

*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" and Jonathan Arac's response, "Repetition and Exclusion: Coleridge and New Criticism Reconsidered," both of which appeared in *boundary 2* (1979).

Our Coleridge section ends with Gene W. Ruoff's "Romantic Lyric and the Problem of Belief," which argues that although modern criticism has readily appropriated many of Coleridge's esthetic precepts, it has systematically minimized doctrinal aspects of his poetry. Ruoff uses as his test case a lyric that is simultaneously one of Coleridge's earliest poems (written by 1796) and one of his latest (receiving its final revisions in 1828). The essay's critical method depends upon retrieving and even accentuating internal dissonances between the poem's voices, arguing for a dialogical and consequently rhetorical consideration of their completing claims.

## *The Politics of "Frost at Midnight"*

Although Magnuson's essay manifests today's critical bias toward the historical, it also reflects the rather subtle because diffuse effect of "reader-response" theories. Magnuson's dialogic approach, which he carefully distinguishes from Bakhtin's, is like most of the best commentary of this kind (such as Cooper's discussion of the shipwreck in *Don Juan* in the next section) undoctrinaire in affirming how readerships may shape the constitution of a poem. For that reason, perhaps, one feels a special cogency in Magnuson's demand that we recognize how *all* the immediate circumstances through which a poem comes into being determine what it has meant and therefore can mean. In this particular case, what has consistently been treated as a "conversation poem" relevant principally to the poet's psyche is shown to be deeply enmeshed in and affected by specific political pressures on Coleridge, the poem's meanings being significantly determined by the relation of its themes and figures to the public discourse in which it participated. The result of this demonstration is, as Magnuson says, "not necessarily to develop a clear meaning for it," but, rather, substantially to increase its fascinating complexities by, for example, showing how issues in it of patriotism and domestic affection have less to do with biographical facts than ideological debates.

Magnuson's essay is one of a forthcoming collection on canonical romantic poems in the public context of the debates on the principles and events of the French Revolution. They argue that poems commonly read as subjective products of a poet's individual sensibility are strongly mediated by the public discourse they enter. Other essays discuss Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), Byron's *Don Juan*, and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." This book has in common with Magnuson's earlier book, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (1988), the theme that location is crucial to reading a poem and that to change a poem's context is to change its significance, sometimes radically.

I would like to begin with a quotation, which I take to be representative of common opinion on Coleridge's Conversation Poems and his mystery poems. In his Clark Lectures, published in 1953, Humphry House remarked:

It has been observed by Dr. Tillyard how very unpolitical "The Ancient Mariner" is. "Frost at Midnight" (dated February 1798—that is, while the "Mariner" was being written) is, if possible, less political still. (85–86)

From *The Wordsworth Circle* (1991): 3–11. Reprinted with the kind permission of *The Wordsworth Circle*.

House argues that at the time that these poems were being written Coleridge began to divide his poetical interests, writing some poems with explicit political content and others that do not contain a word of politics. In other words, the comparison of either "Frost at Midnight" or "The Ancient Mariner" with other poems written or published at the same time, "The Visions of the Maid of Orleans" or "Fears in Solitude" for example, demonstrates that Coleridge was liberating his genius from the mundane impediments of topical literature.

I will elaborate an argument that "Frost at Midnight" is a political poem if it is read in the dialogic and public context of Coleridge's other poems and the political debates of the 1790's. A comparison of "Frost at Midnight" with other Coleridge poems yields a conclusion contrary to House's. But before I ask about the significance of a Romantic lyric, I want to ask about its location: Where is it? and Who conspired to put it there? The method that I will follow argues that a lyric's location determines its significance, and to change a poem's location is to change its dialogic significance, sometimes radically. "Frost at Midnight" was written in late February 1798. It is commonly read as an intensely subjective, meditative lyric written in isolated retirement and reflecting the isolated consciousness of its author; or it is read in the context of Coleridge's other Conversation Poems such as "The Eolian Harp" and "This Lime-Tree Bower," and it echoes the themes of those poems with which it was grouped as "Meditative Poems in Blank Verse" in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817); or it is read in the context of Wordsworth's lyrics, particularly "Tintern Abbey." But it was first published in the fall of 1798 as the final poem in a quarto volume that began with two explicitly political poems: "Fears in Solitude" and "France: An Ode." These two poems were also written early in 1798, and "France: An Ode" was published in the *Morning Post*, April 16. The quarto was published by Joseph Johnson, the radical bookseller, in the early fall after Coleridge met him in late August or early September while he was on his way to Germany with Wordsworth (*CL*, I:417-8, 420).

