

Coleridge: Friend or Partizan?—I

by Bernard Sharratt

‘Unfortunately, in the great theatre of literature there are no authorized door-keepers: for our anonymous critics are self-elected. I shall not fear the charge of calumny if I add, that they have lost all credit with wise men, by unfair dealing: such as their refusal to receive an honest man’s money (that is, his argument) because they anticipate and dislike his opinion, while others of suspicious character and most unseemly appearance, are suffered to pass without payment, or by virtue of orders which they have themselves distributed to known partizans.’ (I, 227).

Coleridge’s comment on ‘those, who under the name of Reviewers, volunteer this office’, of the door-keepers of literature, seems to have passed unnoticed by many of his own reviewers. Of the reviews of *The Friend*¹ I have seen, few have departed from the model drearily and anonymously exemplified in *The Times Literary Supplement*: a meticulous account, drawn almost entirely from Barbara Rooke’s scholarly introduction, of the immediate circumstances in which *The Friend* was first published and later revised; a few (very well-deserved) compliments on the superb editing, and a final paragraph asserting the profundity and continuing worth of Coleridge’s thought—and the job is done. Such a response is doubly inappropriate in this case: because on Coleridge’s own grounds the value of scholarship lies in the *re-disclosure of the relevant in the dated*, and because this particular work is concerned precisely with an attempt to outline underlying, ‘fixed principles in politics, morals and religion’ (title-page). To assert its continuing worth is to acknowledge both points; but—as Coleridge would agree—mere assertion is inadequate.

The assertion would not go unchallenged in any case: the possible relevance of even the recently dated, in whatever area, is under question today, particularly, it is alleged, by that group loosely defined as ‘the Underground’; if one seeks an alternative society, it is presumed, no compromise is allowed: the detritus of the previous is shovelled into the earth and buried, the radical eschewing even the roots that might grow from it. That the demand for such total cleavage exists is clear: it ranges from Rosenberg’s *The Tradition of the New* through to a somewhat notorious article in *Slant* 20 which spoke of students as reduced to ‘conscientious coprophagists’ grubbily chewing the remnants of bourgeois culture, unnaturally subservient to ‘reified knowledge’. The ‘We want it NOW’ school collapses horizons in both directions—shedding even a revolutionary

¹*The Friend*, ed. B. E. Rooke, *Collected Works of . . . Coleridge*, 4, RKP/Princeton 1969. Vol. I prints the 1818 *rifacimento*, Vol. II the original periodical of 1809-10, with various appendices. References are to Vol. I unless otherwise stated.

tradition demanding and embodying both historical diagnosis and future programme: analysis and strategy. It nevertheless—and this is part of the point of this article—remains a mark of that revolutionary tradition to understand and overcome the inadequacies of the inherited ideological modes which continue to sustain counter-revolutionary responses now.

Coleridge is one appropriate starting-point for such an analysis of the English 'intellectual' tradition, viewed in the light of the 'marxist' tradition which it so noticeably lacks. Coleridge wrote at a historical moment broadly characterized, in Europe as a whole, by the conjuncture of far-reaching changes in modes of production in Britain and rapid changes in modes of social relation on the Continent, the former till recently termed the Industrial Revolution, the latter stemming from the French Revolution. But these 'revolutions', so often taken together as different aspects of the 'same' moment, were actually in one sense out of gear with each other. England had already been through something akin to a bourgeois revolution (a premature Republic muted to a constitutional *modus vivendi* in 1688 which abandoned the 'mass' element emergent in the Civil War period), and was now, from 1780 onwards, entering a phase of technological advance which was the possible ground of a 'working-class' revolution, though this was in fact held and contained by the final bourgeois settlement of 1832—a Reform which rested on the reaction to an emergent but stifled revolutionary impetus from the barely-formed working-class. In France, the *content* of the Revolution, in an economic context increasingly post-feudal but some decades behind that of England, was in the end bourgeois (initially prompted in part, anyway, by the deep anglophile attitudes current among some French philosophes—an admiration precisely for the English bourgeois settlement); yet the *form* assumed by that revolution temporarily outstripped the contemporary English form by establishing a Republic rather than a constitutional monarchy; moreover the success of the French Revolution was partly ensured by the spectacular but short-lived role of the Parisian crowd, the 'masses'. The net result of this conjuncture of two different historical dislocations was a war between two empires, one basing itself on the military marshalling of the masses, the other on their proto-industrial recruitment to seriality—and the economic blockade imposed by the industrial power was, of course, decisive, finally curtailing any remnant possibilities of continental development beyond the bourgeois mode by the restoration of Louis XVIII as constitutional monarch in 1814.

