'Where first I sprang to light': Coleridge's Autobiographical Reflections 1797-98

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WITHIN SIX DAYS of moving to Nether Stowey at the turn of the year of 1796-1797 Coleridge sent a list of poems to Joseph Cottle for inclusion in the second edition of his poems.[1] This list omitted the sonnets on contemporary figures in public life and some early poems, reflecting not only Coleridge's new poetic of 'simplicity' urged on him by Charles Lamb and the reviewers of the first edition, but also his disillusionment with the cut and thrust of what he called the 'local and temporary politics' of Bristol. Six weeks later he delivered by hand the first of the sequence of five autobiographical letters addressed to Tom Poole, the last of which was completed the following February. Immediately following this, he composed *Frost at Midnight*, which appeared as the third and final poem of the *Fears in Solitude* quarto, published in the autumn of 1798. This volume not only marked the conclusion of his time in Stowey but can also be regarded as a carefully shaped public statement of the position he had by then reached both politically and personally. This paper will explore the significance for Coleridge of his intense reflections on his childhood during the Stowey period by first reconsidering the five 'autobiographical letters'. It will then go on to examine how this inner dialogue with his childhood, home and family was manifested in the second edition of his poems, published in 1797, and reached its final public expression in the *Fears in Solitude* quarto published in the autumn of 1798, just after he had left for Germany.

It is worth remembering that Coleridge was in general very loth to explore his early life. James Gillman later emphasised this:

> I had often pressed him to write some account of his early life, and of the various circumstances connected with it. But the aversion he had to read or write any thing about himself was so great, that I never succeeded, except in obtaining a few notes, rather than a detailed account.[2]

In fact the letters to Poole and these notes to Gillman are the only two examples of any sustained attempt at autobiography, apart from *Biographia Literaria*, which is a rather different project. This may well be because of the pain the process caused him. What was it which made him feel the need to explore his childhood in February 1797 and why did he choose this rather peculiar form in which to cast these memories? I would argue, in brief, that the Stowey period was a period of re-orientation. In writing about his

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[1] This article is a revised version of a paper given at the Kilve Weekend in September 2009 on 'Home to Coleridge'. I would like to thank Peter Larkin for inviting me to speak, Shirley Watters, as always, for hosting it, and all the true Friends of Coleridge who attended.

[2] James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* (London, 1838), p. 5. The abbreviation JG followed by the page number will appear parenthetically in the text.

childhood and about his Ottery home he was in essence redefining himself and measuring himself against his family, perhaps comparing his own family life in Stowey with that of his past. He was deciding what he wished to preserve and honour from his past and what he wished to prune and reject. It was a revisionary process in some ways analogous to his reshaping of the elaborately titled *Poems on Various Subjects* of 1796 into the simpler more coherent *Poems* of 1797.

Coleridge's reflections on his childhood, home and family can be seen not only in this biographical context but also in the context of a widespread public debate and shift in attitude on the subject.[3] Historians of the family such as Lawrence Stone and Peter Laslett have argued that throughout the eighteenth century there was a gradual shift away from kinship based on blood-ties and blood-lineage to one based on the conjugal tie and on the affectionate ties of the married couple. There was a growing sentimentalising of family life demonstrated in the rise of the modern 'companionate' marriage and the beginnings of the child-centred nuclear family. The first-generation Romantics played their full part in this and Dove Cottage and Coleridge Cottage are both in part shrines to these new ideas of home and family. The regionally based, far-flung family network of the Ottery Coleridges illustrates the late stages of the older model, whereas the idea of home and family which finds its way into the Stowey poems illustrates the new model.

A further context for Coleridge's reflections on his origins and his redefinition of himself around his domestic circle, which figures so prominently in the *Fears in Solitude* quarto, is the debate which followed the French Revolution. Burke had argued that this assault on the state was 'an assault on the family, literally in the case of the attack on Marie-Antoinette…'[4] But his idea of family was based on the older, feudal model based on blood-ties and the transfer of property from father to son. Coleridge's idea of family, however, was based rather on the model of free choice just as Paine's idea of society was one based on the free choice of individuals who have, '*entered into a compact with each other*.'[5] Godwin, in challenging Burke, characteristically takes up a more extreme position on the state and family than Paine in that he replaced both blood-tie and conjugal-tie with reason and justice. Coleridge would have none of it. He early argued for what he called the 'ardour of private attachments' in both domestic and social spheres as being the basis of any wider love for Man: 'The ardour of private attachments make Philanthropy a necessary *habit* of the soul. I love my *Friend*—such as *he* is, all mankind *are* or *might* be!'[6] We also sense that the cult of sympathetic friendship ran alongside Coleridge's quest for a sympathetic audience. Lamb had been one such ideal

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3 See Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790's, (*London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), ch. 1

4 James, op. cit. p.30

5 Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*, (London, 1791), p. 52, quoted in James, op. cit. p. 31

6 CL 1 86, quoted in James, op. cit. p. 35

reader and Tom Poole's protective friendship made him the ideal reader for a narrative of his own life.

