

An Experiment in Honesty: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Friend

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CONSERVATIVES TODAY OWE A debt of gratitude to Russell Kirk for rightly seeing in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's mature thought a great deal more than the epithet "romantic poet" might suggest. Still, some may wonder how exactly Coleridge—notorious for his opium addiction, youthful enthusiasm for the French Revolution, intellectual fixation with German Romanticism, estranged family life, amorous obsessions, bohemian lifestyle, plagiarisms, and long-held interest in establishing a utopian community—found a place among Kirk's pantheon of conservative minds. To imagine the one-time wayfarer of the Lake District and author of the laudanum-inspired "Kubla Kahn" in Kirk's "august line of English Christian" thinkers—Richard Hooker, John Milton, the Cambridge Platonists, Edmund Burke, and John Henry Newman—seems, at first thought, rather unlikely.

One of the virtues of Kirk's account of Coleridge's conservatism is that he never becomes sidetracked by his subject's infamous biography. In an age of Benthamite industrialists and entrepreneurs, men of matter, Coleridge argued in *The Constitu-*

tion of the Church and State for the necessity of *ideas* in directing men's lives and in guiding the nation. For Kirk, Coleridge demonstrated that "religion and politics are inseparable, that the decay of one must produce the decay of the other."¹ Kirk praised Coleridge's spirited Platonic defense of church and state, a defense that separated the idea of both institutions from their worldly deficiencies. He also lauded Coleridge's notion of a national clerisy—a third estate that maintains and advances the cultivation of the people—as a means of safeguarding the masses from becoming alienated from the church. Like Burke's "ever-originating" social contract, Kirk's Coleridge understood the ideal of church and state as an ongoing agreement "between God and man and among several elements of society, a spiritual reality that can be discerned only by spiritual perception."² For Kirk, Coleridge is therefore the "real" philosopher of conservatism among the Romantic generation, the heir of Burke's politics of prescription who foreshadowed the careers of John Keble and John Henry Newman, and who later became a source of "inspiration for Disraeli and conservative reformers a century afterward."³

The strength of Kirk's assessment of Coleridge as a philosophical conservative, however, also portends its weak-

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ness. Kirk's "dreamer of Highgate" published *The Constitution of the Church and State* in 1829, four years before his death in 1834. Coleridge's *Lay Sermons*, which Kirk puts forward as Coleridge's first systematic expression of conservatism, was not published until 1818, nearly twenty years after Wordsworth and Coleridge had published their revolutionary *Lyrical Ballads*. By drawing solely from these two relatively late works, Kirk's portrait gives us a bifurcated and rather conventional picture of a graying Coleridge, one that suggests the august poet had merely grown conservative with age. In *The Conservative Mind*, we observe Coleridge's conservatism in retirement, but we never plumb the turbulent depths whence it sprang.

Missing from Kirk's portrait is the élan and genius of Coleridge's remarkable and often rebellious youth: his wide-eyed flirtations with Jacobinism, the Oriel College troublemaker, freethinking journalist, hapless opium addict, earnest revolutionary, avant-garde poet, and London gadfly. These are more than quirky biographical footnotes, for Coleridge possessed in abundance that admirable but vexing characteristic of living Socrates' ideal of a self-reflective life. Even from an early age he lived deliberately: thinking, talking, and writing obsessively about his motivations, his presuppositions, and his assumptions about his presuppositions. While his later religious and political thought may follow the line of Kirk's English Christian apologists, Coleridge's mind and pen vaulted effortlessly among the peaks of nearly every important subject of his day—literature, aesthetics, philosophy, church history, psychology, painting, landscape, architecture, and linguistics. His influences were many and certainly included the German thinkers—Lessing, Goethe, Kant, and Schiller—that Kirk too easily dismisses.⁴ One aspect of Coleridge's conservative mind is the story of how such a prolific, illuminate, and at

times radical thinker eventually defended and found consolation in what Kirk called "the ancient ideals of England." Coleridge's genius requires of us not only a consideration of its final resting place, but also an inquiry into its origin and development.