I propose to locate "Frost at Midnight" in the context of the other poems in the volume and to locate the volume in the context of the political debates conducted in the popular press. My more general interest is in the ways in which context determines dialogic significance, and I certainly do not intend to argue that "Frost at Midnight" must be read in these contexts or that the reading that I will suggest is the only, or even the best, reading. In a reading of a poem as an isolated, integral, and individual poem, the process of interpretation relies only upon the poem itself; in the variety of dialogic reading that I am offering, the meaning of a poem depends upon the meanings of its themes and figures that exist in the public discourse before the poem is written. I will be comparing Coleridge's poems with other written material that is not often considered in a traditional explication; I draw upon the political pamphlets and political journalism, which implies that a Romantic lyric participates in the ordinary language of the day. For this contextual reading there is no distinction between an aesthetic language that is unique and separate from ordinary language. And in dealing with the dialogic relations of lyric poetry and political journalism, my dialogic method differs from the theory of Bakhtin, who places primary emphasis upon the multiplicity of voices within a single work.

To put all this in a simpler way: I will be looking at the public Coleridge and the public location of the poem. Our reconstructions of Coleridge in this century are based upon the publication of his notebooks and letters, by our knowledge of the scholarship that has traced his reading, and by our knowledge of his later career.

None of these were available to his contemporaries, whose comments make the history of the reception of the poem and whose debates constitute the context of its publication. The story of its public context and reception, I think, is a particularly complex instance of tendentious interpretation and deliberate misrepresentation. To conduct an inquiry into the publication and reception of the poem is not necessarily to develop a clear meaning for it. Significance remains as slippery as it is for other critical approaches. It partakes, in other words, of the rhetoric of public debate rather than the rhetoric of symbolism and allegory by which it is usually discussed.

For a reading of "Frost at Midnight" in the public dialogue, the crucial dates are those of the composition of the volume in late August or early September 1798, when Coleridge first met Joseph Johnson. The dates of the writing of the poem are relatively insignificant, because the purposes of publication are more important than Coleridge's original intentions in drafting the individual poems. To publish, in the 1790's, was inevitably to enter a public debate. In August, when the volume was composed, both author and publisher were under attack from the press and the government. Joseph Johnson, whose name appeared boldly on the title page, had been placed on trial in the Court of the King's Bench and convicted on July 17 for selling Gilbert Wakefield's *A Reply to Some Parts of the Bishop of Llandaff's Address to the People of Great Britain*. His indictment reads in part: "Joseph Johnson late of London bookseller being a malicious seditious and ill-disposed person and being greatly disaffected to our said Lord the King . . . wickedly and seditiously did publish and cause to be published a certain scandalous malicious and seditious libel. . . ." Although he had been found guilty, sentencing was postponed for many months for obvious reasons. At the hearing on his sentence, he would have to produce evidence of his good behavior in any plea for leniency. His sworn statement at the hearing claimed "that where he could take the liberty of doing it, he has uniformly recommended the Circulation of such publications as had a tendency to promote good morals instead of such as were calculated to mislead and inflame the Common people."<sup>1</sup>

Since the end of 1797, Coleridge himself had been under attack in the *Anti-Jacobin*, which began publication as a weekly in November to attack the opposition press. It published on July 9, 1798 a satirical poem called "New Morality, or the promised Installation of the High Priest of the Theophilanthropists," in which Coleridge was ridiculed along with Southey, Charles Lloyd, and Charles Lamb for being both Jacobins and atheists, followers of the French deist La Réveillère Lépiaux, a member of the Directory, who proposed replacing Christianity with a form of Deism called Theophilanthropy.

behold . . .

The Directorial Lama, Sovereign Priest—  
Lepaux—whom Atheists worship—at whose nod  
Bow their meek heads—the Men without a God.  
Ere Long, perhaps, to this astonished Isle,  
Fresh from the Shores of subjugated Nile.  
Shall Buonaparte's victor Fleet protect  
The genuine Theo-philanthropic Sect—  
The Sect of Marat, Mirabeau, Voltaire,  
Led by their Pontiff, good La Reveillere.  
Rejoiced our Clubs shall greet him, and install

The holy hunch-back in thy Dome, St. Paul  
 While Countless votaries thronging in his train  
 Wave their Red Caps, and hymn this jocund strain.  
 (ll. 314–28)

On August first James Gillray published an elaborate caricature of the worshippers of Lépeaux based on the poem. At one side is the figure of Lépeaux based on the poem. At one side is the figure of Lépeaux, standing on a footstool preaching to a group of votaries which includes three dwarfs holding copies of the *Morning Post*, the *Courier*, and the *Morning Chronicle*. Behind Lépeaux are three allegorical figures of starving Justice with a raised dagger, Philanthropy squeezing the earth with a deathly embrace, and Sensibility with what appears to be a bleeding heart. Facing Lépeaux is a Cornucopia of Ignorance, from which flows a torrent of pamphlets and journals, two of which are being read by asses and carry the titles "Southey's Saphics" and "Coleridge's Dactylics." Lamb and Lloyd appear in a corner as a frog and toad croaking from a volume called "Blank Verse by Toad and Frog" (I do not know who is toad and who is frog). It is clear from both text and caricature that Southey and Coleridge were the most important Jacobin poets. Wordsworth and Blake were, of course, nowhere to be seen. Thus a volume apparently presenting simultaneously the author and publisher of "Fears in Solitude" as both patriots and Christians would tend to take the heat off both. The volume would be a public defense against attacks upon both that had been made merely weeks before the volume was composed.