Having considered briefly some of these contexts, I would now like to look closely at the autobiographical letters themselves. Some passages from them have become so familiar through repeated quotation that it is easy to overlook the fact that these letters are in many ways puzzling documents. For example, they present themselves as letters but they are letters of a most unusual kind. For one thing, they were posted by hand to an addressee to whom the writer could speak at almost any time; unconventional, certainly, if not downright contrary. What kind of documents are they exactly? What is their genre? They were not written for publication, yet it would clearly be a mistake to see them as purely private personal letters. After all, they were not spontaneous compositions but written at the request of a friend. According to an MS note by Poole:

> When Coleridge resided at Stowey he agreed to write his life in a series of letters to be addressed to me—I was to receive a letter every Monday morning— (CL I 302 fn.1)

This implies that it was Poole who suggested to Coleridge the idea of writing about his life and also the form which those writings should take. We know that letters of the period were habitually shared and passed round and clear evidence of this comes in a letter of Poole's to Charles Lloyd of June 5, 1797. Poole is inviting Lloyd to contribute to a fund to support Coleridge that he had planned the year before with Estlin. He writes:

> I observe in one of your letters to Col. you reminded me of transmitting to you the letters I received from him containing an account of his life. The truth is I have yet received but two. I excuse him; for his mind has been, and is, deeply engaged in the production of his tragedy.[7]

Poole's utter lack of embarrassment in referring to the contents of Lloyd's letter to Coleridge, together with the plan to 'transmit' the autobiographical letters back to Lloyd, reminds us that they are not 'personal' letters, in which one person talks informally and intimately to another, but occupy a shared, partly public space. A further possible factor is that, even if Coleridge himself was unaware of Poole's project to collect a subscription for him, it may well be that these letters arise partly from the need Coleridge felt at this time to show himself worthy of the faith Poole had in him and his abilities by giving an account of his life thus far to one who looked to him to achieve great things in the future.

Whatever the truth of their origins it is clear that they are very deliberate,

[7] Mrs Henry Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends,* (London: Macmillan, 1888), Vol I p. 229. Reprinted as by Elizabeth Sandford, with a new introduction by Reginald Watters, (The Friarn Press, Over Stowey, Somerset, 1996), p.129

self-consciously literary compositions, which draw upon a range of literary models and contexts. Coleridge himself announces his authorial intentions in the elaborate opening paragraph of the February letter:

> I could inform the dullest author how he might write an interesting book—let him relate the events of his own Life with honesty, not disguising the feelings that accompanied them. (CL I 302)

Coleridge emphasises here not just accuracy but also emotional honesty and, in focusing on the narrator's response to events, he is perhaps already gesturing towards the dissenting spiritual autobiography, a genre which burgeoned in the second half of the eighteenth century. Coleridge makes this reference explicit in the next sentence:

> —I never yet read even a Methodist's 'Experience' in the Gospel Magazine without receiving instruction & amusement: and I should almost despair of the Man, who could peruse the Life of John Woolman without an amelioration of Heart.— (CL I 302)

The Gospel Magazine, started in 1766, was in fact an evangelical Calvinist rather than Methodist magazine, so it is unlikely to be the one referred to here. It is more likely that he was thinking of *The Gospel Magazine and Theological Review,* first published in 1796 and which contained several narrative biographies and autobiographies. Whatever the precise reference, we know from his Bristol Library borrowings that Coleridge had an interest in dissenting spiritual autobiographies with their narratives of salvation and despair and which often came out of the abolitionist context. This was the case with *The Journal* of the American abolitionist Quaker, John Woolman, to which Coleridge refers so warmly here. It was published in 1774 in Philadelphia and in London in 1775 and is essentially concerned with how the author was 'delivered from despair' and impelled by the 'inward principle' to see the inconsistency of Christianity with slave-keeping.

Although Coleridge seems to be justifying his autobiographical project by reference to these essentially didactic dissenting autobiographies, he goes on to draw a distinction between his own account and such narratives in the next sentence:

> As to my Life, it has all the charms of variety: high Life and low Life, Vices & Virtues, great Folly & some Wisdom. (CL I 302)

The truth is that, whereas the typical dissenting autobiography is controlled by the experience of conversion and salvation so that each episode is moralised in relation to it, this is emphatically not the case with Coleridge's autobiography. His narrative is more episodic and, above all, the story is not told from the perspective of the completed journey, of one who has been 'saved'; his project

is unfinished and he is seeking to understand himself in the process of going back to his childhood. He elaborates further on his purpose:

> However what I am depends on what I have been; and you, MY BEST FRIEND! have a right to the narration.—To me the task will be a useful one; it will renew and deepen my reflections on the past; and it will perhaps make you behold with no unforgiving or impatient eye those weaknesses and defects in my character, which so many untoward circumstances have contrived to plant there.— (CL I 302)

Here he acknowledges the obligation to frankness among friends, a Unitarian tradition, and he then introduces one of the dominant motifs of these letters: a portrait of the artist as weakened by 'untoward circumstances', by which he means he has been 'too soon transplanted' from his home.

