Romantic Controversialism and the Universalist Vision of "Fears in Solitude"

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THE ROMANTIC PERIOD witnessed numerous and persistent aesthetic controversies, from the "picturesque controversy" in the visual arts to the "Pope Controversy" to what Coleridge referred to as "the whole, long-continued controversy" over the Lyrical Ballads.[1] By describing the era as characterized by "controversialism," however, I mean to suggest more than the mere fact of such controversies. Indeed, controversy emerges in the late-eighteenth century as an "ism," as an ethos that structures the cultural field of Romantic-era England, bringing together the voices of assent and dissent that surround art into a unified, if also unsteady, totality. For to participate within this field—either as a cultural producer or a cultural consumer, professional or nonprofessional—meant not only to situate oneself against other positions (as the Latin root of "controversy" would imply), but also as one with these other positions, that is, as part of single turn toward the ideal of universal assent.

We can see vividly this relationship, between controversialism and universalism, opposition and unity, in Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude," a poem situated in the unsteady aftermath of what Marilyn Butler has called the "Revolution Controversy," the pamphlet war of the 1790s that divided Britain along sharp political lines.[2] As Paul Magnuson notes, by the time Coleridge wrote the poem in 1798, his "name was infamous enough in Tory circles for him to have become a major target of their satire," and "Fears and Solitude" thus emerges as "one of a number of public defenses… shaped by the charges that had been leveled against [Coleridge]."[3] Yet, if the poem exists as a "public defense," it also exhibits an uneasiness about publicity, and if one of Coleridge's responses to controversy is an open defense of position, another, perhaps subtler, response is visible in the poem's thematic, structural, and linguistic engagement with the threat to universal communicability that controversy poses.

The nature of this response is the primary concern of my discussion here, which argues that "Fears in Solitude" labors to construct a model of universalism that can accommodate the fact of controversy, the fact of dispute, dissent, and cultural unrest. For if, as Coleridge's manuscript note to "Fears in Solitude" tells us, the poem is "perhaps not Poetry,—but rather some sort of middle thing between Poetry and Oratory," this "middle thing" lacks not only the generic determinacy of the lyric and the political manifesto, but also the assumptions about the certainty of language and communication across

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1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, *Vol. I*, ed. John Shawcross (Oxford: Clarendon,1907), p. 8.

2 Marilyn Butler, ed. *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.

3 Paul Magnuson, "The Shaping of 'Fears of Solitude'" in *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today*, ed. Christine Gallant (New York: AMS, 1989), pp. 205-6.

cultural divides that each of these genres carries.[4] In the absence of this certainty, then, the poem moves toward an understanding of universalism as a pure potentiality, as the necessary horizon towards which the poet and reader, orator and audience, must endlessly strive.

In offering up this claim I mean to rethink the critical tendency to read Coleridge's relationship to mass culture as one characterized by withdrawal "from the threatened instability of… discourse," as Kathryn Sutherland puts it, "to the security of the ideal, the text-created reader."[5] Both Mark Canuel and Simon Bainbridge have identified as normative the suggestion that Coleridge, particularly in "Fears in Solitude," endorses a "*retreat* from politics," a "*retreat* to the private."[6] Such a reading is particularly attractive, perhaps, given the structure of the poem, which Mark Jones describes as "not a lyric disrupted by a political harangue in its middle but a harangue contained within lyric bookends."[7] Indeed, the poem is both: rather than read "Fears in Solitude" as a simple retreat to the lyrically constituted, "ideal reader," I shall emphasize the way the poem proceeds from the construction of such a reader to critique the presumptions of the lyric as it moves toward an equally unsatisfactory "political harangue." Ultimately, "Fears in Solitude" exhibits a dialectical structure, whereby the limits of the both "Poetry" and "Oratory" are exposed, as neither of these alternatives is capable of resolving the tensions that constitute the Romantic culture of controversy.

The opening lines establish as a conceit of the poem that within the articulations of the bodiless subject, the pure voice, lies the capacity for unimpeded, universal communication:

> A green and silent spot, amid the hills,
> A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place
> No singing sky-lark ever poised himself.
> The hills are heathy, save that swelling slope,
> Which hath a gay and gorgeous covering on,
> All golden with the never-bloomless furze,

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[4] Quoted in William Keach, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*: *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 522; all references to "Fears in Solitude" refer to this edition and are cited hereafter parenthetically in text. On the relationship between public and private discourses in both Coleridge's poem and, interestingly, the 1798 quarto volume as a whole, see Felicity James, "Coleridge and the Fears of Friendship, 1798" in *Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 24 (Winter 2004), pp. 11-18.

