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Fears in Solitude: Private Places and Public Faces

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*Private faces in public places
Are wiser and nicer
Than public faces in private places.*¹

A UDEN'S EPITAPH from *The Orators* of 1932 may suggest why *Fears in Solitude* remains so interesting. It reminds us that at certain times the interpenetration of public and private existence is inevitable, but also uncomfortable. The nineteen-thirties was one such time and the seventeen-nineties another. *Fears in Solitude* is a poem in which Coleridge, by mixing different poetic styles and languages, tests the relationship between his private and public faces. For modern readers the private 'face' and distinctively personal 'voice' of the opening and closing paragraphs are instantly recognisable from other Conversation Poems, as is the Stowey context, which is immediately evoked in the opening lines:

A green and silent spot, amid the hills,
A small and silent del

(PW 175 1-2)

But this familiar voice and lyrical, private language soon give way to the language of public discourse in the middle section, which makes up more than three quarters of the poem, and readers, including Coleridge himself, have always had problems in satisfactorily reconciling the differing languages of the different sections within the poem. The aim of this paper is to examine some reasons for this and to reconstruct a reading of the poem which brings the relationship between the differing discourses within it into clearer focus and thus to re-emphasise its value as a poem rather than as political polemic.

The title *Fears in Solitude* can of course refer either to the single poem composed in April 1798 or to the quarto volume of that name published later in the autumn of the same year. Paul Magnuson has been particularly influential in the redirection of attention to the poem's original published context and Michael John Kooy and Felicity James, for example, have in their different ways demonstrated just how much can be gained by this approach.² However, this relocation of the poem so that it is read as part of a triptych to

¹ *The English Auden*, ed, Edward Mendelson (London 1977), 59

² See Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3. See also the following articles: Peter Larkin, 'Fears in Solitude': Reading (from)the Dell', *The Wordsworth Circle* 22, 1991, pp11-14; Michael John Kooy, 'Disinterested Patriotism: Bishop Butler, Hazlitt and Coleridge's Quarto Pamphlet of 1798', *Coleridge Bulletin*, 21, 2203, pp55-65; Felicity James, 'Coleridge and the Fears of Friendship, 1798'. *Coleridge Bulletin*, 24, 2004 pp11-18; Mark Jones, 'Alarmism, Public-Sphere Performatives, and the Lyric Turn: Or, What is 'Fears in Solitude' Afraid of?' *Boundary 2* 30:3, 2003, pp 67-105; Tee Ve-Yin, 'Invasion and Subterfuge in 'Frost at Midnight Midnight(1798)', *NUCB JLCC*, 8(3) 2006,-. David Fairer kindly allowed me to see the chapter on 'Fears in Solitude' in his forthcoming book and it is to be regretted that I did not have sufficient time to make use of it. I wish to thank Peter Larkin for his help and practical assistance in the preparation of this paper, which was delivered at the 2008 Coleridge Summer Conference.

include *France: an Ode* and *Frost at Midnight* would have seemed very odd to earlier critics. It was George Harper who long ago in 1928 placed *Fears in Solitude* in the context of what he called the ‘Conversation Poems’ or ‘Poems of Friendship’ and there it has generally remained.³ Coleridge himself, however, when he came to collect his poems in *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817 placed it in the section which he termed ‘Poems Occasioned By Political Events or Feelings Connected With Them’, immediately after *France: an Ode*, while insisting that *Frost at Midnight* be hived off to the section called ‘Meditative Poems in Blank Verse’. However, whereas the poem fulfils many of Harper’s criteria for a Conversation Poem, that ‘intimacy of address’ and ‘ease of expression’, which he identified as being key stylistic characteristics of the genre, are only waveringly present. He fully acknowledges, for example, that in the middle section ‘the violence of the transition is disconcerting’, but is unable to resolve the problem satisfactorily resorting to the analogy of a picture frame surrounding a painting in which the Stowey sections are the frame and the central, political section the painting.

Harper had access to Coleridge’s private life and domestic circle through early editions of his letters and in selections from the notebooks as published in *Anima Poetae* and this no doubt influenced his reading of what he called the ‘Conversation Poems’. The contemporary reviewers had of course no such access to these private documents but instead shared with Coleridge the public context of the poems and therefore were in an excellent position to read their public discourse and the sometimes coded nature of the language. Their reading of the volume as a whole and especially of *Fears in Solitude* was remarkably consistent. For example, three out of four quote the same polemical passages of the poem and all present highly politicised readings which make almost no reference to the first and final paragraphs, which are the ones in which the Stowey context is most prominent. Essentially, they treat *Fears in Solitude* as a political document to be read in the light of current debates about patriotism. Very little attention is given to *Frost at Midnight*.