The public debate that the volume entered was composed of a rhetoric of purposeful duplicity, distortion, and personal attack, and Coleridge was constantly in the sights of the *Anti-Jacobin*, which contains many attacks on him although often Coleridge is not mentioned by name. One of its major aims was to expose the errors in the liberal press, which it ranged under three categories: lies, misrepresentations and mistakes. Its Prospectus promised to present "Lies of the Week: the downright, direct, unblushing falsehoods, which have no colour or foundation whatever, and which at the very moment of their being written, have been known to the writer to be wholly destitute of truth." Yet its own rhetoric was that of parody and distortion. The early numbers contained essays on Jacobin poetry, whose major targets were Southey and Coleridge. In its number for December 18 it included a parody of Southey's "The Soldier's Wife: Dactylics." First, Southey's poem printed from his *Poems* of 1797.

Weary way-wanderer languid and sick at heart,  
 Traveling painfully over the rugged road,  
 Wild-visag'd Wanderer! ah for thy heavy chance!

Sorely thy little one drags by three bare-footed,  
 Cold is the baby that hangs at thy bending back,  
 Meagre and livid and screaming its wretchedness.

\* Woe-begone mother, half anger, half agony,  
 As over thy shoulder thou lookest to hush the babe,

\* This stanza was supplied by S. T. Coleridge.

The *Anti-Jacobin's* parody is prefaced by the following comment: "Being the quintessence of all the Dactylics that ever were, or ever will be written."

Wearisome Sonneteer, feeble and querulous,  
 Painfully dragging out thy demo-cratic lays—  
 Moon-stricken Sonneteer, "ah! for thy heavy chance!"

Sorely thy Dactylics lag on uneven feet:  
 Slow is the Syllable which thou wouldst urge to speed,  
 Lame and o'erburthen'd and "screaming its wretchedness!"

The next stanza, indicated only by a lines of asterisks, is omitted with the following note: "My worthy friend, the Bellman, had promised to supply an additional Stanza but the business of assisting the Lamp-lighter, Chimney-sweeper, &c with Complimentary Verses for their worthy Masters and Mistresses, pressing on him at this Season, he was obliged to decline it." The Bellman is, of course, Coleridge, who had published *The Watchman*, and the reference to the lamp-lighter may be an allusion to the practice of the French Revolutionaries of hanging their victims on lamp posts.

Not only was Coleridge's poetry parodied in the *Anti-Jacobin*, but his journalism was ridiculed as well. An article in the *Morning Post* for February 24, recently identified as Coleridge's by David Erdman in his edition of *Essays on His Times*, was quoted in the *Anti-Jacobin* on March 5. Coleridge had written that "The insensibility with which we now hear of the most extraordinary Revolutions is a very remarkable symptom of the public temper, and no unambiguous indication of the state of the times. We now read with listless unconcern of events which, but a very few years ago, would have filled all Europe with astonishment." The *Anti-Jacobin* quoted this passage with some errors and commented: "Where he found this 'insensibility,' we know not unless among the Patriots of the Corresponding Society;—for our parts, we have a very lively feeling of the transaction [the entry of the French armies into Rome], which for perfidy and inhumanity, surpasses whatever we have yet seen or heard of." Later in his article Coleridge had written "In the midst of these stupendous revolutions, the Nobility, Gentry, and Proprietors of England, make no efforts to avert that ruin from their own heads, which they daily see falling on the same classes of men in neighbouring countries." The *Anti-Jacobin* sniffed in response to this: "Never, probably, in any period, in any Country, were such efforts made, by the very descriptions of men this worthy tool of Jacobinism has pointed out as making no exertions."

In March and April 1793 government pressure upon dissent forced the radical press to become more circumspect and duplicitous in its rhetoric. When Coleridge published "France: An Ode" as "The Recantation" in the *Morning Post*, Daniel Stuart's editorial policy had been shifting against French militarism. Coleridge's ode was prefaced by this note: "The following excellent Ode will be in unison with the feelings of every friend to Liberty and foe to Oppression: of all, who admiring the French Revolution, detest and deplore the conduct of France toward Switzerland." As David Erdman says in his introduction to *Essays on His Times*, "Both editor and poet, in their different ways, recanted while saying that they did not, and oscillated more than they recanted" (*EOT*, I, lxxx). One week after Coleridge's "Recantation" was published, the *Anti-Jacobin* gloated that the *Morning*

*Post* "has wisely shrunk from our severity, reformed its Principles in some material points, and in more than one of its last columns, held language which the Whig Club and Corresponding Society will not soon forgive" and concluded "If we could but cure this Paper of its inveterate habits of Lying and Swearing, and give it a few notions of *meum* and *tuum*, we should not despair of seeing it one day an English Opposition Paper."

