Poetry, Politics and Portents: Coleridge and the Waters of Plynlimon

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'TOMORROW MORNING EARLY I SET OUT on a pedestrian scheme for Oxford—from whence after a stay of three or four days I proceed to Wales, make a tour of the Northern part & return to Cambridge' (CL I 81).[1] So Coleridge wrote to his fellow student Samuel Butler in mid-June, 1794. Coleridge was travelling with another university friend, Joseph Hucks, who would publish an account of their tour the following year.[2] Though intending at Oxford simply to call on his old schoolmate, Robert Allen, here Coleridge struck up a momentous friendship with Robert Southey – and stayed for about three weeks, most of which was spent 'disputing', as Southey later recalled, on 'metaphysical subjects'.[3] Out of those conversations, Pantisocracy was born—a word soon exhilaratingly charged with the philosophical, social and personal aspirations of both men. Their lives were irrevocably transformed by their meeting, and the shared plans that followed—and Coleridge's walking tour to Wales, upon which he finally set out on 5 July—became a psychological theatre for this new dawn.

In this essay, I sketch some salient features of that theatre: how the tour became a medium for Coleridge's self-dramatisation and, more obliquely, the drama of self-disclosure, where past behaviour and future hopes are held in tension, enacting a restless present as heady and effervescent as it is uneasy. Politics, sexuality, poetry, and the characteristics of Coleridge's own mercurial persona occupy his correspondence from the tour. His mind freshly energised with the opportunity to realize himself, Coleridge is on the look-out for symbolic significance in his experiences—reading both society and landscape for signs. This quality—of *feeling for* the destiny he desired, with one eye on the darkness of his own psychological history—gives Coleridge's record of the tour its curiously portentous moment. And this has a bearing on a biographical mystery regarding his excursion to Wales, on which I shall try to shed some further light.

But first, to begin at the beginning. You'll have noticed that Coleridge's walking tour was never simply a walking tour—it was a 'pedestrian scheme'. This is the signal that besides providing a few weeks of adventure and amusement, the walk was a political and philosophical act. Several critics have described how, in the 1790s, the walking tour was a kind of self-levelling

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[1] This essay is a revised version of the paper entitled 'Politics and Portents: Coleridge's Walking Tour to Wales, July 1794', which I gave at the conference on 'The Wye Valley: Romantic Representations, 1640-1830', at Tintern, Monmouthshire, 6-8 July 2011.

[2] Joseph Hucks, *A Pedestrian Tour through North Wales, in a Series of Letters* (London, 1795). Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Birmingham City University [4 July 2011]. After initial reference in the footnotes, short titles are used throughout.

[3] *New Letters of Robert Southey*, 2 vols, ed. Kenneth Curry (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), I 56.

statement of social identity—a deliberate mingling with the people and the landscape beyond the carriage and the post-chaise. In Jeffrey Robinson's words, 'walking signifies the restlessness', 'uprootedness', political drivenness', and '*mobility*, of the radical mind'.[4] Southey, wrote his friend George Burnett—a in phrase with a certain comic equivocation for us now—was at the time 'a great pedestrian' (see Roe 2002, 200). Walking (as it still does) constituted a particular way of knowing: knowing the land and its people through direct, immersive experience that broke through, to some extent at least, the usual distinctions of wealth and property. Hucks wrote that 'as for all ideas of appearance and gentility, they are entirely out of the question—our object is to see, not be seen': 'to explore the hidden beauties of nature unmechanized by the ingenuity of man', as well as 'man in society' (*Tour*, 4, 9). Literally negotiating their way through the state of society, as they walked, gave Coleridge the fledgling Pantisocrat a way of testing the presence of political awakening, or inertia—as well as providing, let's not forget, a good source of exuberant anecdotes.

