

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 30 (NS) Winter 2007

© 2007 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Coleridge and the “Rhapsody on Newspapers”: A New Intertext for “Fears in Solitude”

Nikki Hessel

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE’S “Fears in Solitude” was such a topical poem that within just six months of its publication the *Analytical Review* could adopt an indulgent and forgiving tone as it looked back with the wisdom of hindsight to “those evil days, which, at the time this poem was written, seemed to threaten us with immediate and terrible confusion.”¹ This sense that the poem participates in a particular historical moment has been emphasised by Paul Magnuson, Mark Rawlinson, John Gatta and Michael Simpson, and Coleridge himself stressed the point through his subtitle, “Written in April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion.”² As Mark Jones points out in an observant aside, the subtitle “might seem to prove only that ‘Fears in Solitude’ is ‘occasional.’ But in historical context it suggests the contrary: in supplying contextual information unneeded by contemporary readers, it addresses the poem to posterity.”³

Coleridge took this step to conjure for future readers the crackling emotional climate of living in the shadow of an invasion that did not materialise. The subtitle ties the poem to historical fears because it cannot tie it to historical facts; “an Invasion” never became “the Invasion.” These ideas are vital to research on “Fears in Solitude” because, in addition to its function as a reminder of a non-event, the subtitle also locates the poem in a particular matrix of critical and popular ideas that was likely to be obscure to future readers. Paul Magnuson’s astute reading of the poem demonstrates that it is dialogic, “not only in the sense that it responds to a particular historical event, but more importantly that it responds to the dialogue of interpretation of that event.”⁴ I would like to take one step back from Magnuson’s view and argue that the poem also responds to the process of dialogue; that is to say, it is intended to interact not only with current affairs, and not only with contemporary interpretations of current affairs, but also offers a perspective on the nature of contemporary interpretations. This process is itself dialogic; Coleridge’s idea about the way opinion was formed was as much a contribution and response to a debate on the mass media as the product of his own thought and observation. This paper will situate the well-known sections of “Fears in Solitude” that attack newspapers and their readers within this debate by

¹ J. R. de J. Jackson ed., *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1 (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 44.

² See Paul Magnuson, “The Shaping of ‘Fears in Solitude,’” in *Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination Today*, ed. Christine Gallant (AMS Press, 1989) 197-210; Mark Rawlinson, “Invasion! Coleridge, the Defence of Britain and the Cultivation of the Public’s Fear,” in *Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Conflict*, ed. Philip Shaw (Ashgate, 2002) 110-37; John Gatta, Jr., “Coleridge’s ‘Fears in Solitude’ and the Prospect of Social Redemption,” *Cithara* 26.1 (1986): 36-43; and Michael Simpson, “The Morning (Post) After: Apocalypse and Bathos in Coleridge’s ‘Fears in Solitude,’” in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford (Palgrave, 2002) 71-86.

³ Mark Jones, “Alarmism, Public-Sphere Performatives, and the Lyric Turn: Or, What is ‘Fears in Solitude’ Afraid of?” *Boundary 2* 30.3 (2003): 103.

⁴ Magnuson 203.

examining a potentially important new intertext for "Fears in Solitude": a contemporary magazine article called "Rhapsody on Newspapers."

In the months leading up to the date in his subtitle, April 1798, Coleridge had lived through a minor professional crisis that probably influenced his attitude to journalism and newspapers. In December 1797 he had begun contributing to Daniel Stuart's *Morning Post*, but he worried about the effect of journalism on his professional life, writing to Josiah Wedgwood in January 1798:

The few weeks that I have written for the *Morning Post*, I have felt this—Something must be written & written immediately—if any important Truth, any striking beauty, occur to my mind, I feel a repugnance at sending it garbled to a newspaper: and if any idea of ludicrous personality, or apt antiministerial joke, crosses me, I feel a repugnance at rejecting it, because *something must be written*, and nothing else suitable occurs. The longer I continue a hired paragraph-scribbler, the more powerful these Temptations will become... (CL I 365)