I

One place to observe Coleridge's nascent conservative thought is in his seldom read serial publication *The Friend*. Published sporadically in twenty-eight issues from June 1809 to March 1810, and later published as collected volumes in 1812 and 1818, *The Friend* "occupies a central position not only in Coleridge's life, but also in his thought."⁵ That *The Friend* went through three editions during Coleridge's lifetime, with each collected edition receiving careful editorial revision from its author, is an important detail. This suggests, in a way his later prose works do not, that the contents of *The Friend*, in addition to being popular, were manifestly important to the author. Indeed, Coleridge referred to *The Friend* as "the History of my own mind." He believed that portions of it "outweighed all his other works, verse and prose."⁶

Straddling his tempestuous youth and his relatively sober adulthood, the two ends of Coleridge's life come together in *The Friend*. As such, the work might best be considered a record of Coleridge's development into, in Kirk's phrase, a "philosophical conservative." Even a brief glance at *The Friend* illustrates that Coleridge's mature political thought, which always embodied an element of the poet's mercurial nature, derived not only from those thinkers he championed in his retirement, but also from those he came to reject. Rousseau, Priestley, and Godwin are as important on this account as the Cambridge Platonists, Hooker, and Burke. *The Friend* constitutes both in form and content a brand of conservatism that reflects the sweep of Coleridge's search-

ing and at times unruly intellect.

For conservatives today, taking stock of Coleridge's early thought is useful for at least two reasons. First, analysis of *The Friend* reveals a nineteenth-century example of a certain "type" of individual familiar to us throughout the twentieth century in a range of personages from Richard Weaver and Whittaker Chambers to James Burnham and Frank Meyer. He is the type of young man taken with liberal ideas in his youth, whose thought over the years matures, for various reasons, into some form of philosophical conservatism. For conservatives, the type represents the triumph of reason over emotion; to liberals, he is a "sellout" who has lost his heart (indeed many of Coleridge's friends saw him as such).

The Friend dispels both of these clichés, for Coleridge neither "sold out," nor was he intellectually disinterested in his youth. It was precisely his colossal intellect, rather than his meager experience, that attracted him to the Jacobin cause in his youth. His early enthusiasm, however, did not blind him to history or to the shortcomings of his political commitments when they were put to the test. His response to the devastating effects of the French experiment reveal him as a non-ideologue, as one who was ultimately committed to *understanding* the human condition rather than to *changing* it. For conservatives today, especially young conservatives, Coleridge's ascent to conservatism provides a powerful example of the "type" of liberal-turned-conservative who comes to reject his early political sympathies in pursuit of greater self-understanding.

Second, a glance back at Coleridge's early thought also illustrates for conservatives today a type of conservatism that springs from authentically humanistic concerns; Coleridge's conservatism is not, as many on the Left would say of conservatism in general, a guise masking petty self interest. That Coleridge's conserva-

tism came on the heels of his keenness for populism is important when considering his argument in the *Church and State* that the general interests of mankind are better served by an elite rather than by the tearing down of elites in the name of democracy. It is tempting—though ultimately not very persuasive, given the excruciatingly inane state of modern democratic culture—to write off such sentiments as "elitist." But conservatives (and liberals) today could do a lot worse than to consider Coleridge's proposition that the self-serving tendencies of democracies are best checked by a class not entirely given over to self-interest (even if one ultimately comes to reject this proposition). Coleridge had indeed rejected such a proposition in his youth; that he came to accept and to advocate this view in his later years is today compelling, and worthy of our attention.

II

Although the contents of *The Friend* may in a broad sense be considered "conservative," the work's occasion and sentiments were formed by Coleridge's early radicalism, his political and philosophical experimentalism, rather than the "ancient ideals of England." The poet's failed utopian community and his early support of the French Revolution provided the immediate backdrop against which *The Friend* was initially published. As such, *The Friend* might be thought of as an attempt by Coleridge to come to terms with these two seminal events in his life and in the life of his nation.

More than a decade prior to *The Friend*'s publication, Coleridge had met Robert Southey, a young poet who, like Coleridge, had found in the writings of Rousseau, Godwin, David Hartley, and Joseph Priestley, among others, both an argument for the unreasonableness of civilization and a blueprint for fixing it. Over the next year, the two men threw themselves into planning Pantisocracy: an

experimental and ideal community founded on human reason and directed toward human perfection. Predicated on the notion, later repudiated by Coleridge, that private property was the fundamental evil of mankind, members of the poets' ideal polity would hold land in common on the unspoiled banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. Here, the brotherhood of mankind would take lessons from the mild and didactic hand of nature, away from the tarnished rod of civilization. For months, Coleridge and Southey wrote letters back and forth hammering out the contours of their paper community.

