Coleridge and the Charge of Political Apostasy

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An interesting and unresolved question that occupies the border between literary history and political history is posed by the career of Coleridge. Did Coleridge’s political attitudes over the course of his adult life represent a coherent development from primary assumptions, or, on the contrary, did they represent an incoherent line of thought characterized by opportunism and outright apostasy? To address the question is not simply to re-enter the political milieu of the Romantic era, but to shed renewed light on Coleridge’s mental attitudes and idiosyncratic modes of thought.

Both of the opposing cases were urged in Coleridge’s day and are still being put forward in our own. The historian E. P. Thompson has repeatedly charged that Coleridge lacked political integrity and that he in fact virtually defines one form of discreditable apostasy. In an essay called “Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon,” Thompson attempts to distinguish between apostasy and disenchantment:

There is nothing in disenchantment inimical to art. But when aspiration is actively denied, we are at the edge of apostasy, and apostasy is a moral failure, and an imaginative failure. In men of letters it often goes with a peculiar disposition towards self-bowdlerization, whether in Mr. Southey or in Mr. Auden. It is an imaginative failure because it involves forgetting—or manipulating improperly—the authenticity of experience: a mutilation of the writer’s own previous existential being. . . . Hazlitt commented that there need be no objection to a man changing his opinions. But:

he need not . . . pass an act of attainder on all his thoughts, hopes, wishes, from youth upwards, to offer them at the shrine of matured servility: he need not become one vile antithesis, a living and ignominious satire on himself.1
And then Thompson says: "Coleridge fell into this phase soonest." Thompson argues that a creative tension between "Jacobin affirmation and recoil" was good for Romantic poetry, but that apostasy, the abject giving up of former opinion, was bad: that for Wordsworth the moment of creative tension "was far more protracted than it was for Coleridge." He thus sees Coleridge's apostasy as not only an index to moral bankruptcy but as the prime agent in his loss of poetic power, though others have ascribed that loss to other factors.

If Thompson's distinction may seem to raise more questions than it answers, it at least serves as an introduction to his distaste for Coleridge. Ten years later, in a review of David Erdman's edition of Coleridge's *Essays on his Times*, Thompson indulged that distaste with greater vehemence. Coleridge's political essays, he says, are "the spurious rhetoric of a chameleon"; Coleridge himself underwent "interior redecoration"; "Coleridge," says Thompson, "was an apostate, with a voracious appetite for hatreds"; "These articles then are, in the main, both irresponsible and unprincipled." "These books are most damaging to Coleridge's reputation as an exalted political thinker, and, moreover, it is altogether proper that this inflated reputation should be so damaged. The ingredients of Coleridge's political thought—historical, philosophical—were exceptionally rich, but the results were always half-baked."

In truth, Thompson simply cannot abide Coleridge. "I find these essays objectionable, not on account of their opinions—although most of these are lamentable—but on account of the unction with which they are delivered." Again: "As one lays the volumes down one is sickened by the surfeit of pharisaism and cliché. Coleridge is always writing 'from my inmost soul,' he offers himself as 'a teacher of moral wisdom.' But the content might be better entitled 'Coleridge's Compendium of Cliché.'" Still again: "The more he tried to work up his impulses into finished thoughts, the more unprincipled he became. He is chiefly of interest, in his political writings, as an example of the intellectual complexity of apostasy. He was, of course, a political apostate, and critics have confused the matter only because they have removed it from a political to an aesthetic court of judgment." In a zenith of irritation Thompson even declares that "Coleridge was wrong on almost everything."  

Now not everyone is likable to everyone else, and doubtless there could never be any possibility of rapprochement between the styles and opinions of Edward Thompson and Coleridge. But that Coleridge was a committed Jacobin who then became an apostate Tory seems to me demonstrably
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not the case. Thompson's own political orientation is very unlike that of Coleridge, and we should heed Coleridge's own statement that

he who infamizes another man as an Apostate and Renegado, does, ipso facto, confess that he himself continues to retain the opinions and principles which the other had reneged and turned against. Had no other fragments of the works of the heretic Faustus been preserved but those in which he calls St. Augustine, Apostle and Deserter, yet these would have been amply sufficient to make it certain that Faustus himself had remained a Manichaean.³

Nor does Thompson's quoting Hazlitt against not passing an act of attainder on all one's previous attitudes serve as more than a merely rhetorical point against Coleridge. After all, Coleridge himself said the same thing, more subtly:

Why do we so very very often see men pass from one extreme to another. . . . Alas they sought not the Truth but praise, self-importance, & above all to see something doing.—Disappointed they hate and persecute their former opinion, which no man will do who by meditation had adopted it, & in the course of unfeigned meditation gradually enlarged the circle & so got out of it—for in the perception of its falsehood he will form a perception of certain Truths which had made the falsehood plausible, & never can he cease to venerate his own sincerity of Intention. . . .⁴

The setting up of Hazlitt against Coleridge, indeed, is a more complex matter than would appear on the surface. First of all, Hazlitt had not really been mature enough to experience the before-and-after shock of the Revolution, which as we shall presently see, is so necessary to an understanding of the changes in political sentiment endemic to the time. Second, Hazlitt took a special, indeed a unique pride in not changing his opinions once they had formed, and this temperamental feature cannot be separated from the validity of his position as such:

In matters of taste and feeling, one proof that my conclusions have not been quite shallow or hasty, is the circumstance of their having been lasting. I have the same favourite books, pictures, passages that I ever had: I may therefore presume that they will last my life—nay, I may indulge a hope that my thoughts will survive me. This continuity of impression is the only thing on which I pride myself.⁵

That statement occurs in an essay called "A Farewell to Essay-Writing." In an essay called "On Consistency of Opinion" he proudly says:
I am not to be brow-beat or wheedled out of my settled convictions. Opinion to opinion, I will face any man. Prejudice, fashion, the cant of the moment, go for nothing. . . . If 'to be wise were to be obstinate,' I might set up for as great a philosopher as the best of them; for some of my conclusions are as fixed and incorrigible to proof as need be. I am attached to them in consequence of the pains, the anxiety, and the waste of time they have cost me.  

Hazlitt was particularly "fixed and incorrigible" with regard to the French Revolution, which he calls "the great cause, to which I had vowed myself." As he said in a haunting statement that affirmed his pride in the constancy of his beliefs, "my earliest hopes will be my last regrets":

What sometimes surprises me in looking back to the past, is . . . to find myself so little changed in time. The same images and trains of thought stick by me: I have the same tastes, liking, sentiments, and wishes that I had then. One great ground of confidence and support has, indeed, been struck from under my feet; but I have made it up to myself by proportionable pertinacity of opinion. The success of the great cause, to which I had vowed myself, was to me more than all the world: I had a strength in its strength, a resource which I knew not of, 'till it failed me for the second time [i.e., Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo]. . . . It was not till I saw the axe laid to the root, that I found the full conviction of the right was only established by the triumph of the wrong; and my earliest hopes will be my last regrets. One source of this unbendingness, (which some may call obstinacy,) is that, though living much alone, I have never worshipped the Echo. I see plainly enough that black is not white, that the grass is green, that kings are not their subjects; and, in such self-evident cases, do not think it necessary to collate my opinions with the received prejudices.

Coleridge was quite different. He was not, however, different in the tenacity with which he held to his positions; for as I have elsewhere emphasized, he maintained the same principles throughout his adult career.  

He was different rather in the complex structure of his tenacity; for unlike Hazlitt, who prided himself on seeing that black was not white, Coleridge was always trying to encompass both black and white. He was temperamentally on all sides of a question at once, and he was forever attempting to reconcile and include, rather than to discriminate and reject:

My system, if I may venture to give it so fine a name, is the only attempt I know, ever made to reduce all knowledges into harmony. It opposes
no other system, but shows what was true in each; and how that which
was true in the particular, in each of them became an error, because it
was only half the truth, and therewith to frame a perfect mirror. I show
to each system that I fully understand and rightfully appreciate what
that system means; but then I lift up that system to a higher point of
view, from which I enable it to see its former position, where it was, in­
deed, but under another light and with different relations; so that the
fragment of truth is not only acknowledged, but explained.  

Coleridge, in brief, agreed both with what the Jacobins were attempting
to do, and with what their opponents urged against them. In attempting
to incorporate all positions into his own, Coleridge might well seem to one
who encountered him only on special issues not to honor the difference
between black and white; but I myself have described this being on both
sides of a given issue as the idiosyncrasy and defining merit of his mental
activity. As I affirmed at the conclusion of a work that surveyed the entire
course of his thought:

... through all the transformations of his 'it is'/pantheist interests on the
one hand, and of his 'I am'/moral interests on the other, he remained
ture to the ineradicable fact of their tragic opposition—longing for their
reconciliation, but foundering, as do we all, before the mysteries of exis­
tence.

In this equipoise Coleridge's philosophical achievement is both of its
time and out of its time. His thought shares with that of his German
contemporaries an emphasis upon the central importance of Spinozistic
pantheism. But it differs in its idiosyncratic refusal to decide, either by
pantheism or by solipsistic scepticism, that which cannot be decided.

So, too, as this essay shall argue, Coleridge's voyage down the political
stream, steering a course between the opposed banks of radicalism and
reaction, seeming now to adhere to one side and now to the other, is en­
tirely consistent with his mental procedure on all topics of thought. Hazlitt
sardonically recalled of a walk with him, that

I observed that he continually crossed me on the way by shifting from
one side of the foot-path to the other. This struck me as an odd move­
ment; but I did not at that time connect it with any instability of purpose
or involuntary change of principle, as I have done since. He seemed
unable to keep on in a strait line.

But Hazlitt, despite his disgust at what he thought of as Coleridge's defec­
tion from the libertarian position, really did understand that Coleridge's
political progress was precisely an intellectual version of the idiosyncratic fact that “he continually crossed me on the way by shifting from one side of the foot-path to the other.” Coleridge did keep moving on the path; the shifting, however peculiar to his mode of progression, was not an opportunistic abandonment of one faith and adhesion to another:

I can hardly consider Mr. Coleridge as a deserter from the cause he first espoused, unless one could tell me what cause he ever heartily espoused, or what party he ever belonged to, in downright earnest. He has not been inconsistent with himself at different times, but at all times. He is a sophist, a casuist, a rhetorician, what you please; and might have argued or declaimed to the end of his breath on one side of a question or another, but he never was a pragmatical fellow. He lived in a round of contradictions, and never came to a settled point.13

Despite Hazlitt’s scorn, his characterization of Coleridge here is compatible in its structure with what I praise, in the passage quoted above, as the special “equipoise” of Coleridge’s intellectual achievement. Moreover, to cleave, as did Hazlitt, to an unvarying course through all the subsequent vicissitudes of the French Revolution, was, as he himself conceded, “unbendingness” and “obstinacy”; for such a course could only be maintained by radically downplaying—conniving at, really—the institutionalized murder that for Coleridge and for others changed the entire moral ambience of that Revolution. As Hazlitt says, ready to change reality rather than change his opinions,

The Cant about the horrors of the French Revolution is mere cant—every body knows it to be so: each party would have retaliated upon the other: it was a civil war, like that for a disputed succession: the general principle of the right or wrong of the change remain untouched. Neither would these horrors have taken place, except from Prussian manifestos, and treachery within: there were none in the American, and have been none in the Spanish Revolution.14

But the American Revolution, Hazlitt should have known, was not a true revolution at all; and Hazlitt could not know that the next true revolution, the Russian Revolution, would precisely repeat the horrors of the French Revolution. In sum, if Coleridge’s seeming vacillation between progressive and conservative modes entailed a cost, so too did Hazlitt’s steadfastness. And Coleridge, it must emphatically be repeated, was in his own way steadfast too.