Having considered some of the contexts for the letters, their genre and purpose, it is now time to look at their content. Two motifs will receive most attention. The first is the dominance of his father. Not only is the figure of his father omnipresent, but the whole narrative shape of the series is built around his father's sudden death at the end of the fourth letter. Before this trauma the reader is in a home-based world, vividly recalled and rich in feeling. But the account of his life at Christ's Hospital in the final letter, following his expulsion from the Eden of Ottery, is curiously matter-of-fact, unreflective and emotionally dry. It is as if he has been stunned by his father's death and its consequences into dazed acceptance of an alien world. Only in the final lines does the authentic Coleridgean voice return—the ones devoted to food:

> Our food was portioned—and excepting on Wednesdays I never had a belly full. Our appetites were damped but never satisfied—and we had no vegetables.— (CL I 389)

It is an essentially needy voice, hungry for food and hungry for affection. The second key motif is the unflattering nature of his self-portrait. The famous episodes of the 'crumbly cheese' and of the voracious reading are, it is true, astonishingly psychologically perceptive of the world of a child, but they also add up to a strikingly unflattering self-portrait. Not only is he solitary and intellectually precocious, but he is also, according to his account, an essentially un-likeable child.

The first letter begins with sketches of family history handed down from his mother and his aunt. They tell 'of times too remote to be pierced by the eye of investigation.' Two comments are worth making. Firstly, in these early sketches Coleridge is already foregrounding his father decisively at the expense of his mother. This is true not only in that he devotes so much more attention to his father than to his mother, who is mentioned only in passing, but that he reverses the social standing of the two families:

> The Bowdens inherited a house-stye & a pig-stye in the Exmore Country, in the reign of Elizabeth, as I have been told—and to my knowledge they have inherited nothing better since that time.—
>
> (CL I 302)

This is unfair to a family, which, according to JCC Mays, enjoyed a respectable place in the annals of Molland and South Molton.[8] By contrast, Coleridge's grandfather on his father's side is promoted socially and relocated geogaphically, becoming 'a respectable Woolen-draper in the town of South Molton.' In fact he was very probably the bastard son of William Northmore, brought up on the parish, thrice bankrupt, possibly slightly deranged and bringing up his own family, including Coleridge's father, in chaotic circumstances of extreme poverty. The point is not that Coleridge is here deliberately distorting the truth but that this version of his father's background, received, Coleridge himself tells us, from his mother and aunt, reflects his father's desire to conceal his humiliating origins, a strategy in which his ambitious wife was complicit.

The second motif is Coleridge's treatment of his father's story of escape from poverty:

> 'My father received the half of his last crown & his blessing; and walked off to seek his fortune. After he had proceeded a few miles, he sate him down on the side of the road, so overwhelmed with painful thoughts that he wept audibly. A Gentleman passed by, who knew him: & and enquiring into his distresses took my father with him, & settled him in a neigh'bring town as a schoolmaster.' (CL I 303)

This highly literary style, evocative of fairy-tale or the picaresque novel, not only subtly prepares us for the celebrated account of his own childhood reading, which follows in the next letter, but presents his father and his father's journey from poverty to the financial security and social respectability in Ottery as the story of a rags-to-riches hero from fairytale. This presentation of his father as a 'success' due to good fortune rather than hard work or ambition is just one strand in Coleridge's complex treatment of him in these letters.

Although Poole did not receive a package from Coleridge the following Monday, as was originally agreed, he did not have to wait long for the second instalment, which came in the following month. This letter covers the first three years of Coleridge's life and is mainly devoted to thumbnail portraits of his father and his siblings. He tells us that these very early years had nothing in them that seems to relate to his later self, a view only credible in a pre-Freudian age. But in denying this he is led to declare what he thought was the real focus of the narrative. It was, he says, to identify those things, which 'assisted to

[8] See Jim Mays, 'Was Coleridge's Father as simple as a Child?' *The Coleridge Bulletin* NS 21, Spring 2003. Anyone interested in Coleridge's early life should not miss this remarkable paper, based upon research carried out over many decades. Much of what follows draws heavily upon it.

form my particular mind', a phrase which irresistibly evokes a later and much more celebrated autobiographical account of childhood, *The Prelude*.

It is worth considering closely Coleridge's portrait of his father in the autobiographical letters, not so much to dismantle the myth, a project so brilliantly carried out by JCC Mays, but rather to explore the significance of this myth for Coleridge. I have already suggested that at the time of these letters he was defining himself in relation to his family. In brief, he came to define himself in opposition to Ottery, his mother and his brothers but in sympathy with his father.

His father is presented as a genuinely learned scholar, a would-be writer with a number of literary projects to his name and, if not a first rate genius, 'a first rate Christian': '… in learning, good-heartedness, absentness of mind, and excessive ignorance of the world, he was a perfect Parson Adams.' (CL 1 310) This famous thumbnail sketch is affectionate but essentially comic. His father is presented as a literary type. But the portrait also serves as a comic prefiguring of Coleridge's own life of intellectual enquiry committed to unworldly goals and already there is an implication that quality of character is somehow related to this unworldliness.

