Public Expression and Political Repression—Coleridge on William Pitt the Younger

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THE *SONNETS ON EMINENT CHARACTERS*, published in the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper in the winter of 1794-5, were among the most politically daring of Coleridge's early works, focussing on a selection of the most prominent political and dissenting figures of the day, such as Thomas Erskine, Edmund Burke, Joseph Priestley and William Pitt the Younger. This paper will consider Coleridge's views of Pitt, as expressed primarily through his sonnet *To Pitt,* one of the *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*, and also Coleridge's views of Pitt recorded five years later, in the *Morning Post* (1800), collected as part of the *Essays on His Own Times* (pub. 1850). The final work which I will consider is *Fears in Solitude* (1798), which demonstrates Coleridge's changing religious and political views, particularly his admission that Englishmen as a whole are responsible for the present state of the country, rather than just Pitt alone. My paper will discuss Coleridge's transformation from the politically radical sonneteer of 1794, to the accomplished and more cautious composer of *Fears in Solitude* of 1798, where his more individual poetic voice is seen maturing alongside his changing views.

In 1794, Britain was at war with France, and was thought to be on the brink of a slide into revolution or civil war, following the example of the French Revolution, still ongoing. In Britain, the repressive government of Pitt the Younger was very unpopular for a variety of reasons, including the levying of extortionate taxes to pay for the war, the cost of which threatened to spiral out of control. Many of Pitt's policies were aimed at controlling popular radical activity through restrictions on mediums such as printed materials (including pamphlets and periodicals) and public meetings, both of which had a direct impact on Coleridge's activities in the mid to late 1790's, as his work of this period was aired through forums such as public lectures and national newspapers. Additionally, the harvest of 1794 failed, and this, combined with inflated food prices, meant that Britain was suffering near-famine conditions. The biggest threat to Coleridge personally at this time was the suspension of the Habeas Corpus act (1794). Had Coleridge been arrested on suspicion of treason or sedition at this time, he could have been imprisoned indefinitely without trial.

The young Coleridge was a political radical and Unitarian, a dissenting religious belief which denied the holy trinity and the divinity of Christ. These two belief systems went against both the doctrines of the established Anglican Church, and the policies put forward by Pitt's Government. At this point in his career, Coleridge's radical poetic rhetoric was founded in religious dissent; for Coleridge, the two were inseparable. This is a reminder of the significant part religion played in the development of English radicalism in the 1790's. Revolutionary fervour was already rife in England, as demonstrated in 1794 by

the Treason Trials of the radicals John Thelwall, Thomas Paine, Thomas Hardy and others. Eight hundred warrants were issued by the Government for the arrest of suspected radicals. Following the suspension of Habeas Corpus in May 1794, those arrested were imprisoned in the Tower of London pending trial in the Old Bailey, which began on 25 October with the trial of Thomas Hardy.

In his sonnet *To Pitt*, Coleridge refers to the serving Prime Minister rather unflatteringly as: 'Yon dark Scowler' who 'kiss'd his country with Iscariot mouth'.[1] Both in this sonnet and in the *Conciones ad Populum*[2] (February 1795), Coleridge compares Pitt to Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Christ to the Romans by kissing him on the cheek, as a pre-arranged signal for Christ to be seized and arrested.[3] Pitt is also the subject of *Fire, Famine and Slaughter (1797)* although he is never explicitly named, in which he is portrayed as having been responsible for unleashing fire, famine and slaughter upon La Vendée over an extended period during the war with France. This public ridicule of the serving Prime Minister is evidence of Coleridge taking a huge political risk with his early poetry. In his early career, Pitt put forward policies to streamline and reform Parliament. After these were defeated in Parliament in April 1785, Pitt never again attempted parliamentary reform. He put forward other policies such as the abolition of slavery, and a scheme to pay off the national debt, all of which were rejected by Parliament. Had these policies been adopted, they would have been truly revolutionary; they failed because they would have prejudiced the 'concerns' of many members of both Houses, and members of Parliament did not wish to curtail their own freedoms.