But the two poets quarreled intractably over particulars: the status of women in the community, the number of servants, childhood education. Unable to lift their ideal society from the pages of their notebooks, Pantisocracy crumbled. Still, Coleridge's thoughts and ideas about Pantisocracy, as Richard Holmes has shown, are far from being a youthful aberration in his thinking; instead "they form the intellectual basis of many of the speculative questions which Coleridge carried into his major poetry and later critical prose."⁷

One of the immediate consequences of Pantisocracy's failure was another project ideologically linked to Coleridge's ideal community and to his initial support of the French Revolution. In the wake of Pantisocracy's collapse—nearly fifteen years before *The Friend* appeared—Coleridge began publishing *The Watchman*, a short-lived (ten issues) serial publication. In contrast to *The Friend*, *The Watchman* buzzed with matters of the day: parliamentary reports, poetry, and acerbic editorials directed at the enemies of "Freedom," as well as to "her Friends." *The Watchman*'s motto emblazoned on the masthead—"THAT ALL MAY KNOW THE TRUTH; AND THAT THE TRUTH MAY MAKE US FREE"—broadcast the radical spirit of the age: republicanism and a defense of

human reason set forth in the Baconian dictum "knowledge is power," enthusiastically cited by Coleridge in *The Watchman*'s prospectus. While the Revolution occupied but a portion of the serial's contents, the specter of the Revolution, even as Coleridge's enthusiasm for it began to diminish, is omnipresent. To understand one of Coleridge's motives in publishing *The Friend* years later—to vindicate his youthful enthusiasms—it is necessary to see the poet's Pantisocratic aspirations and his sympathy for the Revolution as two sides of the same coin.

In *The Watchman*, the French Revolution becomes Pantisocracy writ large. Robespierre, a man Coleridge thought great but ultimately misguided, would do for all men what he and Southey could not accomplish for themselves and twelve others on the banks of the Susquehanna River. For the impassioned editor of *The Watchman*, the French Revolution was, as so many of Coleridge's generation at first thought, a struggle not merely for individual liberty, but for the liberation of mankind. Distinct from the American Revolution, which Coleridge believed was fought on behalf of economic man, France fought on behalf of a more humane, and thereby freer, human nature. France fought for all men. Coleridge made his case in the pages of *The Watchman*:

When America emancipated herself from the oppressive capriciousness of her old and doting Foster-Mother, we beheld an instructive speculation on the probable *Loss and Gain* of unprotected and un tributary Independence; and considered the Congress as a respectable body of Tradesmen, deeply versed in the ledgers of Commerce, who well understood their own worldly concerns, and adventurously improved them. France presented a more interesting spectacle. Her great men with a profound philosophy investigated the interests common to all intellectual human beings, and legislated for the WORLD. The lovers of Mankind were every where fired and exalted

by their example: each heart proudly expatriated itself, and we heard with transport of the victories of Frenchmen, as the victories of Human Nature.⁸

Even as late as 1796, as the breakdown of the Revolution had become everywhere apparent, *The Watchman's* editor rationalized the French atrocities as the consequence of years of oppression rather than, as he would later argue, the moral and intellectual hubris of those who, by reason alone, would legislate for the world. In a caustic review of Edmund Burke's "Letter to a Noble Lord," Coleridge's less than convincing criticisms are those of a wistful youth, someone caught up in the spirit of the movement, rather than those of Kirk's self-reflective philosopher of Highgate: "In descanting on the excesses of the French, Mr. Burke has never chosen to examine what portion of them may be fairly attributed to the indignation and terror excited by the Combined Forces [Austria, Russia, Prussia, and England], and what portion ought to be considered as the natural effects of Despotism [aristocracy] and Superstition [the Catholic Church], so malignant and so long-continued."⁹ Such sentiments, among others, had opened Coleridge in his youth to the charge of Jacobinism: a charge he, at times, only half-heartedly denied.

By 1798, few could ignore that France's victories were neither won on behalf of mankind nor won for the sake of human liberty. In his well-known poem of recantation, "France: An Ode," Coleridge argues that France and her Revolution had, as Robert Sayre has surmised, not only lost "their utopian / millennial significance, but had actually become the enemy of the ideal—Freedom—under whose name they have masqueraded."¹⁰

As he would later contend in the *Biographia Literaria*, the French invasion of Switzerland had forced him to this conclusion. Yet it might be more precise

to say that France's excursion into Switzerland had forced Coleridge to investigate more fully the philosophical and moral failings both of the Revolution and of Pantisocracy, for such criticism had been an undercurrent in his public lectures and private letters during *The Watchman* years. *The Friend* would provide the poet a medium for exploring the animating principles of human behavior, society, and government in the aftermath of the failed Revolution.