Coleridge returns to his father's unworldliness at length in the fourth of the series in October of that year:

> 'My Father (who had so little of parental ambition in him, that he had destined his children to be Blacksmiths &c, & had accomplished his intention but for my Mother's pride and spirit of aggrandizing her family)…' (CL I 354)

This picture of his father as completely unconcerned with the real world to the point of parental neglect is of course entirely inconsistent with the fact that Coleridge's numerous older brothers were all already successfully launched on their professional lives at the time he was writing. It is also belied by what we can read of John Coleridge in the *Early Family Letters*, where, as we shall see, he shows himself tirelessly active in making contacts to launch his children's professional lives. It is also immediately contradicted by Coleridge himself telling us that his father had decided early on that his youngest son should become a parson and deliberately took on the role as his spiritual guide and educator. Or is this perhaps not so much a contradiction as a confirmation of the special place he, the youngest, had in his father's affections? Whereas John Coleridge, according to Coleridge himself, was oblivious to the potential of his other children, he recognised his youngest son's special qualities because they were so like his own and, what is more, he loved him enough to do something about it. Hence the celebrated account of his taking the young Samuel with him on his parish visits at night and showing him the stars and planets in the sky and demonstrating their relative movement at home afterwards.

His father's unworldliness takes on a visionary quality in Coleridge's account of his death:

> He dreamt that Death had appeared to him, as he is commonly painted, and touched him with his dart. (CL I 355)

This was, apparently, on the night before his death. Interestingly, Coleridge suggests that he shared with his father this gift of second sight in his account of the night his father died. On being woken by his mother's shriek, he immediately said, 'Papa is dead', even though he had not known that his father had returned home. 'How I came to think of his Death, I cannot tell; but so it was.'

It should be remembered that Coleridge was writing this in 1797, some sixteen years after his father's death and when he was only twenty-four. He was consciously and unconsciously seeking out parallels and connections between their personalities and lives and he clearly went on doing this until the end of his life. But by the time we get to the Highgate years the famous stories, the stock phrases had become hardened by habit into stylisation. As Gillman writes:

> He would recall to memory the past anecdotes of his father and repeat them until the tears ran down his face… 'Yes, my friend,' he would end, 'he was indeed an Israelite without guile, and might be compared to Parson Adams. (JG 2)

Gillman somewhat ploddingly remarks:

> The same appellation which Coleridge applied to his father will also, with equal justice, be descriptive of himself. (JG 2)

Although it is not the purpose of his paper to seek to demythologise Rev. John Coleridge, it is, nevertheless, worth looking at some of the facts which JCC Mays has unearthed. What strikes one most is that the qualities which emerge as a result are precisely those which have been expunged from the son's version. Firstly, impetuousness and subterfuge. The facts seem to be that the recently widowed thirty-five year old Rev. John got one of his young parishioners pregnant. He then attempted to conceal the situation by removing the twenty-six year old Ann Bowden to her mother-in-law's to give birth and had their eldest child brought up there separately. He also falsified the parish register to conceal the fact that his second wife was four or five months pregnant when they got married. Secondly, worldliness. It seems that it was not purely through talent and hard work that John Coleridge rose so swiftly to prominence in Ottery St Mary. The invisible hand of 'interest' or 'management', as it was known at the time, played its part. Apparently, John Coleridge, like his youngest son, did not take his degree at Cambridge, being only resident at Sidney Sussex for under six months. He may in fact, according to JCC Mays be the only person ever to have held the position of headmaster

of King's School, Ottery St Mary without a university degree and he was certainly unique in being appointed to all three of the key positions of Vicar, Schoolmaster and Chaplain Priest in the town within six months and holding them all simultaneously. Professor Mays identifies behind this meteoric rise a kind of quid pro quo relationship with his Buller patrons which was absolutely characteristic of the time but which is at odds with the myth of the 'absent man', the 'Israelite without guile' who was 'as simple as a child'. The real John Coleridge was much more astute and worldly, much more of a 'manager' than either he chose to reveal or, perhaps, it suited Coleridge himself to admit.

Mays's findings are based on exhaustive research in local archives. However, evidence from the *Early Family Letters* tends to support the picture of Rev. John as an accomplished 'manager' of contacts and influence in true eighteenth century style, while providing unmistakable evidence of his love and care for his family.[9] Many of these letters are addressed to him from his sons. He shares with them jokes, intimate revelations as well as their tortuous financial explanations and excuses. In addition he emerges as tirelessly busy on behalf of his son's careers. In a letter of 1775, for example, a Robert Hamilton writes to him thus:

> I have not been unmindful of my promise to endeavour to get your son a commission and spoke to the Secretary at War for that purpose on Saturday last. (EFL 37)

He also has an unquestioning faith in the role of personal influence in gaining preferment and promotion, an old-fashioned assumption which young John, the soldier, newly promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, evidently finds somewhat irritating:

> I must now undeceive you in your opinion that promotion is gained by interest, one only meeting with Preferment according to the general rise, fixed by invariable rules, upon which some instances of infringement have happened in former times, but in all likelyhood (sic.) such will never be seen again. (EFL 38)

The only surviving letter written by Coleridge's father is characteristically on behalf of young Frances, the 'handsome Coleridge', to seek assistance in the start of his naval career.

