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*The Statesman's Science: History, Nature, and Law in the Political Thought
of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

by Pamela Edwards

(Columbia University Press, 2004)

THIS BOOK is ambitious in scope, both chronologically and intellectually. It begins from the earliest of Coleridge's prose (the 1795 *Lectures on Politics and Religion*), concludes with the latest (*On the Constitution of the Church and State*, 1829), and as the subtitle suggests, seeks out the complex principles animating Coleridge's political pronouncements. In a field dominated by literary critics, an intervention from a specialist historian is certainly welcome (the fly-leaf tells us that Edwards is assistant professor of modern British history in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University); and the book comes heartily endorsed by J. G. A. Pocock, whose work is a frequent point of departure for Edwards. All this augurs well.

The Statesman's Science seems to me to fulfil some of its ambitions better than others, however. To get a purely negative point out of the way first: the book slips rather often in matters of textual detail. Several proper names are misspelled: those of De Quincey (4), Wellek (144), Abernethy (152), Poole (214), Beer (233), Tennemann (247), Sadler (253, 270); and a 'Colerigde' creeps in (152). A couple of footnotes are missing (241). A few spot-checks of quotations from Coleridge (on pages 51, 53, 57, 63) reveal multiple minor errors in transcription in each case. In themselves these instances are no more than irritating distractions, but such errors can feed misinterpretation. For instance, Coleridge is quoted as saying that 'security is required *against* the poor whilst the poor are *brutalized* into *beasts*' (113, italics Edwards's). I have not located this quotation: it is not, contra the footnote, from LPR 1795 225, though it does resemble what Coleridge says a few pages earlier: 'But, it may be said, that Government ... procures us security from the attacks of the lower orders. Alas! why should the lower orders attack us but because they are brutalized by Ignorance and rendered desperate by Want?' (LPR 221-2) Edwards, however, comments: 'Coleridge's self-location in this schema—"against" the "beasts," not "for" them—made it all too clear that he saw himself and his Bristol audience as a superior type of people who had a mission to preserve liberty by preventing the swinish multitude from grasping at freedom before they were mature enough to deserve it.' The basis for this interpretation is Edwards's paraphrase of Coleridge's point: 'Poverty has "brutalized" many of the poorest subjects of the realm to the state of "beasts"' (113-4). Yet this is just what Coleridge does *not* say. Instead, 'Ignorance' is the agent of 'brutalizing'; Coleridge never believed poverty to be the irresistible cause of depravity, though he did of course consider it a terrible obstacle to the proper unfolding of human potential. Coleridge is explicitly siding not against the 'brutalized', but against a government which has a vested interest in

promoting ignorance: it is one of the mechanisms of Despotism that ‘To make [the poor man] work like a brute beast he is kept as ignorant as a brute beast’ (LPR 222; cf. the much later OM 123-4). Insofar as Coleridge divides himself and his peers from the suffering multitude, he would consider himself to be acting according to the principle that one should speak *for* the poor, not *to* them (F II 137). Edwards diagnoses ‘unselfconscious elitism’ in Coleridge’s talk of beasts (113), but it is not clear that this judgement has any textual basis.

Edwards portrays Coleridge as deeply consistent in his political principles, throughout ‘an intellectual career that can never be understood as fragmentary’ (219). She argues that at no stage does Coleridge ever conform to a recognisable ‘party’ view, so that it is as wrong to regard the young Coleridge as a typical ‘radical’ as to regard the mature Coleridge as ‘Tory’. Rather Coleridge’s writings are ‘generically critical and polymorphously “oppositional” rather than factional’ (23): his was an ‘antiaffiliative intellect’ (179), which is a neat way of putting it. (As F. D. Maurice wrote, ‘I rejoice to think that those who have most profited by what he has taught them, do not and cannot form a school’.) Edwards takes the very sympathetic view that the changes in Coleridge’s opinions reflect ‘his underlying principles as they pertained to a complex network of ever-changing political realities’ (11), thus echoing Coleridge’s own self-justification in terms of ‘permanent principles’ that transcend the issues of the day (BL I 217).