To be sure, Coleridge was more conservative in the second decade of
the nineteenth century than he had been in the last decade of the eighteenth. As Lewis Patton summarizes Coleridge's language of reform in *The Watchman* of 1796, we hear the tropes likely to be used at that time by any young man of mind and heart. Thus Coleridge in 1796

charged the Church of England with teaching hatred in the name of the God of love (11) and ridiculed the miracles of the New Testament (52); he called the Two Acts breaches of the Constitution (13); he declared that the possessions of the rich rightfully belonged to the poor (64); he predicted that by providential means kings and potentates would shortly be overthrown, and a good thing, too (65–66); he quoted with approval a declaration in favour of the rights of man (372) and that nations other than France and the United States, which had been "too long the dupes of perfidious kings, nobles, and priests," will eventually recover their rights (373); he urged the enlargement of the right of suffrage in England (209); he asserted that in the purer and more radical days of the French Revolution "the victories of Frenchmen" were "the victories of Human Nature" (270); and he likened Pitt to Judas Iscariot and hoped that he would be struck by a thunderbolt (167). But if these extracts, chosen as instances of candour, give an impression of rashness or bombast, as well they might, the impression is false. The tone of *The Watchman* was prevailingly temperate. . . .

Moreover, Coleridge does seem to have attempted to tidy things up a bit with respect to earlier opinions. Thus, just as Southey in 1817 was enraged by the unauthorized publication of his *Wat Tyler* of 1794, Henry Crabb Robinson can note in 1816 that "I read at Montagu's Coleridge's beautiful *Fire, Famine, and Slaughter*, written in his Jacobinical days, and now reprinted to his annoyance by Hunt in the *Examiner*." To make sure that he would not be further embarrassed by having raw earlier emphases thrown in his face, Coleridge significantly altered his poem *To a Young Ass*. Where in 1794 the concluding lines read:

Yea! and more musically sweet to me  
Thy dissonant harsh bray of joy would be,  
Than Handel's softest airs that soothe to rest  
The tumult of a scoundrel Monarch's Breast

by 1834 both Handel and the scoundrel Monarch were gone, and the lines now read

Yea! and more musically sweet to me  
Thy dissonant harsh bray of joy would be,
Than warbled melodies that soothe to rest
The aching of pale Fashion's vacant breast!\(^{17}\)

In the same context, when the *Biographia Literaria* appeared in 1817 it contained in its tenth chapter a denial that Coleridge had at any time been sympathetic to Jacobinism, and in its third chapter presented a eulogy of Southey.\(^{18}\) Hazlitt, in his ferocious review of the *Biographia* took note of both:

Mr. Southey [writes Hazlitt] has come voluntarily before the public; and all the world has a right to speak of his publications. It is those only that have either been depreciated or denounced. We are not aware, at least, of any attacks that have been made, publicly or privately, on his private life or morality. The charge is, that he wrote democratical nonsense in his youth; and that he has not only taken to write against democracy in his muturer age, but has abused and reviled those who adhere to his former opinions; and accepted of emoluments from the party which formerly calumniated him, for those good services. Now, what has Mr. Coleridge to oppose to this? Mr. Southey's private character! ... Some people say, that Mr. Southey has deserted the cause of liberty: Mr. Coleridge tells us, that he has not separated from his wife. They say, that he has changed his opinions: Mr. Coleridge says, that he keeps his appointments; and has even invented a new word, *reliability*, to express his exemplariness in this particular. It is also objected, that the worthy Laureate was as extravagant in his early writings, as he is virulent in his present ones: Mr. Coleridge answers, that he is an early riser, and not a late sitter up.\(^{19}\)

As for Coleridge's claim that people he had met in the 1790s "will bear witness for me how opposite even then my principles were to those of Jacobinism or even of democracy," Hazlitt comments with a verbal shrug:

We shall not stop at present to dispute with Mr. Coleridge, how far the principles of the Watchman, and the *Conciones ad Populum*, were or were not akin to those of the Jacobins. His style, in general, admits of a convenient latitude of interpretation. But we think we are quite safe in asserting, that they were still more opposite to those of the Anti-Jacobins, and the party to which he admits he has gone over.\(^{20}\)

That Hazlitt, however, whose hatred for Coleridge was matched only by the extreme acuteness of his critical perceptions, does not choose actually to examine or assail the *Conciones ad Populum* is significant. For the
work is Coleridge's earliest political statement, and it is there and in those terms, or ultimately nowhere and in no terms at all, that an accusation of early Jacobinism and later apostasy must be substantiated. It will be the argument of this paper that neither charge can in fact be substantiated.

Indeed, this paper will argue that Coleridge's attitude can most fruitfully be understood not as an oscillation between left wing and right wing politics, but rather as a continuing concern for the human (one may in this regard point to Anya Taylor's sensitive study, *Coleridge's Defense of the Human*). As he wrote in 1818, long after the Revolution and his own youth were past, but in words that may serve as an emblem of his attitude from first to last,

Marat had a conviction amounting in his own mind to a moral certainty that the death of 200,000 of his Countrymen was indispensible to the establishment of the Liberty and ultimate moral and physical well-being of France, and therein of all Europe. We will even assume, that events should have confirmed the correctness of this belief. And yet Marat was and will remain either execrable as a remorseless Ruffian, or frightful as an Insane Fanatic. And why? The proposal was frightfully disproportionate to the sphere of a poor fallible Mortal. It was a decisive symptom of an inhuman Soul, that, when the lives of myriads of his fellow-men were in question; the recollection of his necessary fallibility, and the probability of mistake where so many myriads of men possessing the same intellectual faculties with himself entertained different convictions with the same sense of positiveness, did not outweigh any confidence arising from his own individual insight.

Marat, however, and it must be stressed, was an anomaly only by his higher degree of fanaticism, not by any difference from other Jacobins in his theoretical acceptance of reformist violence. Coleridge saw from the first that violence was essential to Jacobinism, despite his sympathy and personal friendship with some of the leading English Jacobins, who were not themselves, like their French counterparts, brought to the actual test of violence. We may perhaps have some indication of what they would have done, however, from the reaction of one of them, James Watt, Junior, the son of the inventor, who happened to be in Paris at the time of the September massacres in 1792. He was appalled—yet he asserted that the deaths were absolutely necessary: Coleridge, on the other hand, saw clearly that Jacobinism was inextricably bound up with a commitment to programmatic violence that necessarily desecrated the human. About this commitment
there can be no convincing historical disagreement; it was the Jacobins (and Hébertists), not the Girondins, who planned and executed the Terror in all its phases. Crane Brinton points out that the Jacobin Clubs from the first, well before the actual advent of the Terror, were permeated by a tropism to violence, sometimes even in slight ways.

In truth, the only real question is whether Jacobin violence arose from circumstances, which was the position of the historian Alphonse Aulard, or was on the contrary an essential condition of the Jacobin way of viewing the world, which was the contention of Hippolyte Taine. The implications of Taine's analysis, indeed, are that it would be better if the revolution had never occurred at all, and that, I believe, although not precisely Coleridge's view, is not far from it. Certainly the question in retrospect is not whether some good may have stemmed from the Revolution, but whether the cost of that good was historically too high.

How radical such a conclusion was in terms of Romantic experience can scarcely be overemphasized, for that the revolution did occur was the overwhelming fact of the era, and that it should occur was the almost equally overwhelming hope of the finest and most ardent sensibilities among those who were young. "The French Revolution," wrote Shelley to Byron, was "the master theme of the epoch in which we live." Hazlitt treated it as the originating moment of Romanticism itself; and certainly no figure in the literature of the early nineteenth century is exempt from the impress of the revolutionary cataclysm.

And yet it is also true that hardly any figure is entirely consistent in his orientation toward that cataclysm. We must not forget that the most eloquent opponent of the French Revolution, Burke, had formerly been the most eloquent defender of the American Revolution. Yet the earlier event gave the later upheaval its pattern of hope and justification. Blake's America, it is generally agreed, is actually a poem about the French Revolution, and its statement that "The King of England looking westward trembles at the vision" should in the reality of 1793 be understood as that the King is looking eastward. But as Hazlitt insisted,

Mr. Burke, the opponent of the American war—and Mr. Burke, the opponent of the French Revolution, are not the same person, but opposite persons—not opposite persons only, but deadly enemies. In the latter period, he abandoned not only all his practical conclusions, but all the principles on which they were founded. He proscribed all his former sentiments, denounced all his former friends, rejected and reviled all
the maxims to which he had formerly appealed as incontestable. In the American war, he constantly spoke of the rights of the people as inherent, and inalienable: after the French Revolution, he began by treating them with the chicanery of a sophist, and ended by raving at them with the fury of a maniac. In the former case, he held out the duty of resistance to oppression, as the palladium, and only ultimate resource, of natural liberty; in the latter, he scouted, prejudiced, vilified and nicknamed, all resistance in the abstract, as a foul and unnatural union of rebellion and sacrilege.32

Notable in Hazlitt’s rhetoric is the tendency to treat Burke’s attitudes not as representing a legitimate approach to different situations, but as nothing less than a breakdown of character and personality: the two Burkes are “not the same person, but opposite persons—not opposite persons only, but deadly enemies.” The charge may serve as an index to the extreme depth of feeling, both for and against, generated by the French Revolution and the political opinions connected with it. In France, former friends sent one another to the guillotine (for a single instance, Robespierre abandoned his boyhood friend Camille Desmoulins to the tumbril).33 When Friedrich Schlegel repudiated his earlier revolutionary sentiments, joined the Catholic Church, became an aide to Metternich, and espoused reaction in a virtually feudal commitment—so strongly indeed that even Metternich was appalled—his brother Wilhelm would have nothing further to do with him, and the estrangement persisted to the end of Friedrich’s life.34

Chameleonlike change, in truth, characterized even those closest to the revolution; for forces were there unleashed that tossed ordinary consistencies around like confetti. Robespierre, although it now seems difficult to credit, was, virtually at the same time that he became the foremost expeditor of institutionalized murder, an opponent of capital punishment:35 On 31 May, 1791, in fact, he delivered to the Assembly a long and humane speech calling for the abolition of the death penalty.36 Again, the Girondin orator Vergniaud spoke with immense eloquence against the execution of Louis XVI, and for a time carried the day;37 only shortly afterward to reverse himself completely, mount the rostrum, and vote for death.38 In England, the stalwart friend of Revolution, John Thelwall, could look back on his own course of action and say unrepentantly, “If it be of any importance to my enemies to know that the opinions of the boy of nineteen, were not the same as those of the man of thirty, let them make what use they please of my apostacy.”39 And for a final example, John Horne Tooke,
Thelwall's mentor and the most respected of the English Jacobins, after a few years accepted an income and became moderate and even cautious in his opinions, for which Thelwall could never forgive him:

I still, indeed, respect the politician, but I abhor the man. I venerate the sage, but I abhor the treacherous friend. . . . If Horne Tooke values posthumous reputation he has reason to wish my memoirs never should be resumed. It became not him to assist in driving me from society—to attempt to draw a line between his politics and mine; for though we differed in some points most assuredly, the principle demarcation between us was, that I was open and sincere, he subtle and hypocritical . . .