[5] Kathryn Sutherland, "'Events...Have Made Us a World of Readers': Reader Relations 1780 1830" in David B. Pirie, ed., *The Penguin History of Literature: The Romantic Period* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 40.

[6] Mark Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790-1830* (CUP, 2002), p. 106, my italics; Simon Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Visions of Conflict* (OUP, 2003), p. 76, my italics.

[7] Mark Jones, "Alarmism, Public-Sphere Performatives, and the Lyric Turn; or, What Is 'Fears in Solitude' Afraid Of?" in *boundary* 2 30.3 (2003), p. 98. By describing the opening and closing sections as "bookends," Jones suggests an agreement with Richard Cronin's claim that "'Fears in Solitude'…[exhibits] an impulse to retreat into an isolated rural society and into domesticity; see Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Macmillan 2000), p. 72. Along similar lines, Laurence Lockridge argues that "Even [as] 'Fears in Solitude'…discusses the larger scene of warfare between England and France…[it] opens and closes in a country cottage suitable for 'solitary musings' and domestic affections"; see Lockridge, *The Ethics of Romanticism* (CUP, 1989), p. 105.

Which now blooms most profusely…. (ll. 1-7)

The self-consciousness implied by the exclamation point at the end of the first sentence—the awareness, that is, that the view of the dell rouses emotion within the speaker himself—quickly gives way to objective description, as if within this mode of articulation lay an objectively universal perspective, a perspective accessible to all subjects. The position of the reader is thus precisely that of the speaker, a position from which it is possible to take in the entirety of the dell "amid the hills": the reader, like the speaker, is bodiless and floating, transcendental.

The certainty of this conceit, and the position of speaker and reader alike, founder throughout the opening section. For example, the transcendental perspective is complicated by the turn at the end of line 7:

but the dell,
Bathed by the mist, is fresh and delicate
As vernal corn-field, or the unripe flax,
When, through its half-transparent stalks, at eve,
The level sunshine glimmers with green light. (ll. 7-11)

Peter Larkin has described these lines as suggesting "a perspective at the same level, or even a little below, the stalks themselves." In this sense, there is an earthward trajectory, a purposive movement from the transcendental perspective to what Larkin calls a "dell's-eye view."[8] Coleridge staves off the conclusion of this movement, however, and returns us to a place above and outside the dell:

Oh! 'tis a quiet spirit-healing nook!
Which all, methinks, would love…. (ll. 12-13)

By emphatically returning to the self-conscious voice, Coleridge brings us back to the disembodied voice of universal communication. The conceit solidifies in the lines that follow, as the speaker becomes visible in the third-person, severing the bodied subject of the speaker as a "humble man… in his youthful years" from the bodiless voice of the poem:

Which all, methinks, would love; but chiefly he,
The humble man, who, in his youthful years,
Knew just so much of folly, as had made
His early manhood more securely wise! (ll. 13-16)

What follows, however, is an emphatic dismantling of the conceit. As the speaker-object—the young Coleridge lying in the dell—"dreams of better

[8] Peter Larkin, "'Fears in Solitude': Reading (from) the Dell" in *The Wordsworth Circle* 22.1 (1991), p. 12.

worlds" (l. 26), the speaker-subject begins to contrast his youthful dreams with his current concerns about England:

> My God! It is a melancholy thing
> For such a man, who would in full fain preserve
> His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel
> For all his human brethren—O my God!
> It weighs upon the heart that he must think
> What uproar and what strife may now be stirring
> This way or that way o'er these silent hills—
> Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,
> And all the crash of onset; fear and rage,
> And undetermined conflict—even now,
> Even now, perchance, and in his native isle:
> Carnage and groans beneath this blessed sun! (ll. 29-40)

As the past and the present are pressed together—"even now,/Even now"—the speaker-subject becomes entangled with the speaker-object, until at last, the subject comes down to earth, entering the frame of the poem:

> We have offended, Oh! my countrymen!
> We have offended very grievously,
> And been most tyrannous…. (ll. 41-43)

Here the persistent wavering between the bodied and the bodiless, the material and the ideal, is resolved. That is, if throughout the first 40 lines the poem continually confronts the limits of its presumptions about lyric universalism, this confrontation finally culminates in the shift from "Poetry" to "Oratory." The "thunder and… shout," "fear and rage," "Carnage and groans"—these demand a mode of address that appeals to, rather than presupposes, a universal audience. This appeal is most visible in the anaphoric repetition of the first-person pronoun, "We" (ll. 59, 93, 103, 116), which labors to constitute out of the multiple voices of readers the nation as a whole, or, more precisely, to reconstitute the false unity of the nation—"this whole people… clamorous/For war and bloodshed" (ll. 93-94)—as a true unity, that of universal brotherhood:

