

Coleridge: Friend or Partizan?—II

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by Bernard Sharratt

The contention that Coleridge's rejection of Rousseau's 'Reason' as a political principle is based on a deep-seated prejudice can be clearly established if we analyse further the roots of his own political position. Just as his plea for more adequate communication of truth is ultimately a petition for administrative reform, the nature of 'truth' itself being analysed at this stage only in terms of the difference between what is self-evident and what must be demonstrated (55f), so his definition of politics is ultimately a reduction to 'administration', to how things 'ought to be managed' (214). That this conveniently forgets that politics is also about policies, i.e. about morality—a position that Coleridge will otherwise argue for—is clear from the use of the term 'political' in his criticism of Cartwright: that he 'confounds the sufficiency of the conscience to make every person a *moral* and amenable Being, with the sufficiency of judgment and experience requisite to the exercise of *political Right*' (207). This position has its epistemological roots in his distinction between the 'truths' of science and the 'probability' of facts of experience (158)—a distinction which holds politically, provided one genuinely acknowledges the equal validity of quite different 'experience'. The practical outcome of Coleridge's position is a politics which can meet an argument that the expenditure on one naval operation to destroy nine French ships could have provided instead £100 for 2,000 poor families or built a new town in every English county, by the response: 'These men *know* that it is not practicable' (244). An age which could award its admirals £20 for every enemy corpse—more than the average annual wage of its own living labourers—or, in our own age, a country which can spend \$904 billion on military power and \$96 billion on education, health, welfare housing and community development (Chomsky, *op. cit.*, p. 106) has need of such responses. At least in the extreme example of a country signing away its national independence, Coleridge can admit that it is the people not the 'half-dozen individuals possessing the government of those countries' that must choose, morally and politically: 'is it to be supposed for a moment, that a whole nation, consisting of perhaps twenty millions of human souls, could ever have invested a few individuals, whom, altogether for the promotion of its welfare it had entrusted with its government, with the right of signing away its existence?' (275). In a world mapped out by the putative trajectories of intercontinental nuclear missiles, those words now have a far grimmer edge—one that bit deep into the consciousness of a rebel generation which first expressed itself in CND.

For what this mode of politics has always deeply presumed is that,

generalizing Coleridge's account of his era as coming *after* all major changes, 'to us there remain only quiet duties, the constant care, the gradual improvement, the cautious unhazardous labours of the industrious though contented gardener' (168). For the liberal, ours is always a post-revolutionary age—and he will, if necessary, regretfully endorse considerable violence to keep it that way. His own direct contribution tends to be interpretative: to *explain away* the revolutionary needs and movements of his own age. Coleridge, of course, attempts to do just this, by desperately differentiating the 'privations, sufferings, and manifold oppressions of the great mass of the Continental population', 'the unutterable abominations of their oppressors', and their 'disgusting forms of despotism', from 'the real blessings of English law' and 'the executive branch of the English sovereignty' (cf. 214-216). True, he declares, in France 'there was indeed a general disposition to change and rebellion', but in England 'there was not a city, not a town, in which a man suspected of holding democratic principles could move abroad without receiving some unpleasant proof of the hatred in which his supposed opinions were held by the great majority of the people' (218-219). A period which could see the London Corresponding Society grow from nine members to 2,000 in a fortnight (1792), or the Society for Constitutional Information organize a street masquerade of 6,000 to celebrate the sans-culotte victory at Valmy (1792), or one town, Sheffield, collect 10,000 signatures challenging the House of Lords' existence (1793), and during which Paine's *Rights of Man: Pt. I* sold 50,000 copies in 1791 and *Pt. II* 200,000 in 1793 (in a population of 10 million which bought only 30,000 copies of Burke's *Reflections*)¹—such a period could hardly be described as Coleridge wanted it to be by 1809, and as many later historians still would like it to be. They too would echo Coleridge's impeccable liberal accents in his sane and balanced reaction: 'The most prudent, as well as the most honest mode of defending the existing arrangements, would have been, to have candidly admitted what could not in truth be denied, then to have shewn that, though the things complained of were evils, they were necessary evils; or if they were *removeable*, yet that the consequences of the *heroic* medicines recommended by the Revolutionaries would be far more dreadful than the disease' (215).