As time wore on Coleridge "saw more clearly the nature and consequences of hired *writing*. I found it the situation of all others in which a delicacy of moral feeling and moral perception would with the greatest difficulty be preserved" (CL I 376). His final *Morning Post* prose contribution for this period appeared on 9 March. By April 1798, he was prepared to attack the profession and the medium that had briefly sustained him.⁵

This sense of professional disenchantment was not the only factor at work, however. Coleridge's deeply critical remarks about newspaper readers in the quarto version of "Fears in Solitude" appear to have been composed as a response to a January 1798 contribution to the *Monthly Magazine*, which was published under the running headline "Rhapsody on Newspapers" and signed "Rhapsodicus."⁶ The *Monthly Magazine* published numerous pieces by Coleridge and members of his circle, including Southey and Charles Lloyd, so it is reasonable to argue that Coleridge read the periodical. However, there is also particular evidence to suggest that he would have encountered the "Rhapsody on Newspapers." On the page following the conclusion of this piece by Rhapsodicus is a letter signed S. T. Coleridge regarding recent coverage of his "Monody on Chatterton," suggesting that he was following the *Monthly Magazine* closely in early 1798.⁷ Within three months of this letter he

⁵ Magnuson has outlined the squabbling between the *Morning Post* and the *Anti-Jacobin*, suggesting that this struggle also sets the scene for "Fears in Solitude." See *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton, 1998) 73-74.

⁶ Rhapsodicus, "Rhapsody on Newspapers," *Monthly Magazine* 4.27 (January 1798): 5-7.

⁷ Coleridge's letter shows that he had been paying attention to the *Monthly Magazine* for some time. The exchange on his monody amongst some of the magazine's correspondents began with a September 1796 letter from "B." and included contributions from "Crito" in October 1796 and "A.B.C.D." in December 1797. Coleridge was apparently aware of all three letters; in his published response he asks the editor of the *Monthly Magazine* to include his letter "if Crito and the Alphabet-men should continue to communicate on this subject."

would compose "Fears in Solitude," a poem that includes a withering attack on newspaper readers, and the influence of Rhapsodicus would be clearly discernible, particularly in the emphasis on callous breakfast-table reading and indifference to war reporting in lines 105-22.

The "Rhapsody on Newspapers," like "Fears in Solitude," was concerned with the subject of the dailies' influence and effect on readers but the two texts approach the subject in very different ways. While Coleridge was sincerely worried by the potential for what Jones calls "an emergent abuse of the public sphere,"⁸ Rhapsodicus adopted a wry tone as he satirised English newspaper readers while ostensibly defending the necessity of reading a morning newspaper. Rhapsodicus's piece was a response to recent public debates about the role of the press. In "Rhapsody on Newspapers" he draws indignant inspiration from William Pitt's controversial declaration (originally uttered in 1789 and reaffirmed during the 1797 debates on raising the Stamp Duty) that newspapers were luxuries, not necessities, and thus subject to additional taxation. As these two dates suggest, the controversy about newspapers and their effects on readers had two distinct centres of impact at moments of exaggerated public tension. Pitt instituted his tax change to achieve two pedestrian political ends: raising revenue and limiting access to inflammatory information at a time when France's chaos seemed potentially infectious. But the language he used to describe this policy seemed to capture a fundamental point about the press in this period: those who defended newspapers as necessities of civic life and good government were in effect allying themselves with those who defended newspapers as necessities of leisure and the *bon ton*. If a daily paper was a necessity, then it seemed that luxury itself had become indispensable. The terminology of "luxury and necessity," apparently binary, actually amounted to a tautology; English readers were hooked on the luxury of the daily news and had gradually come to see that luxury as a daily necessity. Pitt had no reason to expect greater tax revenue from his 1797 move to raise the Stamp Duty unless he believed that the public would continue to treat the daily newspaper in this way. The notions of luxury and necessity, which he appeared to hold up as entirely separate categories, had in fact fortuitously converged.