The *Anti-Jacobin*, however, could claim only some of the credit for the changes of the *Morning Post*. The government had turned up the heat on the paper. The occasion of the government pressure, and the occasion of Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude," as Erdman recounts it, was the arrest on March 1 of John Binns, of the London Corresponding Society and two members of the United Irishmen. They were apparently in possession of papers proposing a French invasion of Ireland. Within a week the *Morning Post* printed accounts of the arrest, and Daniel Stuart was summoned before the ministers to reveal his sources of information. Stuart's editorial policy became more cautious. In these instances the dialogue into which Coleridge's poems enter is conducted by the affirmations and denials, the accusations and defenses, and the distortions and misrepresentations in the continuing battle between the liberal papers and the *Anti-Jacobin*. The early attacks against Coleridge did not mention him by name. Some readers, of course, would have recognized that Coleridge was the Bellman in the parody of Southey's "The Soldier's Wife." It would have been more obvious that the *Morning Post* was responding to various pressures in the shift of its editorial policy and, since Coleridge signed "France: An Ode" with his own name, that he was a part of the shift. But the shift was not his alone.

"Fears in Solitude," which was written at the same time as this exchange between the *Morning Post* and the *Anti-Jacobin*, returns the accusations about the rhetoric of public discourse. "Lying and Swearing" were not confined to the liberal press. While Coleridge's poem attacks Britain for slavery, greed, and war fever, its major theme is the violation of the ninth commandment against baring false witness, which he called "one scheme of perjury." In the Sixth Lecture on Revealed Religion, Coleridge had anticipated these complaints by arguing of government itself that

There is scarcely a Vice which Government does not teach us—criminal prodigality and an unholy Splendor surrounds it—disregard of solemn Promises marks its conduct—and more than half of the business of Ministers is to find inducements to Perjury! Nay of late it has become the fashion to keep wicked and needy men in regular Pay, who without scruple take the most awful oaths in order to gain the confidence which it is their Trade to betray.<sup>2</sup>

Coleridge's immediate target of criticism here is the abuse of the system of government spies, from which he was later to suffer himself, and the bribery of witnesses in criminal cases, but his complaints are resonant of the agitation against the Test Acts which predates the Revolution. Thus both Coleridge and the *Anti-Jacobin* agreed that political dialogue was conducted by duplicity. The truth of duplicity was adopted by both parties.

Perhaps the cruelest attack upon Coleridge came in 1799 when the satirical poems from the *Anti-Jacobin* were republished with a note that Coleridge has "left his country, become a citizen of the world, left his little ones fatherless, and his

wife destitute." Most likely, this is an intentional echo of the accusations made against Rousseau, who ignored and disavowed his natural children. In *The Friend* for June 8, 1809 Coleridge answers these accusations:

Again, will any man, who loves his Children and his Country, be slow to pardon me, if not in the spirit of vanity but of natural self-defence against yearly and monthly attacks on the very vitals of my character as an honest man and a loyal Subject, I prove the utter falsity of the charges by the only public means in my power, a citation from the last work published by me, in the close of the year 1798, and anterior to all the calumnies published to my dishonor.<sup>3</sup>

Coleridge then includes a lengthy quotation from "Fears in Solitude." Since he cited the "Fears in Solitude" volume in his defense in 1809, it seems reasonable to me to think that he thought of it in the same way in 1798. If, indeed, Coleridge's self-defense began in 1798 and not later when he had changed his political allegiances, his later self-defense must be regarded in a different light. His self-defense in 1798 was not, as it later appeared, an effort to change the record to cover up his youthful radicalism, to rewrite his youth, but rather it was a necessary self-defense, done at the moment of pressure from both the press and the government, and done in concert with others who themselves were under similar pressure.

That Coleridge's volume was designed to answer criticisms of himself and Johnson is confirmed by the first notices printed in the *Analytic Review* (Dec. 1798), which was published by Johnson: "Mr. C., in common with many others of the purest patriotism, has been slandered with the appellation of an enemy to his country. The following passage [from "Fears in Solitude"], we presume, will be sufficient to wipe away the injurious stigma, and show that an adherence to the measures of the administration is not the necessary consequence of an ardent love for the constitution." Of "Frost at Midnight" the reviewer said that the poem does "great honour to the poet's feelings, as the husband of an affectionate wife, and as the father of a cradled infant." The review might almost be considered the official publisher's interpretation of the volume, like the puffs we all conspire to write today. The publisher reads the author as a patriot, who can prove that he is a patriot because he is not an atheist. "Fears in Solitude" calls upon his countrymen to rise and defeat the impious French. "France: An Ode" deplores French aggression while retaining admiration for the Revolution. And "Frost at Midnight" concludes with six lines that were later deleted. The "silent icicles" will shine to the moon

Like those, my babe! which, ere to-morrow's warmth  
Have capp'd their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,  
Will catch thine eye, and with their novelty  
Suspend thy little soul: then make thee shout,  
And stretch and flutter from thy mother's arms  
As thou would'st fly for very eagerness.