However, behind the disarmingly straightforward language the early reviewers’ political antennae were very acute. ‘DMS’, writing in December 1798 in the *Analytical Review*, notes, for example, that the fear of invasion had in fact already receded by the time the quarto was published. Having contextualised the poem’s date of composition very precisely and uncoupled it from its date of publication so as to diminish its topicality, he then goes on to place its author among ‘those many others of the purest patriotism who have been slandered with the appellation of an enemy to his country.’⁴ The writer quotes as evidence exactly those lines from *Fears in Solitude* starting ‘Spare us yet a while...’, which Coleridge himself later chose to reprint in self-defence. The reviewer then assures us that Coleridge remains, in spite of his love of his

³ George McLean Harper, ‘Coleridge’s Conversation Poems’ (1928), in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M H Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁴ *Analytical Review*, December 1798, xxxviii, 590-2, in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols., ed. J R de J Jackson (London: Routledge, 1970-1991), 1, 44-45

country, nevertheless, an ‘ardent worshipper of liberty.’ *Frost at Midnight* is largely ignored except for the brief commendation that ‘The few lines, written at a midnight hour in winter—the inmates of his cottage all at rest—do great honour to the poet’s feeling, as the husband of an affectionate wife and as the father of a cradled infant.’

C.L. Moody writing in the *Monthly Review* of May 1799 also devotes most of his attention to *Fears in Solitude*.⁵ His comments on the shorter poem are brief. ‘*Frost at Midnight*’, we learn, is ‘a pleasing picture of virtue and content in a cottage.’ Indeed, the only contemporary reviewer to value *Frost at Midnight* above *Fears in Solitude* is the anonymous but unremittingly hostile writer in the *British Critic*. He laments Coleridge’s ‘absurd and preposterous prejudices against his country’ as revealed by the first two poems and gives what he terms ‘a decided preference’ to *Frost at Midnight* ‘as having no tincture of party.’⁶ Thus of the three poems in the volume only *Frost at Midnight* escapes censure and that only because of its seemingly private discourse.

I have spent time on these contemporary reviews because they demonstrate clearly that the poem was read on its first appearance very much in the way Paul Magnuson urged us to read it today: in the context of an essentially public discourse and as part of a single volume of interrelated works. As a consequence, *Fears in Solitude*, the title poem and the one most closely tied to the subtitle of the volume as a whole, received the great majority of the attention, being read, somewhat selectively, as a purely political document, whereas *Frost at Midnight* was mostly neglected by contemporary readers, even ones sympathetic to Coleridge, who failed to register it as more than at best a beautiful miniature of domestic peace.

Coleridge’s own attitude to *Fears in Solitude* is revealed both by his annotations to the poem and by his choice of the passages he chose to reprint. In summary, he denigrated the poem as a poem so as to emphasise its status as a document to be used in self-defence against the charges of Jacobinical disloyalty and lack of patriotism. By all accounts he initially ‘had great apparent confidence in it’, according to Thomasin Dennis in August 1798.⁷ However, before the end of the year his enthusiasm seemed to have waned. In making a transcription for Carlyon in Germany he not only chose to omit a passage about the corrupting effects of British imperialism, but he also expressed in a note serious reservations about the style of the whole. ‘The above is perhaps not Poetry—but rather a sort of Middle thing between Poetry & Oratory—Sermoni propior. Some parts are, I am conscious, too tame even for animated prose.’⁸ However, much the most important influence on his subsequent treatment of the poem was the savage attack on him in the *Beauties of the Anti-*

⁵ *Monthly Review*, May 1799, xxix, 43-7, Jackson, op. cit. 1, 45-47

⁶ *British Critic*, June, xiii, 662-3, Jackson, op. cit 1, pp 48-49

⁷ Francis Doherty ‘Some First-hand Impressions of Coleridge in the Correspondence of Thomasin Dennis and DaviesGiddy’, *Neophilologus* lxiii-Apr 1979, 300:8, p303 (PW 1 468-9)

⁸ Coleridge’s postscript to the transcript he made for Carlyon in Germany is printed verbatim in PW 1 469.