Coleridge was one of those compromised defenders of the daily paper. In *The Watchman* he had responded angrily to Pitt's 1797 designation of newspapers and maintained a clear distinction between the two terms; it was not, he wrote, "a *mere luxury* for the proprietors to be informed concerning the measures of the directors! a *mere luxury* for the principals to know what their agents are doing" (W 10). Coleridge believed that Pitt had committed a grave act of semantic slipperiness by renaming a necessity as a luxury. But this outburst was based on a vision of the English reader as citizen, not consumer, as an active participant in democracy rather than a passive receiver of sensation. By 1798, when the second centre of impact for this debate occurred

⁸ Jones 68.

during (to borrow Coleridge's phrase) "the alarm of an invasion," his notion of the typical newspaper reader had in fact begun to align with the assumption that underpinned Pitt's assertion: readers were enjoying the luxury of consuming the news and increasingly treating this process as a necessity. There was still a semantic problem but it was the reverse of what he had initially assumed: luxuries were being called necessities, not the other way around. For Coleridge in April 1798, the daily newspaper, like all "must-haves," was an accessory, not an essential. It was a garnish disguised as a staple.

I use the language of food deliberately here, because the debate around newspapers in 1798 seemed to draw its metaphors and indeed its setting from mealtimes. In a well-known passage of "Fears in Solitude," Coleridge takes aim at the heartless practices of the daily newspapers when it came to reporting the war and the consequent numbness felt by readers when death, bloodshed and military manoeuvres were included in their everyday reading matter:

Boys and girls,
And women, that would groan to see a child
Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,
The best amusement for our morning-meal! (PW 175 105-8)⁹

In this section of the poem, Coleridge gets considerable mileage out of the unpleasant image of readers consuming such brutal yet distant facts with the same relish that they consumed their breakfast.¹⁰ His knowledge of the realities of the newspaper market is evident in the passage; morning newspapers were more popular and influential in London than their evening counterparts, which were to some extent designed for the provincial market.¹¹ Coleridge himself had written for one of the most prominent morning papers, the *Morning Post*, and later envisaged the exact scene of consuming the news when he wrote that the typical *Post* readers were "breakfast-table People of Quality" (CL I 627). The connection between the daily press and food was not original; in his poem "The Newspaper," George Crabbe had already sarcastically chastised weekly papers for their stinginess in these terms: "O avarice of words! / When thousand starving minds such manna seek, / To drop the precious food but once a week" (lines 97-99).¹² For Crabbe, the newspaper, "like the public inn, provides a treat, / Where each promiscuous guest sits down to eat; / And such this mental food, as we may call / Something to all men, and to some men all" (lines 233-36). In a world nourished by the freshest possible news, provincial readers were at a particular disadvantage: "Sullen, we ponder o'er a dull repast, / Nor feast the body while the mind must fast" (lines 277-78). Coleridge himself would later stress the importance of freshness in news using a food metaphor: "A Newspaper is a market for flowers & vegetables, rather than a Granary or a Conservatory" (CL

⁹ The quoted lines, amongst others, were deleted from the version of the poem that was published in the *Morning Post* on 14 October 1802. See Simpson 71-86 for a brilliant analysis of this decision.

III 333). But the primary source for the intimate connection between the morning meal and the morning paper in his 1798 poem might have been the "Rhapsody on Newspapers."¹³

Rhapsodicus was insistent about this connection and the dual image of consumption that it suggested. The problematic rhetoric of luxury and necessity that dominated the political argument about newspapers manifests itself in "Rhapsody on Newspapers" in the complicated distinction between food as a basic human need and breakfast as a social construct which elevated that basic need to a luxurious leisure activity. By taking a survival instinct and socialising it, the idea of "breakfast" not only translated a necessity into a luxury, it then codified that luxury as a social necessity. Not coincidentally, the same process had translated the civil right to access information into the civility of reading the morning newspaper. Basic human instincts had evolved into luxurious versions of themselves, but a ubiquitous luxury ultimately just raises the bar of necessity. In order to emphasise the necessity of reading a morning paper, Rhapsodicus stressed the similarity between consuming food and consuming the news, stating that "if we except the mere mechanical operations of eating and drinking, I scarcely know any thing that is so indispensable to the happiness of my fellow-citizens."¹⁴ Even this minor concession to nutrition vanished as the essay continued and he ultimately portrayed English readers as having an "insatiable desire for *news*, which is become as necessary as the food we eat."¹⁵ To be deprived of the daily news was akin to being deprived of food and would amount to an "[i]ntellectual famine."¹⁶

