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# ONCE AN APOSTATE ALWAYS AN APOSTATE

by JEROME CHRISTENSEN

*A Parable.* One evening in April of 1794 at a tavern supper following a meeting of the London Corresponding Society, John Thelwall stood, raised a pot of porter, blew the foam from the top, and proclaimed, "So should all tyrants be served!" An informer in the crowd recorded the remark and the gesture; his report went into the dossier being prepared by the Crown for Thelwall's trial on charges of sedition.<sup>1</sup>

*The Moral.* The informer, evidently no dunce, caught Thelwall's pun on "head" and recognized it as an instance of what Coleridge called "Jacobin rhetoric." What made it such and what made it more seditious than all the oratory of the preceding meeting was that it was not talk *about* revolutionary action but talk *as* revolutionary action. Thelwall not only punned on head, enacting the easy severance of a word from its sovereign referent, he made the pun by blowing the head away, demonstrating thereby the fragility of all arbitrary sovereignty. By fancifully seizing on the blank counter of the head on a pot of porter and, in a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, allegorizing it as the head of the king, Thelwall showed that that head was only a blank counter as well, froth to be blown (not guillotined) away.

Jacobin rhetoric, in other words, is Jacobin politics. The word is an act—figuratively speaking—of course; but in its action the word displays the metaphoricity of political acts and agents that makes figurative speaking the exercise of political power. Thelwall's trope is Jacobin because it attacks the king in particular, the sovereign given in general, and, most importantly, because the politics of the pun acts underneath political philosophy, the supposed sovereignty of which is as much threatened by Thelwall's low but sharp wit as is the reigning monarch. Thelwall did not plan or propose. We do not know nor need to inquire what was on his mind. In truth Thelwall no more needed a head to enact his politics than the people need a king to supervise their civil life. Moreover, the act was fully historical, saturated as it was with contingency: a certain night, the right crowd, enough foam on the beer, the contiguity of a specific verbal formula with a particular physical movement, the presence of a capable critic; but its very contingency displayed

1. Philip Anthony Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1918), p. 115.

a powerful necessity: a politics evidently in the language itself, a politics threatening to monarchs, not only on account of a singular act but because the act leapt forth spontaneously from contingent circumstance. The act was non-teleological: it intended no end, not even a revolutionary upheaval. Instead the act re-marked a usurpation which had already occurred; the punning was possible only because the sovereign meaning of the word, like the sovereign referent of political language, had *already* been severed from its sign. Finally, the necessity of Thelwall's political act lay in its iterability, a toast that could be repeated in other taverns after other meetings of the LCS or wherever in England the local brew might be quaffed.

Naturally, the king and his minions sought to put a stop to all that. If Thelwall had a highly fanciful mind, the king had a very imaginative one. By means of the sedition acts and the organs of the state, the monarch attempted to dissolve and dissipate Thelwall's act, all Jacobin rhetoric, in order to recreate a sovereign unity. He did so on principle and with a philosophical propriety—by definition, for the king has only a political philosophy; as king he can have no politics. Sovereignty is a metaphysic, and the sedition laws, so ostensibly unjust, were a version of that *index expurgatorius* which Coleridge wished could be hung in the Halls of Parliament to halt all lawless language, a methodical extension, that is, of “the universal Laws, and pure IDEAS of Reason, [which] were given us . . . that by an energy of continued self-conquest we might establish a free and yet absolute government in our own spirits.”<sup>2</sup> (Need I explicitly substitute “nation” for “spirits,” or can the reader's fancy be relied on to play with the blank counter of the spirit, to blow away its foam and regard the intoxicating conquest of self preached by Coleridge, the political philosopher, as fit analogue and emblem for the conquest of the homeland prosecuted by those who ruled by metaphysical right?) That conquest achieved, there is established an absolute government where all is free except for John Thelwall's speech, as for Coleridge all is free under the absolute government in the spirit except the willful, Jacobin fancy.

