Coleridge and Politics in 2022

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IT WAS THE ROMANTICS, OR MORE SPECIFICALLY JOHN KEATS'S 'Ode to a Nightingale', that enticed me into studying literature at university. When undertaking some preliminary reading for the undergraduate module on the Romantic period, though, I became captivated by poem after poem of Coleridge's. Beforehand, I had only known 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' of his work, but suddenly his early verse powerfully affected my 19 year-old self. When I read the 'Sonnet to the Autumnal Moon', the description of hope as 'Now hid behind the dragon-wing'd despair' gave me an intense thrill of sympathetic recognition at the perfectly articulated metaphor. Studying him was exhilarating because I found his poems to be not only emotionally dynamic, but intellectually rich and complex. I keep returning to Coleridge because his work helps me both to feel and think about my experiences as an individual and about the state of the world. I believe that Coleridge, as a poet and as a thinker, speaks to our own era of great political volatility.

Coleridge was the child of a revolutionary age. He was born just four years before the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution occurred when he was a teenager. One of his earliest poems is an ode on the 'Destruction of the Bastile', celebrating the storming of the infamous French prison at the start of the Revolution in July 1789. Coleridge's support for the Revolution was tested by subsequent events, though, and after the French invasion of Switzerland in 1798 he publicly renounced his support for France via a poem. In 'France: An Ode', he confronts the question of how to hold onto one's values and sense of self when they are challenged by unforeseen developments. Coleridge maintains that, over the years, he has 'still adored / The spirit of divinest Liberty', though now accepts that Liberty's 'soul' may not be found 'in forms of human pow'r'. Coleridge does not allow himself to retreat merely into political cynicism, but seeks renewed inspiration. He builds to a rousing climax, explaining that he felt Liberty's presence 'on that sea-cliff's verge':

> Yes! while I stood and gaz'd, my temples bare,
> And shot my being thro' earth, sea, and air,
> Possessing all things with intensest love,
> O Liberty, my spirit felt thee there!

Faced with the failings of human efforts, Coleridge reconnects with the source of his ideals in nature.

Coleridge's poetry covers both revolutionary hope and the misgivings that can follow the disappointment of those hopes. Such duality is at the core of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner': a poem which presents a vision both of wondrous spiritual redemption and of a horrific, ongoing curse. The Mariner experiences an 'agony' which compels him to tell his story repeatedly; whatever

moral growth he has achieved from the experience cannot be separated from his persistent suffering. Along with Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (explicitly indebted to Coleridge's poem), 'The Rime' is one of two great symbolic works of the period in English, the central ideas of which retain a perennial interest and fresh applicability. As the world continues to grapple with the effects of the devastating pandemic which likely originated in human interactions with contaminated wildlife, biologists warn us that our increasing contact with wild animals places us at risk of infection by other new diseases. Though it is a work of complexity and ambiguity, on one level 'The Rime' is a poem about the terrible consequences of shooting an albatross: of encroaching upon the natural world whose workings humanity does not understand.

After the shooting, the seascape is transformed. The Mariner tells us that 'The water, like a witch's oils, / Burnt green and blue and white,' then describes it as the 'rotting Sea' and later comments that 'The charmed water burnt always / A still and awful red.' The sea has become polluted: its bloody colour symbolizes the contamination of the world by the act of violence. The ship endures a fearsome storm and is ultimately sunk by some invisible force that makes a 'loud and dreadful sound, / Which sky and ocean smote'. The crew's actions mean that the ship is targeted for destruction, but their transgression has an impact on the whole environment. As the effects of climate breakdown become more obvious, the apocalyptic events of 'The Rime' seem unsettlingly close.