Coleridge, publishing *The Friend* in 1809 and revising it in 1818, was—in these wider 'circumstances' far more important than the inadequacy of paper supplies at Penrith lovingly treated by the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer—not unnaturally confused in his reactions, only able, as a symptomatic example, to classify (along with many English contemporaries both within and without the

'movement') the emergent new revolutionaries of his own country as some kind of 'Jacobins': this anxious response derived primarily from the (illusory) form of the French Revolution. Only a short time after the Revolution, he had tried, in his earlier periodical *The Watchman*¹ of 1796—just two years after leaving Jesus College, Cambridge—both to keep to some extent journalistically abreast of current affairs and to provide original essays and commentary on political principles. That attempt was an uneasy one, in terms both of format and political position. Over half of its material was reprinted accounts of Parliamentary proceedings and extracts from other news-sources, the rest being composed of poems, letters, and essays, mainly by Coleridge but occasionally by various friends and some unsolicited contributors. The response was predictable: provincial readers took it as a newspaper, to counterbalance the Government-controlled press which was almost the only source of news outside London (Flower's *Cambridge Intelligencer* and Montgomery's *Sheffield Iris* were the exceptions), while the London subscribers valued it for the essays; unable fully to satisfy both, the journal folded after only ten issues. Politically, *The Watchman* began with explicit support, in the 'Prospectus', for the Whig Club's opposition to the Gagging Laws and for the Patriotic Societies' aim of general suffrage, but even by the first issue Coleridge had come to question both these positions. He actually gave some approval to the Gagging Acts as encouraging 'more cool and guarded' political discussion and perhaps leading to examination of 'first principles'; the question of suffrage was noticed finally in only one sentence of Number VI. The confused shifts in his specific reactions to the aftermath of the French Revolution can be traced even in the very short lifetime (1st March to 13th May, 1796) of the journal. It was no surprise, then, that a decade later, in starting again a periodical of his own, Coleridge should have both aimed at a more definite audience and changed the format to exclude current news. By then he could see his only viable contribution as the attempt to spell out more single-mindedly 'first principles' that might be the basis of a political philosophy, not immediately tied to specific passing commentary and judgements.

Something of the same dilemma faces many political writers at present, particularly radicals, in an equally confused general situation.² One can curiously parallel the broad (and obviously crude) schematic analysis of Coleridge's historical moment above by a global analysis of our own period. Far-reaching shifts in both modes of production and modes of social relation again characterize the present, but again they are, at their most visible levels, separated out. The 'affluent' First World (U.S.A., Europe, Japan) faces acute

¹Also usefully made available in the new Collected Edition, 2, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, 1970.

²Cf. the Editorial in the final issue of *Slant* (No. 30, March 1970)—a journal which also tried to hold in tension journalism and 'first principles' in a context of connections between 'politics, morals and religion'. Cf. also J. M. Cameron's criticism that the (first) English 'New Left' lacked a 'philosophy of man', *Night Bait*, pp. 50f.

problems arising from considerable technological advance (pollution, disposal of economic surplus, re-deployment, etc.), but the prospects, as distinct from the demands, for a radical overturning of social relations in the advanced West are hardly pressing. The Third World, however, is beginning to live through the tensions between modes (or effects) of a new technological level, well beyond the 'feudal' though still decades(?) behind that of the West, and old forms of social organization that simply cannot co-exist with the new social relations engendered and necessitated by that technological level, and which increasingly give way before them. The Second World (U.S.S.R. and European Socialist Republics) is the effect of a revolution which assumed the *forms* of a post-bourgeois world but in content resulted in its own mode of 'bourgeois' organization. And again an inter-imperial war, resting on military (albeit 'cold') and industrial dragooning on both sides, has dominated our historical consciousness. The early temptation of Western radicals of, say, the Thirties, to identify their programme with that of the Bolshevik-Jacobins has obviously been surpassed. But the current temptation to identify with those areas where a successful leap-frogging of the bourgeois phase has perhaps been achieved (Cuba, China—after two revolutions in a generation, possibly Tanzania, soon perhaps Viet-Nam) ignores the fact that their historical economic-social dislocations are not ours: hence the fundamental irrelevance, to both analysis and strategy, of the Western Maoists at present. That our situation is complicated by the 'invisible earnings' relations between First, Second and Third World and confused by the presence of pockets of the Third World grafted into the domestic exploitation in the First World ('immigration' and 'racial' problems) does not justify a simplistic game of putative leap-frog, forwards or backwards: we are *in* a bourgeois phase and we do not, presumably, advance beyond it by trying to go back to pre-industrial social relations and 'starting again', the thoughts of Chairman Mao in our fists (much as I respect those thoughts for his situations). In other words, the radicals today who do seriously confront the problems of transition are like Coleridge, driven back to basics—which includes their own thinking, critical reflection, not as a collapse into idealism but as an attempt to establish the dialectical bases of praxis.