The connection between breakfast and newspapers was apt not simply because eating was a useful metaphor for an essential activity, nor because both

¹⁰ Coleridge was always sensitive to the newspapers' tendency to add a trivial gloss to serious matters and to play the subject of war for laughs. In *The Friend*, which took issue with many aspects of newspaper culture and its practices, he condemned the frivolousness of some parliamentary reporting, which too frequently discussed "who had the best of it of two parliamentary gladiators, and whose speech, on the subject of Europe bleeding at a thousand wounds, or our own country struggling for herself and all human nature, was cheered by the greatest number of *laughs, loud laughs, and very loud laughs*: (which, carefully marked by italics, form most conspicuous and strange parentheses in the newspaper reports.)" (F I 109)

¹¹ Coleridge considered himself to be best suited to the journalism undertaken by morning papers; when he tried to negotiate some newspaper work with Stuart in 1811 he wrote: "I see that such services, as I might be able to afford, would [be] more important to a rising, than to a risen, paper, to a Mo[rn]ing, perhaps, more than to an evening one" (CL III 333).

¹² George Crabbe, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1988).

¹³ Coleridge was a shrewd observer of marketing strategies and audience-making when it came to the periodical press. While making arrangements for *The Friend*, he wrote to Daniel Stuart: "There is certainly nothing in the work, that could make the numbers more interesting this day than this day fortnight—But then the pleasure of being able to expect it's [*sic*] arrival on a given day, the difference of *one* arriving at a time, instead of *four shillings* at once, in all these places where Book-sellers' parcels arrive monthly only, and the comfort of having a thing come as a Newspaper, & with the Newspapers, are great Influencers" (CL III 165). Later he would remind Stuart that "there are a number of persons who like to have the *Newspaper feeling* of receiving a paper at their own doors without trouble on a particular day" (CL III 232). Alongside this shrewdness was a lingering idealism about breakfast-time reading; books rather than newspapers adorn a hypothetical breakfast-table in *Biographia Literaria* (BL I 41).

¹⁴ "Rhapsody" 5.

¹⁵ "Rhapsody" 7.

¹⁶ "Rhapsody" 5.

breakfast and newspapers could be read as luxurious extensions of basic human needs. As Rhapsodicus noted, the notions of a civilised breakfast and the morning newspaper had developed alongside one another and become mutually constitutive. He envisaged the morning paper as a tool designed by its originators to augment the morning meal: "Wisely, therefore, did our ancestors contrive, that, on our first entrance into daily life, we should have it in our power to devour the newspaper and the breakfast at the same time."¹⁷ The simultaneity of these two activities reinforced the idea that each was a form of consumption. More significantly, the two morning rituals had influenced each other to the point that apparently separate trends in readership, the diet of the household and the demarcation of the newsworthy story had become entwined. As Rhapsodicus observed, so-called morning newspapers had previously been published at noon and "were not deemed of much use in families; but when *tea* was introduced, morning papers naturally followed, and the contents of many of them are now happily contrived to give a particular zest to the Indian luxury."¹⁸ In other words, the morning newspaper, in a neat summary of the terms of the tax debate, became useful only as it became associated with luxury, and that association had led to influential expectations about both reading practices and newspaper content. The only news that mattered was the news that was specifically "handed to us at our breakfast-tables, and carried from thence about with us wherever we go throughout the day."¹⁹ It had become impossible for people like Rhapsodicus's typical newspaper reader to imagine a separation of the rituals of the English morning: "[t]he connection, indeed, betwixt a breakfast and a newspaper is indissoluble."²⁰