In conclusion, whereas Coleridge presents his father in the five autobiographical letters as a model for his own life and as an unworldly man of scholarly interests, involved in diverse literary projects, entirely lacking in worldly ambition, but full of love for his children, it seems that he underestimated his father's energy, shrewdness and skill both in advancing his own career and on behalf of his large family, all of whom, with the exception

[9] (Ed.) James Engell, *Coleridge: The Early Family Letters*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Subsequent references will be abbreviated to EFL followed by a page number.

of Sam, became safely installed in professional careers, largely as a result of his own efforts. In this he was enthusiastically supported by his socially ambitious wife Ann.

Having explored the presentation of his father, it is worth looking at Coleridge's treatment of himself in the autobiographical letters. He builds his self-portrait around episodes. One of these is what may be termed his mock-heroic 'Promethean Moment': 'In this year I was carelessly left by my nurse-ran to the fire, and pulled out a live coal-burnt myself dreadfully.' Even more significant than his selection of the stealing of fire though are his subsequent words to the doctor, which were, according to his mother, his very first words: 'Nasty Doctor Young'. Coleridge speculates thoughtfully: 'The snatching of fire and the circumstances of my first words expressing hatred to professional men, are they at all *ominous*?' He is surely suggesting beneath the comic tone that he is somehow set apart from his brothers and is destined for a life outside the parameters of conventional society and professional occupations.

This sense of difference is constantly emphasised. He took, he writes:

> … no pleasure in boyish sports-but read incessantly… And so I became very vain… and before I was eight years old, I was a *character*—sensibility, imagination, vanity, sloth & feelings of deep & bitter contempt for almost all who traversed the orbit of my understanding, were even then prominent and manifest. (CL I 347-8)

As he explains at the end of his life in his notes to Gillman:

> Alas! I had all the simplicity, all the docility of the little child, but none of the child's habits. I never thought as a child, never had the language of a child. (JG 6)

Even more pronounced by the end was the sense of uprootedness, originating in his premature departure from home following the death of his father:

> When I was first plucked up and transplanted from my birth place and family, at the death of my dear father… Providence (it has often occurred to me) gave the first intimation, that it was my lot, and that it was best for me, to make or find my way a detached individual, a Terrae Filius,… and as such to take my chance for the free charities of humanity. (JG 6 fn. 2)

Above all, it is this sense Coleridge had of himself as deracinated and eternally homeless which is traced unerringly to its source in the five autobiographical letters.

By the time Coleridge was twenty-four and writing his letters to Poole, this self-image as having been prematurely 'uprooted' was already firmly established. However, there was no sentimentality about Ottery itself, since he

had also by then come to define himself in opposition to its small town culture and felt out of sympathy with the members of his family who still lived there with the exception of George. He had made few return visits since leaving home in April 1782. In fact there appears to have been a seven-year gap before he made his first return visit to Ottery from Christ's Hospital. Subsequent visits home found him increasingly disenchanted and he eventually became outspoken in his criticism. Writing to George about Ottery in August 1792 his comments are cutting and superior. He finds the townspeople too easily impressed by his brother Edward, their 'ravenous hunger' for news of the Terror in France distasteful, the women ugly and the place full of social climbers. A Mr Kessell is 'absolutely beside himself' with pride at the advantageous marriage made by a relation of his and button-holes every acquaintance to boast about it. What is more, Coleridge's mother, 'positively drinks in his long-winded speeches, and dreams of the most wonderful prospects.' By the following February news of his brother Francis's death by suicide in India prompts him to reflect more seriously on his Ottery connections. He admits that Francis's death fills him only with Melancholy rather than Anguish, because, as he explains:

> I quitted Ottery, when I was so young, that most of those endearing circumstances, that are wont to render the scenes and companions of our childhood delightful in the recollection, I have associated with the place of my education— (CL I 53)

He goes on to deliver harsh criticism of the inhabitants of Devon: 'I found them (almost universally) to be gross without openness, and cunning without refinement.' Of his Ottery brothers, he says that Edward never thinks and James is too concerned with 'external appearances' and both persist in exacting a deference from their youngest brother which he says, 'I felt myself little inclined to pay.'

Thus in reflecting on his Ottery past in these letters to Thomas Poole he was measuring the distance which had already opened up between himself and his family rather than seeking a return to the family fold. Although by February 1797 Coleridge had modified his position as a radical outsider and sought some kind of accommodation with George, it was to be on his own terms.