Is there any possible value, then, in re-considering Coleridge's earlier grapplings with the same fundamental areas? His attempt, along with many 'Romantics', to think dialectically rather than discursively¹ (exemplified best in the movement and style, organization and tone, of the 1809 version) should itself be invitation enough, but I want in this article to focus primarily on the content of Coler-

¹The distinction here is Jacobi's (whom Coleridge echoes frequently in *The Friend*), though linked to the more Marxist sense used above. Cf. also Coleridge's letter to Tom Poole, 25th January, 1810, justifying his use of parentheses: 'They are the *drama* of reason, and present the thought growing, instead of a mere *Hortus siccus*'.

ridge's political thinking (as expressed rather in the 1818 *rifacimento*). The first point, therefore, to be clear about is the political position (on a narrower definition of politics) in which Coleridge stood at that stage. In 1795 he had approved of the revolutionary ideals of the French and opposed any British military counteraction; in 1809 he had supported the war against Napoleon and was vigorously denying the charges that he had once been a 'Jacobin', equating Jacobinism moreover with 'democracy and sedition' (II, 105); by 1818 he was firmly against the moves at home towards electoral reform, on the grounds that education must precede political change. *The Friend* was begun as a contribution to that 'education', but its sights were clearly élitist (the subscribers numbered 400-600) and the general position idealist. A typical passage in 1809 (No. 4, II; 52) exemplifies both assumptions: he asserts that all national histories are 'accounts of noble structures raised by the wisdom of the few, and gradually undermined by the ignorance and profligacy of the many. . . . the deficiency of good, which everywhere surrounds us, originates in the general unfitness and aversion of men to the process of thought, that is to continuous reasoning.'

This emphasis on the role of ideas, located in an élite, prompts Coleridge to preface his major sections on principles in politics, etc., by an examination of the conditions necessary for the 'communication of truth' (essays i to xvi). He considers in this section such topics as the freedom of the press, tolerance, the laws of libel, censorship, etc., and makes some interesting points—distinguishing verbal accuracy from veracity (42, 49), arguing for a recognition that 'man may be made better, not only in consequence, but *by* the mode and *in* the process, of instruction' (103). But the limits on his analysis are clear throughout: even this last comment is made in a context of wishing that 'a hundred men' would acknowledge this insight. The freedom of communication he seeks is in the final analysis administrative: presuming that communication of a dialogue kind will be restricted to the already 'educated' élite, he demands the removal of restrictions on their power to publish. But the hedges round this position are high: 'free inquiry of the boldest kind' is, of course, allowable—provided 'that it is evidently intended for the perusal of those only, who may be presumed to be capable of weighing the arguments' (42; presumed by whom?). Though, in contrast, he later wants to maintain that in criticism of governments 'the facts are commonly as well known to the readers as to the writer', yet any criticism which might lead to the 'subversion of government and property' or which might help to 'render the lower classes turbulent and apt to be alienated from the government of their country' (isn't that the issue?) is obviously to be ruled out of court—though again at this point Coleridge is even prepared to argue against his general idealist position, with a remark on 'the very great improbability that such effects will be produced by such writings', and even to argue

that 'the frequency of open political discussion . . . indisposes a nation to overt acts of sedition and conspiracy. "They talk ill", said Charles the Fifth, "of the Belgian provinces, but they suffer so much the better for it."' (93). The two main limits—restriction to an élite and an ambivalent attitude to the power of revolutionary writing—are caught in his comment on Luther: 'in his circular letter to the Princes, on occasion of the Peasants' War, he uses a language so inflammatory, and holds forth a doctrine which borders so near on the holy right of insurrection, that it may well remain untranslated' (139).