Jacobin in 1799. He even contemplated taking out a case for libel. Essentially he was accused both of lack of patriotic feeling and of domestic irresponsibility. The satirical poem, first published in the first monthly issue of the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* (July 9, 1798), which gave rise to James Gillray's famous cartoon, 'New Morality', in which Coleridge figures as a donkey, was reprinted with the following note: 'He has since married, had children and has now quitted the country, become a citizen of the world, left his little ones fatherless and left his wife destitute.'⁹ This attack, referring to Coleridge's voyage to Germany, was factually inaccurate as his marriage had taken place long before on 4 October 1795. It was also distorted by the insinuation that he had deserted his family in travelling abroad. Nevertheless, it evidently touched a nerve, which became increasingly raw over the years as his domestic relations deteriorated. As Paul Magnuson has shown, it also incorporates in the phrase 'citizen of the world' a clear, if coded, reference to the Burke-Paine debate since to be a 'citizen of the world' was to be one of those who valued universal philanthropy above love of one's country.

This attack came to dominate Coleridge's attitude to *Fears in Solitude*. In order to refute it he chose the same anti-French passage for reprinting in the *Morning Post* in 1802 and in *The Friend* in both 1809 and 1812, but it was his annotations to Sir George Beaumont's copy of the quarto in 1807 which give the clearest evidence of Coleridge's sensitivity to the *Beauties of the Anti-Jacobin's* charges and to his feelings about the poem.¹⁰ In these he once again returns to the style of the poem, parts of which he now finds is 'neither poetry or anything... which approximates to it...' Essentially, he says that much of the poem is verse rather than poetry but he is prepared to acknowledge its literary faults in order the better to focus on its moral soundness. It is all 'sound good sense' and guilty of at worst 'innocent dullness'. He quotes from the *Anti-Jacobin's* attack and underlines a particular passage from the poem about the repelling of the French as evidence to refute the charges once more.

In summary, the effect of these predominantly politicised contemporary readings of *Fears in Solitude* and the selective use of it by Coleridge as documentary evidence for self-defence is to contract the complexity and variety of the poem as a whole to only its most polemical passages. The first and last sections, in which the Stowey context dominates and which seem most personal and private, were thus silently omitted by a sort of excision through neglect. What is lost in the process is any sense of the poem as a whole and therefore of its dramatisation of Coleridge's inner debate, what he calls in the poem 'the dance of thought'. And it is precisely in this rather than in its pure polemic that its real interest and value lies.

⁹ *The Beauties of the Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner; Containing Every Article of Permanent Utility in that Valuable and Highly esteemed Paper, Literary and Political*, (London: 1799, 306-7) in Magnuson op cit. p 75

¹⁰ Coleridge's annotations to Sir George Beaumont's copy of the first printing of the quarto is quoted in full in PW 1 469.

The poem has had its modern readers, but not many admirers. Nicholas Roe, for example, can neither be accused of ignoring the poem in its totality nor of selective quotation. He reads the poem in relation to Coleridge's trajectory of disillusionment and collapse of faith in revolutionary politics. Roe, however, while acknowledging *Fears in Solitude's* combination of the personal and political finds them to be in 'discomfiting juxtaposition'.¹¹ He finds the conclusion of the poem at odds with all that has gone before and finds the final section full of self-deception 'arising from the need to believe in the beneficent influence of Nature to moral good...'.¹²

My own reading would argue that the fundamental movement of the poem is from a merely conjectural faith in Nature, which is presented in the opening section as only putative or possible in certain circumstances, via fears for his compatriots in the middle section, to a firm faith in human relationships at the end. There is also throughout the poem a very strong preoccupation with language, particularly for the ways in which the language of public discourse has, as a direct consequence of Government policy and propaganda, been emptied of meaning and separated from felt experience. These two strands are closely related because language is seen to regain meaning as it leaves the realm of politics and rejoins the felt experience of human relationships.