Those who turned against the French Revolution were bitter against the Revolution's betrayal of their hopes; those who for their part remained loyal to Revolutionary commitment were bitter against the apostates. As Henry Crabb Robinson said in 1816, "Europe was rising morally and intellectually when the French Revolution, after promising to advance the world rapidly in its progress towards perfection, suddenly, by the woeful turn it took, threw the age back in its expectations." But Hazlitt, as Robinson also recalls on an occasion in 1815, "became warm on politics and declaimed against the friends of liberty for their apostacy. He attacked me, but was at the same time civil." Hazlitt was not always civil. As Crabb Robinson records of a later occasion in the same year: "debated with Hazlitt, in which I was . . . not successful, as far as the talent of the disputants was involved, though Hazlitt was wrong as well as offensive in almost all he said. . . . Hazlitt and myself once felt alike on politics, and now our hopes and fears are directly opposed. Hazlitt retains all his hatred of kings and bad governments, and believing them to be incorrigible, he from a principle of revenge, rejoices that they are punished."

Robinson's diary, indeed, provides the very feeling of the political acrimony that pervaded daily encounters. To avail ourselves of a pastiche of examples, in 1812 he notes of a conversation that "On politics of the time of the French Revolution [Wordsworth] also spoke and attempted, but unsuccessfully, against Anthony Robinson's attacks, to defend Cole-ridge's consistency." Again, in 1813: "A chat with Godwin. He expressed himself in the ordinary commonplace way against Coleridge's honesty, accusing him of a vulgar hypocrisy of which I am sure he is not capable; though he wants courage in company. And he also seemed ready to extend this reproach to Wordsworth, but did not persist in it." On another
occasion, however, Godwin clearly did persist in it: "Spent from ten till half-past eleven in a call on Godwin. He was lately with Wordsworth, and after spending a night at his house seems to have left him with very bitter and hostile feelings. I believe political opinions alone kept him aloof." This was in 1816. A year earlier Godwin had turned on Robinson himself: "I spent the evening by appointment with Godwin. The Taylors were there. We talked politics and not very comfortably. Godwin and I all but quarrelled. He was very rude, I very vehement, both a little angry, and equally offensive to each other." The Revolutionary loyalists were bitter about the apostates; the apostates were bitter about the Revolution; but the apostates were serene about their apostasy. As Robinson writes in 1812: "On telling Burrell of my former attachment to Godwin and the French writers, he observed that I had taken exactly his course; he is now an anti-Jacobin like me, and I should infer a Wordsworthian in politics."

Yet even the Revolutionary loyalists displayed variations in their attitudes. Blake himself, though he never repudiated his radical sentiments, changed very noticeably in his attitude toward the French Revolution as such. America had presented an ecstatic view of political freedom:

Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air:
Let the inchained soul shut up in darkness and sighing
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years;
Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open.
And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge;
They look behind at every step & believe it is a dream
Singing. The Sun has left his blackness, & has found a fresher morning
And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night;
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease.

A decade or so later, however, this intoxication with explicitly realized political freedom had given way to something much more internalized. In his address "To the Deists" that prefaces the third chapter of Jerusalem, Blake specifically says that although the "Tyrant Pride & the Laws" of "Babylon" shall "shortly be destroyed," it will be "with the Spiritual and not the Natural Sword." In line with this internalization, the Revolutionary principle Orc is entirely absent from Jerusalem, although this figure had dominated the earlier prophetic books, as in Enitharmon's call in Europe a Prophecy:
Blake was not the only intellectual to mute and internalize his Revolutionary commitments. John Thelwall, though he started out with Tory sympathies, became a protegé of Horne Tooke and in the 1790s was perhaps the most resolute of all the English Jacobins. About 1800, however, he abandoned revolutionary provocation for the teaching of elocution and the remedy of speech defects, veered back into politics about 1818, then back to elocution until his death in 1834. William Cobbett, the most influential political reformer of the early nineteenth century, oscillated wildly in his commitments. For instance, he reversed himself from vilification of Thomas Paine in the 1790s to glorification twenty years later and even reverentially brought Paine's bones back with him from America, to the vast scorn of his enemies.

But these changes were like the turn of leaves in a California autumn. For flaming color one must visit the apostates. Wordsworth, who was the only one of the major English Romantic poets who actually saw the French Revolution first hand, changed from enthusiastic support of libertarian principles to an almost legendary reaction. "Most intensely did I rejoice at the Counter Revolution," wrote Robinson in 1816. "I had also rejoiced when a boy at the Revolution, and I am ashamed of neither sentiment"; but in the same breath he says, "I am sorry that Wordsworth cannot change with the times. . . . Of the integrity of Wordsworth I have no doubt, as of his genius I have an unbounded admiration; but I doubt the discretion and wisdom of his latest political writings." The year before, Robinson noted that one evening Godwin, constantly bitter on this topic, was "abusive on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Stoddart—for what he calls their political tergiversation." And yet such reversals were not restricted to a small group in England. For a single continental instance, Schiller, who in his youth more influentially than almost any other figure idealized the doctrines of liberty, equality, and fraternity, in later years withdrew his support of the Revolution.

Why was there so much "political tergiversation?" Why did so many writers change their opinions about the French Revolution and the complex of sentiments surrounding it? The answer is both large and simple.
The Revolution was not one thing, but two things: it was one thing in prospect, another in actuality and retrospect. The difference in the two introduced all the variations in attitude that afflicted the best sensibilities of the time.

In prospect, the Revolution partook almost of the idea of paradise, and it was no accident that millenarian doctrines flourished with particular intensity as it gathered to its climax. The overthrow of the Bastille seemed almost the beginning of a new order of peace, wisdom, and brotherhood:

For, lo! the dread Bastille,
With all the chambers in its horrid towers,
Fell to the ground:—by violence overthrown
Of indignation; and with shouts that drowned
The crash it made in falling'. From the wreck
A golden palace rose, or seemed to rise,
The appointed seat of equitable law and mild paternal sway

Meanwhile, prophetic harps
In every grove were ringing, 'War shall cease;

Bring garlands, bring forth choicest flowers, to deck
The tree of Liberty.'

This, it must be emphasized, was what young and ardent spirits all over Europe looked to the Revolution to be. It was not simply that

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!

but that . . . "the whole Earth, / The beauty wore of promise—." It almost argued lack of soul not to participate in the great upsurge of hope. The cause was

Good, pure, which no one could stand up against,
Who was not lost, abandoned, selfish, proud,
Mean, miserable, wilfully depraved,
Hater perverse of equity and truth.

Of special significance is the fact that the Revolution, as idealistic focus, did not suddenly burst upon the scene on July 14, 1789. That was merely the date at which it opened to full bloom. But the plant had been growing for years. Michelet, indeed, customarily spoke of it as an event that
had been centuries in the coming, the rough beast, as it were, slouching


toward Bethlehem. Thus when Hegel enrolled at the Tübingen Stift in


1788, his private readings were not devoted to the reigning king of phi-

losophy, Kant, but toward the revolutionary prime-mover, Rousseau. With

this as preamble, Hegel's circle of students in the spring of 1791 went up

into a meadow outside of Tübingen one Sunday morning, and imitating


the great events in France, put up a liberty tree. Then, young pedants

that they were, they wrote “Vive la liberté” and “Vive Jean-Jacques” in

one another's albums.59 Earlier, in 1786, in the first movement of Mozart's

Piano Concerto in C-Major, Köchel 503, the strains of the “Marseillaise”

shot through the first movement like summer lightning. And we all know

the Revolutionary direction of Le Nozze di Figaro and the subversive play

by Beaumarchais on which it was based.60

But the plant had been growing long before. In 1762, for instance,

Rousseau wrote in his Emile that “You trust in the present order of society

without thinking that this order is subject to inevitable revolutions. . . . The

nobles become commoners, the rich become poor, the monarch becomes

subject. . . . We are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolu-

tions. . . . I hold it to be impossible that the great monarchies of Europe

still have long to last.”61 But even that was a leafing in the high branches.