The liberal contradictions that Coleridge clearly exemplifies here force him simultaneously to argue for the freedom of the press and yet to provide grounds for the actual gagging of the press in his own day—the specific results of which, following his option against 'news', he never mentions: in 1810, for example, Cobbett was fined £1,000 and imprisoned for two years for protesting against military flogging; in 1812 Eaton was pilloried and given eighteen months' imprisonment for publishing Paine's *Age of Reason*; in 1817 Sidmouth authorized commitment by a magistrate of anyone even suspected of 'libel'. Though Coleridge exulted in Hone's acquittal for blasphemous libel, on political libels he remains fixed in the liberal presumptions that everything can be changed by discussion kept within the limits of the law, while also excluding from discussion the majority of people: plead *for* the oppressed not *to* them, teach the poor rather their duties initially, using the Gospel to 'ensure obedience' (374-5; this passage is from 1795). Moreover, one must not allow 'unnatural influences' to enter a political discussion—such as 'bitter declamations against the follies and oppression of the higher classes' or 'details of present calamity or immediate suffering, fitted to excite the fury of the multitude'. The limits of this kind of liberalism recur again and again in the English tradition: half a century after the original publication of *The Friend*, Mill continues to argue: 'An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard' (*On Liberty*, 1859, ch. III). The liberal is quite prepared for 'free speech' provided it remains in fact free of any concrete engagement with the structural realities of oppression. A century after Mill, the Underground press is 'free' (production costs are cheaper, but TV is now dominant, and the print market is capitalist anyway)—until it achieves a wide enough circulation actually to bite: hence the recent raids on *Black Dwarf* and the technical prosecution of *IT*—the only Underground papers in England to break beyond the strangle of distribution. The recent pronounce-

ments of *The Times Literary Supplement* (25/12/69) dismissing the 'Underground press' are part of the same tradition, and have been appropriately demolished (in beautiful pseudo-TLS style) by Sanford Berman's letter (22/1/70) documenting endless persecution in the States and England.

One could develop the analysis of the role of communications in terms of the current debate among the Left on the primacy or subordination of cultural studies, and about the kind of communications-analysis appropriate.¹ We will return to the roots of this problem later, in indirect fashion, but Coleridge's inconsistencies on this topic need first to be tracked to their source. That source is clearly revealed in the 'Section the First on the Principles of Political Knowledge' (163-338). To summarize broadly, Coleridge here applies the psychological categories of Sense, Understanding and Reason to characterize different political philosophies and options. His dismissal of the 'Sense'-based system (of Hobbes) is brief and aspects of the argument will hardly convince the present generation, though they may share his judgements: 'A vast Empire *may* perhaps be governed by fear; at least the idea is not absolutely inconceivable, under circumstances which prevent the consciousness of a common strength . . . but a million of insulated individuals is only an abstraction of the mind . . . the whole Theory is baseless. We are told by History, we learn from our experience, we know from our own hearts, that fear, of itself, is utterly incapable of producing any regular, continuous and calculable effect, even on an individual; and that the fear which *does* act systematically upon the mind, always presupposes a sense of duty, as its cause' (167). A generation whose 'History' is told in terms of Hitler, Stalinism, Apartheid, 'brain-washing', The Lonely Crowd and the Authoritarian Personality, will not so easily accept Coleridge's distinction between fear and choice dictated by duty, as the substratum of social cohesion. Nor will it be entirely bemused by Coleridge's option for a political mode resting on the pragmatic 'Expediency' of Understanding (177). Wilsonism is too close to us for that. Rather, the fascination still present in Coleridge's analysis here (essays iii and iv, 176-202) lies in his account of the inadequacies of Reason as a basis of politics, on which he firmly rests his preference for Understanding.

Though Coleridge admits that 'from Reason alone can we derive the principles which our Understandings are to apply, the Ideal to which by means of our Understandings we should endeavour to approximate' (199), he wants to maintain that 'Human institutions cannot be wholly constructed on principles of Science, which is proper to immutable objects' (176, motto to essay iii, from Robert South; this first sentence is, interestingly, not in South, but probably

¹I have discussed some overall problems of contemporary communications-media for radicals in *Slant* 29.