Against *The Watchman's* enthusiasm, which was showing signs of letdown by the final issues, Coleridge would take care years later in *The Friend* to show that he had not abandoned his principles as he became disillusioned with the Revolution; he argued, rather, that the Revolution had abandoned its principles and, in doing so, one of its most thoughtful English advocates.

III

Unlike *The Watchman's* populism and focus on current affairs, Coleridge's latest fixation would not concern itself with politics, nor would it be addressed to a popular audience. Up in arms against the popular style of "plain good sense" composition and partisan journalism, Coleridge envisioned *The Friend* as neither "merely political" nor for the "Multitude." Instead, *The Friend* was "for those, who by Rank, or Fortune, or official Situation, or Talents and Habits of Reflection, are to influence the Multitude."¹¹ The author of *The Friend* intended to illuminate for his readership the first principles and fundamental doctrines that fortify political and popular opinion. Coleridge called this approach "fundamental instruction." *The Friend's* method and style would also eschew popular forms and would ultimately prove as singular and difficult as its author's intentions. Here, decades prior to the publication of *The Constitution of the Church and State*, Coleridge seems to be formulating a political-philosophical

sophical-literary magazine that in terms of content, form, and style would be intended for his clerisy—the third estate that would act as a prudent restraint on the leveling tendencies of democracies.

Like all his endeavors, literary or otherwise, Coleridge's plan for *The Friend* was grand, and he plunged in with headlong enthusiasm.

The Friend does not indeed exclude from his plan occasional interludes; and vacations of innocent entertainment and promiscuous information, but still in the main he proposes to himself the communication of such delight as rewards the march of Truth, rather than to collect flowers which diversify its track, in order to present them apart from the homely yet foodful or medicinale herbs, among which they have grown. To refer men's opinions to their absolute principles, and thence their feelings to the appropriate objects, and in their due degrees; and finally, to apply the principles thus ascertained, to the formation of steadfast convictions concerning the most important questions of Politics, Morality, and Religion—these are to be the objects and contents of this work.¹²

Many of Coleridge's supporters, long familiar with his mounting list of dead-end projects, viewed *The Friend* with skepticism. Dorothy Wordsworth considered Coleridge's latest crusade with a sober eye: the "mode of publication is not the proper one for matters so abstract...for who can expect that people whose daily thoughts are employed on the matters of business, and who read only for relaxation should be prepared for or even capable of serious thought when they take up a periodical paper, perhaps to read over in haste?"¹³ Yet this was precisely Coleridge's point. *The Friend* proposed to elevate readers, not crouch to their level.

Coleridge disdained that so many were consumed with popular literature at the expense of more serious writing, thinking, and self-reflection. The public's aversion to serious thought, Coleridge de-

clared in a letter to Samuel Purkis, was "the mother Evil of all the other Evils."¹⁴ As he would later argue in *The Constitution of the Church and State*, the life-blood of England depended upon a self-reflective and self-understanding literate class, a clerisy composed of clergymen, teachers, writers, and artists, to serve the interests of the nation rather than those of any one particular class. To this audience, Coleridge addressed *The Friend*. Still, to William Wordsworth, Coleridge's most severe critic, the plan seemed foolhardy. In a letter to Thomas Poole, Wordsworth was biting: "I give it to you as my deliberate opinion, formed upon proofs which have been strengthening for years, that he [Coleridge] neither will nor can execute anything of important benefit either to himself, his family or mankind."¹⁵

Coleridge was undeterred. After a myriad of publication delays that did little to put to rest his detractors' criticisms and his five hundred subscribers' worries, the first issue of *The Friend: A Literary, Moral, and Political Weekly Paper, Excluding Personal and Party Politics, and The Events of the Day*, finally appeared on June 1, 1809. Over the next nine months, *The Friend* roamed between intellectual severity, philosophical obscurity, and moral lightheartedness. Throughout *The Friend's* sporadic run Coleridge tried, especially in the initial numbers, to sustain his original plan of upholding "those truths and those merits which are founded in the nobler and permanent parts of our nature, against the caprices of fashion."¹⁶ In so doing, *The Friend* jolted the expectations of its first readers. Not only did some find *The Friend* hopelessly obscure, tangled throughout by esoteric digressions, irrelevant learning, and difficult prose, but several issues ended in the middle of things, with essays and footnotes broken off in mid-sentence. From week to week, readers never knew when the next issue would, if ever, appear.

