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Radical Contra-diction: Coleridge, Revolution, Apostasy
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by Björn Bosserhof

BJÖRN BOSSERHOF'S *Radical Contra-diction: Coleridge, Revolution, Apostasy* considers Coleridge's responses to the French Revolution, including both public and private reflections during that time, as well as recollections on these views made later in his life. The Introduction sets the scene. Bosserhof outlines the key events of the French Revolution, explaining how the air of optimism that it originally generated was attractive to young intellectuals (such as Coleridge, who was in his late adolescence at this time), as it offered the tantalising prospect of a better life. Bosserhof discusses how far radical views may have permeated British society, beyond the intellectuals, and notes how Burke's *Reflections* (1790) created an unintended wave of opposition (receiving at least 70 published responses), making it one of the most controversial texts of its day. Bosserhof considers how Britain became polarised politically, too, with elements of violence appearing in the name of political reform, giving examples such as Tom Paine being burnt in effigy (1792–93) and the destruction of Joseph Priestley's laboratory by the 'Church and King' mob (1791). He notes that the press became increasingly controlled by the government, large gatherings began to be suppressed, and activists were attacked. Reformers were treated as terrorists by Pitt's government, and anyone who was anti-Pittite was termed 'Jacobin'. This was misleading, as the English Jacobins were much less militant and violent than their French counterparts (for example, they did not carry out mass executions). Legislative measures (such as the Two Acts of 1795) were implemented to try and further combat radicalism, followed by the Treason Trials which aimed to make examples of those radicals who were imprisoned after the suspension of Habeas Corpus. The legislation enacted by Pitt's Government was more a deterrent than a punishment, but this culture of repression is present, both overtly and covertly, in many romantic works. Public and private texts often gave different and contradictory messages or were revised to reflect changing political views. Romanticism, for Bosserhof, was never only about the individual man, but always about humanity at large.

Bosserhof's study is comprised of two parts. Part one, 'Catching Fire: A Politico-Biographical Account, 1792–96', focuses on works concerning the French Revolution that were written at the time, such as *The Watchman* (1795) and the 1795 Bristol lectures. The first chapter begins with an overview of Coleridge's life at Cambridge, including the 15th Light Dragoons episode, his

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love for Mary Evans, and his first momentous meeting with Robert Southey.[2] Bosserhof suggests that Coleridge was not as politically aware at this point in his life as has been previously thought. He cites John Beer's comment that Coleridge 'could dash off … at the end of 1793 to become a dragoon without, apparently, pausing to reflect that he was enlisting in [the] war' (43). He also speculates that the two prize odes which Coleridge wrote at this time (*Ode on the Destruction of the Bastille* [1790], and *Ode on the Slave Trade* [1792]) were written in response to subjects set by Christ's Hospital and Cambridge University rather than through any political sympathies that Coleridge himself may have had at this point. So, although Coleridge demonstrated some awareness of events in France at this point, he was not pre-occupied with them.

Bosserhof suggests that it was the first meeting with Southey that truly opened Coleridge's mind to current events in France. While many studies mention the pantisocracy scheme, for example, Bosserhof sets the theme in relation to Coleridge's development of political awareness, Coleridge and Southey's feelings towards the events of the French Revolution, and their response to conditions of famine, industrialisation, and war at home in England. Bosserhof credits Southey with bringing out Coleridge's radicalism and asks why this remains largely unacknowledged. He also credits Southey with the original impulse and main ideas of pantisocracy, and suggests that Coleridge's use of his newly discovered radical rhetoric was largely to impress Southey.

Next, Bosserhof considers Coleridge's life in Bristol, including his lectures on politics and religion and *Sonnets on Eminent Characters* (1795). Bosserhof notes that the sonnet *To Pitt* also includes Coleridge's first public denunciation of the serving Prime Minister, with an allegation of apostasy: 'Pitt is described to have "kiss'd his country with Iscariot mouth / (Ah! Foul apostate from his Father's fame!)"' (76). In a comparison of Coleridge and Southey's lecturing styles, Bosserhof notes that the Bristol lectures represented Coleridge's first public stage and his emergence as a (public) political figure. Coleridge spoke both about the early promise of the French Revolution and the devastating turn which it had taken. He was called a Jacobin by association because, although his works were seditious, Coleridge had never belonged to the London Corresponding Society or any other formal radical groups. Bosserhof states that Coleridge had never endorsed the Jacobin's violent regime, but attempted to understand it on an intellectual level. In 1795, at Coleridge's most radical, he called not for violence but for its prevention. Bosserhof states that Coleridge's arguments were common opposition arguments of the time, although many of them were potentially atheistic (for example, Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* [1791]). He suggests that Coleridge's use Christian rhetoric in opposition to Pitt's Government (the language of the

[2] Notably, Bosserhof speculates that the follow-up to the 15th Light Dragoons episode (Coleridge's letters of apology and explanation to his brother George) was a continuation of a larger pattern of only revealing those parts of himself which he thought would be in sympathy with his audience.

political leaders at this time) gave rise to many of the tensions and seeming contradictions in Coleridge's works.