Coleridge's own addition). He argues for this conclusion mainly by attacking Rousseau and through him Paine's writings (a few years later and he would have had to attack Bentham's now neglected pamphlets). He summarizes Rousseau as saying that the only constitution which is legitimate is that which is 'capable of being demonstrated out of the original laws of the pure Reason' (cf. 178). The argument underlying Rousseau's system, he alleges, is roughly that: all voluntary actions are moral, but all morality is grounded in Reason; every man is born with Reason, and without it would be a thing not a person; the distinction between person and thing (end and means) is the ground of all law, which recognizes a man as a free agent, unable to disown his legal and moral responsibility as person; this equality before the law rests on the recognition that in respect of their Reason all men are equal. Since society is an aggregate of individuals, society cannot impose notions of Right and Wrong on any man, except those 'contained in the common Reason'; Rousseau's perfect constitution, then, is one in which each man 'uniting with the whole, shall yet obey himself only and remain as free as before': in obeying laws based on Reason the man of Reason obeys himself. A society can only arrive at this happy state by allowing all the individuals to decide the common law; in the process, any prejudices will cancel themselves out. (cf. 190-193.)

Clearly, as Coleridge points out, this argument collapses at the last stage: prejudices may reinforce one another, leading to a common error. From this flaw, Coleridge can argue that Rousseau's system leads both to Napoleon and to laissez-faire politics of individualism; the only alternative, then, is a system of politics based not on Reason, but on Understanding. *Significantly, however*, Coleridge, to summarize the final stage of that argument, uses a quotation not from Rousseau but from Burke. For in fact Coleridge has ignored two crucial premisses and conditions of Rousseau's position: 'if the People, engaged in deliberation, were adequately informed' and, secondly, if there were no over-dominant *groups* influencing public opinion in the society (cf. *du Contrat Social*, ch. III). Coleridge had, in fact, already ignored this step in his earlier 'refutation' of Rousseau's position, that all men are equal in respect of their Reason: 'though *the Reason itself* is the same in all men, yet the means of exercising it, and the materials (i.e. the facts and ideas) on which it is exercised, being possessed in very different degrees by different persons, the *practical Result* is, of course, equally different—and the whole ground of Rousseau's Philosophy ends in a mere Nothingism' (159). Rousseau's point, however, is, precisely, to make available to all men the necessary 'facts and ideas' (rejecting, incidentally, the very notion of 'possession' in this area) and to equalize the 'means of exercising' Reason. The debate is still with us, of course, though now in terms of the validity of I.Q. testing and the proposals of the *Black Paper*.

One could analyse further Coleridge's various misunderstandings of Rousseau (especially of *Volonté de Tous* and *Volonté générale*) or examine Rousseau's actual contributions to current radical thought.¹ But what is particularly interesting in Coleridge's failure to summarize Rousseau fairly is that the premiss he omits is precisely the condition on which Coleridge himself had first focussed his attention in *The Friend*: the adequacy of 'the predominant state of public opinion' (181), an adequacy which depends on the absence of any power with disproportionate control over the public media. Once again, it is the ambivalence of Coleridge's attitude to the revolutionary potential of mass information and public opinion that clearly underlies his 'misunderstanding'. *His basic option for Expediency, in other words, does not in fact rest on an argument that holds, but rather on a deep prejudice that presumes.* How much it presumes must be examined next, but it is worth remarking at this point that the notion of 'Reason' has, from very different considerations, become suspect also to the present generation seeking an alternative society based on the fusion of individual and social decision. For 'Reason' has been a difficult term to sustain in the twentieth century; Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* sketchily treats some aspects of its demise, and others have been revealed in the subordination of (academic) rationality to political ideologies—a process analysed again and again from Orwell's seminal essays to Chomsky's *American Power and the New Mandarins*. But the basic reason (pardon the word) surely lies in the rise since, precisely, Hegel's response to the French Revolution, of that area of interest which now constitutes 'sociology of consciousness'—again notably absent, as a discipline or approach, from an English academic tradition that escaped the rise of continental sociology in general.² The final part of this article will return to the problem of the relation between modes of rationality and social group, but for the moment we can note that no matter how great the present difficulty of the notion of reason, that can hardly excuse those 'revolutionaries' who are apparently content, to use Coleridge's harsh shaft, 'to live as alms-folks on the opinions of their contemporaries and . . . reconcile themselves to the sans-culotterie of their ignorance by scoffing at the useless fox-brush of Pedantry' (212)—beware Fontana Masters!

(To be continued)

¹Cf. e.g. G. Della Volpe, *Rousseau e Marx* and 'The marxist critique of Rousseau', *New Left Review* 59; L. Althusser, 'Sur le Contrat Social (les Décalages)', *Les Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, 8.

²Cf. H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*; P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; P. Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *Student Power* (Penguin); J.-P. Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*.