

COLERIDGE AND JOHN THELWALL;
MEDICAL SCIENCE, POLITICS, AND POETRY.

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John Thelwall (1764—1834) is best remembered now for his courageous activities as a political lecturer and reformist in the turbulent years 1793-5. A leader of the London Corresponding Society, he was arrested with other prominent reformists in May 1794, imprisoned for six months, then tried for high treason and acquitted. His escape from this capital charge made him a little more circumspect about his radical allegiances, but not all that much. Although he was no longer formally aligned with the Corresponding Society, he addressed the mass-meetings of London reformists in October and December 1795 and subsequently defied the two ‘Gagging Acts’ (which had been contrived to silence him) by attempting ‘to revive discussion, under the title of Lectures on Classical History’ on a tour of East Anglia in 1796-7.^[1] He broke-off his lectures because of violent intimidation, and, in July 1797, following a walking-tour through Hampshire, Wiltshire and Somerset, he arrived at Nether Stowey. Thelwall had been corresponding with Coleridge since April 1796, but this visit to Stowey was his first meeting with ‘Samuel’ and with the Wordsworths—‘Allfoxden’s musing tenant, and the maid / Of ardent eye’ (‘Lines Written at Bridgewater’).^[2]

I’ll return to Thelwall and the poets later on. My immediate purpose here is to look into aspects of Thelwall’s life other than his politics and to suggest that, if he did not share Coleridge’s genius, he nevertheless possessed something of Coleridge’s ‘myriad—mindedness’: a diversity of intellectual pursuits enabling us to place Thelwall’s radical career in a broader cultural perspective than has been appreciated

hitherto. Among „Thelwall’s interests were medicine and anatomy, science(or ‘natural philosophy’), journalism, poetry, farming, elocution and speech-therapy. In this impressive range of concerns, we may find reason enough for Coleridge’s ‘enthusiastic espousal of Thelwall’s friendship’ in 1796. ^[3] Thelwall emerges most fully as representative figure of ‘an age of revolutions’ not just in his commitment

to social-political changes, but in the variety of ways through which he sought intellectual justification for that cause and, later, some means to come to terms with its failure.

Thelwall and the ‘Animal Vitality’ Debate.

At the start of the revolutionary decade, 1791-3, Thelwall could be found among the students attending the anatomical and medical lectures delivered at Guy’s Hospital by the celebrated surgeons Henry Cline, Astley Cooper, William Babington, and John Hunter. [4] Thelwall may have been projecting a medical career at this time — like another young radical at Balliol College, Oxford, Robert Southey. [5] It is notable that Cline and Cooper were democrats, and strong supporters of the French Revolution. Indeed during summer 1792 Cooper, like Wordsworth, had visited France, ‘witnessing the great political struggle which was then rife in Paris’ and hearing Brissot, Danton, Marat and Robespierre speak in the National Assembly. [6] As is well known, at this time advanced medical science was closely bound-up with revolutionary principles and ideas of human progress (a conjunction that Mary Shelley would later explore with monstrous irony in *Frankenstein*). Thelwall had long been friendly with Cline and Cooper, and his participation in these medico-political circles is an important context for his emergence as a popular orator in 1793— and for the radical milieu of contemporary medicine more generally. [7] And as we shall see, this also has a bearing upon Thelwall’s subsequent relation to Wordsworth’s poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* 1798.

The Physical Society at Guy’s Hospital, founded in 1771, was a distinguished group that met for lectures on and discussion of advanced medical and philosophical issues. The Society’s manuscript records have survived, showing that Thelwall was proposed for membership on 29 October 1791, and elected a week later. During 1792-3 Thelwall was ‘one of the most conspicuous members’ of the Society, dividing his time between scientific interests and political commitments in the cause of reform. On 19 January 1792, for example, Thelwall apologised to the Society for his absence from a lecture, ‘stating that he was obliged to attend a Meeting of the Society of the Friends of the Liberty of the Press’. One year later, the Physical Society’s minutes record a ‘Public Meeting’ at the Theatre, Guy’s Hospital, 26 January 1793, at which ‘Mr Thelwall read his Essay on Vitality which was in part discussed’. The paper was a great success. Discussion of it was resumed at five subsequent meetings of the Physical Society, and on 2 March 1793 the Society communicated a ‘Letter of Thanks’ to the lecturer - ‘the first’, as

Thelwall's widow recalled, 'that was ever voted to any member on such an occasion'. [8]

Thelwall published his lectures as *An Essay Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality...in which Several of the Opinions of the Celebrated John Hunter are Examined and Controverted* - a title which is sufficient to indicate the nature of the controversy Thelwall had entered. His purpose was to discriminate between 'a vital principle, and the state of vitality' in order to refute Hunter's 'misleading' theory 'of the Vital principle being resident in the blood'. [9] Pointing out that 'many of the most imperfect animals have no blood', Thelwall opened the broader question of philosophical materialism that was at issue:

Whether life itself is to be considered as a distinct and positive essence, or, simply, as the result of a particular harmony and correspondence of the whole, or aggregate combination, preserved and acted upon by a particular stimulus? [10]

Is life to be identified with the separate existence of soul or spirit?— or is it the result of material organisation, responding to 'the stimuli necessary for the production and sustainment of Life...absorbed and properly diffused through the organized frame'? [11] Arguing that 'Spirit, however refined, must still be material' (though 'our senses have never yet been capable of taking cognizance of it') Thelwall speculates on the nature of the 'stimulus' necessary to the production of 'Vital Action':

But what is this something-this vivifying principle? - Is it atmospheric air itself? - Certainly not. The coats of the arteries, and the membranous linings of the cells of the lungs, forbid the access of such an element; besides, it has been proved by experiment, that in the arteries of the living body there is no air. Something, however, it must be, that is contained in the atmosphere, and something of a powerful and exquisitely subtile nature.