William Hazlitt, a perennial Coleridge-

ean heckler, dismissed *The Friend* as a work “so obscure, that it has been supposed to be written in cypher, and that it is necessary to read it upwards and downwards, or backwards and forwards, as it happens, to make head or tail of it.”¹⁷ Undeterred, Coleridge prevailed upon his readers to become his “fellow laborers” in the establishment of principles and fundamental doctrine. “The primary facts essential to the intelligibility of my principles,” Coleridge pleaded with his audience, “I can prove to others only as far as I can prevail on them to retire *into themselves* and make their own minds the objects of their steadfast attention.”¹⁸

As England plodded toward democratic reforms, *The Friend* was Coleridge’s attempt to inspire a self-reflective class that, armed with greater self-knowledge, would act as a bulwark against unbridled self-interest. Yet to know one’s self required a degree of intellectual effort perhaps unfamiliar to Coleridge’s audience. The author fumed:

No real information can be conveyed, no important errors rectified, no widely injurious prejudices rooted up, without requiring some effort on the part of the reader. But the obstinate (and toward a contemporary Writer, the contemptuous) aversion to all intellectual effort is the mother evil of all which I had proposed to war against, the Queen Bee in the hive of our errors and misfortunes, both private and national. To solicit the attention of those, on whom these debilitating causes have acted to their full extent, would be no less absurd than to recommend exercise with the dumb bells, as the only mode of cure, to a patient paralytic in both arms.¹⁹

Some became Coleridge’s “fellow laborers,” and those who did discovered in *The Friend* what Richard Holmes has called “a pure expression of Coleridge’s wayward genius.”²⁰ Although literary antecedents might include Addison’s *Spectator* or Dr. Johnson’s *Rambler*, *The Friend*’s style, as Walter Jackson Bate has pointed

out, richly echoed seventeenth-century English sermons; and the content, more philosophical than literary, was pure Coleridge—“almost calculated to frighten off readers.”²¹ By emulating in *The Friend* the prose style of a previous aristocratic age, Coleridge warns, in the very manner of his words, against the excesses, whether literary or political, associated with his own increasingly democratic age, especially those related to the French experiment.

Yet, one does not find in *The Friend* a systematic expression of the author’s conservatism, as Russell Kirk might have known. Indeed, the contents of *The Friend* would at first appear to belie any system. The essays travel the distance between Burke’s notion of an organic community on one hand to the question of apparitions and spirits—what Coleridge called his “Ghost-Theory”—on the other. He describes his early ideas for establishing a utopian community in one number and in another the failings of England’s political parties. Threaded throughout this profoundly original miscellany one does find, however, an ardent critique of radicalism and a defense of tradition that is commensurate with Coleridge’s literary talents. In *The Friend*’s varied essays one also witnesses the activist poet struggling to anchor his airy and youthful idealism in the weighty matter of human convention and custom.

What is “systematic” about *The Friend* is the author’s dissatisfaction with the apparent shallowness of the age in which he lived, as well as his desire to defend publicly his philosophical consistency in matters of personal morality, ethics, and politics. In so doing, Coleridge articulates in *The Friend* a mode of self-reflective conservative thought that provides an important meditation for conservatives today on the limits and excesses of democratic sentiments. Yet to apprehend Coleridge’s meaning requires patience, for throughout *The Friend* po-

litical insight comes on the heels of personal experience, which is conveyed through a seemingly unending yarn of digressions.