Parable and moral have been a roundabout way of expressing my agreement with Professor Fischer's claim that “when Coleridge chooses metaphysics over politics, he is not choosing between evasion and power but between two kinds of power.” Although I do agree, my Coleridgean parable (no more than a mechanical redaction of Coleridge's attack on the Encyclopedists in *The Friend*) encourages me to press one step farther

2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, Vol. 4 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1969), I, 185.



and suggest that the choice of metaphysics *over* politics is a means of attaining power over politics by imposing an index that would stanch the free circulation of political power and allow the restoration of the severed head. The power of metaphysics is not overt, not a matter of a Jacobin toast in a public place. It derives from the possibilities inherent in strategic equivocation, which may be exemplified by the neatly Coleridgean equivocation in Professor Storch's assertion that "not only . . . does the imagination save politics (or the idea of politics) from self-destruction; but the converse is also true: a political philosophy gives substance and vitality to a theory of the imagination." In the first half of the assertion the equivocal relation between politics and the idea of politics is marked by the parentheses; in the converse the equivocation has apparently vanished; it is as if in this proposition about the imagination the imagination were secretly at work saving politics from self-destruction by subliming it into "political philosophy." In exemplifying the strategic design of a Coleridgean conversion Professor Storch's comment not only refers to a history but also exposes its own history. The strategy that equivocates politics and political philosophy and that imaginatively converts the former into the latter (a continuous act of power in disguise, powerful precisely because of its power to disguise itself) came into English history under the name of Coleridge.

What I mean by "Coleridge" is what Coleridge means by "Burke." Coleridge's descriptions of Burke tend to be self-portraits, and especially so in the second essay on "Government and Reason" in *The Friend*. His queer characterization of Burke, that "no man was ever more like himself," which seems to identify self-authenticity with self-simulation, is at once the best and the worst that one might say of Coleridge himself (*The Friend*, I, 188). And, certainly, despite Coleridge's espousal of the "straight line" in reasoning, even his most ardent apologists would expect to locate him there rarely, if at all. The "apparent versatility of the principle with the occasion" (*The Friend*, I, 188) for which Coleridge gently criticizes Burke is a better self-likeness, a more polite or more precise rendering of the apostasy with which Coleridge was charged by Hazlitt and others. Even that mild phrase, however, bears the equivocation which is at the heart of Coleridge's power; for in the arena of manifest political action an "apparent versatility" can only be an active and therefore real versatility. Only under the dispensation of the idea, of a political philosophy which claims to transcend dialectically all mere appearances, can the versatility of principles be considered "apparent." In the manner of dramatic irony dialectic gives us a knowledge superior to the actor, a knowledge that is a sovereign power. By subsuming the manner in which "Burke himself defended these half contradictions, on

the pretext of balancing the too much on the one side by a too much on the other” under the rubric of the “apparent,” Coleridge makes history by turning political vacillation into philosophical equivocation and exercises power over the dangerously mercurial, public Burke by making the partisan into a philosopher.

Hazlitt, who was not of Burke’s party, was able nevertheless to admire the great conservative for his politics, which he recognized as identical with the forcefulness of his tropes. Coleridge’s imaginative recreation of Burke is a sovereign rebuke for that overt forcefulness—a forcefulness of fancy all compact with Thelwall’s Jacobin rhetoric, because, as Coleridge says, it led Burke to compromise with “meanness.” That rebuke emerges as the philosophical expression of the greater power of strategic equivocation to evade compromise and enforce the law.

Coleridge’s inclusion, *mutatis mutandis*, of the *Political Lecture at Bristol, 1795* in the 1818 *The Friend* is a self-evident display of the apparent versatility of his principles with the occasion. *Coleridge* insists on the continuity of his principles; no one can doubt the change of occasion. Because he had always been writing political philosophy, however, Coleridge’s position originally was and always would be equivocal in relation to the political occasion, “tangential,” as Hazlitt would say, to the contingencies of history. As a political philosopher and *qua* political philosopher, Coleridge was always slightly away from a political position; never a Jacobin revolutionary or a Burkean compromiser, he was always technically an *apostate*. Coleridge’s career does show a continuity: once an apostate always an apostate. David Erdman has noted that “C[oleridge] may not have ‘changed or abandoned any of his fundamental political principles’ . . . he had changed their social application almost diametrically.”<sup>3</sup> That change, I maintain, results from a logic of equivocation proper to principles as principles; it reflects a historical logic which checks political action by a sovereign prohibition, sublimates politics into philosophy, and turns apostasy into a kind of power.

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3. Coleridge, *Essays on His Times*, ed. David V. Erdman, Vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1978), III, 388, n. 6.