Indeed, the *experiential* and *performative* character of Coleridgean discourse is telling. His half-resolution, in 1803, 'to write my metaphysical works, as *my Life*, & *in* my Life—intermixed with all the other events/ or history of the mind & fortunes of S.T. Coleridge' (CN I 1515), also provides a fair summary of the method that animates his letters on the Welsh tour in 1794. Humour, role-play, and the sheer verve of his love of language are never far away. This experiential/performative method, or way of being, in no way vitiates the seriousness of Coleridge's meaning, nor the sincerity of his enthusiasm. Constitutionally communicative, in his instinctive self-dramatisation Coleridge wants to be known—as well as to know *himself*—through performance. Truth itself is not so much a static fact, with Coleridge, as *realized* and *performed*.[5] To recognise this in the letters from the Welsh tour, is to recognise something fundamental to Coleridge as a writer and thinker.

This character is on display from the first letter he sends to Southey, only a day after they parted. Coleridge loudly heads the letter: 'Health & Republicanism!' (CL I 83), and soon launches into a tale to kindle mutual excitement in their new-found system. Coleridge describes how his fellow pedestrian, Hucks, sends a woman away in haughty fashion after she begged for food during their dinner, and goes on: 'My companion is a Man of cultivated, tho' not vigorous, understanding—his feelings are all on the side of humanity—yet such are the unfeeling Remarks, which the lingering Remains of Aristocracy occasionally prompt. When the pure System of Pantocracy shall have aspheterized the Bounties of Nature, these things will not be so—!' (CL I

[4] Jeffrey C. Robinson, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 52. See also Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1989), 60; Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*, 2nd edn. (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), 171-72; Simon Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (Houndmills, Palgrave 1997), 33-9.

[5] See Coleridge's approving quotation from Sir William Davenant's *Preface to Gondibert* (1651), in *Biographia Literaria* (and CN III 3769): '*truth operative,* and by effects continually alive, is the mistress of poets, who hath not her existence in matter, but in reason' (BL II 127).

83-4). Here then, is what Pantisocracy (or 'Pantocracy' at this stage) will sweep away—and not only one neologism, but two. Coleridge continues: 'I trust, you admire the word 'aspheterized' from α non, σφετερος proprius! We really *wanted* such a word—instead of travelling along the circuitous, dusty, beaten high-Road of Diction you thus cut across the soft, green pathless Field of Novelty!—Similies forever! Hurra!' (CL I 84).

Here is the nub of Pantisocracy—'Aspheterism', effectively communal property—spun in the dance of word-play. Southey takes up Coleridge's term straight away: within days of Coleridge's letter, he uses it while trying to convert his friend Grosvenor Bedford to the cause: 'I will get thee a house like my own simple & convenient, & when thou hast once seen the aspheterizing system realized, thou wilt gladly fraternize with us'.[6] '[W]hat is the origin of moral evil?' Southey asked, later that summer, 'whence arise the various vices & misfortunes that disfigure human nature & destroy human happiness? from individual property'.[7] 'I have positively done nothing but dream of the System of no Property every step of the Way since I left you' (CL I 90), Coleridge wrote to Southey from Denbigh—and it seems, Southey had done the same. He had set out from Oxford with Burnett, at the same time as Coleridge and Hucks, eventually leaving them to proceed into Wales while he and Burnett went on to Bath. During that time, Burnett recalled, he and Southey 'discoursed of no other subject but that of Pantisocracy'.[8] If, in the idea of Pantisocracy, Coleridge and Southey hoped to transcend the divisions of property and pioneer a new kind of social order, then the idea also represented hope itself. 'This Pantisocratic system has given me new life new hope new energy', Southey wrote; 'All the faculties of my mind are dilated' (Curry I 74-5). Later, alone on Malta in very different circumstances, Coleridge would recall that during these months, in the flush of Pantisocratic enthusiasm, he 'became an exalted Being' (CN II 2398).

