, thus resembling an orb. Due to its infinitude, the circle embodies unity and oneness. After all, unity and oneness shapes the form of the poem, too, by virtue of its rhyming ends and its regular pentameter. In *Aids to Reflection* (1828), the simile above is also glossed:

In application to the presence case, it is sufficient to say, that Pindar's remark on sweet Music holds equally true of Genius: as many as are

¹⁹ 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in: *The Collected Words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works I (Part 1)*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, (Princeton, New Jersey, 2001), 161 ff.

not delighted by it are disturbed, perplexed, irritated. The Beholder either recognizes it as a projected Form of his own Being, that moves before him with a Glory round its head, or recoils from it as from a Spectre.²⁰

Accordingly 'The image with a glory round his head' (l. 30) becomes the form of unified Being that moves before the genius, who will eternally limp behind it. Thus, the last lines of the poem form an allegory of poetic creation and its essential unity of that creation. The woodman or enamoured rustic thus becomes the poet during the act of composition; he tries to capture his whole Being, which is, in essence, immediate and in persistent movement. Capturing his being would inflict stasis upon persistent movement, so all that the poet is left to do is to pursue the *shadows* he makes himself, namely that of his unified Being.

The apostrophe in *Constancy to an Ideal Object* is highly performative and is as such indeterminate. Its various references inside and possibly outside the text enact the speaker's search for Other to bring about 'the only constant in a world of change'. In the beginning of the poem, the various references of the apostrophe, 'thou' or 'she', are an obstacle for the 'I' to relate to otherness. Such subjective self-consciousness appears as eternal confinement. In the end however, such detachment of the apostrophe from any specific reference enacts the speaker's *making of the shadow he pursues*. Hence, the insight that 'the only constant in a world of change' is our inescapably subjectivity is finally valued as the source of poetic creation.²¹

The apostrophe in *France: An Ode* performs a process of gradual disillusionment as it denies its readers the possibility to read 'liberty' with constative reference to the French Revolution. The poem comes to a formally incomplete end, the antistrophe, in the very moment when the problem of the representation of feeling 'O Liberty—I felt thee there!' arises. Both poems pose the dilemma to mediate the immediate as both odes are attempts to represent 'Absolute Unity', which resides in the unconscious, in feeling.

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²⁰ *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1993), 227.

²¹ I have consciously not mentioned Sara Hutchinson. This paper aims to deconstruct Coleridge's presentation of yearning in the poem and to disclose various possible referents of the address in this Ode.