Romantic Britons: National Identity in the Writings of Coleridge and Southey

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I

THROUGHOUT THE PERIOD lasting from 1789 to 1815, when European countries went through the social turmoil caused by the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleonic France, the ideology of the British national identity inevitably met with the philosophical impact of the liberal sensibility that grew more intense with the increased national consciousness in British people's minds at that time. S. T. Coleridge and Robert Southey, in various important ways, modified their ideas on the national identity of Britons. By the latter term, I mean the concept of the value of their own country as realised by the British people. My overall purpose in this paper is to re-examine this concept by looking into the relevant ideas and writings of the two poets, particularly focusing on the formation of their ideological views.

The first generation of Romantic poets in England, whose prime of life coincided with the time of the rise and fall of the French Revolution, shifted their political position from a pro-revolutionary one to a less radical one. In the early 1790s, Coleridge and Southey (who both supported the common cause of liberty and human rights as expressed in revolutionary slogans at the first stage of the political uprising in France) apparently believed that the revolution would change and reform the social system into a better one, not only politically but also artistically. The French Revolution was the realisation of artistic visions of William Godwin's ideas regarding social reforms. The Pantisocracy plan that Coleridge and Southey tried to carry out, for instance, was one of the social concepts designed to reproduce an ideal Godwinian society in America. Their zeal for the egalitarian movement mirrored the social atmosphere in England in the early 1790s. Coleridge was in frequent contact with radical intellectuals who belonged to new political societies such as the London Corresponding Society and the Cambridge Constitutional Society and whose aims from the 1780s to the early 1790s were to support the democratic movements in Britain. The political and religious ideas of those members greatly helped to shape Coleridge's ideology of social reformism during the time in the early 1790s when he was communicating with them. For instance, Coleridge's dissenting sensibility at that time was similar to that of Richard Price, a radical Unitarian priest in London, who proclaimed that the revolution would open the way to civil and religious liberty not only for every religious sect but also for the people in general.

Coleridge, who openly supported new movements in favour of social reforms in Britain, felt that the philosophy behind these movements signposted the ideal direction the British nation should take. His contribution to *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794) in collaboration with Southey, and the theme of "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue" (1798), significantly show his

sympathy with liberal sensibility. Southey also shows his support for the movement to develop an egalitarian society in such works as *Joan of Arc* (1796), several anti-slavery poems, and *Wat Tyler* (1817).

The favourable climate for social reforms in British society, however, hastily cooled down after 1795, partly because of William Pitt's policy of repression, which severely restricted public demonstrations against the monarchy, church and state. The Jacobin Reign of Terror (from 1792 to 1794) which followed the French Revolution gave Pitt's policy its excuse. Witnessing the oppression by the Jacobins in France, people who had been sympathetic to revolutionary causes came to lose their interest in them. Moreover, this reaction developed into a more solid anti-Gallic feeling among the British people particularly after the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte at the beginning of the 1800s. During the intermittent war against revolutionary and Napoleonic France during the period from 1793 to 1815, disillusionment with the ideology of revolutionary France and an acute awareness of the possibility of a French invasion were the main concerns of the British people.

Of necessity, the British government's policy then became more practical as it faced the impending peril of war, and the resulting military mobilisation certainly worked for a fresh formation of British national identity. The government even suspended its persecution of radicals and its rejection of their demands for social reformation, since recruitment of as many men as possible now became more important, taking priority over domestic worries and conflicts. Men from the poorer classes as well as labouring people in general (whom the government used to deem to be potential rebels against its authority) joined the national army after 1797 when Napoleon's army gathered round the French coastline. The crisis made the British as a nation realise the value of their country and its defence, which was not necessarily the natural historical consequence, as Pitt pointed out. Pitt, who had instigated two Gagging Acts against social reform movements, expressed his faith in the allegiance of all Britons thus: "There was a time… when it would have been dangerous to entrust arms with a great portion of the people of this country… *But that time is now past*."[1] Although Pitt's remark was one of patriotic rhetoric, the people found it wholly reasonable, and united as if by instinct under the countrywide plight.