IV

Wanting especially to vindicate himself against prior charges of Jacobinism (as well as subsequent accusations of apostasy), Coleridge addresses in several issues of *The Friend* his earlier utopian and revolutionary ardor. Conscious of his critics' allegations, he draws a correlation between Pantisocracy and his support for the French Revolution and argues that, although he had come to reject them in kind, his eagerness for both was indispensable to his intellectual and moral development. In an issue of *The Friend* entitled "Enthusiasm for an Ideal World," Coleridge writes that as a young man, he had hoped to achieve through religion and a small company of chosen individuals, away from the great poverty and sickness of cities, that which no government or nation could provide. When this failed, his hopes, like those of so many others, were transported "to the wide expanse of national interests, which then seemed fermenting in the French Republic as in the main outlet and chief crater of the revolutionary torrents."²²

In recalling his zeal, Coleridge gives voice—his is perhaps the very first—to that phenomenon which later generations would come to know as the *fellow traveler*: "But oh! There were thousands as young and as innocent as myself who, not like me, sheltered in the tranquil nook or inland cove of a particular fantasy, were driven along with the general current!"²³ This is less a rationalization than it is a self-realization, an acknowledgement of the potent allure of ideology, especially upon those who possess an inquiring intellect.

Even as Coleridge soberly recollects his youthful aspirations as "Strange fancies! And as vain as strange," the self-searching poet does not reject outright

his keenness for them, for he sees both as necessary influences on his mature thought:

[T]he intense interest and impassioned zeal, which called forth and strained every faculty of my intellect for the organization and defense of this scheme [Pantisocracy], I owe much of what I at present possess, my clearest insight into the nature of individual man, and my most comprehensive views of his social relations, of the true uses of trade and commerce, and how far the *wealth* and relative *power* of nations promote and impede their *welfare* and inherent *strength*.²⁴

There is something manifestly important, Coleridge implies, about a philosophically serious young mind seizing upon an idea, even if it finally proves to be wrongheaded, and seeing it through to its logical outcome. Aware of the obvious limitations to such sentiment, Coleridge argues that even misguided intellectual seriousness may produce the salutary effect of saving one from traveling among the "crowd of less imaginative malcontents, through the dark lanes and foul bye roads of ordinary fanaticism."²⁵

His argument here is much more than personal vindication. One of Coleridge's primary objects of criticism in *The Friend* is the habit of mind that would reduce the world to abstract principles divorced from the manifold complexity of human experience. Typical of *The Friend's* method, Coleridge's personal anecdote, his self-analysis and vindication, becomes a vehicle for broader social and political analysis. His personal failings with respect to his misguided faith in utopianism and the new age of man become analogues for the failings of the Jacobins on the one hand and the old regime on the other. "[L]et it be remembered, by both parties, and indeed by controversialists on all subjects," Coleridge writes, "that every speculative error which boasts a multitude of advocates, has its *golden* as well as its dark side, that there is always some Truth connected with it, the exclusive attention to which

has misguided the Understanding, some moral beauty which has given it charms for the heart.”²⁶ The failings of both parties, what Coleridge called the “The Errors of Party Spirit: or Extremes Meet,” forms one of the central and unifying principles of *The Friend*.

While Coleridge recognized the threat of extremism in the increasing polarization of English politics, he also argued that such perversion of moral beauty and lack of understanding characterized the “party spirit” that ignited and later fanned the conflagrations of the Revolution. Those like Thomas Paine who reduced our “ancestors’ noble attainment” of legislative prudence to mere common sense, Coleridge insisted, exemplified the error of the Republican fervor: the elevation of abstract rights above all others and independent of human experience. Throughout *The Friend*, Paine receives, like no other, Coleridge’s ire:

All the positive Institutions and Regulations, which the prudence of our ancestors provided, are declared to be erroneous or interested perversions of the natural relations of man; and the whole is delivered over to the faculty, which all men possess equally, i.e., the common sense or universal Reason.... To be a Musician, an Orator, a Painter, a Poet, an Architect, or even to be a good Mechanist, presupposes Genius; to be an excellent Artisan or Mechanic, requires more than an average degree of Talent; but to be a Legislator requires nothing but common Sense.²⁷

Yet, if the Jacobins “ran wild with the Rights of Man, and the abstract sovereignty of the people, their antagonists flew off as extravagantly from the sober good sense of our forefathers, and idolized as mere an abstraction in the Rights of Sovereigns.... They defended the exemptions and privileges of all privileged orders on the presumption of their inalienable right to them, however inexpedient they might have been found, as universally and as abstractly as if these

privileges had been decreed by the Supreme Wisdom.” Even as Coleridge came to accept and defend a Burkean view of the French Revolution, he argued throughout that Burke had gone too far in defending aristocratic privilege. By attending solely to a single insight, both parties, in Coleridge’s mind, exemplified the failures of party and partisan spirit that were growing increasingly apparent in his England.