Chapter four explores the political aspects of Coleridge and Southey's marriages, the breakdown of their relationship with each other, Southey leaving for Portugal, and Coleridge's residence in Clevedon with Sara (and her family) following their marriage. Bosserhof examines Coleridge's poetry written whilst at Clevedon (*The Eolian Harp* and *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement* [1796]) and considers his stated reasons for returning to Bristol, namely, that he could not sit and watch the progress of the Revolution without entering the debate. Coleridge spoke at many public meetings following creation of the Two Bills. His lecture *On the Two Bills* was published as a result of his attendance at these meetings. Remarkably, Bosserhof does not speculate that Coleridge was more stimulated by these intellectually charged events than by his newly discovered domestic seclusion with Sara in Clevedon. Coleridge's hatred of, and attacks on Pitt, are discussed, making the point that although these were muted after 1802, it was a subject which Coleridge would return to for many years, including those following his radical period. Bosserhof notes that Coleridge "especially despised Pitt for his 'apostasy'" (96) and put his life in danger in the process. After the premature demise of *The Watchman*, Coleridge refocussed his attention on what was happening on the ground in France rather than in the Ministry. Throughout, Bosserhof includes fascinating background information, but often relegates key details to footnotes.

Part two, 'Under Fire: Negotiating the Past', outlines Coleridge's later political life, concentrating on his attempts to justify earlier political leanings. He identifies 'the turn of the years 1796/97' as 'a convenient date for locating 'the moment of apostasy' (111). Major episodes of apostasy are examined in chapter five. Noting that *Recantation* was the sub-title to *France, an Ode*, Bosserhof asks a pivotal question: when, if at all, did this apostasy take place? *France, an Ode* was published by *The Morning Post* after the invasion of Switzerland in 1798 and the proclamation of the Helvetic Republic. Bosserhof, quoting amply from *Religious Musings*, suggests that it was the fear of invasion that changed Coleridge's politics (as well as those of the *Morning Post*), as it united people behind the government, making open criticism very difficult and dangerous. The Privy Council summoned Daniel Stuart (owner and editor of *The Morning Post* from 1795) in March 1798. Days after this, Coleridge stopped writing prose for *The Morning Post* and only contributed a few more poems, all of them anonymous or pseudonymous, apart from *France, an Ode*. Bosserhof speculates that Stuart published this as a 'momentous public statement', noting that this publicity greatly increased the 'vulnerability and 'recognisability' (120) of the Coleridge circle. *Frost at Midnight*, read as a response to such precarious political events, was less biographical than the presentation of an altered (un-political) persona to the world. *Frost at Midnight* is also a recantation.

Coleridge subsequently revised his former Jacobin views, as subsequent

chapters reveal. In chapter six Bosserhof focuses on several publications by Coleridge, including *Once a Jacobin Always a Jacobin* (1802). Bosserhof also highlights Coleridge's 1803 letter to Sir George Beaumont, which states that his apostasy was real, and that he had recanted his former Jacobin views and opinions. *The Friend* (1809–10), Bosserhof argues, represents another apostasy. Contrary to promises made in the Prospectus of *The Watchman*, Coleridge's Preface to *The Friend* pledges not to mention "the Events of the Day" and "all personal Politics" (136).

In chapter seven, Bosserhof notes that Southey was similarly considered an apostate. Southey embraced his role as Poet Laureate in 1813, and *Wat Tyler* (1794) was published in 1817 without Southey's consent. This was bad timing: spies were once again out in force, and habeas corpus was suspended much as in 1797. Critics such as Hone (*Reformists Register*) and Hazlitt (*Examiner*) took full advantage of the situation, slating Southey in print. Byron also joined in, stating in a letter to Murray that it was Southey's attitude that he objected to rather than his politics. Still, while Southey did not feel 'shame or contrition' (155) related to his earlier views (noting that he changed his views as events in France moved on), Southey never attempted to whitewash his past. Coleridge, for his part, wrote about the *Wat Tyler* affair in a series of anonymous articles in *The Courier* in March and April 1817 and defended Southey. In this, Hazlitt thought that Coleridge was also defending his own previous actions in this regard. Bosserhof notes that, at this time, Coleridge republished *Fire Famine and Slaughter* under his own name, suggesting that Coleridge thought that the long *Apologetic Preface* would take the edge off its radical tone (it had originally been published anonymously in 1798).

After a chapter on Southey's own acts of apostasy, Bosserhof concludes that Coleridge's attempts to rewrite his own past were to counter the charges of apostasy made against him by critics such as Hazlitt. He notes that Coleridge was keen to take the chances presented to him to publicly renounce his former youthful opinions. Of course, Coleridge's later apostasy was largely unsuccessful—people remembered his earlier views—and his public recantations did nothing to change the minds of those who knew him (such as Hazlitt). Bosserhof's *Radical Contra-diction* includes a number of colour illustrations, including portraits of Coleridge and Southey among other works related to the Revolution. In all, Bosserhof's study sheds new light on a decisive period in Coleridge's life and thought.