In the lower branches, the seventeenth-century levellers and diggers dis-
cussed in Christopher Hill's The World Turned Upside Down, in Milton and
the English Revolution, and in The Experience of Defeat, were already ma-
ture in Revolutionary ideology.62 Still further down the trunk, a century
earlier, the ever-subversive Rabelais had Pantagruel say of the portentous

King Anarche: “These accursed kings are nothing but dolts. They know
nothing, and they're good for nothing except harming their poor subjects,

and troubling the whole world with wars, for their wicked and detestable
pleasure. I mean to put him to a trade, and make him a hawker of green
sauce.”63

The very roots of that vast tree of liberty, indeed, twine round the Peas-

ants Revolt of 1381, and the figures associated with that revolution, Wat

Tyler, Jack Straw, and John Ball, no less than Danton, Marat, and Robes-
pierre in the French Revolution, were moved to action by the great and

perpetual question: Why should human hierarchies be allowed to per-

petuate the exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few? When

Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman? John Ball’s speech
to the peasants, as recorded by Froissart, seems forever modern:
Good people, things cannot go right in England and never will, until goods are held in common and there are no more villeins and gentlefolk, but we are all one and the same. In what way are those whom we call lords greater masters than ourselves? How have they deserved it? Why do they hold us in bondage? If we all spring from a single father and mother, Adam and Eve, how can they claim or prove that they are lords more than us, except by making us produce and grow the wealth which they spend? They are clad in velvet and camlet lined with squirrel and ermine, while we go dressed in coarse cloth. They have the wines, the spices and the good bread: we have the rye, the husks and the straw, and we drink water. They have shelter and ease in their fine manors, and we have hardship and toil, the wind and the rain in the fields. And from us must come, from our labour, the things which keep them in luxury. We are called serfs. . . . If we go in good earnest and all together, very many people who are called serfs and are held in subjection will follow us to get their freedom.64

That was the aspiration of the Revolution seen in prospect. As Wordsworth asks, "What temper at the prospect did not wake / To happiness unthought of? The inert / Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!"65 The ardent Schiller, in his school days, was, as James Sime says,

fascinated by Rousseau's glowing pictures of 'nature,' and shared all his burning scorn for despotism and conventionality. Why had man been endowed with powers if all of them were not to be freely exercised? What reason could there be in the nature of things for the advantages heaped on one class and denied to another? And was it not the clear duty of humanity to destroy institutions and customs that had been handed down from degenerate ancestors, and to return to primitive simplicity and happiness?66

Schiller's youthful and sensational play of 1781, The Robbers, incorporated these burning ideals. It had an enormous impact. "It is past one o'clock in the morning," wrote Coleridge to Southey in November 1794, "—I sate down at twelve o'clock to read the 'Robbers' of Schiller—I had read chill and trembling until I came to the part where Moor fires a pistol over the Robbers who are asleep—I could read no more—My God! Southey! Who is this Schiller? This Convulser of the Heart? . . . Upon my Soul, I write to you because I am frightened—I had better go to Bed. Why have we ever called Milton sublime?"67 Others beside Coleridge fell under Schiller's spell. "Schiller wrote for the great ideas of the Revolution," said Hein-
rich Heine, "he destroyed the Bastille of the intellect, he aided in building the temple of freedom." The National Assembly of the Revolution even went so far as to make Schiller an honorary citizen of France; the diploma was signed by Danton and accompanied by a letter from Roland.

But that was the Revolution in prospect. At length there supervened the Revolution in retrospect, and that was a different entity for everyone. Hazlitt, who never gave up his libertarian commitments, nevertheless records the change from paradisal dawn to disappointment. He speaks of

that bright dream of our youth; that glad dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own; when France called her children to partake her equal blessings beneath her laughing skies; when the stranger was met in all her villages with dance and festive songs; in celebration of a new and golden era.

But then, as Hazlitt goes on to lament,

The dawn of that day was suddenly overcast; that season of hope is past; it is fled with the other dreams of our youth, which we cannot recall, but has left behind it traces, which are not to be effaced by Birthday and Thanks-giving Odes, or the chaunting of Te Deums in all the churches of Christendom. To those hopes, eternal regrets are due.

Hazlitt was nostalgic for the golden days of Revolutionary prospect and melancholy at the onset of reaction. Others, however, in Revolutionary retrospect felt betrayed and responded with revulsion rather than nostalgia. Burke’s great attack of 1791 preceded the events that made him a true prophet: the many thousands of state murders undertaken in the name of John Ball’s ideal. After the execution of Louis XVI, Schiller wrote to his friend Körner: “For fourteen days I have been unable to look at a newspaper—these butchers disgust me so!” He turned his back on the Revolution forever. He did not, like Friedrich Schlegel, retreat to reactionary feudalism and religious ultra-montanism. He always maintained his ideals for human freedom and brotherhood; but he separated them henceforth from the French Revolution as a means of achieving such advancement. As he says at the end of a poem that was occasioned by the advent of the new century, “Freedom exists only in the realm of dream / And beauty blooms only in song.”

So, too, with others. Wordsworth, who had earlier proudly become “a patriot; and my heart was all / Given to the people, and my love was theirs.”
now felt “That he, who would sow death, reaps death, or worse, / And can reap nothing better.” Earlier he had said that “in the People was my trust,” but now he confessed to a “loss of confidence in social man.” The recognition of “Lamentable crimes,” of “dire work, / Of massacre,” began to erode his commitment to “arguments of civil polity.” “O Friend!”, he exclaims to Coleridge, “It was a lamentable time for man.”

Thenceforth his social views began to move toward the ideal of a slow and natural evolution of human betterment and toward a hardening abhorrence of any and all state intervention in this process. He even threatened to leave the country if the Reform Bill of 1832 were enacted!

Thus the split between the Revolution in prospect and the Revolution in retrospect introduced a profound instability into the opinions of those who experienced both entities masquerading under a single name. Southey in his youth wrote a Jacobin play called Wat Tyler in which he expressed the rejection of kingship that became the insignia of all Revolutionary sentiment: “King,” exclaims Tyler, “is all this just? / The hour of retribution is at hand, / And tyrants tremble—mark me, King of England.” This is quite worthy to occupy a place of honor besides Blake’s alleged remark to the soldier Scholfield: “damn the King and Country, his Subjects and all you Soldiers are sold for Slaves.” It accords too with Shelley’s proclamation in the Preface to Hellas: “This is the age of war of the oppressed against the oppressors, and every one of those ringleaders of the privileged gangs of murderers and swindlers, called Sovereigns, look to each other for aid against the common enemy and suspend their mutual jealousies in the presence of a mightier fear.” The compatibility of all these sentiments with Jacobin doctrine is evident, as we see by considering the 38th and last proposition of Robespierre’s own Declaration of the Rights of Man: “Kings, aristocrats, tyrants of every description, are slaves in revolt against the sovereign of the earth, which is the human race, and against the legislator of the universe, which is Nature.”

Shelley, however, had never experienced the French Revolution in its two forms, nor in truth had the consistently libertarian Hazlitt. Shelley therefore sounded in 1820 much as Thelwall sounded in 1791, and Hazlitt could heap scorn on Southey’s political tergiversation. “Poor Bob Southey! How they laugh at him!” This was in 1817, before Byron’s immortal riposte, A Vision of Judgment, showed them how really to laugh at the hapless poet-laureate. Hazlitt had said that “Mr. Southey’s Muse is confessedly not a vestal; but then she is what is much better, a Magdalen.” And Southey’s
The Vision of Judgment, written in 1821 as laureate's lament for the death of George III, the erstwhile tyrant of Wat Tyler, was a maudlin work in all senses. Summing it up in 1825, in The Spirit of the Age, Hazlitt judged that Southey was "anomalous, incalculable, eccentric, from youth to age (the Wat Tyler and the Vision of Judgment are the Alpha and Omega of his disjointed career)." But although Southey elicited more scorn than any other of the figures who changed their minds about the Revolution, his career is nonetheless a pattern for the political vicissitudes of the time. Wat Tyler was published in 1817 without Southey's permission and to his great embarrassment. "Mr. Southey," said Hazlitt, "calls the person who published 'Wat Tyler' 'a skulking scoundrel,' . . . and says that it was published, 'for the avowed purpose of insulting him, and with the hope of injuring him if possible.'" Hazlitt went on to say that "Mr. Southey is not a man to hear reason at any time of his life. He thinks his change of opinion is owing to an increase of knowledge, because he has in fact no idea of any progress in intellect but exchanging one error for another." But we see Southey in quite a different and more complex light in a diary entry by Robinson on May 2, 1817:

I had a call from Robert Southey the laureate. I had a pleasant chat and a short walk with him. Southey spoke gaily of his Wat Tyler. He understood thirty-six thousand copies had been printed. He was not aware how popular he was when he came to town. He did not appear to feel any shame or regret at having written the piece at so early an age as twenty. He wrote the drama in three [months], anno 1794. We spoke of his Letter to W. Smith [where Southey had defended himself against the imputation of political apostasy], of which I thought and spoke favourably. I did not blame Southey, but commended him for asserting the right of all men, who are wiser at forty than at twenty years of age, to act on such superiority of wisdom. 'I only wish,' I added, 'that you had not appeared to have forgotten some political truths you had been early impressed with. . . .' Southey said: 'I spoke of the present time only. I am still a friend to reform.'

So Southey, interestingly enough, regarded himself as constant in his opinions; it was the revolution itself that had proved disjointed. Certainly Southey's life in all other respects was one of enormous consistency and of a constancy in personal commitments that verged on the heroic.

Coleridge, who had known Southey in both youth and later years, wrote two letters to the Courier in March 1817, vindicating him from the charge
of political apostasy (he actually wrote four, two of which were published; those two were scathingly criticized by Hazlitt). The vindicating letters might well have served as vindications of their author as well. For like Southey and Wordsworth, Coleridge too veered from sympathy with the ideals of the Revolution to sympathy with the ideals of the established order. Indeed, although Southey was the most ridiculed apostate in his own time, and though Wordsworth changed more radically than either, Coleridge has in our own day become the symbol *par excellence* of political apostasy.

Not everyone even in his day liked the apparent change. On the appearance of the *Biographia Literaria* in 1817, Thelwall annotated a copy with the comment that at Stowey in 1797 “I visited and found him a decided Leveller—abusing the democrats for moderation—” Again, Thelwall remembered in 1817 that Coleridge had in 1797 been “a down right zealous leveller,” actually “a man of blood” from the “violence and sanguinary tendency of some of these doctrines.” (Incidentally, in view of Thompson’s charge about Coleridge’s “voracious appetite for hatreds,” it is interesting to compare Coleridge’s own later statement about Thelwall, in a lecture reported in 1813. “A friend of the Lecturer (Mr. Thelwall) at one time was called a traitor, but though he did not deserve that appellation, he was doubtless a mistaken man: it was at a period when men of all ranks, tailors and mechanics of various descriptions, thought they had a *call* for preaching politics, as Saints had a *call* for preaching the Gospel.” Although the report may sound somewhat patronizing, it hardly seems to exhibit a “voracious appetite for hatreds.” Coleridge, as De Quincey observes, “had no real unkindness in his heart towards any human being.”