The vexed luxury versus necessity debate, which concerned the general purposes of the newspaper as a medium and the general responses of the reader as a consumer, was paralleled by a much more specific argument about war reportage in 1798. For an observer like Coleridge, readers seemed to have replaced a humanitarian and politically astute interest in the war with a voyeuristic and thoughtless interest. The rhetoric of interest was as problematic as the rhetoric of necessity, however; those advocating a heightened emotional response to warfare and its reportage on ethical grounds were essentially seeking the same *level* of reader interest in the war as those wishing to whip up a sensation-addicted, news-hungry public, though with very different expectations about the readers' motives. In "Fears in Solitude," Coleridge complains of the public's ability to become:

absolute
And technical in victories and defeats,
And all our dainty terms for fratricide;

¹⁷ "Rhapsody" 5-6.

¹⁸ "Rhapsody" 6.

¹⁹ "Rhapsody" 7.

²⁰ "Rhapsody" 6.

Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
 Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
 We join no feeling and attach no form! (PW 175 112-17)

Once again, an influential source for these ideas about language and disassociation might have been Rhapsodicus. He notes that "battle, murder, and ... sudden death" are necessary ingredients for any good daily paper but he differentiates between them in revealing ways.²¹ While he argues, in an authorial aside, that this list of potential evils "seems an anti-climax, battle being the greatest calamity of the three," he speaks for a war-weary audience by commenting that "[b]attles, indeed, from long habit, we read over with frigid indifference, and I must say, they are very dull and unentertaining."²² Death and murder strike home with readers, who can see the effects of these events and even imagine themselves as victims, "but the prostration of ten thousand bodies on a field, to gratify the inexplicable schemes of contending courts, is the ephemera which cannot outlive the day."²³ There is a calculated carelessness to the language used here, through which ten thousand corpses dissolve into ephemera, and it displays the sort of semantic detachment that appalled Coleridge, who noted that the reading public behaved:

As if the soldier died without a wound;
 As if the fibres of this godlike frame
 Were gor'd without a pang; as if the wretch,
 Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,
 Pass'd off to Heaven, translated and not kill'd (PW 175 118-22)

These two passages share an awareness of the disconnection between real death and its reportage, between the actual battle and the article that it spawned, although the two authors expressed that awareness differently. Rhapsodicus's language conflates a human life and a news bulletin in a deliberately macabre fashion when he writes that war news "cannot outlive the day." Impending death is here associated with news in a manner that renders the soldiers' literal bodies subordinate to the lines of type reporting their demise; the soldiers, like the news itself, would not survive the night. Although Rhapsodicus's satiric endorsement of a response that mortified Coleridge displays a conclusive difference in tone, the rhetorical position underpinning the former's idea anticipates Coleridge's use of the phrase "translated and not kill'd" to describe the public perception of a soldier's passing.

It is worth noting that Coleridge and Rhapsodicus appear to disagree on

²¹ "Rhapsody" 7.

²² "Rhapsody" 7.

²³ "Rhapsody" 7. George Crabbe had made a similar point about the lack of interest shown in genuine political news, especially amongst women readers: "The sprightly nymph, who never broke her rest / For tottering crowns, or mighty lands oppress'd, / Finds broils and battles, but neglects them all / For songs and suits, a birth-day, or a ball" ("The Newspaper" 261-64).

the extent of readers' interest in news from the war-zone. Coleridge depicts this reading material as the key element in the experience of consuming the news at breakfast-time while Rhapsodicus sees war reportage as tired and repetitive content that readers prefer to skip. What both men clearly observed, however, was the numbing effect of war reportage in the papers. They arrived at this conclusion by different routes; Coleridge tended to see indifference as a product of an *excess* of stimulation while Rhapsodicus wryly saw it as the product of a *lack* of stimulation in the "unentertaining" reports. Despite this difference, the "Rhapsody on Newspapers" does provide Coleridge with a rhetorical device for warning his audience about the perils of this attitude to war. If personal identification with tragedy is necessary to enhance newspaper readers' interest, then personal identification is what they shall get, as Coleridge asks them to consider "what if all-avenging Providence, / Strong and retributive, should make us know / The meaning of our words [?]" (PW 175 126-28).