From Oxford, Coleridge and Hucks proceeded to Gloucester, on to Ross, followed the Wye to Hereford, then headed north to Leominster, Bishop's Castle, finally crossing the border to Welshpool, and on to the village of Llanfyllin, ready to penetrate 'the interior of the Country', as he put it (CL I 88). Here, Coleridge writes, 'I preached Pantisocracy and Aspheterism with so much success that two great huge Fellows, of Butcher like appearance, danced about the room in enthusiastic agitation—And one of them of his own accord called for a large Glass of Brandy, and drank it off to this, his own Toast—God save the King. And may he be the Last' (CL I 88). Coleridge casts himself as an itinerant missionary, igniting the latent energies of political change—a character he carries over into another state-of-the-nation anecdote, this time from Bala. At an inn that he populates, sit-com style, with a 'Welch Democrat', a clergyman, a Justice of the Peace and an apothecary, among others, Coleridge

[6] Southey, Robert. *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey, Part I: 1791-1797*. Ed. Lynda Pratt. Romantic Circles. [June 2011] <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters>. Letter 96, 20-21 July 1794.

[7] Pratt, Letter 99, 22 August-3 September 1794.

[8] See Roe 2002, 200.

says that upon being invited to give a toast, he proposed General Washington: 'The parson said in a low voice—(Republicans!)—After which the medical man said—damn Toasts! I gives a sentiment—May all Republicans be *gulloteen'd*!—Up starts the Welch Democrat—May all *Fools* be gulloteen'd—and then you will be the first!' (CL I 89). In the middle of the fray, Coleridge reports that he calmed everyone down by appealing to their common Christianity – and 'all except the Parson shook me by the hand, and said I was an open hearted honest-speaking Fellow, tho' I was a bit of a Democrat' (CL I 89). Well, it's a good yarn—and a few days later, writing from Caernarfon to his friend Henry Martin, Coleridge repeats the tale—with the difference that this time, he says that he proposed a toast to 'Dr Priestley' instead (CL I 91). It is a nice instance of the fluidity of Coleridge's sense of self, where he plays to the appetites of his audience by inhabiting the same kernel of fact in multiple ways—or, more ominously, evanesces himself into another form. Hucks confirms the essentials of the incident, but has someone sat at another table propose 'General Washington', while he and Coleridge withdraw from the commotion (*Tour*, 25-6). Given the public context in 1795, however, when Hucks published his account, it would only have been prudent to keep Coleridge's identity secret, had he proposed either toast.

While politics loomed large in his mind on his tour, however, this was mingled, like Pantisocracy itself, with other fundamentals in the 'history of the mind & fortunes of S.T. Coleridge' (CN I 1515). Some of his encounters show Coleridge alert to a liberating blurring of sexual boundaries. At Gloucester, he admires a woman boating on the River Severn, 'mighty unconcerned' by the nakedness of the men bathing near her: 'I stared—for she was elegantly dressed—and not a Prostitute. Doubtless', he writes, 'the citadel of her chastity is so impregnably strong, that it needs not the ornamental Out-works of Modesty' (CL I 83). At Abergele, things get even more interesting: 'Walking on the sea sands—I was surprized to see a number of fine Women bathing promiscuously with men and boys—*perfectly* naked!' He repeats (this time to Henry Martin) his quip about 'the citadels of their Chastity' that he made at Gloucester, 'But seriously speaking', he continues, 'where sexual Distinctions are least observed, Men & women live together in the greatest purity. Concealment sets the Imagination a working' (CL I 93). While Coleridge muses on the shape of a sexually emancipated society, Hucks relates the sighting at Abergele with rather less enthusiasm: he confirms that there were 'ten or a dozen of both sexes promiscuously enjoying themselves in the lucid element, regardless, or rather unconscious, of any indecency. Not being myself accustomed to this mode, I chose to retire farther up' (*Tour*, 58).

An incident at Wrexham, however, raised the spectre of Coleridge's own anguished love-life. There, he saw Mary Evans—his first love—with her sister Eliza, coming out of church, and fled to an inn, after he 'turned sick, and all but fainted away!' (CL I 87). Months before, his passion for Mary—or rather, his lack of prospects, and hence inability to propose marriage—had been a contributing factor to the wild episode that culminated in his financially

disastrous enlistment in the army. He wrote to Southey that 'her Image is in the sanctuary of my Heart, and never can it be torn away but with the strings that grapple it to Life' (CL I 88)—a phrase that found its way into his poem 'The Sigh', composed later that summer. His reaction at his failure to escape her image suggests that she did remain the focus of his true feelings for some time—with the strength of his attachment becoming all the more vivid as, at Southey's behest, he would submit to a misguided sense of 'duty' in courting and then marrying Sarah Fricker in 1795, just as the flames of Pantisocracy were dying.