> From east to west
> A groan of accusation pierces Heaven!
> The wretched plead against us; multitudes,
> Countless and vehement, the sons of God,
> Our brethren! (ll. 43-49)

The syntactical doubling of Coleridge's language (wherein the syntax of the line is brought into tension with the syntax of the sentence) suggests that the

"multitudes" of line 45 are not simply multitudes of "The wretched" but also multitudes of "us," a divided nation in the guise of a unified one, or "one scheme of perjury":

> Oh! blasphemous! the book of life is made
> A superstitious instrument, on which
> We gabble o'er the oaths we mean to break;
> For all must swear—all and in every place,
> College and wharf, council and justice-court;
> All, all must swear, the briber and the bribed,
> Merchant and lawyer, senator and priest,
> The rich, the poor, the old man and the young;
> All, all make up one scheme of perjury…. (ll. 70-78)

It is precisely the relationship between the diverse English subjects—"the briber and the bribed," "Merchant and lawyer," etc.—and the "book" (which replaced "Word" in an early draft and survived all later revisions) that constitutes their speech-acts as perjuries, and in this sense the nation divided is, to employ William St. Clair's titular phrase, a "reading nation," a nation of multiple readers, of multiple readerships with what Jon Klancher calls multiple "interpretive strategies."[9] That the emergence of a mass reading audience was a source of worry for the Romantic author, and especially for Coleridge, has, of course, been the subject of much critical work. For example, reading the famous reference to the "multitudinous PUBLIC" in the *Biographia Literaria*—"all men being supposed to read, and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism"—John Whale and Lucy Newlyn both emphasize the way the public thus conceived undermines Coleridge's deepest beliefs; the public emerges, they argue, as a "false form of subjectivity…[whose] 'personal unity' is a mockery of the integrated, moral self," a "parodic version of the multeity-in-unity which was his personal creed."[10] Andrew Bennett pushes this reading further, describing the passage as a "paranoid caricature of the reading public."[11]

In light of these conclusions, I would suggest that, though the poem's immediate concern is the sins of Coleridge's countrymen, for which they are about to be punished in the form of French invasion, this concern cannot be divorced from the ills brought on by mass readership:

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[9] William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987), p. 46. My reference to "speech-acts" follows on Jones's reading of the poem, which is in turn indebted to the theories of J.L. Austin. See particularly Jones, "Alarmism," pp. 72-74.

[10] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, Vol. 1*, p. 42; John C. Whale, Imagination under Pressure, 1789-1832: *Aesthetics, Politics, and Utility* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 174; Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 55.

[11] Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 44.

> We send our mandates for the certain death
> Of thousands and ten thousands! 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! (ll. 103-7)

According to Michael Simpson's deft reading of this scene, "in which women and children begin their day by reading about the end of someone else's," "Boys and girls,/And women" sits in apposition to the "thousands and ten thousands" until the syntactic tension is relieved, that is until "Boys and girls,/And women" is revealed to be the subject of the verb "read."[12] Building on this insight, which leads Simpson to conclude that the death of "thousands and ten thousands" suggests also the death of "Boys and girls,/And Women," we might note again Coleridge's syntactic doubling, which reveals a commentary upon the sheer number of readers and the problems caused by the "multitudinous PUBLIC."

Further, this anxiety about readerly diversity signals an uncertainty about the very status of language, which, debased, seems to have lost the potential to appeal to readers across antagonistic divides, for to identify the English as "one scheme of perjury" is also to identify English as a language of perjury:

> The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers
> From curses, who knows scarcely words enough
> To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,
> Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
> And technical in victories and defeats,
> And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
> Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
> Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
> We join no feeling and attach no form! (ll. 108-116)

The echoes between this passage and the "multitudinous PUBLIC" of the *Biographia Literaria* are striking: the "phraseman" is both "absolute" and absolutist, a "nominal despot"; the "mere abstractions" of a language debased are "shaped" like the public itself "by the magic of abstraction." Just as there should be a unity of "body and soul" in man, and as there should be a genuine unity of the nation, so too should there be a unity of "feeling and…form" in language.