As these stark lines indicate, acts of speaking, reading or writing about the war had not yet brought it any closer to home, literally or figuratively. Coleridge was fearful that this apparent divide between language and fact would shortly close, leaving English readers, in his own classic definition of a mixed blessing, sadder and wiser. He was perhaps drawing further inspiration from the "Rhapsody on Newspapers." Rhapsodicus depicted a reading public unused to accepting the idea that words conveyed pure information: "[i]t is a mistake to suppose that the intelligence in newspapers is to be understood in a literal sense, or that we are to be contented with what the editor pleases to tell us."²⁴ The English newspaper reader, in other words, was used to augmenting news with a host of underlying social meanings and language that combined to form the real story. This interpretative process was largely directed at easily accessible information, however. Rhapsodicus walks his reader through this approach to reading with regard to a fictional marriage announcement, arguing that the true significance of the information could only be found in the gossipy and unwritten social context of fortunes, dowries, beauty, age and eligibility that readers brought to bear on a brief notice of nuptials, a context that drew its validity from the assumption that such extraneous facts about the couple were "well-known."²⁵ Familiarity with the topic and with the protagonists was the decisive factor in reader engagement, as Rhapsodicus pointed out in his distinction between war news and reports of violence at home. The anonymous bodies of soldiers and inscrutable manoeuvres of monarchs did not pass such a test – at least, not yet.

This sense of "not yet" is of course critical to Coleridge's poem and foregrounds its status as a textual relic, a fossilised moment of emotion, alarm, and debate. Like all such artefacts, it takes its meaning from a complicated interplay between its moment of composition and its potentially infinite

²⁴ "Rhapsody" 6.

²⁵ "Rhapsody" 6-7.

moments of reception, but also between its apparently stable finished form and its unstable and often unrecoverable source materials. Coleridge had the foresight to caption his particular artefact, as if to suggest that further digging would reveal sediments of meaning. The "Rhapsody on Newspapers" helps to constitute one of these thin ulterior layers. In its satiric treatment of key ideas that would later appear in "Fears in Solitude," especially the relevance of reading newspapers at the breakfast table and readers' over-familiarity with war reporting and its lexicon, the article not only supplies Coleridge with ideas, it also demonstrates the dialogic nature of the poem, opening up the possibility that there are many other undiscovered intertexts.

Most significantly, the relationship between "Fears in Solitude" and the "Rhapsody on Newspapers" proves that Coleridge's poem is not just available *for* reading, it is also *about* reading. In particular, it is about the importance of the moment of reading: its setting, medium, the responses it provokes and the connections between texts read. Alongside our present day experience of reading his poem, and the image of the vilified eighteenth-century reader perusing the paper over breakfast, we can now insert Coleridge's own moment of reading: his probable encounter with the "Rhapsody on Newspapers." There is a crucial textual and rhetorical resonance in the friction created amongst these moments that the "Fears in Solitude" subtitle invokes. Through his attention to the date in the subtitle, Coleridge acknowledges that the voices of key interlocutors from the moment of original composition, like Rhapsodicus, are no longer clear or accessible to later readers, who can be expected to remember or imagine the fear at an impending invasion but cannot necessarily be counted upon to understand the fear of an inadequate approach to reading the news.

Appendix:

Text of the "Rhapsody on Newspapers"

To the Editor of the Monthly Magazine.