Coleridge wrote poetry about the devastating series of conflicts that dominated his era. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were fought between European powers on the continent, but also over their colonial possessions in North Africa, the Americas, and in the Indian Ocean. 2022 will be remembered as the year that large scale state warfare returned to Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forged a rare political unity and led to a renewed support for NATO and western security arrangements. The parallel is not exact, but the shift in attitude does remind me of Coleridge's poem *Fears in Solitude. Written, April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion*. In the poem, Coleridge, previously a critic of Britain's war with France, finds a voice to support a national effort against a belligerent France that might soon invade. He asserts his patriotism:

> O native Britain! O my mother Isle!
> How should'st 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,
> All sweet sensations, all ennobling thoughts,
> All adoration of the God in nature,
> All lovely and all honourable things,
> Whatever makes this mortal spirit feel
> The joy and greatness of it's future being?

Britain offers Coleridge a sacred experience and thus has transcendent value unaffected by political concerns. Coleridge was fascinated by mental processes and his patriotism also derives from an acknowledgement that the psyche is shaped by one's surroundings. Coleridge lists the various natural features because his intellectual habits are intimately connected with them. Consequently, 'There lives nor form nor feeling in my soul / Unborrow'd from my country!' His homeland is part of himself; his values derived from a life lived in Britain.

The poem is no work of jingoistic fervour, though. Coleridge denounces the actions of the British Empire, particularly its slave trade, and takes aim at the moral complicity of his countrymen seemingly disconnected from the horrors nearby as 'all read of war, / The best amusement for our morning meal!' I do not think anyone today views the atrocious war against Ukraine as entertainment, but Coleridge underscores the moral discomfort of knowing war at a distance, of relying on reports of the suffering of others, while being safe ourselves. If not deriving pleasure from television reports and newspapers, we certainly have our interest engaged by them.

But *Fears in Solitude* ends by pivoting away from caustic declamation and abstract politics towards 'my own lowly cottage, where my babe / And my babe's mother dwell in peace.' Coleridge returns to his family feeling recuperated. The anger has dissipated and the recriminations are finished. Once again he is 'worthy to indulge / Love, and the thoughts that yearn for human kind'. By ending with this longing for family and community, the poem affirms a powerful motivation for persisting in times of turmoil. This impulse towards seeking human affection runs through Coleridge's poetry and his politics. Opposing the rationalistic approach of many radical political thinkers of his day, Coleridge insisted on the primacy of human emotional relationships. Society needs people to act benevolently and Coleridge argued in his Bristol lectures of 1795 that 'general Benevolence is begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections.' Coleridge's lyrics navigate his feelings about his friends and family and his desire for human connection because Coleridge considered such bonds the foundation of morality and society.

As he grew older, Coleridge retained this emphasis on social bonds, but his ideas became more conservative and he was known as a Tory philosopher. His conservatism contrasts with much of the contemporary kind, though. Over the past half century, the British Conservative Party has become increasingly ideological. It is ever more dominated by Thatcherism: the combination of conservative social morality with a reverence for the free market. Economically, the Thatcherite aim is to lower taxes and create a smaller state. The ethics of the free market, though, are sometimes in tension with concern for the well-being of others. Thatcherism has frayed the very social bonds that Coleridge prioritized.

In the summer of 2022, the British Conservative Party elected a new leader, choosing between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak. Superficially, the candidates were offering substantially different economic programmes. Truss proposed a

programme of aggressive tax cuts, which Sunak presciently criticized (he would go on to replace her despite losing the contest). Both candidates were operating within a Thatcherite paradigm, though, since Sunak also presented a low-tax, smaller state as the long-term goal. His party have grudgingly acquiesced to tax rises only as regrettable measures forced by present exigencies.