We may infer that these doctrines, which were extensions of those of Thelwall himself, had been ones he was delighted to hear Coleridge express. In March 1798, Thelwall had written Dr. Crompton and said that “Mount him [Coleridge] upon his darling hobby horse, ‘the republic of God’s own making,’ & away he goes like hey go mad, spattering & splashing thro thick & thin & scattering more levelling sedition, & constructive treason, than poor Gilly [that is, Gilbert Wakefield] or myself ever dreamt of.” But against Thelwall’s Coleridge, who mirrored Thelwall so satisfactorily, we may place Coleridge’s own statement in a letter to Josiah Wade of August 1797:

> John Thelwall is a very warm hearted honest man—and disagreeing, as we do, on almost every point of religion of morals, of politics, and of
philosophy; we like each other uncommonly well. . . . Energetic Activity, of mind and of heart, is his Master-feature. He is prompt to conceive, and still prompter to execute—. But I think, that he is deficient in that patience of mind, which can look intensely and frequently at the same subject. He believes and disbelieves with impassioned confidence—I wish to see him doubting and doubting. However, he is the man for action—he is intrepid, eloquent, and—honest.—Perhaps the only acting Democrat, that is honest for the Patriots are ragged cattle—a most execrable herd—arrogant because they are ignorant, and boastful of the strength of reason, because they have never tried it enough to know its weakness.\textsuperscript{99}

Along with the dismissal here of the French Jacobins as “a most execrable herd,” there is the pointed avowal of disagreement with Thelwall: “disagreeing, as we do, on almost every point of religion, of morals, of politics, and of philosophy; we like each other uncommonly well.”\textsuperscript{90}

It may be instructive to consider the implication of the flat disagreement of Coleridge’s statement at the time, which is certainly friendly and admiring enough with respect to Thelwall, and Thelwall’s own memories.\textsuperscript{91} The implication can only be that there was a difference between what Coleridge thought, and what friends perceived him to think. We know that Coleridge was universally considered the greatest talker of that, or possibly any other age. “If Mr. Coleridge,” said Hazlitt in 1825, “had not been the most impressive talker of his age, he would probably have been the finest writer; but he lays down his pen to make sure of an auditor, and mortgages the admiration of posterity for the stare of an idler.”\textsuperscript{92} Other testimonials abound. We know, too, that there was a difference between Coleridge’s talk in later years and his talk as a youth, the later talk being more like the seamless and droning flow immortalized in Carlyle’s description,\textsuperscript{93} the earlier talk being something more dazzling and dynamic. By 1798, in the words of Leslie Stephen, “Coleridge had not only given proofs of astonishing power, but had won what was even more valuable, the true sympathy and cordial affection of young men who were the distinct leaders of the next generation.”\textsuperscript{94} We can only shake our heads in perplexity as to how Coleridge so unerringly collected future famous men as his friends; we can perhaps hope to understand, however, how he managed to win their “true sympathy and cordial affection.” By being a hypocrite? That can hardly be the case; the intellectual caliber of his interlocutors of itself confutes such a conclusion. Rather it was by mirroring, in his matchless, his truly unique conversational flow, their own deepest
aspirations. Thelwall himself reported in helpless admiration that Cole-
ridge was "one of the most extraordinary Geniuses & finest scholars of the
age."95 The scarcely less radical Hazlitt, for his part, said that Coleridge
was "the only person I ever knew who answered to the idea of a man of
genius."96

As to why Coleridge gave himself so wholly to the mirroring of his
friends' deepest and dearest aspirations, we surely find the answer in his
lifelong sense of having been abandoned in his childhood. As he explained
to Sir George Beaumont in 1803, "Who then remained to listen to me? to
be kind to me? to be my friends? . . . These offices of Love the Democrats
only performed to me; my own family, bigots from Ignorance, remained
wilfully ignorant from Bigotry." Forever seeking the approval of surro-
gate brothers, Coleridge expended heroic effort in mirroring their hopes.
"With an ebullient Fancy," he remembers, "a flowing Utterance, a light &
dancing Heart, & a disposition to catch fire by the very rapidity of my own
motion, & to speak vehemently from mere verbal associations . . . I aided
the Jacobins, by witty sarcasms & subtle reasonings & declamations full of
genuine feeling against all Rules & against all established Forms."97

Thompson finds these explanations of 1803 particularly indicative of
Coleridge's chameleonlike lack of principle. Perhaps we ourselves should
regard them rather as extraordinarily perceptive self-analysis. Certainly
they were no change of opinions uttered specifically for the benefit of Sir
George Beaumont. For instance, in 1801, two years before the explanation
to Beaumont, Wordsworth wrote to John Taylor that

Mr Coleridge and I had a long conversation [probably at Keswick on
March 25] upon what you with great propriety call jacobinical pathos;
and I can assure you he deeply regretted that he had ever written a
single word of that character, or given, directly or indirectly, any encour-
gagement whatever to such writings; which he condemned as arguing
both want of genius and of knowledge: he pointed out as worthy of the
severest reprehension, the conduct of those writers who seem to estimate
their power of exciting sorrow for suffering humanity, by the quantity of
hatred and revenge which they are able to pour into the hearts of their
Readers. Pity, we agreed, is a sacred thing, that cannot, and will not be
prophaned. Mr C is as deeply convinced as myself that the human heart
can never be moved to any salutary purposes in this way; and that they
who attempt to give it such movements are poisoners of its best feelings.
They are bad poets, and misguided men.98
Wordsworth, who knew Coleridge somewhat better than is possible for Thompson, apparently found nothing chameleonic in these sentiments; indeed, on the very same day, April 9, that this letter was written, another one, to Thomas Poole, said that Coleridge “is a great man, and if God grant him life will do great things.”

In any event Coleridge mirrored Thelwall’s aspirations, as he had those of Hazlitt, as he had those of Southey. His first letter to Southey, in July 1794, mirrors Southey’s ardent political radicalism, although no earlier letter of Coleridge’s mentions anything at all of such matters. But to Southey he writes at the close, “Farewell, sturdy Republican!”, and in the body of the letter he has said that “The Cockatrice is a foul Dragon with a crown on its head”; he has referred to “the unfeeling Remarks, which the lingering Remains of Aristocracy occasionally prompt”; and he has asked—we may well suspect the event to be an imaginary one—“is it wrong, Southey! for a little Girl with a half famished sickly Baby in her arms to put her head in at the window of an Inn—‘Pray give me a bit of Bread and Meat’: from a Party dining on Lamb, Green Peas & Sallad. Scant wonder that Southey in 1809, after Coleridge in The Friend had defied his “worst enemy to shew, in any of my few writings, the least bias of Irreligion, Immorality, or Jacobinism,” irritably commented: “It is worse than folly, for if he was not a Jacobine, in the common acceptation of the name, I wonder who the Devil was, I am sure I was, am still, and ever more shall be. I am sure that he wrote a flaming panegyric of Tom Paine, and that I delivered it in one of my lectures.”

If Southey’s ardent Jacobinism of the early 1790s seemed wholly mirrored in Coleridge’s language and action, still more dramatic examples of Coleridge’s unique ability to mesmerize his friends by mirroring their most cherished opinions can be supplied elsewhere. Southey the enthusiastic Jacobin found Coleridge an enthusiastic Jacobin. The nature-loving Wordsworth, however, found him an enthusiast for nature, one who had “sought / The truth in solitude, and thou art one, / The most intense of Nature’s worshippers; / In many things my brother, chiefly here / In this my deep devotion.” The joking Lamb, still again, found him a joker: “Summer, as my friend Coleridge waggishly writes, has set in, with its usual severity.” And always there was the awe before Coleridge’s conversational powers. On an occasion in 1823, when Lamb said he “dined in Parnassus, with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Rogers, and Tom Moore—half the Poetry of England constellated and clustered in Gloster Place!”,
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Ridge was at the top of his form. "Coleridge was in his finest vein of talk, had all the talk, and let 'em talk as evilly as they do of the Envy of Poets, I am sure not one there but was content to be nothing but a listener. The Muses were dumb, while Apollo lectured on his and their fine Art." Significantly, to poets Coleridge talked about poetry—"his and their fine Art."

But perhaps Coleridge's mirroring powers are shown in most instructive relief in his comments on Swedenborg. Coleridge mentions Swedenborg infrequently either in his correspondence or elsewhere, although he knew Swedenborgian thought extremely well. Benjamin Kurtz, who has investigated the matter, shows that Coleridge had read at least eleven volumes of Swedenborg's works, which means that he knew the seer as well as Blake himself did. On certain occasions, however, despite his usual reticence about Swedenborg, Coleridge talks about the Swedish thinker so volubly, knowledgeably, and enthusiastically as almost to seem a Swedenborgian. Remarkably, these occasions are almost always in letters to a single person, Charles Tulk. Who was Charles Tulk? A wealthy Swedenborgian, whose father had been a Swedenborgian before him. The younger Tulk, with John Flaxman, formed the society for publishing Swedenborg's works and devoted much of his own later writing to elucidating the underlying rationalism of Swedenborg's doctrines. To Tulk, Coleridge seemed a Swedenborgian adept. But Coleridge did not talk of Swedenborg in his letters to Thelwall, or those to Southey, or those to Wordsworth.

So too with Coleridge's alleged Jacobinism. Republican enthusiasm mirrored the aspirations of those who testified to its reality. It did not, however, by that fact reflect the intricacy of what Coleridge really thought. That it was, moreover, very possible for those who heard Coleridge to be mistaken about what he thought may be shown from a single example. It is almost a truism that Coleridge's deepest and most constant thoughts were directed toward the Christian religion, from the Unitarianism of the 1790s to the Trinitarianism of his final position. As Walter Jackson Bate, to name only one of many scholarly investigators, concludes: "If we wish to understand and assess Coleridge's career, we must do so at least partly in terms of what mattered most to him: the hope that his life, whatever its failings, might ultimately be religious in shape, intention, meaning." As Coleridge himself said, "I can truly affirm of myself, that my studies have been profitable and availing to me only so far, as I have endeavoured to use all my other knowledge as a glass enabling me to receive more light in
a wider field of vision from the word of God." That is the simple and ineluctable truth of Coleridge's career. And yet Henry Crabb Robinson says of Coleridge in 1812:

He afterward entered into a long series of observations on the Trinity, from which I could learn only that he is very desirous to be orthodox. . . . Coleridge is very desirous to be both a refined and subtle philosopher and metaphysician, and at the same time conform with the people in religion. That this desire is consciously excited by any unworthy suggestions, or that he is grossly insincere in any of his assertions, I do not believe; but I believe there is in him much self-deception.

It is fascinating to consider how antithetical Robinson's eyewitness but casual report is to Bate's considered conclusion. Those companions who thought Coleridge a Jacobin, I suggest, are the complement of a Henry Crabb Robinson who, despite his good intentions, thought Coleridge not serious about Christianity. We correct both misapprehensions in the same way, by considering the course and ramification of Coleridge's intellectual commitment over many years.

If we look at that course and commitment, we see Coleridge as actually quite different politically from both Southey and Wordsworth. Instead of passing from committed Jacobinism to committed reaction, Coleridge developed, very early, an original and profound theory of politics that was not only far more sophisticated than the attitudes of either Southey or Wordsworth but was, so far as one can judge, consistent throughout his adult life. For Coleridge, so weak and vacillating in all personal situations, was, as I stressed above and wish continually to repeat, almost unbelievably constant in his intellectual views.

If we turn toward the Coleridge of later years we do not quite see a Tory, though conservative opinion took much comfort from his views. But De Quincey, continually perceptive with regard to the Lake Poets, insists on the unsatisfactoriness of classifying Coleridge as a Tory.