Sir,

During the parliamentary debates of last winter, relative to imposing an additional tax upon newspapers, it was disputed by some of our state-orators, whether a newspaper was an article of *luxury* or *necessity*; but the Minister, who was more desirous to obtain an addition to the revenue, than to wait for the discussion of so intricate a question, hurried the business forwards, without allowing time to determine it. Perhaps, indeed, he might think that much was to be said on both sides; and that it was a matter of very little consequence to a mere financier whether it was determined one way or other. When, however, I look around me in this vast metropolis, and mix in the varied societies that are

formed in it, I am clearly of opinion, that a newspaper ranks among the *necessaries* of life, and ranks so high, that, if we except the mere mechanical operations of eating and drinking, I scarcely know any thing that is so indispensable to the happiness of my fellow-citizens. As a question, "What news?" is second only to "How do you do?" and I am much mistaken if, on many occasions, it does not precede even now, and hereafter, in all probability, it will issue at the first opening of the lips.

It is, perhaps, impossible to prove the misery that would overshadow such a place as London, were there no newspapers published in it; but my imagination has sometimes suggested to me the horrid thought of a suspension of newspapers for only *one week!* Dreadful idea! Intellectual famine! What crowds of distressed human beings, hurrying from place to place, asking and beseeching one another, "for the love of mercy," to supply one little bit of intelligence, to cool the parched tongue of communication—one little accident to supply the repetition of diurnal morality—one anecdote, ever so meagre and barren, just to keep the life and soul of conversation together—or one *crim. con.* or even the least suspicion, hint, conjecture, or surmise, to employ the magnifying powers of imagination, and prevent the dreadful necessity of seeking for what we know we cannot find—resources within ourselves.

Such have sometimes been the horrid images which my imagination, probably disordered at the time, has suggested to me: but how faint is this expression of the workings of fancy; for sure I am, it hath not yet entered into the heart of man to form words capable of displaying the wretched state of our metropolis, were it to be afflicted with a cessation of news. Wisely, therefore, did our ancestors contrive, that, on our first entrance into daily life, we should have it in our power to devour the newspaper and the breakfast at the same time; that in an hour when sleep has left a blank in our thoughts, and the memory of past events hath perished, a new world, or a world of news, should start up to fight, and set every spring of the mind in fresh motion. This I call winding up our curiosity for the day; by means of which operation, the machine *goes* regularly for the accustomed time. The invention of morning papers was of infinite importance; for morning was not the original time of publication; most of the old papers were published at noon, or in the evening, when they could be of use only to those persons who make a trade of politics. At that time they were not deemed of much use in families; but when *tea* was introduced, morning papers naturally followed, and the contents of many of them are now happily contrived to give a particular zest to the Indian luxury. The connection, indeed, betwixt a breakfast and a newspaper is indissoluble. We *may* hear news at any other time of the day; but how lame, how imperfect, how unsatisfactory, how deficient in all those little circumstances of detail and description, for which we are indebted to the abilities of editors and collectors of paragraphs. Insensible and ungrateful persons can only count the value of a blessing from the loss of it; but if ever the time comes that the propagation of news is suspended, they will learn to prize the abilities of those geniuses who

furnish the news of the day with appropriate imagery; give a brilliancy to an accidental fire; break the neck of a brick-layer with grace; and even cloathe the gallows in heroics;—men, whose mere reports transcend even facts in point of entertainment; and whose hints and surmises are to the thirsty reader

—“Confirmations strong,
“As proofs of holy writ.”