It was, however, the 'existing arrangements' that most deeply linked France and England. Whatever the differences, in both countries there existed a minority in control of a majority, that control resting ultimately on the control of property. Though Coleridge deprecated the 'panic of property' and questioned the grounds on which the inherited right to that property was defended by the ultra-right Anti-Jacobins, that he too defended property was never in doubt.² He opens Essay vi with the statement: 'From my earliest

¹Cf. Gwyn Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

²At least in *The Friend*. Coleridge's *Notebooks* of this period are less positive.

manhood, it was an axiom in Politics with me, that in every country where property prevailed, property must be the grand basis of government; and that that government was the best, in which the power or political influence of the individual was in proportion to his property'—adding, of course, the characteristically liberal and politically meaningless condition, 'provided that the free circulation of property was not impeded by any positive laws or customs' (223). This position he had already justified to his own satisfaction in his earlier debate with Rousseau and Cartwright. Against Rousseau, he declares 'The chief object for which men first formed themselves into a State was not the protection of their lives but of their property. . . . But where individual landed property exists, there must be inequality of property'—for men *are* unequal, and one must respect their inequality (a respect shared by Marx, Lenin and Rousseau; what they further demanded was that men should also respect those *less* equal than themselves). Against Cartwright he argues that if, as Cartwright asserted, 'Laws to bind all must be assented to by all, and consequently every man, even the poorest, has an equal right to suffrage . . . (because) . . . all without exception are capable of feeling happiness or misery, according as they are well or ill governed', since, adds Coleridge, happiness or misery also depends on possessing the means of a comfortable subsistence, 'might not then, on the same or equivalent principles a Leveller construct a right to equal property?' Since universal suffrage in fact would give a legal power of abolishing or equalizing property, Coleridge feels quite content to 'answer' Cartwright by quoting back at him one of Cartwright's own 'Principles': 'That a power which ought never to be used ought never to exist' (199-202). For Coleridge the idea of abolishing property was as morally unthinkable as the idea of nuclear retaliation is for any Christian now: the very threat 'ought never to exist'.

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That Coleridge found the abolition or equalization of property almost unthinkable drives us deeper, to perhaps the core of his political attitudes: his presumption that the Law is legitimate.¹ He clearly sees a connection between property and law: 'to property . . . and to its inequalities, all human laws directly or indirectly relate' (200). But the relationship implied here is obscured by its mystified reversal: using an anecdote about Alexander Ball's liberal handling of naval discipline, Coleridge sings: 'An *invisible* power it was, that quelled them, a power which was therefore irresistible, because it took away the very will of resisting. It was the awful power of LAW

¹Since I have accused Coleridge throughout of 'prejudice', perhaps I should remark here that pre-judice *means* taking the law for granted. Cf. also *privi-lege*. Note too that the fallacy of the notion of 'negative liberty' so strong in the liberal tradition (cf. 'no positive laws' above) lies in its forgetting that present law is the legitimization of the end-term of a previous historical process which it takes for granted as legitimate. Coleridge's attitudes to law are more complex than this (cf. his argument against the 'Antiquarians', and his *Addresses on Sir Robert Peel's Bill*, 1818) but not, in the result, radically different.