One character in which Mr. Coleridge most often came before the public was that of politician. In this age of fervent partisanship it will, therefore, naturally occur as a first question to inquire after his party and political connexions . . . was he Whig, Tory, or Radical? Or, under a new classification, were his propensities Conservative or Reforming? I answer that, in any exclusive or emphatic sense, he was none of these; because, as a philosopher, he was, according to circumstances, and according to the object concerned, all of these by turns.
Unlike Thompson, De Quincey finds no lack of sincerity in Coleridge's political views. "In his politics, Mr. Coleridge was most sincere and enthusiastic. No man hailed with profounder sympathy the French Revolution; and, though he saw cause to withdraw his regard from many of the democratic zealots in this country, and even from the revolutionary interest as it was subsequently conducted, he continued to worship the original revolutionary cause in a pure Miltonic spirit."

To the extent that Coleridge did make common cause with the Tories, De Quincey urges, it was because the Whigs themselves had deserted their principles. With regard to Coleridge's alleged "want of principle in his supposed sacrifice of his early political connexion," says De Quincey, the "explanation is involved in the strange and scandalous conduct of the Parliamentary Whigs":

Coleridge passed over to the Tories only in that sense in which all patriots did so at that time . . . by refusing to accompany the Whigs in their almost perfidious demeanor towards Napoleon Bonaparte. . . . [H]is adhesion to the Tories was bound by his approbation of their foreign policy; and even of that rarely in its executive details, rarely even in its military plans . . . but solely in its animating principle . . . that Napoleon Bonaparte ought to be resisted. . . . Thus far he went along with the Tories: in all else he belonged quite as much to other parties—so far as he belonged to any.

Certainly Coleridge did not move toward the hardened reaction of Wordsworth. "With respect to Mr. Coleridge," noted De Quincey, "he was certainly a friend to all enlightened reforms; he was a friend, for example, to Reform in Parliament."

De Quincey saw with his customary acuteness the complexity and idiosyncrasy of Coleridge's later sympathy with conservative policies. That complexity made Coleridge as difficult to dismiss as to classify. John Stuart Mill, as Michael St. John Packe points out, thought the aged Coleridge the most formidable opponent of his own libertarian and intellectually powerful views:

Coleridge, then at the height of his prophetic powers, wielded tremendous influence. He was writing little. . . . But he talked . . . and young men, eager and adventurous like Maurice and Sterling, sat listening to him by the hour. As the story-teller ran along in his soft sweet voice, his hearers forgot him and forgot themselves. For he told of the white marble palaces of heart's desire. . . . Mill, unlike most others, was be-
witched less by the presence than by the written word. In April 1834 he wrote, “Few persons have exercised more influence over my thoughts and character than Coleridge has; not much by personal knowledge of him, though I have seen and conversed with him several times, but by his works, pieced together by what I have otherwise learned of his opinions.”

Everything about him was directly contrary to radical beliefs. While Radicals worked industriously, building up their man-made tower to heaven, he... said that heaven was already in the world, all but the seeing of it. Where they dealt in proofs, he dispensed faith.

The very delicacy of his opposition to radicalism made it all the more dangerous. The general run of intuitionist defended Church, State, and the Aristocracy simply and for what they were—their country right or wrong. Not so Coleridge: his distinction between the apparent shadow and the spiritual substance enabled him to attack the existing framework of the institutions while exalting the possibility of what they might be made. None was ahead of him in deploring inhumanities and injustices, the slave ships, the child labour, the presumption of the rich, the complacency of the clergy. He was ahead of all in describing the spirit of the whole... of a gracious civility between the orders of society working together harmoniously towards a proud and placid destiny... The opposed movements of Christian Socialism and Oxford Mysticism alike derived from him. In the great battle of the century between authority and the individual, between tradition and science, he was the most significant of the patricians.115

St. John Packe’s description of Coleridge’s conservatism as involving political progressivism accurately reflects the dialectical basis of Coleridge’s politics. They are, like Marx’s, based on the Romantic doctrine of the progression of opposites; Marx’s were borrowed from Hegel, Coleridge’s arose from the same sources that Hegel himself used. At the very heart of Coleridge’s theory was an insistence on the “harmonious balance of the two great correspondent, at once supporting and counterposing, interests of the state, its permanence, and its progression.”116

The formula is characteristic of Coleridge in that it serves as illustration for his lifelong tendency not to reject but to incorporate adverse data. Thus in order to combat Enlightenment raison, he changes the raison of Diderot into “understanding,” and nominates his own version as “reason”; both, however, remain necessary to the definition of mind. Likewise, in order to combat the psychology of Locke’s tradition, he calls that tradition’s theory of mental imaging “fancy,” and nominates his own version
as “imagination”; both, however, remain necessary to the functioning of mind. So, too, with his great political polarity. The interests of his earlier libertarian sympathies are preserved in the word “progression,” which is cast into polar opposition with his conservative interests under the word “permanence.”

But certainly permanence lay deeper in the psychology and instinct of Coleridge. For, leaving aside his political opinions, his intellectual attitudes were always profoundly conservative, which, indeed, is precisely the reason for his immense and lifelong reading of other and earlier thinkers.

What is it [asks Coleridge] that I employ my Metaphysics on? To perplex our clearest notions, & living moral Instincts? To extinguish the Light of Love & of Conscience, to put out the Life of Arbitrement—to make myself & others . . . Worthless, Soul-less, Godless?—No! To expose the Folly & the Legerdemain of those, who have thus abused the blessed Organ of Language, to support all old & venerable Truths, to support, to kindle, to project, to make the Reason spread Light over our Feelings, to make our Feelings diffuse vital Warmth thro’ our Reason—these are my Objects—& these my Subjects.117

In his commitment to “support all old & venerable Truths” we see one reason why Coleridge could never have been in any real sense a Jacobin, nor have remained one if he temporarily did espouse such radicalism. As he said, “the dreariest feature of Jacobinism” was “the contempt of the Institutions of our Ancestors and of past wisdom.” Coleridge, on the contrary, and it cannot be emphasized enough, found such contempt abhorrent. As he says in November of 1803, he always rejoiced “to find his opinions plumèd & wingèd with the authority of venerable Forefathers.”119

It is interesting that this statement about “the dreariest feature of Jacobinism” was summoned in a context that depletes “the Jacobinism of Anti-Jacobins,” for it clearly reveals Coleridge’s temperamental lack of radicalism, either of the left or the right. He hewed to his own line, which steered between the two extremes.

That idiosyncratic line is defined by the second of the reasons why Coleridge could never have been in any real sense a Jacobin: his commitment to the Christian religion. Not only is the Conciones ad Populum of 1795 shot through with Coleridge’s Christianity, which even Thelwall accepted, but in that same year he produced writings entitled Six Lectures on Revealed Religion its Corruption and Political Views. As Peter Mann, the editor of Coleridge’s Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion points out: “The Le-
tures on Revealed Religion allow one to see how deeply rooted Coleridge’s religious and moral feelings were in 1795 and how they would necessarily bring him into conflict, intellectually and morally, with the extreme radical movement and lead him to a point of view that was different from that of such ‘friends of liberty’ as Paine, Thelwall, and Holcroft.” The Jacobins, on the other hand, were virulent anti-Christians. Embarking on a specific program of “Dechristianization,” they replaced Christianity with a religion of reason. As Lefebvre says,

The new religion endowed itself with symbols and a form of liturgy, honoured the ‘holy Mountain’ [the Jacobin side of the Assembly was called “the mountain”), and venerated its martyrs, Lepeletier, Marat, and Cha-lier. On 3 Brumaire, Year II (October 23, 1793) the Convention adopted the revolutionary calendar. It attempted to dechristianize daily life by substituting the date of September 22, 1792, the first day of the Republic, for the Christian era; by replacing references to religious ceremonies and the saints with names borrowed from tools . . . and above all, by eliminating Sunday in favour of the Tenth day (décadi).

Indeed a Festival of Liberty was planned for 20 Brumaire, Year II (November 10, 1793), for which the Commune seized Notre Dame, now called the Temple of Reason, and built a mountain in the choir, with an actress impersonating Liberty. As Brinton remarks, “The Jacobins unquestionably held their political philosophy as a matter of faith.” Again: “Jacobinism is, then, first of all a faith. . . . ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,’ as words, may be subject to definition and contain the seeds of infinite dispute; as symbols, they were to the Jacobins a common property above logic.”

It is tempting to linger over the implications of Jacobin anti-Christianity, which led directly to the doctrinal atheism of Marx. What has been said, however, suffices to show how profound the division was between Coleridge and the Jacobins, especially since the Christian religion came to be elaborated into the very theory of Coleridge’s view of the social organism. In his On the Constitution of the Church and State, which was his last published prose work, and which, as John Colmer says, is “a brief and brilliant synthesis of the political and theological thinking of a lifetime,” Coleridge takes up a theme he had described twenty years earlier and adhered to tenaciously all that time. In 1810 he writes:

Church and state—civil and religious rights—to hold these essential powers of civilized society in due relation to each other, so as to prevent them from becoming its burdens instead of its supports: this is perhaps
the most difficult problem in the whole science of politics. . . . From the first ages of Christianity to the present period, the two relations of a rational being, to his present and future state, have been abstracted and framed into moral personages, Church and State: and to each has been assigned its own domain and its especial rights.\textsuperscript{126}

When in 1830 Coleridge published \textit{On the Constitution of the Church and State}, the reconciliation of the two domains was effected as a large instance of the principle of interacting opposites. The “two antagonist powers or opposite interests of the state, under which all other state interests are comprised, are those of PERMANENCE AND PROGRESSION.” In a footnote Coleridge distinguishes between opposites and contraries:

The feminine character is \textit{opposed} to the masculine; but the effeminate is its \textit{contrary}. Even so in the present instance, the interest of permanence is opposed to that of progressiveness; but so far from being contrary interests, they, like the magnetic forces, suppose and require each other. Even the most mobile of creatures, the serpent, makes a \textit{rest} of its own body, and drawing up its voluminous train from behind on the fulcrum, propels itself onward. On the other hand, it is a proverb in all languages, that (relatively to man at least) what would stand still must retrograde.\textsuperscript{127}

Coleridge never wanted society to stand still, but to balance its progression principles of rest were necessary. One of these was property, which he, like Burke, specifically summoned against the Jacobin spirit. As he writes in 1802, in his thirty-first year:

\begin{quote}
We were never at any period of our life converts to the system of French politics. As far back as our memory reaches, it was an axiom in politics with us, that in every country in which property prevailed property must be the grand basis of government; and that that government was the best, in which the power was the most exactly proportioned to the property.\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

The Revolution had not initially been opposed to private property. As the \textit{Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen}, drafted by Lafayette and decreed on August 26, 1789, emphasized in its seventeenth and final article, “Les propriétés étant un droit inviolable et sacré, nul ne peut en être privé, si ce n'est lorsque la nécessité publique légalement constatée l'exige évidemment, et sous la condition d'une juste et préalable indemnité.”\textsuperscript{129} Robespierre himself, as Louis Madelin points out, “had three dogmas: \textit{the support of Virtue by Terror; the existence of the Supreme Being; and the abso-
But the Jacobin theories of taxation and of the subordination of property to personal rights—and the burgeoning socialism of figures like Chaumette and Fouche—tended to erode the status of property, a status still more compromised by the time of the Communist Manifesto. "The theory of the Communists," says that enchiridion, "may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property." But property as a principle of rest, along with the church, does not exist in monolithic stagnation in Coleridge's scheme; it too is brought into the conciliating flux of permanence and progression. "We have thus divided the subjects of the state into two orders," he says in 1830, "the agricultural or possessors of land; and the merchant manufacturer, the distributive, and the professional bodies, under the common name of citizens." The first group, he says, "either by their interests or by the very effect of their situation, circumstances, and the nature of their employment," are "vitaly connected with the permanency of the state, its institutions, rights, customs, manners, privileges—and as such, opposed to the inhabitants of ports, towns, and cities, who are in like manner and from like causes especially connected with its progression."  