However, the idea of patriotism in Britain had an intricate nature at this particular time. It had within it a mixture of the traditionally conservative character of the nation, widespread realisation of human rights, freedom of thought, new conceptions of morality and ideologies, and an artistic sense of patriotism. Edmund Burke's theorising, for instance, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), on the moral basis of British conservatism was consistent in declaring its essential nature, but on the other hand, his thinking on contentious subjects, such as new ideas about human rights, liberty, religious dissent, and the exiling of poets, was not always well kempt. However,

[1] *The Times,* 19 July 1803.

at the time of the Napoleonic invasions of European countries, Burke's philosophy apparently gained a new aspect of patriotism that subsequently contributed to the idiosyncratic character of Romantic nationalism.

This convoluted sensibility of the British national identity from the late 1790s to the early 1800s influenced the themes of Coleridge's and Southey's literary output and their concept of the British nation. In the early 1800s, Coleridge analysed the nature of revolutionary sensibilities in the early 1790s and tried to modify his sympathy with the radical politics of the French Revolution. He considered the republicanism of the early 1790s to be theoretical rather than practical and felt that the ideological direction which the British people should take was to re-evaluate the importance of maintaining a stable national sense of worth. The ideal concept of the British national identity, in his terms, had a moral basis in individual liberty and in a reliance on and love for the unchanging value of their country, such as its natural beauty. In Southey's case, holding onto his republican enthusiasm in the 1800s, he tried to balance it with his love for his nation. Southey realises his ideal society in *Madoc* (1805) in which Madoc, the Welsh hero, undertakes to create his own utopia in co-operation with the Native Americans under his egalitarian scheme. Madoc's success as a ruler in America, however, reveals Southey's belief in the superiority of British (or European) civilisation over the way of life of the native people of the New World. Southey's sense of the nation is a typical instance of the conflicts and contradictions within the idea of British nationalism: Britishness is, for him, a term that involves a supremacist notion of exclusiveness as well as that of patriotism.

Coleridge's notions concerning the British national identity are more intricate. Contemplating the nature of the radical politics of the 1790s, he envisages a unified concept of the British nation. Britishness, in his vision, is an outcome of speculation on the significance of affection and respect for Britain and the innate conventional nature of British ideology. His self-excusing of his own radical thinking in the 1790s and endorsement of the traditional British social system instead, both illustrated in "The Apologetic Preface" (1817) to "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter," suggests his philosophical struggles to find the proper idea of British sensibility.

Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude", *The Friend* (1809 and 1810) and "The Apologetic Preface", and Southey's *Madoc* (1805) and his essay in *The Quarterly Review*, are all thus concerned with the discussion of this speculation on the idea of British nationality. Their viewpoints on republican ideals and their respect for the value of their nation were subtly interwoven in different ways, which suggests the crucial moment at which the contemporary concept of British national identity was formed.

II

Coleridge and Southey published *The Fall of Robespierre* during the period of their strong support for the reform movements. The subject of this poem is

intended to advocate revolutionary liberty by portraying the eponymous hero as a man who is "Sudden in action" and "fertile in resources".[2] Their sympathy with this radical hero was, however, slightly different in the degree to which each of them believed in the advantage of Jacobin politics. These differences in their understanding of revolutionary ideology may suggest one aspect of the characteristic nature of the British national identity in the transitional age of political ideologies in British society. The concept of the British national identity involved great complexity, from an idea of a zest for republican ideals at one extreme to a more careful and conservative attitude towards liberalisation movements at the other.