acting on natures pre-configured to its influences. . . . Who dares struggle with an *invisible* combatant? with an enemy which exists and makes us know its existence—but *where* it is, we ask in vain—No space contains it—time promises no control over it—it has no ear for any threats—it has no substance, that my hands can grasp or my weapons find vulnerable—it commands and cannot be commanded—it acts and is insusceptible of my reaction—the more I strive to subdue it, the more am I compelled to think of it—and the more I think of it, the more do I find it to possess a reality out of myself, and not to be a phantom of my own imagination’ (171). In their own different styles, Dickens, Marx and Kafka could all rewrite this passage—but hardly its continuation: ‘that all, but the most abandoned men, acknowledge its authority, and that the whole strength and majesty of my country are pledged to support it; and yet that *for me* its power is the same with that of my own permanent Self, and that all the choice which is permitted to me, consists in having it for my Guardian Angel or my avenging Fiend! This is the Spirit of LAW! . . . This is the true necessity, which compels man into the social state, now and always, by a still-beginning, never-ceasing force of moral cohesion.’ (171). The mundane fact that English laws derived finally from a Commons composed largely of undistinguished younger sons and placemen seems momentarily to have escaped Coleridge.

This mystification is not, however, only Coleridge’s. As he rightly points out (though he sees it as differentiating France and England), this sense of The Law as primary and alienated from specific human creation, has also entered deep into the consciousness of those whom it most affects: ‘in Great Britain, a tyrant, who has abused [sic] the power, which a vast property has given him, to oppress a whole neighbourhood, can walk in safety unarmed and unattended, amid a hundred men, each of whom feels his heart burn with rage and indignation at the sight of him. . . . To what does the oppressor owe his safety? To the spirit quelling thought: the laws of God and my country have made his life sacred! I dare not touch a hair of his head!’ (168).

Law, like the invisible earnings which entwine the exploited abroad, is a silent, clean and highly effective weapon: the conscience as castration. (It is also appropriate that it is through Fleet Street and past St Paul’s that one travels from Chancery Lane to reach the Stock Exchange; the other way is via Newgate.) The Law becomes, in Coleridge’s thought, the unquestioned arbiter even of sanity, of reason: ‘What man in his senses would regard the faithful observation of a contract entered into to plunder a neighbour’s house, but as a treble crime?’ (173)—but there are different possible definitions of sanity, crime, contract, plunder—and even neighbour. To re-define those terms would redefine our society, but to do so means first seeing the law in a different light. Coleridge anxiously recognized

this possibility—hence his attacks on that ultimate redefinition: the Code Napoléon (cf. 87-88, 173, 184, 198, etc.). Further, for Coleridge, the ‘destruction of the Athenian constitution by the ascendancy of its democratic element’ was brought about in part by the Sophists’ extension of access to learning beyond the élite and by the attack on religion, but finally by ‘the frequency of perjury’ (438-442). Coleridge gives an interesting account, using Plato’s character Callicles in the *Georgias*, of the argument behind this refusal to acknowledge the validity of Athenian Law: that ‘laws, honour and ignominy were all calculated for the advantage of the law-makers’ and that the Sophists saw those law-makers as protecting themselves from those stronger than themselves by legally enshrining the doctrine of *equality* (443). What is almost laughable is that Coleridge equates the Sophists with the Jacobins—whose doctrine of equality he had earlier expended great energy combating. As in Coleridge’s treatment of Rousseau, this case of ‘muddled’ thinking has its clear ideological undertow. For one can cut through Coleridge’s mystificatory, topsy-turvy notion of law as that on which property is dependent by a comment from a man whom he called a ‘former Jacobin’ (180)—Cromwell—but quoted by a later Lord Chancellor who, more than any other man in the nineteenth century, grappled with and constantly reformed English laws: Henry Brougham: ‘But (said Cromwell) the sons of Zeruiah are too strong for us, and we cannot mention the reformatting of the law but they presently cry out we design to destroy property, whereas the law, as it is now constituted, serves only to maintain the lawyers, and to encourage the rich to oppress the poor’ (Brougham, *Memoirs*, 1871, III, 440).