However, an account that easily juxtaposes Coleridge’s early lectures with *Aids to Reflection* and *Church and State* is surely guilty of smoothing things over a little too much. The young Coleridge insisted that Christ forbid his disciples to own property (LPR 215, 226), so it is not exactly the case that ‘Throughout his career, Coleridge maintained that the principle of landed property was, and must be, the stable foundation of any good government’ (Edwards, 184). In 1795 Coleridge also declared that commerce ‘is useless except to continue Imposture and oppression’ (LPR 223-4); whereas by the time of *Church and State*, both landed property and commerce have indeed become mutually counterbalancing pillars of Coleridge’s ideal state, the former embodying the principle of ‘permanence’, the latter of ‘progression’. A more moderate account of Coleridgean coherence would, to my mind, make the thesis of this book more tenable. That is to say, the same *issues* – property, commerce, the Trinity – agitate Coleridge at every stage of his career, and although he made a gradual about-turn on each of these, he consistently avoided dogmatism. Thus despite moving to a relatively ‘conservative’ position, he continues to insist that neither stable property nor volatile commerce are beneficial in themselves, ‘the OVERBALANCE OF THE COMMERCIAL SPIRIT’ being the prime cause of the social distress of 1817 (LS 169). Nor, despite his increasingly systematic Trinitarian theology, does Coleridge require members of his ideal ‘clerisy’ to subscribe to any specific teaching.

Edwards does usefully emphasise Coleridge’s avoidance of dogma, building on J. S. Mill’s portrayal of him as a persistent friend of liberty. Writing

in 1840, Mill felt that ‘the rising generation of Tories and High-Churchmen’ would find Coleridge ‘vastly too liberal’: his thought was, for Mill, ‘the natural means of rescuing from oblivion truths which Tories have forgotten, and which the prevailing schools of Liberalism never knew.’¹ Edwards elaborates this point, though remaining properly cautious about the definition of ‘liberty’ in an age when so many different conceptions of it were in play. She employs Isaiah Berlin’s two concepts of liberty: negative liberty, i.e. ‘freedom from’ governmental interference to pursue one’s personal goals; and positive liberty, i.e. ‘freedom to’ perform certain actions, enabled by state institutions (94). According to Edwards, Coleridge combined aspects of both these views: he was always pro-free speech and anti-censorship, for instance, but at the same time believed in the responsibility of the state to create conditions in which citizens have the freedom positively to do as they ought (109). The latter conviction is underpinned by the centrality of the notion of Will in Coleridge’s metaphysics. Despite a few questionable details (could any of Coleridge’s writings really be labelled ‘post-Hegelian’? (97)), Edwards makes a fair case for the inseparability of Coleridge’s politics from his Idealist philosophy, the latter being as irreducible to a ‘school’ as the former.

Through careful definitions of key terms, Edwards attacks the common notion that the older, ‘Tory’ Coleridge was an ‘apostate’ from his youthful ‘radicalism’. Edwards shows that he was none of these things. The apostasy theory depends upon a view of what Coleridge *should* have been, that is a revolutionary in the mould of Thelwall; whereas he conspicuously never joined a radical society, and was already ‘conservative’ in 1795 in the sense of maintaining the importance of constitutional history and precedent to present-day government. Most importantly, Edwards argues that there was no contradiction between Coleridge’s elation at the collapse of the absolutist Bourbon monarchy in France and his preference for the moderate British constitution over the regime of Robespierre. Instead, ‘in 1795 Coleridge was caught, like so many others of his generation, in the middle: he hated Jacobinism and Terror and hated Bourbonism and absolute monarchy and did not wish to see either succeed’ (84).

The ‘conservative’ slant of Coleridge’s early ‘radicalism’ (one can see why Edwards pauses so long over these inadequate terms) is highlighted in an interesting reading of a lecture of 1795, *The Plot Discovered*. This lecture was Coleridge’s response to Pitt’s two notorious ‘gagging bills’: the Seditious Meetings Bill, which limited public gatherings, and the Treasonable Practices Bill, which made it treasonable ‘to compass, or imagine, or devise to deprive or depose the King’ (LPR 288). Pitt was responding to disturbances that culminated in a stone being thrown at the King’s carriage. He subsequently explained that ‘The sole object of the bill was, that the people should look to parliament, and to parliament alone, for the redress of such grievances as they

¹ ‘Coleridge’, in *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, ed. by F. R. Leavis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), 166, 167; cf. Edwards, 99.

might have to complain of.² But the danger to free speech inherent in legislation about the *imagination* or *intention* behind a speaker's words (a danger all too familiar in an age of anti-terrorism legislation) sparked Coleridge's anger. He regards the Bills as constituting a despotic governmental 'plot' against the people. More surprisingly, as Edwards emphasises, he also sees them as a plot against *the King*. He invokes a traditional notion of Majesty as 'the unity of the people', the focal point at which ten million rays concentrate (LPR 295). This is not the belief of a typical republican, but rather places Coleridge within a long tradition of attacks on evil ministers who manipulate monarchs (Edwards 57-8). On Coleridge's account, the balance of the constitution ought not to be disturbed such that MPs can prevent the people from addressing their monarch directly. 'In our laws the King is regarded as the voice and will of the people: which while he remains, it is consequently treasonable to conspire against him' (295), as Pitt and his acolytes were in his view doing through the very treason laws themselves.