The public and dialogic significance of "Frost at Midnight" in the fall of 1798 was that it presented a patriotic poet, whose patriotism rested on the love of his country and his domestic affections. Coleridge specifically instructed Johnson to send a copy of the volume to his brother, the Reverend George Coleridge. As the

reviewer in the *Monthly Review* (May 1799) put it, "Frost at Midnight" displays "a pleasing picture of virtue and content in a cottage," hardly a penetrating critical comment of interest to us in these days of deconstruction and hermeneutics, until one recognizes that the word "content" implies the negation of its opposite. Coleridge is not discontent, not ill-disposed to the existing state of society; he is not, therefore, seditious.

Considering the political intentions of the volume, intentions that were present in 1798 and not constructed later to hide a youthful radicalism, is it possible to draw conclusions about Coleridge's political principles and ideology as they appeared in the public discourse in 1798? Isn't the public dialogue that "Frost at Midnight" enters full of duplicity? Does not the volume intend to present Coleridge both as a loyal patriot who loves his country and as a devoutly religious man, on the one hand, and on the other as one who continues to support the ideals of liberty that he has always held? The evidence of the volume along with the letter that Coleridge sent to his brother George in March that he had "snapped [his] squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition" (*CL*, I, 397) suggest that the invasion of Switzerland and government pressure upon Stuart had forced him to change his views. In this private letter he announces that

I deprecate the moral & intellectual habits of those men both in England & France, who have modestly assumed to themselves the exclusive title of Philosophers & Friends of Freedom. I think them at least as distant from greatness as from goodness. If I know my own opinions, they are utterly untainted with French Metaphysics, French Politics, French Ethics, & French Theology. (*CL*, I, 395)

Considering Coleridge's 1795 Lectures, this comment is less of an apology or an announcement of new views as it is a confirmation of his original positions. In the same letter he comments upon his public persona:

I am prepared to suffer without discontent the consequences of my follies & mistakes —: and unable to conceive how that which I am, of Good could have been without that which I have been of Evil, it is withheld from me to regret any thing: I therefore consent to be deemed a Democrat & a Seditious. A man's character follows him long after he has ceased to deserve it . . . (*CL*, I, 397)

At the same time that Coleridge claims to have converted to being a loyalist, he admits willingness to be considered a democrat and seditious. In part, the volume *Fears in Solitude* wants to have it both ways. Its author as a public figure is both a friend of liberty and a loyal patriot.

At the same time that he seemed to recant his former praise of the French Revolution, he continued to publish poems in the *Morning Post* expressing some sympathy with France. For instance on July 30 he published "A Tale," the story of the mad ox, which, as a note explains, represents the French Revolution:

An ox, long fed on musty hay,  
And work'd with yoke and chain,  
Was loosen'd on an April day,  
When fields are in their best array,  
And growing grasses sparkle gay  
At once with sun and rain.

The grass was sweet, the sun was bright  
With truth I may aver it;  
The beast was glad, as well he might,  
Thought a green meadow no bad sight,  
And frisk'd,—to show his huge delight,  
Much like a beast of spirit.

'Stop, neighbours, stop, why these alarms?  
The ox is only glad!  
But still, they pour from cots and farms—  
'Hallo!' the parish is up in arms,  
(A hoaxing-hunt has always charms)  
'Hallo! the ox is mad.'

The ox is chased through the town:

The frightened beast ran through the town  
All follow'd, boy and dad,  
Bull-dog, parson, shopman, clown,  
The publicans rush'd from the Crown,  
'Halloo! hamstring him! cut him down!  
They drove the poor ox mad.<sup>4</sup>

The poem concludes with the admission that now the beast of the Revolution is indeed mad and must be controlled, as does "France: An Ode," but the attitude toward the Revolution is quite different. "France: An Ode" had portrayed the Revolution rising like the allegorical figure of wrath, not the animal gladness of the ox:

When France in wrath her giant limbs uprear'd  
And with that oath which smote earth, air, and sea,  
Stamp'd her strong foot and said, she would be free. . . .

The picture of the ox liberated in gladness and goaded to madness displays both a greater sympathy with France and a liberal attitude which, as Carl Woodring points out, Whigs and Friends of Freedom had held for some time.<sup>5</sup> One wonders at the degree of recantation that has actually gone on.

The language of politics in Coleridge's dialogue with the reactionary press is tempered to suit the intentions of those who use and abuse it. If Coleridge seems to oscillate and to move easily from side to side, it is in part because his writing was entering a public discourse of duplicity, one in which his works were certain to be misread and mistaken. While the conservatives who attacked him and the other radicals could parade without ambiguity their principles and ideology, the radicals including Coleridge were forced to be more cautious. Coleridge's oscillations could be reread as the acrobatic feat of remaining in the public debates, when other radical voices had been silenced or exiled.

At any given moment and with any given utterance in the public debates, its terms are complex and even contradictory. And because of the surrounding context, each utterance is unique in the complexity of its dialogic significance. For an obvious example, the word "patriotism" is about as ambiguous as one could want.