It is perhaps hopeful that as this article is being written the two cases in the headlines are, in England, the invasion of the High Court by Welsh Nationalists who received sentences of three months’ imprisonment for ‘contempt of court’ and, in the USA (land of ‘Law and Order’), the pre-trial hearings of the Black Panthers, which was described by a contemporary liberal journalist, Alistair Cooke in the *Guardian* (6.2.70), as one continuous contempt of court—though despite constant scuffles and interruptions the first person actually to be committed for contempt of court was a woman who asked: ‘And who judges the judge?’ Precisely. Alistair Cooke finished his account by commenting that once respect for law and obedience to the courts has gone ‘the whole game of democracy is up’. That ‘democracy’ can now appear in a liberal context 150 years after Coleridge, might even indicate that the term will one day cease to refer to a game.

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This article has already suggested at times that a more adequate ‘epistemological’ starting-point for a political philosophy would be somewhere in the area of sociology of consciousness—perhaps that of class-consciousness. This is not the place to explore this problem in

detail,¹ but only to point a direction. For both Coleridge and many of the present generation 'Reason' is an unhelpful notion,² but their different reasons for querying it lead into very different political arguments: while Coleridge maintains that life cannot reflect the exactness of Reason, *the tendency now is to see specific forms of rationality as reflections of specific forms of life—as rationalizations*. In both cases something akin to a political pragmatism is the logical next step; *the crucial difference lies in the recognition by the present generation of radicals that the basic political conflict is not one primarily of ideas, which liberal discussion might dissolve, but one of forms of life, their opposition (the concrete contradictions of the world, not contradictions between propositions) sustained by property-relations and justified by those ideological language-games which are taken-for-granted from within particular forms of life*. This is presumably familiar. What is interesting is that Coleridge himself at times recognized the deep interpenetration of ideology and experience, not just in the case of law cited earlier ('acting on natures pre-configured to its influences') but also more widely: he remarks that 'in an age in which artificial knowledge is received almost at birth, intellect and thought alone can be our upholder and judge' (124). But though even 'the meanest of men has his Theory, and to think at all is to theorize' (189), Coleridge recognizes that much that passes for thinking is merely an intensification of inherited 'artificial knowledge'. Some years after *The Friend*, Coleridge clarified his political position on the relation between property and intellect: in *On the Idea of the Constitution of Church and State* (1829) Coleridge argues first the need for a national 'Clerisy'—educators resident in every village and town, concerned with 'cultivating . . . the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity'. But he also argues that an intelligentsia without property and/or unmarried (marriage for Coleridge was 'the simplest . . . form of property', 200) should have no political power. In this conjunction of two attitudes to intellectuals we have the authentic voice of a later tradition, simultaneously 'intellectual' and anti-intellectual, ultimately concerned (to use Coleridge's description of his Clerisy's function) 'to train the people of the country to be obedient, useful and organizable subjects, citizens and patriots, living to the benefit of the State and prepared to die for its defence'; there might be distinctions made within the 'people' and various substitutes might now be offered for 'the State', but the presumptions remain.

In the wider perspective I have tried to indicate throughout, phrases from the quotation at the beginning of this article begin to echo with a more sinister ring: 'anonymous . . . self-elected', 'I shall not fear the charge of calumny if I add that they have lost all credit

¹Cf. S. Ossowski, *Class Structure in the Social Consciousness*; another Polish thinker is also important in this debate, cf. my review of L. Kolakowski, *Marxism and Beyond*, *New Blackfriars*, September, 1969.

²The notion of 'rights and duties', linked to it, also seem inadequate to many at present; cf. della Volpe, *op. cit.*—and Brecht's play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

...’, ‘they anticipate and dislike his opinion . . .’, ‘while others . . . are suffered to pass without payment . . . by virtue of orders which they themselves distributed to known partizans.’ *The clash between partisans of different sides in intellectual matters, in ‘the great theatre of literature’, cannot be disentangled, as we have seen in Coleridge’s case, from deep-seated political attitudes, our roots in our own limited forms of life and experience.* The presence now, in England and America, of what may soon almost merit the name of ‘Anti-Clerisy’, composed of a wide scattering of counter-educators who have endeavoured to redefine existentially the nature both of property and of marriage, as a prelude releasing them for an active redefinition of society, has disclosed again the connexions between art and politics: on the one side, the Arts Labs, the Anti-Universities, the poetry readings, guerilla theatre, Underground press and films, the committed music groups, the opposition journals directly concerned with arts-politics, all linked to new senses of living; on the other—as the cartoon said—‘It’s nice to see the police so interested in Culture these days’.