To Henry Martin, Coleridge wrote that 'I had been wandering among the wild-wood scenery and terrible graces of the Welch mountains to wear away, not to revive, the Images of the Past!' (CL I 92), and this did not extend just to Mary. Seeing her awakened once more the troubled, tumultuous matrix underlying Coleridge's sense of self. In the April preceding the Welsh tour, he had obtained an expensive discharge from the army on the grounds of insanity—foreshadowed and followed by a glut of guilt-ridden letters: 'mine is a sensibility gangrened with inward corruption, and the keen searching of the air from without!' (CL I 62), he wrote; 'What my future Life may produce, I dare not anticipate' (CL I 65). In a passage that sheds light on the urgency of his need for Pantisocratic deliverance, he wrote in March 1794: 'I am convinced that a man once corrupted will ever remain so, unless some sudden revolution, some unexpected change of Place or Station shall have utterly altered his connection. When these Shocks of adversity have electrified his moral frame, he feels a convalescence of soul, and becomes like a being recently formed from the hands of Nature' (CL I 74). Like 'a being recently formed from the hands of Nature': that was the sense of self-renewal that Coleridge was seeking, and attempting to sustain, in the summer of 1794. While in February he was confessing that 'the time, which I should have bestowed on the academic studies, I employed in dreaming out wild Schemes of impossible extrication' (CL I 67), by September he is exultant: 'Pantisocracy—O I shall have such a scheme of it! My head, my heart are all alive' (CL I 103).

This conflict points to an authentic paradox at the centre of Coleridge's emerging sense of selfhood—namely, that the guilt of his transgressions, relative to the moral expectations of others, blended with a sense of the power of his own imagination. 'It had been better for me', he wrote in half-contrition at his misdemeanours, 'if my Imagination had been less vivid—I could not with such facility have shoved aside Reflection!' (CL I 67)—while going on to assert that 'Wisdom may be gathered from the maddest flights of Imagination, as medicines were stumbled upon in the wild processes of Alchemy' (CL I 71). I suspect he is rather pleased when, during an argument about Pantisocracy, a fellow student says 'that the Strength of my Imagination had intoxicated my Reason—and that the acuteness of my Reason had given a directing Influence to my Imagination' (CL I 103). Ever alive to the *frisson* of his own mixed feelings and moral ambivalence, Coleridge mused in the February of 1794 that

'there is a pleasure doubtless an exquisite pleasure mingled up in the most painful of our virtuous Emotions' (CL I 63).

Coleridge carries over this troubled self-awareness into his letters on the walking tour. To Martin, he typified his state of mind as 'now philosophizing with Hucks, now melancholizing by myself, or else indulging those day-dreams of Fancy, that make realities more gloomy' (CL I 90)—and to his new friend Southey, even his lighter moments are tinged with self-accusation and hints of a dark past. After his first letter of 6 July, he promises that 'My next shall be a more sober & chastised Epistle—but you see I was in the humour for Metaphors—and to tell thee the Truth, I have so often serious reasons to quarrel with my Inclination, that I do not chuse to contradict it for Trifles' (CL I 84-5). Coleridge's pervasive sense of a tainted self emerges in the poetry he produces on the walk, too—most clearly in 'Lines Written at the King's Arms, Ross, Formerly the House of the "Man of Ross"', which, after praising the philanthropy of John Kyrle, turns inward: [9]

> … if, like me, thro' Life's distressful Scene
> Lonely and sad thy Pilgrimage hath been;
> And if, thy breast with heartsick anguish fraught
> Thou journeyest onward tempest-tost in thought—
> Here cheat thy cares—in generous Visions melt—
> And *dream* of Goodness, thou hast never felt. (CL I 87)[10]