"Fears in Solitude" was reviewed in the *Analytic* as displaying the "purest patriotism." And the *Monthly Review* (May 1799) echoed the evaluation: "Of his country he speaks with a patriotic enthusiasm, and he exhorts to virtue with a Christian's ardor . . . no one can be more desirous of promoting all that is important to its security and felicity." But what does "patriot" mean? In the first edition of his *Dictionary*, Dr. Johnson defined a patriot as "one whose ruling passion is the love of his country," but in the fourth edition he added a contrary definition: "a factious disturber of the government." A correspondent to the *Anti-Jacobin*, who signed himself "A Batchelor" had his own definition: "By pretty long habit of observation, I have at length arrived at the skill of concluding from a man's politics the nature of his domestic troubles" (Jan. 1, 1798). The inflamed passions and gloomy dispositions of those who are discontent are caused by sexual frustration. The Batchelor concludes that "A Patriot is, generally speaking, a man who has been either a Dupe, a Spendthrift, or a Cuckhold, and, not unfrequently, all-together." Clearly the Batchelor has been reading Swift's *Tale of A Tub* and thinks of a patriot as someone whose height of felicity is being a "fool among knaves" and whose acquisitions include the perpetual "possession of being well deceived," and whose great achievements in new systems and conquests can easily be traced to sexual frustration. Curiously enough, in a somewhat different and Miltonic key, Coleridge agrees with the Batchelor's analysis. In "Fears in Solitude," he accused both radicals and conservatives: "We have been too long / Dupes of a deep delusion." Among those deceived Coleridge includes the radical iconoclasts as well as the conservative idolaters, who demand total submission to the present system of government. The volume thus presents Coleridge as a patriot but what kind of patriot? Both of course, depending which of Coleridge's readers is doing the reading.

Another related, and more complex, set of political keywords surrounds the domestic affections in "Frost at Midnight." Does the love of landscape and family form the basis of a patriotism similar to Burke's or does it lead to a love of all mankind that is characteristic of radical writing? The question of the value of patriotism of this sort enters the public discourse on the French Revolution with Dr. Richard Price's sermon "A Discourse on the Love of our Country, Delivered on November 4, 1789" before the society to "commemorate the Revolution in Great Britain." Price's thesis argues that the love of one's country is not based on "the soil or the spot of earth on which we happen to be born . . . but that community of which we are members . . . who are associated with us under the same constitution of government." He argues that any love of one's own country "does not imply any conviction of the superior value of it to other countries, or any particular preference of its laws and constitution of government." Finally he concludes that "in pursuing particularly the interest of our country, we ought to carry our views beyond it. We should love it ardently, but not exclusively. We ought to seek its good, by all the means that our different circumstances and abilities will allow; but at the same time we ought to consider ourselves as citizens of the world, and take care to maintain a just regard to the rights of other countries. . . ."6 In response to Dr. Price, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* countered that the inheritance of monarchy went hand in hand with the inheritance of property, and that the love of one's country and government is bound to the love of one's family:

By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives. . . . In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood, binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties, adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections, keeping inseparable and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our states, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars. (Butler 40)

In Coleridge's 1795 Introductory Address, he, like Burke, grounds benevolence and patriotism in the domestic affections, but his definition of benevolence as universal is precisely the opposite of Burke's:

The searcher after Truth must love and be beloved, for general Benevolence is a necessary motive to constancy of pursuit; and this general Benevolence is begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections. Let us beware of that proud Philosophy, which affects to inculcate Philanthropy while it denounces every home-born feeling, by which it is produced and nurtured. The paternal and filial duties discipline the heart and prepare it for the love of all mankind. The intensity of private attachments encourages, not prevents, universal Benevolence. (*Lect.* 46)

The thought is repeated in Lecture Three, where it introduces a criticism of Godwin:

Jesus knew our Nature—and that expands like the circles of a Lake—the Love of our Friends, parents, and neighbors lead[s] to a love of our Country to the love of all mankind. The intensity of private attachments encourages, not prevents, universal philanthropy—the nearer we approach to the Sun the more intense his Rays—yet what corner of the System does he not cheer and vivify. (*Lect.* 163)

Coleridge's immediate criticism in these passages is not of Burke, but of Godwin's "proud philosophy" and his indifference to personal and domestic affections. In the next paragraph he ridicules the "Stoical Morality which disclaims all the duties of Gratitude and domestic Affection" and addresses Godwinians (like Thelwall, to whom he used the same words in a private letter): "Severe Moralist! that teaches us that filial Love is a Folly, Gratitude criminal, Marriage Injustice, and a promiscuous Intercourse of the Sexes our wisdom and our duty. In this System a man may gain his self-esteem with little Trouble, he first adopts Principles so lax as to legalize the most impure gratification and then prides himself on acting to his Principles" (*Lect.* 164–65). Coleridge's consistent rejection of materialism, atheism, and the libertinism in liberty separates him from Godwin, Thelwall and other radicals, but that does not mean that his invocation of the domestic affections places him in Burke's camp. For Burke the domestic affections form the basis of the British Constitution, a decidedly national allegiance, while Coleridge views them as the basis of a universal benevolence and a love of all mankind. The *Anti-Jacobin*, not surprisingly, takes Burke's and not Coleridge's position. In "New Morality" Coleridge's image of the sun for the love of mankind is turned against him. The "universal man"

through the extended globe his feelings run  
 As broad and general as th'unbounded Sun!  
 No narrow bigot he—his reason'd view  
 Thy, interests, England, ranks with thine Peru  
 France at our doors, he sees no danger nigh,  
 But heaves for Turkey's woes th'impartial sigh;  
 A steady Patriot of the World alone,  
 The Friend of every Country—but his own.  
 (ll. 107–14)