The one thing there was no room for in Coleridge's view of politics was reformist violence. And this, though connected with his commitment to Christianity, is the third and most unbridgeable of the reasons why he never was a Jacobin and never could have been one. Although, as Lefebvre observes, "nothing contributed as much to spreading the Terror as dechristianization," in the remainder of this essay the Christian/anti-Christian opposition of Coleridge and the Jacobins shall be muted in favor of an emphasis on the contrast between Coleridge's humanitarianism and the Jacobin commitment to reformist violence. Thus, in his earliest political statement, the Conciones ad Populum of 1795, Coleridge is clearly and unarguably not a Jacobin, for he says, with epigrammatic terseness: "A system of fundamental Reform will scarcely be effected by massacres mechanized into Revolution."  

Even Jacobin apologists have to take note of the truth of the oneness of Jacobinism and massacre. Isser Woloch, for instance, in Jacobin Legacy, says that Jacobinism "had much to do with what Americans call grassroots democracy, and a commitment to equality in the sense of mitigating social distinctions"—but in the same sentence he must also grant that Jacobinism is also synonymous "with the strange mantle of terrorism and fanaticism that the sociétaires wore in the Year II." Lefebvre, whose
history of the Revolution is written as a partisan both of Robespierre and the Jacobins, and though he does his best to mute the terror, nevertheless must note things like this: “Proposals involving violence were more and more frequently heard, even at the Assembly, where Merlin de Thionville demanded that wives and children of emigrés be seized as hostages, while Debry advocated a ‘tyrannicide corps’ to exterminate kings. Marat had many times insisted that the only way to save the Revolution was to slaughter the aristocrats en masse.” Or this: “So, after Germinal the sessions of the Convention became dreary, the committees worked in silence, and the clubs disappeared, except for the Jacobins, where most of the regulars were functionaries of the Terror.”

That Coleridge was acutely aware of the Jacobin commitment to violence is evident at the outset. In the Introductory address to Conciones ad Populum—the year is 1795 and Coleridge’s age is 23—he says:

The Annals of the French Revolution have recorded in Letters of Blood, that the Knowledge of the Few cannot counteract the Ignorance of the Many; that the Light of Philosophy, when it is confined to a small Minority, points out the Possessors as the Victims, rather than the Illuminators, of the Multitude. The Patriots of France either hastened into the dangerous and gigantic Error of making certain Evil the means of contingent Good, or were sacrificed by the Mob, with whose prejudices and ferocity their unbending Virtue forbade them to assimilate.

The rejection of reformist violence, the arguing for humanity, the avoidance of the “gigantic Error of making certain Evil the means of contingent Good,” these indeed are the very hallmarks of Coleridge’s political writings of 1795:

We should be cautious how we indulge the feelings even of virtuous indignation. Indignation is the handsome brother of Anger and Hatred. The Temple of Despotism, like that of Tescalipoca, the Mexican Deity, is built of human skulls, and cemented with human blood;—let us beware that we be not transported into revenge while we are levelling the loathsome Pile; lest when we erect the edifice of Freedom we but vary the stile of Architecture, not change the materials.

The passage is a fair glimpse of Coleridge’s line of thought in the process of steering itself between the extremes of Jacobinism and Toryism. The temple of despotism must be levelled; but the edifice of Freedom must be careful not to duplicate it in a different style. This steering of a
We detest equally Jacobinism and usurpation in the French, and the principles of despotism preached by their opponents—we look with equal horror on those who murder a lawful Constitution, and those who, under pretence of medicine, administer poison to it. We deem it among the most fatal errors in some friends of freedom in England, that they have thought it necessary to a consistent opposition to Ministers, that they should slur over the follies or wickedness of France. We think otherwise. TRUTH is OUR policy. We despise the absurdities and dread the fanaticism of France; believing, however, at the same time [and here Coleridge presages the position of Auland] that but for the war against France they would have died in their infancy.

Such steering between extremes is the pilot's course throughout this exhortation of early 1800, which concludes by rejecting both Jacobinism and monarchical reaction, and doing so in terms of the interplay of permanence and progression. He said (and proved true prophet):

Supposing for a moment, that Royalty could be restored—what reason have we for affirming its permanency? Will not the principles of Jacobinism remain? Can the faction of the Royalists boast more talent, more activity, more energy, than the Republicans? Will it not disturb the present state of property infinitely more than the usurpation of Buonaparte? And by the very act of disturbing property, will it not necessarily bring Jacobinism once more into play? And will not Royalty therefore, if restored, perish, like a bubble, by the very agitation that produced it?

Coleridge understood not only the violence inseparable from Jacobinism, but also the nobler ideals that lay behind its aspiration. As he says in 1802:

A Jacobin, in OUR sense of the term, is one who believes, and is disposed to act on the belief, that all, or the greater part of, the happiness or misery . . . of mankind, depends on forms of government; who admits no form of government as either good or rightful, which does not flow directly and formally from the persons governed; who—considering life, health, moral and intellectual improvement, and liberty both of person and conscience, as blessings which governments are bound as far as possible to increase and secure to every inhabitant, whether
he has or has not any fixed property, and moreover as blessings of infinitely greater value to each individual, than the preservation of property can be to any individual—does consequently and consistently hold, that every inhabitant, who has attained the age of reason, has a natural and inalienable right to an equal share of power in the choice of governors. In other words, the Jacobin affirms that no legislature can be rightful or good, which did not proceed from universal suffrage. In the power, and under the control, of a legislature so chosen, he places all and everything, with the exception of the natural rights of man, and the means appointed for the preservation and exercise of those rights, by a direct vote of the nation itself—that is to say, by a constitution. Finally the Jacobin deems it both justifiable and expedient to effect these requisite changes in faulty governments, by absolute revolutions, and considers no violences as properly rebellious or criminal, which are the means of giving to a nation the power of declaring and enforcing its sovereignty.\footnote{141}

All this is not only perspicacious, accurate, and subtly articulated, but it is eminently fair toward the aspirations of the Jacobins.

Indeed the Jacobins, in Coleridge's description here, sound more like bourgeois liberals in the Jeffersonian mold than architects of terror. Marx and Engels, in fact, distinguished Communism from the Jacobin revolution by claiming that their own revolution was to be a proletarian revolution that looked totally to the future, whereas the French Revolution had been a bourgeois venture that recapitulated the past. "The social revolution of the nineteenth century," said Marx in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, "cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot make a beginning until it has stripped off all superstitution of the past."\footnote{142} But Marx was not so much different from the Jacobin spirit as he affected to believe. After all, Shelley, "the most Jacobinical of poets," as Richard Holmes calls him,\footnote{143} said that "The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & forms."\footnote{144} Marx, however, not caring to see himself as preempted by Jacobin theorists and attitudes, disregarded this central truth of the Jacobin spirit and insisted on the bourgeois character of the French Revolution. He pointed out that it looked back to Roman Republican values as the English Revolution had looked back to Old Testament values. (Coleridge, incidentally, published three articles in 1802 on the comparison of Revolutionary France and ancient Rome.) Marx says:

Camille Desmoulins, Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Napoleon, the heroes, as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revo-
lution, performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of releasing and establishing modern bourgeois society. The first mentioned knocked the feudal basis to pieces and cut off the feudal heads which had grown from it. The other [Napoleon] created inside France the conditions under which free competition could first be developed . . . and outside the French borders he everywhere swept the feudal form away, so far as it was necessary to furnish bourgeois society in France with a suitable up-to-date environment on the European Continent.  

Despite these arguments, Marx, with his acceptance of the cutting off of feudal heads, reveals himself as far closer to Jacobinism than Coleridge ever was. Violence, indeed, is cherished in Marxist theory as in Jacobin actuality. Writing on Engel’s utopian phrase, “the withering away of the state,” Lenin, in *The State and Revolution*, sharply reminds true believers that this refers only to the proletarian state; violence, on the contrary, must and should be used by the proletariat to abolish the bourgeois state. “In the same work of Engels, from which every one remembers his argument on the ‘withering away’ of the State,” says Lenin, “there is also a disquisition on the significance of a violent revolution. The historical analysis of its role becomes, with Engels, a veritable panegyric on violent revolution.” Lenin then quotes Engels as saying that “force” is, “in the words of Marx,” the “midwife of every old society that is pregnant with the new; that it is the instrument with whose aid social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilized political forms.” And the conclusion of the *Communist Manifesto* proudly proclaims that “The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.”

It is the obsession with reformist violence that provides the final link in the chain joining Jacobinism to Communism. Although the Jacobin clubs were disestablished following Robespierre’s fall on 9 Thermidor of the Year II (July 27, 1794), the Jacobin spirit did not die. A later strain of Jacobinism, Babouvism, transformed itself into outright communism. Babeuf himself (the Chartist Bronterre O’Brien compared him to Jesus) was not guillotined until 1797. Coleridge, in listing the radical tenets Babouvism in an issue of *The Watchman* for April 27, 1796, is confronting an enumeration perhaps even more unequivocal than that contained in the Communist Manifesto. Certainly he understood the tendency of the Jacobin spirit from the Democrats of the original Jacobin clubs to the Ter-
rorist functionaries of 1792 to 1794 to the Babouvian communism of 1796 and 1797 to the Communist Manifesto of 1848 to the Russian radicals described by Dostoevsky in *The Possessed* to the latter-day Jacobins called Bolsheviks, and all the way to Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station, there is one united progression of a single spirit, the spirit of Jacobinism.\(^{151}\)

That spirit is unseparable from reformist violence. The Communist apotheosis of violence merely raised to theory what the Jacobins had discovered as praxis. Its institutionalization has borne the richest kind of historical fruit. As aftermath of Marxist and Leninist commandments, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge actually and in grotesque fact caused to be erected new temples of skulls to replace those Aztec temples of skulls metaphorically invoked by Coleridge. Stalin, using reformist violence to achieve the Communist goal of collectivizing Russian farmland, achieved also the death of staggering numbers of human beings—fourteen million of them, according to Robert Conquest's melancholy history of that late Jacobin episode.\(^{152}\) The nonviolent reforms of American capitalism, on the other hand, which were undertaken in the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Taft, and Franklin Roosevelt, were the sorts of action that were stigmatized by Marx, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, as effects of "the humanitarian school," or even worse, of "the philanthropic school";\(^{153}\) they were reforms, certainly, that were entirely in the spirit of Coleridge's reconciling and humane political vision.