The opening lines establish not only the topography of the poem, the 'green and silent spot amid the hills', but also a private, symbolic language tied to this natural world; what might be termed the 'language of nature'. In this sense we are in the same territory as *Frost at Midnight* and *The Nightingale*. However, Coleridge then unexpectedly declines to speak in the first person and constructs instead a representative persona, 'the humble man' to speak on behalf of all those people in society who had been sympathisers of the Revolution but who have since founded their faith on firmer foundations. And so it is not, as one might assume, Coleridge himself who in the opening section lies 'on fern or withered heath' to find 'religious meanings in the forms of nature' but this representative 'newly wise' citizen. Furthermore, this pastoral idyll in which it is possible to dream of 'better worlds' to the sound of an angelic lark is putative only, merely a possibility in an ideal world and one which is definitely not open to anyone who, like Coleridge, retains a feeling for 'all his human brethren'. Thus the transition to the second paragraph which contains all those dissonant sounds of war, the 'Invasion and the thunder and the shout' is not an uneasy change of direction as Harper originally suggested, but is fully prepared for by the conditional nature of the tranquillity of the first paragraph. The real point is that tranquillity and escape is not in fact possible amid the alarms of an invasion.

¹¹ Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 2001 p 263

¹² Roe, op. cit. p 267

Coleridge goes on to trace the true origins of the imminent French invasion and finds them above all in the corrupt language of public discourse. It is this last point I want to bring out because it is at the heart of the poem. Coleridge speaks of the ‘sweet words of Christian promise’ at the start of the passage and finishes it with the flapping wings of the ‘owlet Atheism’. There is throughout a constant use of onomatopoeia such as ‘mutter’, ‘gabble’, ‘scoff’ as if words have become merely sounds without meaning. Coleridge is suggesting that all the institutions of society are corrupted by false-witness, lies and the use of the law to suppress opposition to the Government, something of which Coleridge’s publisher, Joseph Johnson, had had first hand experience in the summer of that year of 1798.

All, all make up one scheme of perjury,
That faith doth reel; the very name of God
Sounds like a juggler’s charm;

(PW 175 79-81)

The consequence of this draining of truth and meaning from language and society is the release of the monstrous and wilfully blind owlet Atheism, ‘sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon’¹³ and it is a master stroke of Coleridge to release into the texture of the poem at this point the equally monstrous language of allegory, that two-dimensional, satirical language of the *Anti-Jacobin’s* poem and Gillray’s subsequent cartoon, which presented Coleridge in the guise of a donkey.

This preoccupation with the corruption of language is continued in the passage about what Coleridge calls the ‘war-whoop’, which is the term he applies to the use of the media by the Government as a propaganda tool to gain support for the war against France. It is once again the separation of language from experience and feeling, which Coleridge abhors:

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 175 115-118)

It is this Orwellian abuse of language in both civil institutions and the media, which, he suggests, is the root cause of the threatened invasion. This concern for language continues to be behind the patriotic passage about Britain in which Coleridge desynonymises the term ‘Britain’ so that it refers not to the Pitt administration nor indeed to any political party or grouping, but refers

¹³ It is an owlet rather than an owl because Atheism was such a fledgling phenomenon, which Coleridge regarded as a form of intellectual blindness. Its ‘blue-fringed’ lids remain something of a puzzle, although Cecilia and Nick Powell have privately suggested possible solutions.

rather to the actual physical landscape of the country and to the personal relationships which exist with in its geographical boundaries:

All bonds of natural love, and find them all
Within the limits of thy rocky shores.
Oh native Britain!

(PW 175 181-183)

And thus the final section when he leaves the 'small and silent dell' and walks 'on the green sheep track up the heathy hill' dramatises the return of Coleridge not only from solitude to the 'bonds of natural love' in the shape of Tom Poole, Sara and Hartley but also from the euphemism and abstract language of government propaganda to the living language of felt experience. The abstract, politicised idea of Britain is made real when he sees the Bristol Channel and 'the rich and elmy fields' of Somerset, and the abstract idea of Love is made real in the domestic and friendly figures in the final lines. The conclusion to the poem is thus not an unconvincing affirmation of a wavering faith in Nature nor a retreat into apolitical domesticity, but a confirmation of his humanity whereby love is rooted in family and friends but spreads out like a tree to become love and sympathy for all mankind.

I would like to finish by returning to where I started and the apparent disjunction between the private, symbolic language of the framing outer sections and the public discourse of the middle section of the poem. I hope I have not tried to deny this but rather to suggest that in a sense this points to the special quality of the poem, although contemporary readers, including Coleridge himself, were distracted from seeing this by immediate political considerations. For the value of the poem lies not in its status as a political document nor in its avowal of faith in Nature, but rather in its total journey and in its dramatisation of the oscillations between the private and public worlds; what Coleridge calls in the poem 'the dance of thought'.