By means of morning papers, the inhabitants of the metropolis are put upon a footing of equality in point of information, which is not to be looked for in provincial towns, far less in villages, where perhaps the great Squire only receives a paper, the contents of which he doles out to his especial favourites. Yet it may be said, that this equality of information which prevails in the metropolis, can tend only to perfect silence, because no man possesses an overplus of news which he may communicate; and at first sight this would appear to be the case, but in fact it is quite otherwise; for although one may not know more than another, he certainly may *conceive* more than another. It is a mistake to suppose that the intelligence in newspapers is to be understood in a literal sense, or that we are to be contented with what the editor pleases to tell us. For example, we read that “Yesterday was married at St. Dunstan’s church, Mr. Joshua Tape, an eminent mercer, to Miss Polly Languish, of Mile-end.” Were we to stop here, I question whether all the papers in London would furnish half an hour’s conversation. But this is no barren text; it includes doctrines, and inferences, which may branch out into as many heads as a sermon of the last century. Is it not necessary to ascertain what Mr. Tape’s property is; how far he may be called an eminent mercer; when it is *well known* that he failed ten years ago, and paid only ten shillings in the pound; and how far he may be called a genteel man, when it is *well known* he stoops in the shoulders? It may be also necessary to determine whether he deserves the character of a polite shop-keeper, who, it is *well known*, refused to take back an article which a lady had kept only six months; and, above all, whether the man was not an arrant fool to marry Polly Languish, who, it is *well known*, had not a sixpence? Then, Sir, with respect to the lady, many important questions arise; as, first, how it can be possible any person can think her handsome, when it is *well known* she has no complexion, very bad staring eyes, appears to be crooked, and moreover, it is *strongly suspected*, is thirty-three, or thirty-two at least. Thus you see that he above paragraph is a full and rich fountain, sending forth waters, sweet and bitter, and quenching the talkative thirst of the whole parish of St. Dunstan’s, and, probably, the hamlet of Mile-end.

Let us take another example:—“Yesterday Lady ----- was detected in an amour with Col. ----. His Lordship has sent her to her mother’s, for the present, and is immediately to sue for a divorce.” Now, Sir, will any lover of news stop there? Will this satisfy him? No. It is necessary to divide and subdivide this into an infinite series of lesser intelligences, all greatly contributing to a right understanding of the matter. On the one hand, his Lordship, it is *well*

known, was old enough to be her father. On the other hand, Lady -----, it is *well known*, was young enough to be his daughter, and wherein was she disappointed? Then it is highly probably that he was the most indulgent husband in the world, and that she was the most unreasonable and disobedient wife. Or, should this not be the case, the reverse will exactly serve the same purpose; that is, gratify that insatiable desire for *news*, which is become as necessary as the food we eat, or the raiment we put on.

We constantly pray to be delivered "from battle, murder, and from sudden death;" (this, by the bye, seems an anti-climax, battle being the greatest calamity of the three; but let that pass) and yet, Mr. Editor, I know no three ingredients more necessary, nor, of late years, more frequent than these. Battles, indeed, from long habit, we read over with frigid indifference, and I must say, they are very dull and unentertaining. The other two, however, afford many comments, which greatly tend to promote conversation, because they come home to "men's business and bosoms." The death of one man in the streets, who thought himself a match for half a dozen armed robbers, is a topic of conversation for a month; but the prostration of ten thousand bodies on a field, to gratify the inexplicable schemes of contending courts, is the ephemera which cannot outlive the day.

Thus much for the *facts* recorded in our newspapers. Now, Sir, only consider what the case must be, if, after dwelling so long upon any important event handed to us at our breakfast-tables, and carried from thence, about with us wherever we go throughout the day, as ammunition ready to shoo the monster, *silence*, and supply the deficiency, *thought*—if, I say, after all this, it should be next day contradicted by the same authority. This may appear somewhat embarrassing; but habit has reconciled us to this also. "We *always thought* there was something improbable in the story;" or, "we had *our suspicions*, yet did not chuse to communicate them;" or, "we were *very cautious* in giving full credit to the report, although, to be sure, it appeared to be *very well founded*, and every body must acknowledge it was remarkably *well told*." With this *ex post facto* sagacity, some continue to get out of the scrape pretty decently, while others, determined to support the dignity of first impressions, and studious to avoid the weather-cock variations of common changelings, are still firmly of opinion that there was *something in it*, and vote *hem. con.* "that there is no scandalous story without some foundation."

I might now proceed to consider the *necessity* of newspapers, as supplying fund for political conversation; but as that subject would lead me to be more prolix than in duty bound, I shall adjourn the question *fine die*, and conclude with an humble hope that I have suggested enough to prove that newspapers are articles of absolute necessity, and of the "first requisition." I am, Sir, your's, &c. RHAPSODICUS.