That political vision is wholly at odds with the infatuation with force and violence that was the truest legacy of Jacobin. "To reconcile," said Coleridge in one of his most characteristic statements, "... is truly the work of the Inspired! This is the true *Atonement*."\(^{154}\) The Jacobins were not interested in reconciling;\(^{155}\) and in the Marxist analysis, the Terror of 1792, 1793, and 1794 was not an aberration but an accreditation, a necessary and desirable cleansing action. In Coleridge, on the other hand, one finds everywhere an express humanitarianism that stands in irreconcilable opposition to this essential of the Jacobin spirit. For instance, in the very midst of the twenty-three-year-old Coleridge's passionate democratic plea in *Conciones ad Populum*, we read of

the awful Truth, that in the course of this calamitous Contest more than a Million of men have perished—a MILLION of men, of each one of whom the mangled corpse terrifies the dreams of her that loved him, and makes some mother, some sister, some widow start from slumber with a shriek.\(^{156}\)
To the Coleridge of 1795 the slave trade was not a matter of charts and statistics and moral guidelines:

I address myself first of all to those who independent of political distinction profess themselves Christian. As you hope you live with Christ hereafter you are commanded to do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you! Would you choose that Slave Merchants should incite an intoxicated Chieftain to make War on your Tribe to murder your Wife and Children before your face and drag them with yourself to the Market—Would you choose to be sold, to have the hot iron hiss upon your breast, to be thrown down into the hold of a ship ironed with so many fellow victims so closely crammed together that the heat and stench arising from your diseased bodies should rot the very planks of the Ship?[^157]

That was the true substance of Coleridge’s political libertarianism. Programmatic Jacobinism and its desecration of the human were alien to him. He avoided, if the Jacobins did not, “the dangerous and gigantic Error of making certain Evil the means of contingent Good.”

If we wonder whether it was certain evil or contingent good that loomed larger in the French Revolution, we might be helped in our conclusion by Taine’s great history of the revolution, *The Origins of Modern France.*[^158] To Taine, the real truth of that revolution was the triumph of violence and the desecration of the human: “from the peasant, the labourer, and the bourgeois, pacified and tamed by an old civilization, we see suddenly spring forth the barbarian, and still worse, the primitive animal, the grinning, bloody, wanton baboon, who chuckles while he slays, and gambols over the ruin he has accomplished.”[^159] To Taine, the Revolution was an orgy of violence from the start, and he records its enormities in passionate detail. “To every impartial man,” he quotes Malouet as saying, “the Terror dates from the 14th of July [1789].”[^160] But Taine sees it as being brought to its edge of perfection by what he calls the “homicidal idea” of the Jacobins. For the Jacobins themselves he has only revulsion and scorn:

From one end of the territory to the other, the machine, with its hundred thousand arms, works efficaciously in the hands of those who have seized the lever at the central point. Resolution, audacity, rude energy, are all that are needed to make the lever act, and none of these is wanting in the Jacobin.

First, he has faith, and faith at all times “moves mountains.” Take any ordinary party recruit, an attorney, a second-rate lawyer, a shopkeeper,
an artisan, and conceive, if you can the extraordinary effect of this doctrine on a mind so poorly prepared for it, so narrow, so out of proportion with the gigantic conception which has mastered it. Formed for routine and the limited views of one in his position, he is suddenly carried away by a complete system of philosophy, a theory of nature and of man, a theory of society and of religion, a theory of universal history, conclusions about the past, the present, and the future of humanity, axioms of absolute right, a system of perfect and final truth, the whole concentrated in a few rigid formulae as, for example: "Religion is superstition, monarchy is usurpation, priests are impostors, aristocrats are vampires, and kings are so many tyrants and monsters." These ideas flood a mind of this stamp like a vast torrent precipitating itself into a narrow gorge; they upset it, and, no longer under self-direction, they sweep it away. . . .

A plain bourgeois, a common laborer is not transformed with impunity into an apostle or liberator of the human species.  

Taine speaks with equal contempt of the Jacobin clubs. "In many of the large cities, in Paris, Lyons, Aix and Bordeaux, there are two clubs in partnership, one, more or less respectable and parliamentary . . . and the other, practical and active. . . . The latter is a branch of the former, and, in urgent cases, supplies it with rioters. 'We are placed amongst the people,' says one of these subaltern clubs, 'we read to them the decrees, and through lectures and counsel, we warn them against the publications and intrigues of the aristocrats. We ferret out and track plotters and their machinations. We welcome and advise all complainants . . .'.  

But Taine's profoundest revulsion is for the leaders of the Jacobins. "Three men among the Jacobins," he says,

Marat, Danton, and Robespierre, merited distinction and possessed authority:—owing to a malformation, or distortion, of head and heart, they fulfilled the requisite conditions.—Of the three, Marat is the most monstrous; he borders on the lunatic, of which he displays the chief characteristics—furious exaltation, constant over-excitement, feverish restlessness, an inexhaustible propensity for scribbling. . . . From first to last, he was in the right line of the Revolution, lucid on account of his blindness, thanks to his crazy logic, thanks to the concordance of his personal malady with the public malady, to the precocity of his complete madness alongside the incomplete or tardy madness of the rest, he alone steadfast, remorseless, triumphant, perched aloft at the first round of the sharp pinnacle which his rivals dared not climb or only stumbled up."
Robespierre, to both Taine and Coleridge, was different. He was, says Taine, a "cuistre," that is to say,

the hollow, inflated mind that, filled with words and imagining that these are ideas, revels in its own declamation and dupes itself that it may dictate to others. Such is his title, character and the part he plays. In this artificial and declamatory tragedy of the Revolution he takes the leading part; the maniac and the barbarian slowly retire into the background on the appearance of the cuistre. . . . If we would comprehend him we must look at him as he stands in the midst of his surroundings. At the last stage of an intellectual vegetation passing away, he remains on the last branch of the eighteenth century, the most abortive and driest offshoot of the classical spirit. He has retained nothing of a worn-out system of philosophy but its lifeless dregs and well-conned formulae, the formulæ of Rousseau, Mably, and Raynal, concerning "the people, nature, reason, liberty, tyrants, factions, virtue, morality," a ready-made vocabulary, expressions too ample, the meaning of which, ill-defined by the masters, evaporates in the hands of the disciple. . . . It might be said that he never saw anything with his own eyes, that he neither could nor would see, that false conceptions have intervened and fixed themselves between him and the object; he combines these in logical sequences, and simulates the absent thought by an affected jargon, and this is all. . . . For hours, we grope after him in the vague shadows of political speculation, in the cold and perplexing mist of didactic generalities, trying in vain to make something out of his colorless tirades, and we grasp nothing. We then, astonished, ask what all this talk amounts to, and why he talks at all; the answer is, that he has said nothing, that he talks only for the sake of talking, the same as a sectary preaching to his congregation, neither the preacher nor the audience ever wearying, the one of turning the dogmatic crank, and the other of listening. So much the better if the hopper is empty; the emptier it is the easier and faster the crank turns. And better still, if the empty term he selects is used in a contrary sense; the grand words justice, humanity, mean to him piles of human heads, the same as a text from the gospels means to a grand inquisitor the burning of heretics.165

With Taine's reference to Robespierre's "piles of human heads," we return to Coleridge's warning in 1795 about not building again the Aztec temple of skulls in the name of freedom. Indeed, Taine's burning volumes, motivated not by political prepossession but by humanitarian concern, are especially relevant to Coleridge's attitudes. As Taine says in the preface to his third volume:
I have again to regret the dissatisfaction which I foresee this work will cause to many of my countrymen. My excuse is, that almost all of them, more fortunate than myself, have political principles that serve them in forming their judgments of the past. I had none; if, indeed, I had any motive in undertaking this work, it was to seek for political principles. Thus far I have attained to scarcely more than one; and this is so simple that it will seem puerile, and I hardly dare enunciate it. . . . It consists wholly in this observation: that human society, especially a modern society, is a vast and complicated thing.  

Taine's implication, that human knowledge is not sufficient to balance hypothetical improvement against real massacre is identical with Coleridge's counsel to avoid "the dangerous and gigantic Error of making certain Evil the means of contingent Good."

And just as the great French savant's portrait of Robespierre brings to burning focus his rejection of the crimes of Jacobin activity, so does the twenty-three-year-old Coleridge's portrait of that same arch-Jacobin Robespierre serve as similar focus and serve to establish once and for all that Coleridge was never, and never in any true sense could have been, a Jacobin:

Robespierre, who displaced [Brissot], possessed a glowing ardor that still remembered the end, and a cool ferocity that never either overlooked, or scrupled, the means. What the end was, is not known: that it was a wicked one, has by no means been proved. 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. If however his first intentions were pure, his subsequent enormities yield us a melancholy proof, that it is not the character of the possessor which directs the power, but the power which shapes and depraves the character of the possessor. In Robespierre, its influence was shaped by the properties of his disposition. . . . [E]nthusiasm in Robespierre was blended with gloom, and suspiciousness, and inordinate vanity. His dark imagination was still brooding over supposed plots against freedom—to prevent tyranny he became a Tyrant—and having realized the evils which he suspected, a wild and dreadful Tyrant.—Those loud-tongued adulators, the mob, overpowered the lone-whispered denunciations of conscience—he despotized in all the pomp of Patriotism, and masqueraded on the bloody stage of Revolution, a Caligula with the cap of Liberty on his head.

This, then, is enough. Not even Taine's portrait of Robespierre can quite match the point, the compression, the Roman parallelism so beloved by
the Jacobins, of “a Caligula with the cap of Liberty on his head.” For Coleridge’s beautiful prose not only validates his idiosyncratically humane political stance against any charge of Jacobinism, but in its depth and cadence perhaps gives us as well a fleeting glimpse of the conversational power that bemused so many among his most brilliant contemporaries.