Despite these early abortive attempts at reform, the above 'Iscariot' comment sums up Coleridge's views of Pitt, both in 1794 and throughout the rest of Pitt's career. In Coleridge's view, Pitt's betrayals of his country were as follows: Fox blamed Pitt for not doing enough to preserve peace with France, following the war with France in February 1793; Habeas Corpus was suspended in 1794; advocates of parliamentary reform were arrested and charged with sedition during the Treason Trials;[4] Pitt increased taxation to pay for the war, exacerbating existing social problems caused by the failed harvest of 1794 and the resulting near-famine conditions in Britain. Simon Schama states:

> The real difference between the British and French predicaments following the war was that… Pitt could raise revenue from new taxes without threatening a major political crisis, an option that was not

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[1] PW *94* 4-7

[2] "All this—O calumniated Judas Iscariot! all this WILLIAM PITT said!" LPR 64

[3] Matthew 26: 46-50, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford World's Classics; Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998) p40-41 (KJB)

[4] *The House Magazine: Pitt and Fox Exhibition Autumn 2006* Pitt and Fox: The Great Rivals House of Commons Exhibition, September 16-October 27 2006

> open to his French counterparts.[5]

There was therefore no immediate political crisis, but Pitt alienated a large percentage of the population of Britain due to the poor social conditions, some of which had been caused by the war with France, and others which hadn't; this was coupled with a lack of freedom of speech and expression which were enforced by Pitt's government. Additionally, to replace heavy losses in the English navy and a shortfall in recruitment, men were press-ganged into the navy through enlisting-places with sides of mutton and beef hanging above the doors to entice starving people in.

Coleridge continues his harangue of the Prime Minister with the following phrase: '(Ah! foul apostate from his Father's fame!)'.[6] This line refers to Pitt the Elder's emerging foreign policy, and the resulting beginning of the British Empire. Additionally, Pitt the Elder wanted the Government to recognise the United States Congress, as he saw that the American desire for independence from England would be inevitable and unstoppable. Coleridge viewed Pitt the Younger's apostasy from the policies of his father as follows: England under Pitt the Younger was at war with France, and Pitt also oversaw the war with America, thereby undoing much of the work of his father by reducing the British Empire, although arguably the American war would have happened eventually. Pitt the Younger did however also play a role in increasing it in other areas, such as enabling the settlement of liberated slaves in Freetown, Sierra Leone, after the abolition of the Slave Trade in 1808.

The sonnet *To Pitt* also covers the subject of slavery. Coleridge was vehemently and vocally anti-slavery. His radical opposition to the Slave Trade was heightened by living in Bristol, England's second slave-port, during the height of the slave trade. Pitt the Younger was also anti-slavery, and was a close friend of William Wilberforce. In one of his abortive efforts to pass reform bills through Parliament in his early career, Pitt proposed the abolition of the slave trade in 1781. The bill failed, due to being outvoted by the large numbers of pro-slavery MP's and Lords, many of them slave owners. Slavery was deeply ingrained in Britain at this time, especially in the higher echelons of society, and makes appearances in many of Coleridge's works around this time. It was also largely a matter of conscience, with Coleridge emphasising the religious overtones of parliamentary apostacy from the Christian teaching of "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater…"[7] This is stated explicitly in the *Lecture on the Slave Trade*:

> I address myself first of all to those who independent of political distinction profess themselves Christian. As you hope to live with Christ hereafter you are commanded to do unto others as ye would

[5] *The House Magazine: Pitt and Fox Exhibition Autumn 2006* Pitt and Fox: The Great Rivals House of Commons Exhibition, September 16-October 27 2006

[6] *PW 94 8*

[7] Mark 12:31 (KJB) p63

> that others should do unto you! Would you choose that Slave Merchants should incite an intoxicated Chieftain to make war on your Tribe to murder your Wife and Children before your face and drag them with yourself to the Market...(?)[8]