I began by promising to explore some of the connections between Coleridge's reflections on his Ottery childhood represented by the autobiographical letters and his published poetry at the time. It has already been suggested that the reshaping of his oeuvre represented by *Poems* of 1797 is a public statement of his new position. The volume is book-ended by ambitious works, but the sonnets on contemporary public figures are dropped from the first edition of his poems because they represented the kind of involvement in controversy which he had come to feel was not his destiny. As he wrote to Estlin: 'Besides, local and temporary Politics are my aversion—they

narrow the understanding, they narrow the heart, they fret the temper.' (CL I 222) He justified their exclusion to Cottle on the grounds that, 'by omitting everything political, I widen the sphere of my readers.' In their place he prints more personal and domestic poems reflecting his desire to write more simply about real feelings such as the *Dedication* to his brother George*, To the River Otter, On the Birth of a Son* and *On Leaving a Place of Residence.*

The River Otter sonnet, probably written in 1796, seems an obvious candidate for a biographical reading and has been repeatedly used thus to demonstrate Coleridge's affection for his hometown. However, its nostalgia for Ottery is conventional only. It is essentially a genre poem, an imitation of Bowles's River Itchen sonnet. Lamb nails the nature and provenance of its kind of sentimentality unerringly when he writes to Coleridge about Bowles, the original dedicatee of the 1797 *Poems,* in November 1796: [10]

> I love you for dedicating your poetry to Bowles. Genius of the sacred fountain of tears, it was he who led you gently by the hand through all this valley of weeping, showed you the dark green yew trees and the willow shades where, by the fall of waters, you might indulge in an uncomplaining melancholy, a delicious regret for the past…[11]

The final line of the sonnet is exactly the kind of thing Lamb is referring to: 'Ah! That once more I were a careless child.' This is grotesquely far removed from the truth of Coleridge's real experience as a child as represented in the autobiographical letters.

Literary convention is also part of the dedicatory poem to George. It was written at Cottle's request, who must have thought it would be good for sales. 'I then pressed him to dedicate his Poems to one of his relatives, his brother George, of whom he occasionally spoke with peculiar kindness.' But why did Coleridge accept this proposal? Some of the reasons are contained in the poem itself. But George had always been the brother he wanted to please. He felt he had let him down badly following the Dragoon episode and the 1797 *Poems* were evidence that he was not wasting his life or his talents, even if he could not follow a conventional professional path like his brothers. George by then of course held the very same posts the Rev. John had held, along with opinions of similarly unimpeachable orthodoxy. Coleridge, in dedicating the volume to him, was thus making up for his past and seeking some accommodation with the Ottery Coleridges, a process which received its clearest expression in his letter to George of early 1798, in which he talks of his decision to 'snap the squeaking baby trumpet of sedition', a phrase so good and perhaps so expressive of his own attitude towards what he had come to see as the immaturity of his earlier political views that he recycled it at least twice to different correspondents a year apart. Of course, we know that this

[10] Coleridge changed his mind, dedicating the volume to his brother George, since 1794 schoolmaster and chaplain priest in Ottery St. Mary like his father, on the recommendation of Cottle. (See below.)

[11] (Ed.) Edwin W. Marrs, Jr: *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, (Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 62

dedicatory gift was rebuffed. In a copy of the 1797 *Poems*, possibly belonging to Robert Southey, Coleridge later wrote:

> N. B. If this volume should ever be delivered according to it's Direction, i.e. to Posterity, let it be known that the Reverend George Coleridge was displeased and thought his character endangered by this Dedication!! (PW I 1 326)

Beneath these judiciously chosen words and double exclamation marks, one feels the weight of the whole painful history of Coleridge's childhood, boyhood and youth, and of his relations with his family. There was to be no happy return for the prodigal son.

The poem's final lines in which he hesitatingly offers the contents of the rest of the volume to his brother show that Coleridge knew at the time he was taking a risk. He was aware that brother George might find some hard to stomach: 'for some perchance/ Will strike discordant in thy milder mood.' But the poem as a whole wonderfully pulls together many of the threads of the autobiographical letters. It begins with a somewhat conventionalised picture of George and his brothers returning to the family home, 'the same Dwelling where his Father dwelt', to be surrounded by children and siblings: '…now fraternal love hath drawn you to one centre…' (PW I 1 326) In contrast with this conservative domestic idyll Coleridge presents himself in a memorable passage, the best lines in the poem, in which we hear the authentic voice of the autobiographical letters and of the conversation poems. In them he gives definitive expression to that image so deeply embedded in the letters to Poole, that of himself as one prematurely uprooted and doomed forever to wander the earth in search of something lost:

> To me th' Eternal Wisdom hath dispens'd
> A different fortune and more different mind—
> Me from the spot where first I sprang to light,
> Too soon transplanted, ere my soul had fix'd
> Its first domestic loves; and hence through Life
> Chasing chance-started Friendships. (PW I 1 327)

The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner is of course a reworking and expansion of this core theme.[12] There was to be no true rondo or return for either the Old Navigator or Coleridge himself.

However, it is in the 1798 *Fears in Solitude* quarto that the results of Coleridge's autobiographical reflections find their fullest and most mature expression. In this volume the 'inner work' of reflection on childhood, home

[12] See, especially perhaps, the celebrated gloss with its evocation and celebration of the idea of 'home': 'In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.' (PW I 1 393)

and family, represented by the autobiographical letters to Poole, emerges into a public context, both in the sense that his domestic circle feature strongly in two at least of the published poems and in the sense that the volume in which these poems appear is placed most deliberately and explicitly in the context of the threatened invasion by France.