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Obviously, this essay, too, is partisan. But it is not only liberal-at-heart symptoms/sympathies that persuade me to end on a note of approval. The essays on ‘the Principles of Method’ (448-524), originally intended as an introduction to an encyclopaedia, are far from the only essays worth careful, probing encounter in these volumes: the whole periodical takes us close to the core of Coleridge; but these essays closest. I can only briefly indicate the depth of some of the shafts opened here: the first essay in the section begins with a few pages (448ff.) that anticipate aspects of Basil Bernstein’s work, of Heidegger and of Merleau-Ponty; from then on the reverberations are endless, touching major contributions in many disciplines that have become only recently living elements in our sense of ourselves: the pre-echoes range from T. S. Kuhn on paradigmatic shifts through Max Black on scientific metaphors and Charles Hartshorne on wonder to the early developments of existentialism (Coleridge is the second writer in English to use ‘existential’ in a modern sense), while the very problematic of the essay itself looks back to Descartes’ *Discours de la Méthode* and forward to Sartre’s *Questions de Méthode*. For theologically-oriented readers, the anticipation of Dewart’s recent contention against Sartre (the choice of the incomprehensible rather than the absurd) might save them 500 pages of *Foundations of Belief*; but they would do even better—bearing in mind the connexions between Coleridge and Newman on development and Lonergan on method—to allow Coleridge’s conception of method itself to sink deep: ‘all Method supposes a principle of unity with progression; in other words, progressive transition without breach of continuity’ (476)—there are partisans too in the Church.

Finally, may I add to the general admiration for the exact academic training that reveals itself in the editing of these volumes, a

word of admiration for the anonymous working printers who also produced this edition: in a total of some 1,800 pages there are probably no more than half-a-dozen printing errors: it is on such work also, in various ways, that serious scholarship depends.

The Dry Salvages—Topography as Symbol—II

by John D. Boyd, S.J.

To stop, then, at the mere recital of topography would be like having 'had the experience but missed the meaning'. Yet the meaning of the symbols which rise out of the topography enjoy a peculiar character precisely because, as Miss Gardner has already been quoted as saying: 'The landscape of *The Dry Salvages* is a landscape remembered.' I suggest that this symbolism, especially of the sea and the rocks and of the plight of the fishermen, has a peculiarly realistic quality. I use the word 'realistic' largely in an epistemological context, with, however, psychological and anthropological overtones. This quality refers to structure, theme and tone. Further, transforming and intensifying this realism is a structure best seen as deriving from a Christian imagination—an 'approach to the meaning restores the experience/In a different form'.

It is commonplace to say that Eliot's poetry is deeply indebted to the French *Symboliste* tradition. It is also commonplace to say that this tradition, as its theory and practice developed from Baudelaire through Rimbaud and Valéry, became more and more self-enclosed and private in tone and meaning. The strong idealist tendencies of its epistemology and its premises of the poet's isolation from society are well known.¹

Whatever Eliot's rather rarefied and complex epistemological interests in his Harvard days, such as we find in his recently published thesis on F. H. Bradley, *Knowledge and Experience*, by the time of the *Quartets* his Christian belief had surely directed his imagination towards a more communal realism. This seems clear enough from the tenor of these poems, and in the preface to *Knowledge and Experience* we note: 'Forty-six years after my academic philosophizing came to an end, I find myself unable to think in the terminology of this essay. Indeed, I do not pretend to understand it.' (*Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, New York, 1964, p. 10).

¹William Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), pp. 590 ff.