This uncertainty about language, which is equally the uncertainty about the "multitudinous PUBLIC" that employs the language, thus complicates Coleridge's appeal to the nation as a whole, which we see as the poem moves

[12] Michael Simpson, "The Morning (Post) After: Apocalypse and Bathos in Coleridge's 'Fears in Solitude'" in Tim Fulford, ed., *Romanticism and Millenarianism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 71.

away from the imperatives that recur throughout the "political harangue" toward the softer jussive—

> And oh! may we return
> Not with drunken triumph but with fear,
> Repenting of the wrongs with which we stung
> So fierce a foe to frenzy!
> (ll. 150-153)

—and, as Coleridge reintroduces, immediately thereafter, the "I":

> I have told,
> O Britons! O my brethren! I have told
> Most bitter truth, but without bitterness.
> Nor deem my zeal or factious or mis-timed… (ll. 153-156)

The self-reference here marks an awareness of the merely subjective universality of the speaker's articulations and sheds light on the transition from the second section of the poem to the final "bookend." That is, just as the first section concludes by exposing the assumptions of lyric universalism, the second section concludes by exposing the impossibility of constituting universal agreement from within the public sphere by means of "Oratory."

What is left for Coleridge, then, if he cannot find universal communicability outside the cultural field (in the solitude of the dell), nor within the public sphere, is a position located at the interstice between the public and the private. In the final verse paragraph, the speaker is again situated alone in the dell, but, in contrast his position at the beginning of the poem, here the speaker appears within the frame as the subject of articulation:

> Now farewell,
> Farewell, awhile, O soft and silent spot!
> On the green sheep-track, up the heathy hill,
> Homeward I wind my way; and lo! recalled,
> From bodings that have well nigh wearied me,
> I find myself upon the brow, and pause
> Startled! (ll. 207-213)

No longer possible is the opening conceit, wherein universal communication is assumed and spatialized as a position above and outside the dell. Rather, the process of articulation is revealed as a process, a means of constituting universality. Yet this process is merely purposive, universal in form only; following on the second section, Coleridge is all too aware that a claim to universality is no guarantor of universal assent. Thus, far from retreating into a form of address that presumes an ideal "society" of "elmy fields," Stowey's "church-tower" and "four huge elms" (ll. 222), Coleridge sees only the possibility of society, the "burst of prospect":

> This burst of prospect, here in the shadowy main,
> Dim tinted, there the mighty majesty
> Of that huge amphitheatre of rich
> And elmy fields seems like society…. (ll. 215-218)

If, as I have argued, the first section ends with the collapse of present and past, the poem closes, it seems, with the collapse of present and future, as Coleridge looks forward and, in the poem's final words "yearns for human kind" (l. 232). With this closing gesture, Coleridge transforms the failures of the first two sections—the inability to communicate across the deep divides within an England grounded in controversy—into hope: as long as there is controversy, there is the potential for universal agreement, if only the potential.

At the risk of offering a totalizing statement of the sort that tends to arouse immediate suspicion, I would venture to conclude that this understanding of universalism as a potentiality is a quintessentially "Romantic" one, necessitated by the particular historical conditions that characterize the early nineteenth century. As the public sphere widened, as literacy and the institutions of literature expanded across England, and as the country grew, in the wake of the Revolution controversy, increasingly divided—in short, as controversialism became the dominant ethos—ideas of general agreement and common sense that had achieved predominance in the eighteenth century were exposed to a critique that was itself rooted in common sense: the fact of general disagreement was evidence enough of the shortcomings of the philosophy of generality.[13] The articulation of an alternative model of universalism would take various forms, one of which is the peculiar "middle thing between Poetry and Oratory" that is "Fears in Solitude." With its dialectical critique of the universalist assumptions of both "Poetry" (universal communication is possible from a position of transcendence) and "Oratory" (universal assent must be constituted from within the public sphere) and its ultimate turn toward the purely potential status of universal accord, Coleridge's poem provides a model of universalism that preserves the hope of national unity while acknowledging the challenges posed by the fact of controversy in an England composed of continually shifting readerships and allegiances.

[13] Paul Trolander argues persuasively that the shift away from a philosophy of general nature was rooted in politics rather than philosophy, particularly in the critique of generality that Burke inaugurates in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. His analysis not only helps explain how an epistemic rupture is rooted in historical events, but also how the Revolution controversy—in which Burke is a key participant—might have demanded a new model of universalism to replace that of the Enlightenment; see Trolander, "Politics of the Episteme: The Collapse of the Discourse of General Nature and the Reaction to the French Revolution" in Lisa Plummer Crafton, ed., *The French Revolution Debate in English Literature and Culture* (Westport: Greenwood P, 1997), especially pp. 115-118.