Coleridge would have understood the Thatcherite approach as a modern iteration of what he knew as 'political economy': a rationalistic, calculating approach to policy making that focuses on aggregate effects and prioritizes commercial considerations. Coleridge denounced political economy for focusing on material concerns over moral ends: 'in its zeal for the increase of food it habitually overlooked the qualities and even the sensations of those that were to feed on it.' He believed it originated from a false philosophy that was only concerned with expediency and immediate gratification. Coleridge wished to distinguish between worth and material value. He insisted upon the importance of religion and (what he considered) genuine philosophy as promoting moral behaviour through the contemplation of eternal truths. Coleridge's later political thought thus offers a different kind of conservatism from the Thatcherite kind: one with extensive ethical foundations and a valuation of the nation's well-being that extends beyond its total income. The older Coleridge strongly believed in the importance of property rights (the younger version had wished to abolish property), but he also emphasized the duties that came with them. He argued that landowners should treat their estates as held in trust, to be managed for the well-being of those who live and depend upon the land. He made this case in the aftermath of Waterloo. The end of the wars against Napoleon had led to a collapse in government spending, which precipitated an economic recession and rising unemployment. At the same time, the government passed Corn Laws to prevent the importation of crops from Europe, keeping food prices high, to the benefit of landowners. The situation was exacerbated by poor harvests. Coleridge's advocacy of using the land to make the people's subsistence easier and to develop their 'rational and moral being' remains striking as we face a cost of living crisis today.

J. S. Mill said that 'In political economy especially he writes like an arrant driveller, and it would have been well for his reputation had he never meddled with the subject', but Coleridge's ideas about economics actually hold up rather well. In his *Lay Sermon* of 1817, Coleridge celebrated the prosperity generated by commerce, but also discussed 'the very Evils of this System': the credit cycles and periodic economic crashes, which had disastrous consequences for individuals. Observing that the spirit of commerce, 'may be said to live on a narrow isthmus between a sterile desert and a stormy sea, still threatened and encroached on either by the Too Much or the Too Little', Coleridge made an implicit case for demand management. Rather than seeing taxation as a dubious kind of appropriation by rulers, he argued that it could enable the government to manage the nation's commercial affairs to make it more

productive, for the benefit of all. As Coleridge explained, first in *The Friend* and then in the *Lay Sermon*:

> taxation itself is a part of commerce, and the Government may be fairly considered as a great manufacturing-house, carrying on in different places, by means of its partners and overseers, the trades of the ship-builder, the clothier, the iron-founder, &c. &c.

Coleridge was unconcerned with the absolute level of taxation on individuals; what mattered was what the net effect of taxation and public spending was on people's incomes and well-being. While some commentators were alarmed by the increase in the national debt as the government borrowed to finance the wars against Napoleon, Coleridge did not treat the debt as some kind of unbearable, intergenerational burden. Instead, he considered it as contributing to greater prosperity. In 1809 in *The Friend*, Coleridge claimed that 'it is the National Debt which has wedded in indissoluble union all the interests of the State,' and consequently has 'rendered Great Britain, from the Orkneys to the Rocks of Scilly, indeed and with more than metaphorical propriety a body politic'. Through the national debt, our situations are become intertwined and we have 'added to our public Duties the same feeling of Necessity, the same sense of immediate Self-interest, which in other Countries actuates the members of a single Family in their conduct toward each other.' Coleridge saw the benefits of such spending: it improved people's quality of life and funded vital infrastructure. His argument might be applied to the last few years. It is the national debt which preserved people's livelihoods through a financial crisis and a pandemic, and which distributed life-saving vaccines. It is a powerful symbol, as Coleridge understood the term: the inseparable part which makes the whole intelligible.

According to many accounts, Coleridge could be a dazzling conversationalist. He was also fascinated by charismatic figures and their ability to mould events, even if he thought they did so, like the Prime Minister, William Pitt, by giving speeches of vacuous phrases. Coleridge's great poem 'Kubla Khan' is about a tyrant, but it also confronts the difficulty of building and sustaining paradise on earth. Political projects have grand imaginings and strain under the pressure of delivering on what they promised. In the poem, Kubla is able, briefly, to create 'a miracle of rare device, / A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice'. It is a brilliant metaphor for the fissiparous tensions within visionary political projects. The poem retains a forlorn wish to 'build that dome in air' even as it suggests danger and instability around the attempt to do so. Coleridge remains a poet and a thinker for all who yet envision a better world, even amidst the struggle to realize it.

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Robert Hancock (1729-1817); pencil and wash on off-white paper; 1796; (7 x 6 in.)
National Portrait Gallery; MP cat. 2