The lines acknowledge a disturbed past and prophesy—accurately, as it would turn out—a future 'tempest-tost in thought'. The last, equivocal couplet signals an alienation: the poet is orphaned from the philanthropic sphere. As David Fairer puts it, 'he is unable to embody the ideal, only dream about it'.[11] Southey immediately shared the poem with his friend Grosvenor Bedford: 'Admire the verses Grosvenor, & pity that mind that wrote them from its genuine feelings'.[12]

Coleridge is very keen, in his letters, to signal his desire to be a poet—early breathings of the power and authority he would invest in that name and its calling. He bought one of his first notebooks for the trip, in order to capture what could, he was already aware, all too easily flit from him unrealized: 'I have bought a little Blank Book, and portable Ink horn—as I journey onward, I ever and anon pluck the wild Flowers of Poesy—"inhale their odours awhile"—then throw them away and think no more of them—I will not do so!' (CL I 84). Coleridge would later tell Hazlitt that he liked to compose 'walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copsewood'[13]—a songline of his wayfaring.

In Coleridge's accounts of this tour, one aspect of his imaginative

[9] Coleridge published an altered version of the poem in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796).
[10] Hucks quotes Coleridge's 'Lines' in his account of their trip (*Tour*, 15-16).
[11] David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 167.
[12] Pratt, Letter 96, 20-21 July 1794.
[13] William Hazlitt, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets'.

engagement with the landscape—which has consequences for his poetry—stands out: namely, his encounters with spring water, and it is with an eye to this that I will conclude. At Holywell, he 'bathed in the famous St Winifred's Well'— an ancient sacred spring, the focus of centuries of pilgrimage, said to have risen where St Beuno brought his decapitated niece, St Winifred, back to life, and renowned for its healing powers—an aura that Coleridge rather punctured with the iconoclastic observation that 'it is an excellent cold Bath' (CL I 93). But it is not so much bathing in, as *drinking* from springs, that features in his writing. 'From Llanvunnog', he writes—that's Llangynog—'we walked over the mountains to Bala—most sublimely terrible! It was scorchingly hot—I applied my mouth ever and anon to the side of the Rocks and sucked in draughts of Water cold as Ice, and clear as infant Diamonds in their embryo Dew!' (CL I 88). In that gorgeous image, Coleridge captures a symbolic sense of feeding on the earth's treasure, in which the traveller could tap the secret springs of generation—of life itself—in drinking from a primal, uncontaminated source.[14] Later on the tour, Coleridge maintained, it became literally a matter of life and death. And herein lies a mystery.

Coleridge and Hucks had met up with other friends, Brookes and Berdmore, on the road, and Coleridge mentions in a letter from Caernarfon how 'Brookes, Berdmore and myself at the imminent hazard of our Lives scaled the very Summit of Penmaenmawr—it was a most dreadful expedition!' (CL I 94). Coleridge doesn't give details here, but Hucks records the ascent of Penmaenmawr. At the top, after a difficult ascent, another hot day 'occasioned a tormenting thirst that we were not able to gratify'—until they 'accidentally turned over a large flat stone that concealed a little spring': 'The parched-up soldier of Alexander's army could not have felt more greater joy in the discovery of his little treasure, than we did of ours' (*Tour*, 62). A life-giving spring indeed.

But in the table talk recorded for 31 May 1830, the older Coleridge describes how he developed the lines in the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'—'they for joy did grin, / And all at once their breath drew in, / As they were drinking all' (1817; ll. 164-66)—thus: 'I took the thought of "grinning for joy," in that poem, from my companion's remark to me, when we had climbed to the top of Plinlimmon, and were nearly dead with thirst. We could not speak from the constriction, till we found a little puddle under a stone. He said to me,—"You grinned like an idiot!" He had done the same' (TT II 101; TT I 149). Curiously, then, Coleridge remembers this incident as being at Plynlimon, and his companion, according to Henry Nelson Coleridge's 1835 attribution, as George Burnett. Had he been misheard (as Southey thought: TT I 149), or was Coleridge's memory mixing up Penmaenmawr with Plynlimon, and Burnett with Berdmore, as John Livingston Lowes and Carl Woodring (TT II 101)