Coleridge shows a certain doubt about the radical agenda of politics in the preface to this play describing Robespierre as a revolutionary hero whose "bad actions have cast a disastrous lustre on his name."[3] He also develops his analysis of Robespierre's personality and ideals in one of his lectures. Coleridge comments on the superficiality of Robespierre's grasp of reality, which, while supported by the prospect of "peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality"[4], ignored the possible predicament of finding an effective way to realise it:

> I rather think, that the distant prospect, to which he was travelling, appeared to him grand and beautiful; but that he fixed his eye on it with such intense eagerness as to neglect the foulness of the road.[5]

For Coleridge, therefore, Robespierre's failure was regrettable, since he accepted at heart the dogmatic excessiveness, or rather the "grand and beautiful" philosophy, underpinning his ideology.

On the other hand, from Southey's point of view, Robespierre was "the benefactor of mankind", and they should "lament his death as the greatest misfortune Europe could have sustained."[6] Southey seems to be more vocal in his sympathy with Jacobin politics than is Coleridge, and he advocates Robespierre's politics more eloquently as "the voice of truth"[7] through his contribution to acts II and III. In the play, while Southey argues that Robespierre must have failed because of his extreme Jacobin background, he also presents him as a constant patriot who tried to reform French society according to his own beliefs. Clearly, the basic tone of the theme was pro-revolutionary, and it demonstrates the authors' (probably particularly Southey's) philosophy of political liberty. Nevertheless, Robespierre's

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2 S. T. Coleridge and Robert Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre. A Historic Drama*, Cambridge: Benjamin Flower, 1794, rpt. Ecco Print Edition, I. 5.

3 Coleridge and Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre*, 4.

4 P. Beik, trans. and ed. *The Documentary History of Western Civilisation: The French Revolution* (London: n. p., 1971), 278.

5 Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion,* eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 35.

6 Southey, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, gen. eds. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford, Ian Packer, Part One, ed. Lynda Pratt, Letter 99, Southey to Horace Walpole Bedford, 22 August-3 September, 1794, Online at Romantic Circles. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEd.26.99 html>

7 Coleridge and Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre*, II, 16.

philosophy inevitably collapsed because its extremist methodology was not realistic. Coleridge artistically perceives the catastrophic nature of Robespierre's politics in spite of his support for his egalitarianism, while Southey still shows his strong belief in revolutionary sensibility. Their philosophical differences reveal the difficulties in realising the ideal of liberty and equality in European society in the late 1790s.

As for the impracticality of republican ideals, both Coleridge and Southey began to notice the weakness of Godwinian philosophy during the years 1795 and 1796. Coleridge claimed that Godwin's philosophy was not equipped with a sufficient theoretical "foundation"[8]. Southey also revealed to his friend, G. C. Bedford, that he had found a fundamental error in Godwin's theorisation, that is, an ignorance of the present state of the British nation: "I have since seen his fundamental error--that he theorises for another state--not for the rule of conduct in the present-- . . ." [9] In this respect, in *The Fall of Robespierre*, the dogmatic fragility of radical republicanism was already hinted at by the tragic destiny of its hero.

Coleridge's "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter" demonstrates his indignant frustration with the obstinate social repression that disrupts human freedom in Britain. The poem is condemning Pitt's suppression of the Vendéan protest against the republican government in Vendée in France from 1793 to 1796 as well as depicting the Irish rebellion against the British government in 1797. Pitt did not carry out his promise to support the Vendéan Catholic royalists, and they were killed as rebels by the French republican government. Coleridge, in an article of *The Watchman* (1796), describes the resulting bloodbath thus: "SIX HUNDRED THOUSAND FRENCHMEN HAVE PERISHED IN LA VENDEE . . ." [10] Concerning the slaughter in Ulster of Irish Catholics by the British army, Coleridge severely demands who is responsible, indicating the name of Pitt through the voice of the three "forces of war"[11], Fire, Famine and Slaughter:

BOTH.
Who bade you do't?

SLAUGHTER
The same! the same!
Letters four do form his name.
He let me loose, and cried Halloo!
To him alone the praise is due.[12]

[8] Coleridge, *Lectures 1795*, 164.