In the eyes of the defenders of tradition and prejudice, Coleridge then should stand in the ranks with Dr. Price and his followers who ask

What has the love of their country hitherto been among mankind? What has it been but a love of domination; a desire of conquest, and a thirst for grandeur and glory, by extending territory, and enslaving surrounding countries? What has it been but a blind and narrow principle, producing in every country a contempt of other countries, and forming men into combinations and factions against their common rights and liberties . . . ?" (Butler 25–26)

Finally, in the first of the series on Jacobin poetry, the *Anti-Jacobin* ticks off its characteristics:

The Poet of other times has been an enthusiast in the love of his native soil.

The Jacobin Poet rejects all restriction in his feelings. His love is enlarged and expanded so as to comprehend all human kind.

The Old Poet was a Warrior, at least in imagination; and sung the actions of the Heroes of his Country, in strains that 'made Ambition Virtue,' and which overwhelmed the horrors of War in its glory.

The Jacobin Poet would have no objection to sing battles too—but he would make a distinction. The prowess of Buonaparte indeed he might chaunt in his loftiest strain of exultation. There we should find nothing but trophies, and triumphs, and branches of laurel and olive, phalanxes of Republicans shouting Victory, satellites of Despotism biting the ground and geniuses of Liberty planting standards on mountain-tops.

"Frost at Midnight" as a portrait of the domestic affections enters this debate in 1798, but how was it possible for a reader in 1798 to know whether what the *Monthly Review* called this "pleasing picture of virtue and content in a cottage" reflects the ideology of Price, or Burke, or Coleridge, or Lépeaux, or Paine, or Priestley, or Bishop Berkeley? Is the public Coleridge the Watchman, the Bellman, or the lamp-lighter, the patriot or the Jacobin, a Christian or a theophilanthropist? Coleridge's and Johnson's friends would have read the "content in a cottage" as portraying the domestic affections as the ground for universal benevolence. Coleridge clearly hoped that his brother would have read it in an opposite way, as a rejection of sedition and atheism. The *Critical Review* (Aug. 1799) wouldn't buy it at all: "But those who conceive that Mr. Coleridge has, in

these poems, recanted his former principles, should consider the general tenor of them. The following passage is not written in conformity with the fashionable opinions of the day," and then the reviewer quotes from "Fears in Solitude." The *Anti-Jacobin* may have read the references in "Frost at Midnight" to the "eternal language, which thy God / Utters" as an allusion to Paine's *Age of Reason*: "The Word of God is the creation we behold: And it is this word . . . that God speaketh universally to man" (*Lect.* 95n). In 1799, when the *Anti-Jacobin* republished "New Morality" it included a footnote that described Coleridge as "an avowed Deist," which to their Church-and-King crowd meant that Coleridge was an atheist and a follower of Paine. Combined with their ungenerous note about his going to Germany and leaving his family destitute, the note interprets Coleridge as a Jacobin in the camp of Rousseau, Godwin, and Paine.

These issues of patriotism, content, and domestic affections have little to do with the facts of biography. They are parts of a crucial political struggle, keywords in an ideological debate. Their various meanings existed long before Coleridge wrote "Frost at Midnight," and when he did write it, he was certainly aware of their meanings, because he himself had contributed to the debate as early as 1795. To put it another way, Coleridge's references to the domestic affections had nothing to do with his own domestic affections and everything to do with the public discourse. The language of "Frost at Midnight" in 1798 is the creation of that public discourse, not the creation of private circumstances or private meditation. "Frost at Midnight" is a private poem with public meanings because it has a public location. Its language is defined by the rhetoric of public oratory, not the rhetoric of symbolism and allegory, a language that takes its significance from the allusiveness of the dialogue, not from the referentiality of its figures. Since it was placed in 1798 in the public dialogue, it cannot represent rural retirement as an evasion of political issues, although it is certainly evasive. Nor does it represent a desire to escape from history. Rather, by becoming public, it enters history because it enters the debates that constitute history and that motivate action. It is not the private meditation of an isolated consciousness, but the testimony of a public figure. "Frost at Midnight" is a poem that is changed by its public context.

How would "Frost at Midnight" be read with this context in mind? In traditional symbolic readings the images and figures are explicated, first of all, by reference to other figures in the poem itself and perhaps by reference to Coleridge's other poems or philosophical writings. In the form of dialogic reading that I am suggesting, the images are glossed by their meanings within the public discourse and its political language. If this method is to have any value, it should have a practical effect on the readings of poems, yet all I can do here is to suggest some significantly different readings of portions of the poem that the context provides. The reference to "abstruser musings" becomes a problem. In a symbolic reading Coleridge is alone in his cottage in the silence of the night quite removed from the intrusive presence of sensible activity and permitted to think philosophically about the activity of nature, the ministry of frost and its ultimate cause and purpose. Yet in the public context "abstruse" thinking sounds suspiciously like the kind of abstraction and metaphysics that Burke saw as part of the origin of the Revolution: "I cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and

solitude of metaphysical abstraction" (Butler 8). What after all could Coleridge be thinking about so abstrusely?