Typical of Coleridge’s mature thought—as well as his position years later in *The Constitution of the Church and State*—he finally offers in *The Friend* his retrospective judgment on the Revolution: “The most prudent, as well as the most honest mode of defending the existing arrangements, would have been, to have candidly admitted what could not with truth be denied, and then to have shewn that, though the things complained of were evils, they were necessary evils; or if they were *removeable*, yet that the consequences of the *heroic* medicines recommended by the Revolutionaries would be far more dreadful than the disease.” A society is far better off with an existing imperfect social order, Coleridge argues, than the promise of a future perfect society. Here Coleridge has come full circle since *The Watchman*.

His task in the coming decades would be to articulate a means of preserving England’s existing social order, blemishes and all, in the face of ever-leveling democratic reforms. As Kirk has shown, this was Coleridge’s task in *The Constitution of the Church and State*; but it was an effort that came only after Coleridge had plumbed his own revolutionary depths. That the poet had come to this position only after having been personally committed to both utopianism and the French Revolution reinforces the notion that the byway that transported Coleridge to England’s “ancient ideals” ran through Pantisocracy and the French Revolution. Only by rejecting the promise of the lat-

ter two had he come to accept the durable reality of the former.

V

Yet, *The Friend* is less a repudiation of his early radicalism—Hazlitt’s persistent charge of apostasy is overblown—than it is a vindication of his principles: principles that at times seemed contradictory to a world that, in Coleridge’s mind, favored political conformity over philosophical consistency. To those who view the world solely from the perspective of political partisanship, Coleridge appears hypocritical, turning his back in *The Friend* on his utopian longings and the French Revolution, among other things. More astute readers of *The Friend* discover that Coleridge’s politics are intimately entwined with his persistent self-analysis and his experience of the world. Far from exposing its author’s alleged hypocrisy, *The Friend* reveals his authenticity, his willingness to accept and defend the necessity of continuity and tradition in

directing the lives of men, even as the better part of his youth was spent in denying such principles.

Rather than a systematic defense of conservatism, what lies at the heart of *The Friend* is a project perhaps even more profoundly conservative: Coleridge’s aspiration for self-knowledge and self-understanding—the Delphic admonition to know one’s self. Coleridge considered those who do not take full account of their lives as only “fragments” of selves: unacquainted with their past and thus dead to their future, such men live in but half their being, “self-mutilated, self-paralysed.”²⁸ Precisely this capacity—the ability for authentic self-reflection—is for Coleridge the quality that sets human beings apart from the rest of creation. While Coleridge at times referred to *The Friend* as an experiment in amusement and instruction, the undercurrent of self-examination throughout the work reveals it rather as a persistent search for self-knowledge: an experiment in honesty.

1. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C., 1986), 139. 2. *Ibid.*, 141. 3. *Ibid.*, 146. 4. Kirk’s estimation of the German influence on Coleridge must be squared, for example, with Irving Babbitt’s lament that “Coleridge probably did more than any other person, except possibly Carlyle, to instill into the English and Americans that exaggerated and superstitious regard for things German as compared with things French which in one form or another has persisted from that day to this.” *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C., 1986), reprint, 144. 5. Barbara E. Rooke, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, 1969), Vol. 4, xxxv. 6. *Ibid.*, lxxxv-lxxxvi. 7. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Vi-*

sions: 1772-1804 (New York, 1990), 82. 8. *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, 2 vols. (London, 1970), Vol. 1, 269. 9. *Ibid.*, 33. 10. Robert Sayre, “The Young Coleridge: Romantic Utopianism and the French Revolution,” *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 28 (Fall 1989), 403. 11. Rooke, xxxvi. 12. *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke, 2 vols. (London, 1969), 16. 13. Cited in Rooke, liv. 14. Rooke, lxii. 15. Cited in Rooke, lii. 16. See facsimile of Coleridge’s prospectus for *The Friend* in Rooke. 17. Cited in Rooke, lxxx. 18. *The Friend*, 21. 19. *Ibid.*, 22. 20. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections: 1804-1834* (New York, 1999), 165. 21. Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (London, 1968), 122. 22. *The Friend*, 225. 23. *Ibid.*, 224. 24. *Ibid.* 25. *Ibid.* 26. *Ibid.*, 227. 27. *Ibid.*, 213. 28. *Ibid.*, 41.