[9] Southey, *The Collected Letters*, Part One, Letter 136, Southey to G. C. Bedford, 1 Oct. 1795. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_One/HTML/letterEEd.26.136.html>

[10] Coleridge, "Foreign Intelligence", *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970, 112.

[11] Anya Taylor, "Coleridge's "Fire, Famine, Slaughter": The Veneer, Rage, and Hypostasized Allegory", *European Romantic Review*, 21.6, December 2010, 711-25, 717.

[12] Coleridge, "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue" (1798), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Poetical Works I, Poems (Reading Text):* Part 1, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), ll.23-27.

The four letters suggest "Pitt" or "King". The concealment of the name is because of the danger of censorship for radical writings in the late 1790s, particularly after the enforcement of the two Gagging Acts. Despite that, the poem's tone is more direct and is reminiscent of that of political satires of the 18th century, only without allegories and rhetorical locutions.

Under such circumstances of the oppression of liberal movements as a result of Pitt's policy and the threat posed by Napoleon's rise to power in France, the radical sensibilities in Britain that supported social reform movements changed direction in the late 1790s. France invaded Switzerland in 1798, and in that year, Coleridge published "Fears in Solitude," whose political theme is not only to blame the French action but also at its core to cross-question Britain for its capitalistic policy of sacrificing another nation's liberty and human dignity, which produced only "pollutions from the brimming cup of wealth… ".[13] This poem represents Coleridge's reconsideration of the meaning of liberty and the ideological direction that British people should take.

As bad as was Napoleon's tyranny, which was the natural consequence of French Jacobin atrocities, the British "pollutions", that is, the wealth gained by exploitation, would also damage human dignity. From Coleridge's point of view, the two evils were almost equally vicious. The British slave trade was a typical symptom of this excessive mercantilism. Claims in favour of the liberty, equality, and dignity of all human beings are essential Romantic subjects, and are Coleridge's artistic theses *sine qua non* at all times. The slave trade was a vice that the British nation produced, corrupting the "whole man's body and soul":

> And deadlier far, our vices, whose deep taint
> With slow perdition murders the whole man,
> His body and his soul![14]

The poet, while indignantly denouncing the corruption of the age and its hypocrisy caused by the policy of ruthlessly pursuing prosperity, also expresses grief over the loss of human dignity with which a poet could not but be obsessed. "Fears in Solitude", then, is a résumé of Coleridge's artistic and essential preoccupations, his moral indignations and social protests, at a time of spiritual and political crisis in contemporary Britain, which was suffering from the vice of slave trading, fears of a French invasion, the commotion of incessant reforms, and the tumult of religious instability.

It is natural to understand that the poem's logic, which deplores "so much of folly"[15] within Britain, articulates at the same time an encomium for the strength, integrity and natural beauties of the poet's homeland. Retrospection back to the time of the poet's youthful meditations in the quietness of woods, dells and nooks, where he could feel secure and healed, is an integral recognition of recovery from fears experienced in solitude. In particular, by

[13] Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude", *The Collected Works I*, Part 1, l.61.
[14] Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude", ll.52-54.
[15] Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude", l.15.

elaborating on how much he owes to the beauties of nature of his "Mother Isle"[16], Coleridge suggests the solution for his own confusion and his nation's turmoil, in the awareness, or rather, the rediscovery of the healing nature of homeland:

> O native Britain! O my Mother Isle!
> How shouldst thou prove aught else but dear and holy
> To me, who from thy lakes and mountain-hills,
> Thy clouds, thy quiet dales, thy rocks and seas,
> Have drunk in all my intellectual life,…[17]

Here the poet cherishes his own idea that intellectuality, feelings, workings of the soul, and lives of human beings themselves are involved and protected in the beauty, quietness and holiness of the native landscape. Inconsistencies and self-righteousness are reconciled in "an uncontroversial harmony in nature."[18] The realisation of the possibility of quiet meditations, or rather, the recognition of the existence of serene musings in the heart of nature, is not only a discovery of imagination but also a firm rededication to his beloved mother isle amidst all the alarms and uncertainties surrounding it.