The sonnet *To Pitt* continues to vent Coleridge's displeasure with Pitt through the use of Biblical references and language. It is as if, at this early point in his career, Coleridge feels that the use of Biblical language invests his works with an authority which he cannot otherwise impart. The sonnet *To Pitt* continues: 'Then fix'd her on the Cross of deep distress.'[9] Coleridge here states that Pitt had crucified British Freedom through the above betrayals, making an already very bad situation much worse. The sonnet continues:

> And at safe distance marks the thirsty Lance
> Pierce her big side![10]

In other words, Pitt is accused of being chief amongst those who crucified liberty, in the same way that Christ was crucified.[11]

The sonnet concludes with Coleridge's vision of what eventual British freedom will spell out for Pitt in the future:

> Seize, Mercy! thou more terrible the brand,
> And hurl her thunderbolts with fiercer hand![12]

Coleridge implies here (and also in *Conciones ad Populum*),[13] that all of Pitt's repressive policies will eventually come back to bite him when the British people are once again free from the threat of war, poverty, famine, and able to speak and publish freely. Perhaps Coleridge was in fact correct, as Pitt died in 1806 (aged 47) as a result of increased drinking and related failing health, which, as for Winston Churchill, was perhaps Pitt's way of coping with the pressures of being a war-time Prime Minister. Following the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805, Pitt was hailed, fleetingly, as the saviour of Europe, until Napoleon's triumph at the Battle of Austerlitz in December the same year. As part of the overall picture, Austerlitz was a far more politically crucial battle than Trafalgar. Napoleon's victory was devastating to Pitt's already fragile health, and he died a month later.

The most sustained attack on Pitt in Coleridge's lectures takes place in the *Lecture on the Two Bills*, delivered at the Pelican Inn, Bristol, on Thursday 26 November 1795, subsequently reprinted as *The Plot Discovered; or an Address to the People, Against Ministerial Treason.* In this lecture, Coleridge uses an extended

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[8] LPR 247
[9] PW *94* 9
[10] PW *94* 10-11
[11] John 19: 33-34 (KJB) p143
[12] PW *94* 13-14
[13] "horrors…as would arm MERCY with the Thunderbolt" LPR 71

metaphor taken initially from the Book of Isaiah:

> "… they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity. They hatch cockatrice' eggs… he that eateth of their eggs dieth and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper…"[14]

Coleridge's metaphor compares Pitt to a viper, and George III to a cockatrice, which in Coleridge's own words, taken from a letter to Southey dated 6 July 1794, is:

> … a foul Dragon with a *crown* on it's head. The Eastern Nations believe it to be hatched by a Viper on a *Cock's* Egg… The Cockatrice is emblematic of Monarchy—a *monster* generated by *Ingratitude* on *Absurdity*.[15]

The Cockatrice also makes an appearance in *The Fall of Robespierre*, written the same year.

In *The Plot Discovered*, it appears that Coleridge's anti-monarchical views have been extended to include Parliament, in particular the Prime Minister. In the middle of a section on Jewish observance of Mosaic Law, Coleridge warns that the rule of the Cockatrice is the consequence of Mosaic Law being brushed aside. Here Coleridge conflates ancient Mosaic Law with 18th Century current events, also giving further legitimacy to his own Pantisocratic plans, which he intended to finance by the 1795 lecture series. Pantisocracy was to be based on equality, rather than on the autocratic rule of one all-powerful, poison-spitting Prime Minister with monarchical pretensions.

Five years later, Coleridge's views of Pitt are no more forgiving. Pitt is the subject of a biographical essay submitted by Coleridge to the *Morning Post*, and published on Wednesday 19 March, 1800. Here Coleridge follows up on two earlier themes. The essay begins by sketching Pitt's early life, emphasising how Pitt's love of power was formed as a child, and portraying him as not quite human, making passing reference to his own debauched University days:

> The young Pitt was conspicuous far beyond his fellows, both at school and at college. He was always full grown: he had neither the promise nor the awkwardness of a growing intellect. Vanity, early satiated, formed and elevated itself into a love of power… That revelry and that debauchery, which are so often fatal to the powers of intellect, would probably have been serviceable to him; they would have given him a closer communion with realities… But Mr Pitt's conduct was correct, unimpressably correct.[16]