He is vexed and disturbed with the extreme calm, a calm that indicates its opposite, activity and audible language. In a symbolic reading of the poem, the language of nature troubles him, and he wishes to be able to read that language symbolically, but his phrase "the numberless goings on of life" signifies that the vitality of natural and human life is indistinct. But "Frost at Midnight" is preceded by two political poems that worry specifically about war and invasion. In the context of those poems, how could the phrase mean anything else but the present political anxieties. Within the poem itself the "numberless goings on of life" are asserted to be present in "Sea, hill and wood"—the elements of nature; but in the context of the first two poems, the potential invasion by sea changes the reference of the phrase.

Why is not the relation between the calm and the vexation in "Frost at Midnight" the same as it is at the beginning of "Fears in Solitude" when calm and retired solitude turns abruptly to thoughts of war: "it is a melancholy thing / For such a man, who would full fain preserve / His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel / For all his brethren." "Fears in Solitude" concludes with a return to calm that provides a location for continued thoughts of human sympathy:

O green and silent dell!  
And grateful, that by nature's quietness  
And solitary musings all my heart  
Is soften'd, and made worthy to indulge  
Love, and the thoughts that yearn for human kind.

If one reads the entire volume of "Fears in Solitude" as a single composition, why are not the "abstruser musings" of "Frost at Midnight" precisely the same as the "solitary musings" that conclude "Fears in Solitude?" If the two are the same, and if the thoughts of humanity and universal benevolence at the end of "Fears in Solitude" remain with Coleridge throughout the volume, then the "abstruser musings" of Frost at Midnight" may well be precisely the kind of thinking that Burke feared.

Let me select one more example of an important phrase that becomes richer because of the context. Toward the end of the poem Coleridge hopes that Hartley will be able to "see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters. . . ." God is the "Great Universal Teacher." But whose universality are we talking about? My preferred traditional answer is that Coleridge is alluding to the divine visible language of nature that Bishop Berkeley writes about in *Alciphron* and to which Coleridge himself alludes in a note to "This Lime-Tree Bower" when he explains to Southey that "I am a Berkeleyan:"

the great Mover and Author of nature constantly explaineth Himself to the eyes of men by the sensible intervention of arbitrary signs, which have no similitude or connexion with the things signified; so as, by compounding and disposing them, to suggest and exhibit an endless variety of objects differing in nature, time, and place; thereby informing and directing men how to act with respect to things distant and future, as well as near and present. In consequence, I say, of your own sentiments

and concessions you have as much reason to think the Universal Agent or God speaks to your eyes, as you can have for thinking any particular person speaks to your ears.<sup>7</sup>

For the purposes of my contrast, it is a matter of some indifference whether other traditional readers might wish to quote Spinoza or Priestley as the source of Coleridge's lines. If the poem is located within a political context, universality becomes a problem. What is the universal teacher teaching? The works of Tom Paine or the works of Edmund Burke?

In his review of the *Biographia*, Hazlitt said of Coleridge's political writings: "His style, in general, admits of a convenient latitude of interpretation."<sup>8</sup> With some modification Hazlitt's words can be used to conclude. Coleridge's latitude wasn't merely convenient; it was necessary. If Coleridge was dodging, it was because the heat was on him, and his associates Stuart and Johnson, from the government and the hostile press. As we know, it is common for those who try to maintain opposition in times of repression to speak in a kind of double talk; it is the nature of public discourse. The latitude that Hazlitt observed does more than measure the poles of his political oscillations. It also describes a field of possible contexts in which his poetic and political utterances were received and read, the contexts that determined how they would be read, and the context that determined the dialogic significance of "Frost at Midnight" in 1798.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (Iowa, 1979) 159–61.
2. *Lectures On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton and London, 1971) 221, hereafter abbreviated *Lect.*
3. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton and London, 1983) I: 68n; *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke (Princeton and London, 1969) II: 23.
4. "A Tale," later reprinted as "Recantation: Illustrated in the Story of the Mad Ox," is here reprinted with the corrections listed in David Erdman's "Unrecorded Coleridge Variants," *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958): 154.
5. Carl Woodring, *Politics in the Poetry of Coleridge* (Wisconsin, 1961), 141.
6. Marilyn Butler, ed., *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge, 1984) 25–6. Peter Swaab spoke on some of these same issues in his talk "Wordsworth and Patriotism" at the Wordsworth Summer Conference, July 1990.
7. *Berkeley: Essay, Principles, Dialogues*, ed. Mary Whiton Calkins (New York, 1929) 370.
8. "Coleridge's Literary Life," *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930–34) 16:129.

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