III

Coleridge's ideological shift away from republican enthusiasm to a keen consciousness of British national identity is apparent in his literary works in the early 1800s. He was deliberately retrospective and concerned about his earlier political, social and religious ideas accompanied by his national sensibility, as is evident in *The Friend II* in 1809. Coleridge's speculations on the Jacobin ideology in 1809 manifest a certain psychological distance from it, which has an ironical contrast to his former sympathy with it: "I was a sharer in the general vortex, though my little World described the path of its Revolution in an orbit of its own."[19] He describes his revolutionary idealism of the early 1790s as having been "air built Castles"[20].

Southey, in the 1800s, showed that his ideology was intricately balanced between a republican sensibility and a patriotic faith in British civilisation. During the Napoleonic wars, his sense of Britishness became more intense, as also did his growing belief in the benefits of expanding the British Empire. His unresolved philosophy mixed with sympathy towards revolutionary ideology and a Eurocentric worldview was tactfully equalised in the figure of the pantisocratic hero, Madoc. The poetic theme of *Madoc* emphasises the benefits of Welsh culture protected by its Christian "pure law". Madoc is a legendary Welsh prince who escaped from a battle against his brothers for

[16] Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude", l.176.
[17] Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude", ll. 183-87.
[18] Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996, 234.
[19] Coleridge, No. 11. October 26, 1809, *The Friend II*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 146.
[20] Coleridge, *The Friend II*, 147.

leadership of the royal family. He flees and sails to America, where he eventually colonises the lands of the Native Americans to establish his own country. The poem contains young Southey's political and religious views that are biased and idealistic, obviously echoing images of "Pantisocracy". Madoc naturally believes in the cultural superiority and benefit of British civilisation over those of the Native Americans. He prudently leads the Hoamen to share Welsh civilisation and so to enjoy the blessings available within the institution of Christianity that would elevate their souls:

> … From this pure law
> Hath all proceeded, wisdom, power, whate'er
> Here elevates the soul, and makes it ripe
> For higher powers, and more exalted bliss.
> Share then our law, and be with us, …[21]

Madoc's missionary rhetoric mirrors Southey's conviction that it is the responsibility of the British to civilise the uncivilised. Thus he comments in *The Quarterly Review* : "The seas are ours, and to every part of the inhabited or uncivilized world our laws, our language, our institutions, and our Bible may be communicated."[22] The basis of Southey's patriotic sensibility is apparently colonial, supported by his belief in the superiority of Christian culture over "pagan" society. The Hoamen accept the leadership of Madoc as they recognise his competence, amply demonstrated by his having conquered the Aztecs who enslaved the Hoamen. Madoc's success in liberating, or subordinating, the Aztecs and the Hoamen, in terms of power and religion, presents an idealistic image of the political resolution of republican sensibility and of the elasticity of Christian logic.

For Southey, the creation of Madoc's success is important for, and necessary to, his republican norms. Since Southey supported social reforms as a means of improving civil conditions for the socially repressed, the liberation and civilisation of the Hoamen symbolised the republican ideal. On the other hand, Madoc's triumph reveals Southey's strong attachment to and respect for Welsh culture, representing excellence in his Eurocentric world view. In *Madoc*, therefore, Southey's republican sympathy is not exactly incompatible with his belief in the worthiness and importance of British culture. The theme of *Madoc* suggests the particular nature of the ideological transition of British national identity in Southey's mind.

