

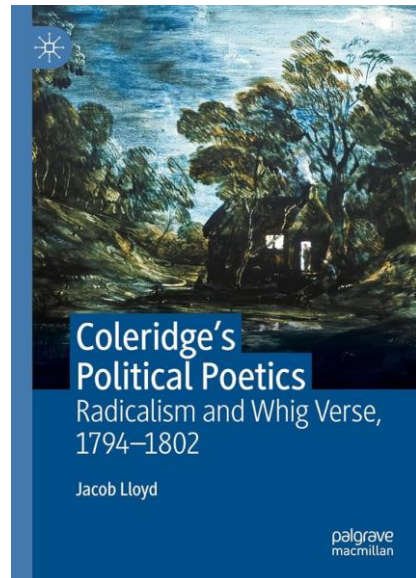
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*Coleridge's Political Poetics:
Radicalism and Whig Verse, 1794–1802*

by Jacob Lloyd¹

JACOB LLOYD'S *COLERIDGE'S POLITICAL POETICS* is a refreshing exploration of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry and its intricate interplay with the shifting political landscape that followed the French Revolution. Lloyd sets out to challenge simplistic binaries of 'radical' versus 'Tory' Coleridge, instead tracing a nuanced evolution of the poet's ideas, influenced profoundly by Whig traditions and their diverse poetic expressions. This study returns the reader, from a new perspective, to the richness of Coleridge's intellectual world and the ways in which political and poetic thought informed one another during a turbulent historical period.

From the outset, Lloyd makes clear that Whiggism is not a monolithic ideology. Rather, it encompasses a broad spectrum of views, united by a commitment to liberty, tradition, and a vision of national history rooted in continuity. These values, Lloyd argues, spoke to Romantic thinkers like Coleridge, who were disillusioned by the materialist philosophy of some radicals and the violence of the French Revolution. Coleridge's engagement with Whig ideas, therefore, is not contrary to his youthful radicalism but an extension and reconsideration of it. This framework allows Lloyd to position Coleridge within a 'revivified' sense of historical and ideological context, emphasizing continuities rather than sharp breaks in his political and poetic development.

Lloyd conjoins poetry and politics by adopting the concept of 'Whig verse'—a term he uses to describe a tradition of poetry associated with figures such as Mark Akenside, William Lisle Bowles, William Cowper and John Thelwall. As these diverse names suggest, Whiggism is presented as a complex range of views, giving Coleridge the latitude to play political chameleon, while plausibly claiming adherence to core fundamental principles. Lloyd's approach is innovative, not so much for identifying these poets as key influences on Coleridge, as for demonstrating how their works reflect and shape Whig political ideals. He argues



¹ Jacob Lloyd, *Coleridge's Political Poetics: Radicalism and Whig Verse, 1794–1802* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

that Akenside's 'politico-metaphysical' verse, Percy's antiquarian ballads, and Cowper's conversational style all offered Coleridge models for integrating political thought into poetic practice. Lloyd's analysis underscores the dynamic interplay between poetic form and political content, showing how shifts in Coleridge's verse style mirror broader changes in his political thinking.

One of the book's most original contributions is its reassessment of Akenside's influence on Coleridge's early poetry. Lloyd convincingly argues that Akenside's *Pleasures of the Imagination* and other works were 'absolutely essential' to Coleridge's development as a poet, providing a framework for his 'politico-metaphysical' ambitions. Through detailed close readings, Lloyd traces parallels between Akenside's verse and Coleridge's early works, such as *Religious Musings*, that incorporate Neoplatonic philosophy into a vision of social and moral amelioration. This analysis enriches our understanding of Coleridge's intellectual influences and places Akenside at the forefront of his poetic formation—a move that challenges longstanding critical neglect of this connection. I was particularly struck by Lloyd's exposition of the correspondences between 'Dejection. An Ode' and Akenside's 'Hymn to Cheerfulness'. This fresh perspective invites a re-reading of 'Dejection' and (ahem . . . I must confess) a first reading of the less anthologised parts of Akenside's extensive poetical output. Lloyd does not go overboard here; he goes on sensibly to acknowledge the close relationship between 'Dejection' and the opening stanzas of Wordsworth's partially completed 'Ode'. Lloyd keeps to this measured tone throughout the book, fairly assessing a wide range of views other than his own, before coming decisively to his own view, in a way that makes his book valuable as a means of reviewing or recapping the major strands of Coleridge scholarship.