Coleridge continues the reptilian theme begun in *The Plot Discovered*, along with

[14] Isa 59.4-9 (KJB) p819
[15] CL I 84
[16] EOT I 220

his previous commentary on Pitt's apostacy from the policies of his father in the following quotation, referring to Pitt as "the influencer of his country", and his father Pitt the Elder as "another":

> The influencer of his country… was… the creature of another's predetermination… whose feet had never wandered… whose whole track had been as curveless as the motion of a fascinated reptile![17]

In this essay, Coleridge accuses Pitt of being out of touch, and "wholly unprepared" for the onset of the French Revolution:

> Half favouring, half condemning, ignorant of what he favoured, and why he condemned, he neither displayed the honest enthusiasm and fixed principle of Mr Fox, nor the intimate acquaintance with the general nature of man, and the consequent *prescience* of Mr Burke.[18]

Coleridge admits that Pitt is an impressive public speaker, but states that, beneath the surface, Pitt's eloquence is nothing more than empty rhetoric, which Pitt finds very difficult to adapt to the situation currently in hand; in this case, the onset of the French Revolution.

Coleridge took much more of a risk with his early poetry and prose than is often recognised. Coleridge evidently knew where to stop before he overstepped the bounds of what was socially acceptable, as there is no evidence of him being arrested at this point in his career. Given that his 1795 lectures *On Revealed Religion* were actually a thinly-veiled criticism of the political and social conditions in Britain in the mid 1790's, this is surprising. It is also surprising that Coleridge was quite so vocal in airing his distrust and dislike of the Prime Minister, the person responsible for the suspension of Habeas Corpus, in the *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post.* Additionally, Coleridge was closely associated with several of those implicated in the 1794 Treason Trials, such as John Thelwall; it would be a natural assumption that this fact alone would have led to close Prime-Ministerial surveillance of Coleridge's activities at this time. Theoretically, this should have been the ultimate deterrent to Coleridge to curb the public vocalisation of his seditious political and religious views.

I think there was an element of foolhardiness in Coleridge's publication of his sonnets *On Eminent Characters,* especially the sonnet *To Pitt.* However, as stated above, I think he was well aware of the boundaries, which he observed by releasing the sonnets as a series over a number of weeks. By publishing them gradually, I believe the impact of the more seditious sonnets was diluted by the less inflammatory ones. This kept the series as a whole within the

[17] EOT I 221
[18] EOT I 223

bounds of what was socially (and politically) acceptable in the mid 18th Century. The sonnet *To Pitt* is a reminder of the significant part religion played in the development of English radicalism in the 1790's. As stated at the beginning of my paper, for Coleridge, politics and religion were inseparable. The style of the early potentially dangerous and seditious works is slightly awkward and unsettled, and thereby possibly indicative of juvenilia.

By the time Coleridge came to write *Fears in Solitude* in April 1798, his ardent political views had become tempered. His dislike of Pitt was as strong as ever, but by 1798 Coleridge had acknowledged that Pitt could not be held solely responsible for the state of England. Coleridge saw that the alleviation of the current appalling social conditions in England was the responsibility of all Englishmen, not just the Prime Minister alone. This joint responsibility is evident throughout the poem:

> We have offended, Oh! my countrymen!
> We have offended very grievously,
> And been most tyrannous. From east to west
> A groan of accusation pierces Heaven!
>
> 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,
> That faith doth reel; [19]

Fears in Solitude also airs Coleridge's concerns that England is becoming a godless nation, and that the seemingly imminent French invasion is God's revenge for this. Coleridge describes how atheism is persuaded to emerge from its lair, and literally fly in the face of God, now that the threat of being banished by a God-fearing nation is no longer present:

> …the very name of God
> Sounds like a juggler's charm; and bold with joy,
> Forth from his dark and lonely hiding-place,
> (Portentous sight!) the owlet, ATHEISM,
> Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon…
> And hooting at the glorious Sun in Heaven,
> Cries out, 'Where is it?'[20]

So where is it? There is the suggestion of God's presence throughout the poem, although the implication is that God is more of a pantheistic presence than a traditional Anglican one. A consciousness of the benign influence of Nature is also present throughout the poem, with the first and final stanzas