Coleridge's speculation on radical politics in England in the early 1790s and the ideal direction for the British nation continued in 1817 when he wrote an apologetic preface to "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue". This poetic modification coincides with the ideological revision of his radical attitude concerning social reforms, which also appeared in *The Friend* with its

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[21] Southey, *Madoc*, ed. Lynda Pratt, Vol.2 of *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, gen. ed. Lynda Pratt, 5 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), Part2, Book VIII, ll.94-98.

[22] Southey, "Inquiry into the Poor Laws", *The Quarterly Review*, viii (1812), 355-56.

tone of political modulation. Coleridge, at this time, was highly alert to what a poet should do in society, and the long preface to the poem was the result of this recognition. On the other hand, the defensive style of the preface reveals the fact that Coleridge takes pains to unite his earlier liberal sensibility with his concept of British national identity.

In the preface, which was written 18 years later than the poem, Coleridge modifies his excess of vehement criticism against Pitt, stating that he, Coleridge, should have interposed his body and defended Pitt's life at the risk of his own.[23] Is this a sincere confession? His apologies are that the poem was a product of his "wild imagination" and that it resulted only in provoking "vindictive, turbulent and unprincipled readers, and violent words were mere bubbles."[24] Excusing his enthusiasm for social reforms in the early 1790s, Coleridge seems to disclose his poetic imagination that could at times be swayed by youthful zeal and at other times be calmed by serene meditations. What readers find here is a unification of his young and old artistic selves. It is typical of his awareness of a poet's moral duty to present readers with some "perfect ideal of human virtue" and demonstrate the importance of "devotion for Truth, Religion, and public Liberty."[25] In his proclamation of the concept of British national identity, Coleridge is wholly sincere in his appeals to the British nation to unite itself. The apologetic tone of the preface, however, exposes the fact that Coleridge was still in the complicated ideological process of redefining his early radicalism and revising his notion of what the British national identity should be. The modification of his radical sensibility in the preface reveals Coleridge's philosophical and moral struggle to identify the proper direction a sense of Britishness should take in the socio-political climate of England in the early 1800s.

IV

Both Coleridge and Southey supported revolutionary theories and ideologies at the time of the French Revolution and the social reforms in Britain. Yet the Reign of Terror, Napoleon's invasions, and the rising feeling of uncertainty in British society in the late 1790s and thereafter, changed the perspectives of society and the recognition of British national identity, not only in the minds of the people in general but also in the hearts of these Romantic poets in particular. Coleridge, in his deliberations and speculations on Jacobin politics, rediscovered a secure sense of reconciliation and a state of spiritual liberty in the composure of the English landscape. For him, this discovery almost amounts to a moral redefinition of the national sensibility of Romantic Britons. Southey's ideology in the 1800s positively became "more John Bullish"[26] as he

[23] Coleridge, "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue, with an Apologetic Preface" (1817), *The Collected Works I*, Part 1, 434.
[24] Coleridge, "an Apologetic Preface" (1817), 430.
[25] Coleridge, "an Apologetic Preface" (1817), 435.
[26] Southey, *The Collected Letters*, Part Two, eds. Ian Packer and Lynda Pratt, Letter 729, Southey to Charles Wynn, 19 Oct. 1802.

confessed in a letter to Charles Wynn. Still, Southey kept his republican sensibility and continued to regard the French Revolution as a necessary step to "clear away the pestilence of the old Government. . . ."[27] In Southey's mind, the ideological border between his respect for the value of his country and his sense of liberty was not always clear at this time. Southey and Coleridge presented in their works the predicament of the British people in the process of establishing the concept of their nationhood collectively, along with their own individual artistic visions. They pursued a unified concept of the British nation in the time of the nation's crisis from 1789 to 1815 when the norms of society, politics, religion and morality were at their most confused, and accomplished to some extent the task of helping to create a new notion of British national identity.

<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Two/HTML/letterEEd.26.729.html>

[27] Southey, *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. John Ward Warter, 4 vols. (London, 1856), Vol.2, 337, Southey to John Rickman, 30 Nov. 1813.