

**S T COLERIDGE: *Conciones ad Populum*, 1795.
(Woodstock Books, Spelsbury, Oxford. July 1992.)**

Reviewed by Reggie Watters

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Two models for the ordinary citizen's response in a time of crisis. First, radical young Coleridge in the unrest of 1795:

"When the Wind is fair and the Planks of the Vessel sound, we may safely trust every thing to the management of professional Mariners: in a Tempest and on board a crazy Bark, all must contribute their Quota of Exertion." *Conciones ad Populum*.

Second, conservative old Shakespeare in the uneasy 1610's :

"You mar our labour; keep your cabins: you do assist the storm." *The Tempest* I,i.

Twenty-three year old Coleridge's metaphor looks hopelessly lacking in any grasp of seamanlike practicalities, whereas Shakespeare's Boatswain speaks with the authentic professional's voice. But today, slithering along a sloping deck in our own buffeted times of crisis, who hasn't come to distrust the professional's voice? Perhaps young Coleridge's less sea-wise metaphor carries now the greater resonance? It was conceived in a white-hot democratic zeal, a political idealism in tune with Thelwall's better-known words: "You must have your knowledge not as the parrot has his by rote; but from the labour of your own minds, from the feelings and convictions of your own hearts." We can scarcely afford nowadays to dismiss patronisingly these youthful notions as once we did, for we, too, find ourselves

gazing into waters as muddied: " as if all the Parrots in the House of Commons had been washing their consciences therein".

Such musings are prompted by *Woodstock Books'* timely reprint of *Conciones ad Populum* 1795 with its important additional passages on the Girondists,(a convenient programme-note for Coleridge and Southey's *Fall of Robespierre*, also reprinted in this useful series). The range of titles chosen and introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth for *Revolution & Romanticism* 1789-1834 may have been aimed primarily ,at academic libraries, but certainly the series' catalogue makes a helpful short list of titles for any interested amateur of the period, who might well get hold of Jonathan Wordsworth's general introduction and index to the fifty chosen books entitled *Ancestral Voices* and work on from there. It is helpful, in this period of academic obscurantism, to have scholarly knowledge so readily made accessible to the general reader, and there are certainly some titles, at least, which anyone who is haunted by those potent literary ghosts may find difficult to resist. Where else, for example, could you hope to find your own copy of *Edmund Oliver* or of the delightfully-derivative Coleridgean "Conversation Poem" that John Thelwall wrote at Bridgwater on his birthday in July 1797, and published in his *Poems written chiefly in Retirement* (1801)?

Reading well-known texts in facsimile editions can also be a revelation. Place S.T.C.'s two publications of 1798 side by side: the anonymous *Lyrical Ballads*, in its unambitious provincial imprint, and the handsomely slim quarto *Fear in Solitude/France: an Ode/Frost at Midnight*, issued under the poet's name by the leading London radical publisher of the day. Perhaps that suggests the relative importance Coleridge himself may have placed upon the two books; a point of which critics, even today, take too little account.

Academic league tables make, at best, controversial measurements of stature. But, judged by the number of his titles on the *Woodstock* scale, Coleridge is the Giant among English Romantics , outstripping even his giant, Wordsworth! Anything which helps refocus attention on S.T.C.'s central role in the period deserves commending. So, at least two cheers for *Woodstock Books*! And why not one more, for letting us hear again young Coleridge as Tom Poole heard him? A voice which (to. end with yet another inept metaphor) after two centuries still carries the dew on it:

"Watch ye! Stand fast in the principles of which ye have been convinced! Quit yourselves like men! Be strong! Yet let all things be done in the spirit of Love.°

Reggie Watters