Lloyd's examination of Bowles highlights the role of 'manly sentiment' and the 'culture of sensibility' in shaping Coleridge's poetics and politics. Bowles's poetry, with its emphasis on tender feeling and personal connection, provided Coleridge with a means of tempering radical enthusiasm with emotional depth and social harmony. Lloyd's reading of Coleridge's *Conciones ad Populum* and other writings demonstrates how this synthesis allowed Coleridge to critique abstract rationalism, such as that espoused by William Godwin, while advancing a vision of reform rooted in 'tender British feeling'. This insight adds a new dimension to our understanding of Coleridge's engagement with the politics of sensibility and the ways in which he adapted Bowles's verse for his own radical purposes.

Lloyd's approach is equally illuminating when it comes to Coleridge's later poetry, such as the *Ode on the Departing Year* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In the former, Lloyd argues, Coleridge confronts and critiques the Whiggish myth of Britain as the land of liberty. By appropriating and reconfiguring the aesthetics of the 'Whig sublime', he exposes the ideological inconsistencies of patriotic verse while advancing his own vision of liberty. This analysis exemplifies Lloyd's broader claim that Coleridge's poetry is deeply political—not in the sense of partisan advocacy, but as a site of ideological negotiation and critique.

The discussion of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is particularly thought-provoking. Lloyd situates the poem within the Gothic tradition and its associations with liberty and national identity, as exemplified by Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. However, he also highlights the contested nature of the Gothic aesthetic, showing how Coleridge's use of Gothic tropes resists simplistic political alignments. The ambiguity of the Mariner's moral and political message, Lloyd argues, reflects broader tensions within the Gothic tradition itself, making the poem a rich site for exploring the interplay of politics and poetics.

Throughout the book, Lloyd's close readings are meticulous and insightful, often uncovering new dimensions of well-studied texts. His analysis of prosody, while occasionally over-detailed, contributes to a deeper appreciation of Coleridge's technical artistry and its relationship to his thematic concerns. For instance, Lloyd's discussion of metrical variations in *Religious Musings* and *The Rime* illuminates how Coleridge's formal choices enhance the political and philosophical resonance of his verse. These moments of detailed analysis are balanced by broader theoretical and historical insights.

One of the strengths of *Coleridge's Political Poetics* is its engagement with previous scholarship. Lloyd positions his argument in dialogue with critics such as David Fairer, Abigail Williams, and David Hopkins, building on their work while offering fresh perspectives. I particularly enjoyed Lloyd including the Friends' very own former chair Justin Shepherd in this scholarly pantheon. He quotes Shepherd's comment concerning 'Fears in Solitude': 'Coleridge desynonymises the term "Britain" so that it refers not to the Pitt administration nor indeed to any political party or grouping, but refers rather to the actual physical landscape of the country and to the personal relationships which exist within its geographical boundaries'. To which Lloyd responds: 'Such an approach is not politically neutral. Coleridge erases government associations in order to reinscribe the landscape with his own values. He counters the idea of loyalist Britain with his own home: a reminder that Pitt's Britain is just a construction' (173–74).

This is the crux of the book in both senses: as the meat of Lloyd's argument, and as the central problem it raises. For Lloyd, politics is an all-pervading context that cannot be escaped even by opting out. One of his chapter headings deploys the term 'Retirement politics', a clear sign of Lloyd's conviction, in common with the New Historicist school of criticism that has dominated the last half-century of scholarship, that the world of imagination and poetry is not an apolitical space. *Et in Arcadia ego*.