The *Fears in Solitude* quarto as a whole requires careful reading; so much is left open to interpretation. But the long letter to George of March 10 1798 (CL I 394) gives a very clear exposition of what Coleridge thought at the time and is a kind of prose summary of the attitudes and political opinions which underpinned the *Fears in Solitude* quarto. Indeed, there are striking verbal echoes of the letter in the poem. Coleridge's letter was clearly written in response to one he had received earlier from his brother and reads in places like a point-by-point refutation of some of his brother's accusations. Here we find Coleridge defining himself explicitly in dialogue with his own orthodox family as if voicing what until then had been a mainly internal debate with his own past. The position he sets out in this letter is essentially one of disillusionment with bipartisan politics, while retaining a deep attachment to underlying principles of liberty: 'You think, my Brother! That there can be but two *parties* at present, for the Government & against the Government.—It may be so—I am of no party.' He deplores what he calls '…the error of attributing to Governments a talismanic influence over our virtues & our happiness—as if Governments were not rather effects than causes.' He in no way regrets his earlier position: '…it is withheld from me to regret any thing: I therefore consent to be deemed a Democrat & a Seditionist.' He recycles that favourite passage of the year before: '…I have snapped my squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition…' Coleridge's fundamental problem is the way in which political controversy about what he calls 'immediate causes' plays into the hands of 'fiery and undisciplined spirits' so that the passions turn 'the Reason into an hired Advocate.' This in turn leads to the debasement of public discourse and thus to the erosion of reason and humanity among the general public. It is this rather than the Pitt administration itself which is the real target of his attacks in the title poem *Fears in Solitude*, written soon after this letter. In this letter of March 10, Coleridge is seeking some accommodation with his brother and tries to find as much common ground as possible, while at the same time clearly marking out the differences which remain.

What about the *Fears in Solitude* quarto? This volume, appearing in an elegant printed quarto pamphlet, but in an edition of only 200, represents the synthesis of many of the deepest preoccupations of the Stowey period. The key political events behind the volume were the suppression of the Swiss cantons by the French in March and the rumours of invasion of England by Bonaparte, which persisted from January to late April at least. The volume did not in fact appear until September, by which time it had become clear that the invasion would not take place. However, Coleridge, helped by Johnson his publisher, went out of the way to emphasise the fears of invasion current

earlier in the year. The title page, which foregrounds the title poem, establishes clearly the situation which called it into being and by means of skilful page design suggests strongly that the other two poems, subordinate as they are to the title poem, are also to be read in the light of this invasion context. He also gives the month of composition of each individual poem and, in the case of the title poem he even gives the precise date and place: Nether Stowey, April 20th, 1798.

What was his intention in all this elaborate signalling? It has been suggested that Coleridge and Johnson, both under attack from the pro-government press, were deliberately re-stating their fundamental patriotism as a defence. Mark Jones, however, has argued persuasively for a more sophisticated interpretation, one which hinges upon a detailed consideration of the significance of Coleridge's use of the word 'alarm' in both the title page of the volume and as 'alarms' in the subtitle to the title poem.[13] Jones argues by reference to contemporary sources that what Coleridge is really alluding to here is not so much the general fear of a threatened invasion by the French but to the specific evil of 'alarmism', the deliberate fostering of the fear of invasion among the populace by the government for their own narrow political interests. In brief, 'alarm' and 'alarms' are coded allusions to the damage done by politicians and their propaganda machines to the public discourse of the time. If this is so then it is absolutely in keeping with the key central section of the long title poem, which is a polemic against the corruption of language caused by political expediency. It is also in keeping with the views he expressed in his letter to his brother George earlier in March about bipartisan politics. The poem *Fears in Solitude* is thus not a private lyric interrupted by a public harangue, as was at one time a widespread critical view, but a profound meditation from the perspective of solitude on the state of a nation in thrall to an idolatrous faith in the power of government: '…We have been too long/ Dupes of a deep delusion!' (PW I 1 475)

While painting a picture of a society and political culture in crisis, Coleridge presents himself in domestic roles—as 'a son, a brother, and a friend,/ A husband and a father!' He sets against the corruption of public discourse and society at large the values of what he calls 'the bonds of natural love'. In this poem he is asserting the importance of what he called elsewhere 'home-born feeling' and this, he had discovered, was to be found not in Ottery St Mary among his brothers, but in his lowly cottage in Stowey, with Sara and Hartley.