An interesting contrast to Edwards's account is made by John Barrell's provocative reading (to which Edwards unfortunately does not refer) of Coleridge's anti-war poem 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter'.³ The bloody agent of destruction in that poem is described thus: 'Letters four do form his name'. This seems an obvious reference to Pitt, as Coleridge acknowledged in his 'Apologetic Preface' of 1817: the Preface avers that although Coleridge had *imagined* the death of Pitt in the poem, he had no *intention* of bringing it about. Barrell, however, suggests that those 'letters four' could also spell 'KING'. One of his several arguments is that to speak of 'imagining' a death, as Coleridge does in the 'Preface', would inevitably in those days have reminded readers of the Treason Bill's prohibition of imagining the *King's* death. Therefore, for Barrell, 'behind the fantasy of Pitt's death [in 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter'] is a fantasy of regicide', and Coleridge's later Preface covertly disavows a wish to kill George III even as it overtly disavows a wish to kill Pitt. Yet if Edwards's interpretation of *The Plot Discovered* as 'royalist', containing a 'democratic-monarchist polemic' (57), is accepted, this may do some damage to Barrell's detection of a republican undercurrent in 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter'. Or perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Certain phrases in *The Plot Discovered* do sound ambivalent toward monarchy: 'my friends! if Monarchs would behave like republicans, all their subjects would act as royalists' (LPR 294); but such a declaration is still far from a fantasy of regicide.

The apocalyptic violence of Coleridge's early rhetoric is nevertheless striking: 'The present Bills were conceived and laid in the dunghill of despotism among the other yet unhatched eggs of the old Serpent. In due time and fit opportunity they crawled into light. Genius of Britain! crush them!'

² Pitt to his brother Lord Chatham, 4 September 1796, quoted in William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 378.

³ *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793-1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 652-6.

(LPR 288). Edwards tends to separate the ‘rhetorically impassioned’ manner of Coleridge’s writing from its ‘politically moderate’ content (89), and therefore leaves a major change out of account when she moves from these lectures to a discussion of the ‘moral will’ in *Aids* (chapter 5, ‘Morality and Will’). Continuities there may be, but how did the incensed rhetorician of 1795 come to adopt the ‘sobering silvery-grey Tone’ of Robert Leighton by 1825 (AR liii)?

There follows an analysis of the way in which Coleridge’s ‘Theory of Life’ informs an organic view of the state (chapter 6, ‘Science and Nature’): what he himself calls ‘the correspondence between the Body Politic to the Body Natural’ (C&S 85). Edwards then discusses Coleridge’s criticisms of Malthus in some detail (chapter 7, ‘History and Life’). The final two chapters focus on *Church and State*. As Edwards says, this work is typically Coleridgean in attempting to save what was best in the current establishment, whilst admitting the necessity of change (178). She follows Pocock in attempting to ‘penetrate the fog of party names’ (193) that surrounds politics in this period: neither Whig-Tory nor radical-conservative are adequate polarities by which to estimate *Church and State* (179). Instead, Edwards refers to the three contemporary ‘ecclesiopolitical categories’: High Church (seeking restoration of ecclesiastical power); Erastian or Low Church (aiming to diminish Church control over the secular realm); and the compromise position of William Warburton, who proposed a more equal alliance between church and state. Coleridge’s scheme was one of alliance too, but differing from Warburton’s in being ‘based upon a complex sociological model of the separate social, cultural, and political spheres of commercial independence and landed trust’ (179). That seems to me a very vague explanation of the difference, but it is evident enough that Coleridge was no ‘Warburtonian’ (C&S xxxiv).

In 1811, Henry Crabb Robinson noted of a meeting with Coleridge during which the latter had fulminated against Irish civil rights: ‘The conversation was on politics & on no subject did I like him so little.’⁴ Many readers of Coleridge on politics have since echoed Robinson’s discomfort. *The Statesman’s Science* is helpful in contributing to dismantle the accusation of ‘apostasy’ against Coleridge, and in pointing out certain traditions of English political thought with which Coleridge can more profitably be compared. But if the Coleridge who emerges from these pages is consistent, principled, and admirably detached from competing factions, he is also likeable to a suspicious degree—to the point of blandness.

⁴ Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb &c. being *Selections from the Remains of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. by Edith J. Morley (Manchester UP, 1922, 1932), 36.