[14] Southey's letters show that he and Coleridge continued this habit, when walking through Cheddar Gorge together, later that August: 'we talked philosophy like two poets & often paused one while to drink at a clear spring […] a stream of water cold & clear flows from under the rocks where we paused to drink & pour libations to the Naiad': Pratt, Southey Letter 98, 1-21 August 1794.

have, respectively, guessed?[15] Hucks's account suggests that Coleridge is thinking of Penmaenmawr. He and Coleridge did pass close to Plynlimon later on the tour—visiting Devil's Bridge, and climbing down the glen of the Mynach Falls (*Tour*, 122)—but he does not mention climbing Plynlimon (whereas he mentions the ascent of other major peaks, like Snowdon and Cader Idris). Perhaps Burnett was in the older Coleridge's mind, as they had left Oxford together at the beginning of the tour. Some slip in Coleridge's memory (or Henry's hearing) seems likely.

There is, however, more to it than that. Given the patterns and characteristics of Coleridge's psychological theatre on this tour, with all that was vested in it of past and future in restless tension, of self-accusation and exultant imagination, there is poignancy in the fact that Coleridge's memory of those strange grins later placed the experience at Plynlimon—renowned as the source of the river Wye—and that the experience came to be identified with Burnett. The older Coleridge knew that Burnett had died as a fellow laudanum-drinker. Coleridge saw Burnett in February 1804, ten years after the Welsh tour, with a another strange look on his face: 'so nervous, so helpless—with such opium-stupidly-wild eyes—O it made the place, one calls the Heart, feel as if it was going to break' (CL II 1074). In 1804, of course, also addicted to opium, Coleridge could see himself reflected in that face. Thinking of the poet of the 'Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan', there is a haunting pathos in the fact that in 1830, Coleridge might have recalled them drinking from the same spring under the stone, the same secret source of life—a double vision of imbibing a 'sacred river' and another 'milk of paradise' (PW I.1 514), in which his younger self slakes a terrible thirst, and in the joy of relief meets the Night-Mare.[16]

[15] John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (rev. edn. 1930; London: Pan, 1978), 193.

[16] The Course of Coleridge's Tour of July 1794:

Oxford – Gloucester – Ross – then following the Wye to Hereford – before heading north to Leominster – Bishop's Castle – Welshpool – Llanfyllin – Llangynog 'a Village most romantically situated' (CL I 88) – Bala – 'Druid House' (Druid, on the A494 Bala to Llangollen) – Llangollen – Wrexham – Ruthin – Denbigh – St Asaph – east to Holywell – west again to Rhuddlan – Abergele – Conwy – 'Abber' = 'Abber Conway', a village on the Menai Straits (Hucks, *Tour*, 70) (possibly now swallowed by Bangor) – ferry to Beaumaris, Anglesey – Amlwch – 'Copper mines, Gwindu, Moel don' (Hucks: 'Gwyndn' and 'Moel Don Ferry, a single house': *Tour*, 87) – ferry to Caernarfon (Coleridge's account ends here) – Beddgelert – went on to Snowdon, at the top of which he was unable to see anything but clouds (*Tour*, 101) – Tan-y-bwlch – Harlech (where they scaled the castle walls: *Tour*, 110-11) – Barmouth – Dolgellau (climbed Cader Idris, where they 'looked into the frightful abyss of clouds', which reminded them of Milton's chaos, 'a dark / Illimitable ocean, without bound': *Tour*, 113-14) – Tywyn – Aberdovey – Aberystwyth – Devil's Bridge (climbed down the glen of the Mynach Falls: *Tour*, 122): just south of Plynlimon (but no mention of an ascent here by Hucks) – Tregaron ('a miserable hole': *Tour*, 122) – Llandoverey, where Coleridge parts with Hucks, and on (probably, if he went Hucks's way), via Brecon, Crickhowell, Abergavenny, Raglan – following the modern A40 – to meet the Wye valley and the ruins at Tintern – Chepstow – Bristol…