Frost at Midnight, of the three poems in the quarto, is the one which most tangibly draws on Coleridge's autobiographical reflections during this period. It is a meditation not so much on the state of the nation at a moment of crisis but on that same 'home-born feeling' in a domestic circle which Coleridge had identified as the real core of any wider philanthropy or sense of society. Childhood, home and family are right at the centre of the poem and material

[13] 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.

about Christ's Hospital from Coleridge's fifth and final autobiographical letter, endorsed on Feb 19, finds its way, subtly altered, into the poem written a few days later. *Frost at Midnight* is often read now as a purely private and personal poem, partly as a result of its being removed from its original published context alongside the two more overtly political poems in the quarto. Coleridge himself while supervising *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817 gave impetus to this process. He insisted that it be removed from the political section and placed among what he call his 'Meditative poems in Blank Verse'. However, its domestic setting and themes of childhood, nature and education take on a deeper resonance when the poem is read in its original invasion context. Coleridge here presents himself as a family man who has a stake in the future and is thus to be trusted in a moment of national crisis. This is acknowledged by the contemporary reviewers, all of whom note its domestic setting approvingly.[14] However, the poem also comes to mean more when read alongside the other two poems of the volume. I suggest that it reads as a kind of extension or expansion of the final paragraph of *Fears in Solitude*, even if it was written first. It is almost as if we are zooming in on the 'lowly cottage', entering inside and being introduced to 'the inmates of my cottage all at rest.'

Coleridge's self-presentation in the poem is broadly consistent with the self-portrait of the autobiographical letters. He recaps the basic motifs: uprooted from Ottery; unhappy childhood; a dreamer; 'pent mid cloisters dim' in London. However, as in the River Otter sonnet, he allows a certain falsification of his real feelings about Ottery in the interests of the poem itself. It is important for the sake of the poem that his own schoolboy childhood is portrayed as disadvantaged in order to emphasise the contrast with the one he projects for his own child:

> … it fills my heart
> With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
> And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
> And in far other scenes! (PW I 1 455)

For the sake of this antithesis he permits himself to indulge in a rhetorically convenient and no doubt publicly acceptable nostalgia for a country childhood in Ottery:

> and as oft
> With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
> Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
> Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang

[14] See, for example, the *Monthly Review* May 1799, xxix, 43-7: "Frost at Midnight' is pleasing picture of virtue and content in a cottage.' Also the Analytical Review December 1798, xxviii, 592: '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 feelings, as the husband of an affectionate wife, and as the father of a cradled infant.' Both are printed in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage* (ed.) J. R. de J. Jackson, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp.45-47.

> From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
> So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
> With a wild pleasure… (PW I 1 455)

This passage is moving and convincing in its position in the poem, but it is not quite an accurate picture of his real feelings. As we have seen from his autobiographical letters, his feelings about his birthplace while at school were less simple and it is clear from a notebook entry made six years later in Malta that a difficult mixture of feelings had always surrounded holidays and festivals. He searches out and analyses the root causes of these feelings with his characteristically probing intelligence, which in this instance provides an utterly convincing account:

> It is a subject not unworthy of meditation to myself, what the reason is that these sounds & bustles of Holidays, Fairs, Easter-Mondays, & Tuesdays, & Christmas Days, when I was a child & when I was at Christ-Hospital, always made me so heart-sinking, so melancholy? Is it, that from my Habits, or my want of money all the first two or three and 20 years of my Life I have been *alone* at such times?—That by poor Frank's dislike of me when a little Child I was even from Infancy forced to be by myself—or rather is it not, that from all these other causes, & from sundry accidents of my Life, I cannot be happy, but while awakening, enjoying, and giving *sympathy* to one or a few eminently loved Beings, and that when external Joyances call away my attention from these Dreams, which are the poor substitute & wretched Mock-indemnification of that Sympathy & that Society I feel my Hollowness? (CN II 2647)

We might also add that his sister, whom he pictures himself desperately hoping to see, certainly never came to London to see him. Coleridge's primary loyalty in this section is not to autobiographical accuracy but to the poem he is writing, a kind of *Prayer for My Son*, in which he imagines a Wordsworthian future childhood for Hartley. Strict truth is secondary to poetic intention. The original published version of 1798 foregrounds Hartley even further, because the six lines at the end, later cut by Coleridge, describe him in his mother's arms stretching up to the sky:

> Like those, my babe! which, ere to-morrow's warmth
> Have capp'd their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,
> Will catch thine eye, and with their novelty
> Suspend thy little soul; then make thee shout,
> And stretch and flutter from thy mother's arms
> As thou would'st fly for very eagerness. (PW I 1 456 74fn.)

The poem and entire quarto thus conclude not with the sense of rapt closure of 'quietly shining to the quiet moon' which is such a memorable feature of the familiar revised version, but rather with a sense of reaching out and human

activity. The reader may recall Coleridge's own memories of looking up at the night sky with his father and register also that the word 'flutter' in these final lines not only introduces the image of Hartley as a fledgling bird, but is an echo of the passage earlier in the poem about the 'fluttering stranger' where this same word is used twice. It is this image of a child 'stretching and fluttering' in his mother's arms, 'As thou would'st fly for very eagerness', which concludes the original poem, the original volume, and which also provides, in view of the nature of his autobiographical reflections at the time and the first publication of the poem on his departure for Germany, a wholly appropriate conclusion to Coleridge's Stowey period.