[19] PW *175* 42-45, 76-80
[20] PW *175* 81-87

given over almost entirely to a natural description of England, including the poet as part of that natural landscape. The first appearance of God is noted in the lines—

> And from the Sun, and from the breezy Air,
> Sweet influences trembled o'er his frame;[21]

The sun as an emblem of God, and the breeze of religious or poetic inspiration are common emblems in Coleridge's poetry of this time. Coleridge shows how the breeze has been a religious, if pantheistic, inspiration for the poet:

> And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,
> Made up a meditative joy, and found
> Religious meanings in the forms of nature![22]

The imagery of the sun continues as Coleridge imagines the changes that would take place if war came to England: "Carnage and groans beneath this blessed sun!". [23] This is suggestive of the vengeful Jehovah of the Old Testament wreaking his revenge on the godless people of England, through French invasion. Coleridge warns that the English nation has become complacent about the war, as they have not experienced it first hand, but only through received intelligence from the newspapers. Thus far, they have been immune to the true horrors of war, but Coleridge warns that this could change:

> Thankless too for peace
> (Peace long-preserved by fleets and perilous seas),
> Secure from actual warfare, and we have loved
> To swell the war-whoop, passionate for war!
> Alas! for ages ignorant of all
> Its ghastlier workings, (famine or blue plague,
> Battle, or siege, or flight through wintry snows,)
> We, this whole people, have been clamorous…
> For war and bloodshed; animating sports,
> To which we pay for as a thing to talk of,
> Spectators and not combatants![24]

To conclude, between 1794 and 1800, despite his changing political beliefs and the tempering of his early political radicalism, Coleridge's negative views of William Pitt the Younger did not change. This period also coincided with Coleridge finding, and becoming renowned for, his own poetical voice, which emerged fully in the productive years of 1797 and 1798 with the writing of his great poems including, amongst others, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Fears in*

[21] PW *175* 20-21
[22] PW *175* 22-24
[23] PW *175* 41
[24] PW *175* 87-97

Solitude. The intervening period covers Coleridge's development from the politically radical sonneteer of 1794, whose language is partially, if not wholly derived from a late 18th Century vocabulary of sentimental and sensationalist popular poetry, to the accomplished and more cautious composer of *Fears in Solitude* of 1798, where his poetic voice is seen maturing alongside his changing views.

Fears in Solitude reveals Coleridge at the height of his poetic powers, continuing to use Christian and Biblical imagery to present an image of the society of which he is now a part. His religious rhetoric, and his connection with the religious and spiritual side of his life is not lost through his development as a poet, but is used in a slightly different way. In becoming more of a nature poet, Coleridge is gradually taking on more pantheistic ideas, which suggests he has adopted a broader, more organic and inclusive approach to spirituality and religion. By 1798 Coleridge has less reliance on Biblical authority, although Eucharistic references continue to be demonstrated in *Fears in Solitude*. By 1798, Coleridge has matured enough to be able to demonstrate, through *Fears in Solitude*, that the general population was to blame for the current state of the country, rather than just William Pitt, the "Iscariot" figure of 1794. In 1798, Coleridge is still every bit as fiercely opposed to the war and resulting social problems in England, but is able to take a broader and more inclusive view, that this is a problem for English society as a whole, rather than just for the Prime Minister.

The subduing of Coleridge's political 'radicalisation' coincided with the writing of his more well-known 'Conversation Poems', which reveal Coleridge as a mature poet. Coleridge's politics are still evident in the 'Conversation Poems', but they are less ardent. It could be said that toning down the expression of Coleridge's political views was a prerequisite to him flourishing as a great poet, although personally I believe that Coleridge's politics would eventually have become tempered regardless of how well known he became as a poet. This was mainly because Coleridge was outgrowing his radical adolescence, and his politics were becoming replaced by other more immediate interests such as his family, and his friendship with Dorothy and William Wordsworth, with whom he was able to discuss his works, along with his new-found interests in pantheism and becoming closer to the natural world.