Here Thelwall's appeal to empirical 'experiment' underlines the materialistic assumptions of his thinking, as does the final paragraph of his Essay in which he identifies the mysterious 'vivifying principle':

If, then, we look upon the component parts of our atmosphere, what can we discover so competent to the task - so subtle, so powerful, so nearly approaching to that idea of an ethereal medium, which some philosophers have supposed necessary to complete the chain of connection between the divine immortal essence, and the dull inertia of created matter, as the electrical fluid?-that principle, whose presence, under such a variety of forms, is constantly presenting itself to the researches of the philosopher!- whose agency, in so many of the phenomena of Nature, we are daily detecting! and which, perhaps, will one time be discovered to be the real principle by which all heat and action are originally generated and maintained! [\[12\]](#)

Years after Thelwall's death, his widow remembered that it had been 'common' in the 1790's 'to charge every active member belonging to political Societies with atheism'. *An Essay Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality* shows that in Thelwall's case there was some reason for the charge, in that he sought to reconcile 'divine immortal essence' and 'created matter' as a 'principle' or 'phenomenon' of Nature.

But he was not alone in this respect. At various times Benjamin Franklin, Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Priestley and other natural philosophers of the later eighteenth century had identified the 'vital principle' of the material universe with 'the all-pervading aethereal electrical fluid...seen in the depths and heights of nature'. [\[13\]](#) Furthermore, the discovery of electricity afforded empirical evidence that knowledge was progressive, and that human beings might be perfectible — a philosophical justification, in other words, of Thelwall's political agenda as a reformist. But *An Essay* leads us in other directions too, towards the poetry written by Coleridge and Wordsworth in the period 1794-8.

In a letter to Thelwall, 31 December 1796, Coleridge discusses the principle of life in some detail mentioning various competing theories of the day. He quotes from his 'favorite' among his own poems, 'Effusion XXXV' (*The Eolian Harp*),

And what if all of animated Nature

Be but organic harps diversely fram'd

That tremble into *thought* as o'er them sweeps

Plastic and vast &c -

—by way of illustrating the neoplatonic theory of life—‘a plastic immaterial Nature’- advocated by Alexander Monro. [\[14\]](#) Beyond their mutual concern for political reform in the mid—1790s, Thelwall and Coleridge shared an interest in the vitalist debate: ‘I have written all this not to expose my ignorance’, Coleridge says, ‘but to shew you, that I want to see your Essay on Animal Vitality’ (*Letters*, i.295). Perhaps the *Essay* was included in the ‘parcel’ for which Coleridge thanked Thelwall in his letter of 6 February 1797 (*Letters*, i.305). This would go some way towards explaining the curious similarities, hitherto (so far as I know) unremarked, between Thelwall’s pamphlet and the poem which concludes *Lyrical Ballads* 1798: *Tintern Abbey*.

Having recently returned from France, Wordsworth was certainly in London on the day that Thelwall presented his lecture to the Physical Society, 26 January 1793 (just three days after the lecture, 29 January, Wordsworth’s poems *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* were published). Although Wordsworth most likely knew of Thelwall by then, or very shortly afterwards, it is unlikely that he joined the audience at Guy’s Hospital on that occasion. But five years later he may well have glanced at a copy of the *Essay* in Coleridge’s cottage at Nether Stowey, reading Thelwall’s speculations on the ‘vital principle’ as ‘a something’ collected by the blood ‘in its passage through the Lungs’:

But what is this something - this vivifying principle?— is it atmospheric air itself?... Something, however, it must be, that is contained in the atmosphere, and something of a powerful and exquisitely subtile nature.

Thelwall, as we’ve seen, opted for electricity as the powerful ‘something’ that generates life. There is no ‘electrical fluid’ in Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, although the poem is receptive to the enlivening force of subtle influences ‘Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart’. Rather than murderously dissecting the ‘principle’ of that sensation (like Thelwall and the Physical Society discussing topics such as the body’s nutritive power, specific heat, the vascular system, and ‘membranous linings’), Wordsworth’s poem suggests how the intuitive processes of feeling, memory, imagination may lead us beyond the material limitations of physical life,

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(44-50)

Evocative rather than analytic, Wordsworth's poem tells of a visionary access to 'the divine immortal essence' about which Thelwall had speculated in his lecture. 'What is this something-this vivifying principle?', Thelwall had asked in 1793; Wordsworth's response, five years later, comes as a sublime affirmation of spiritual existence:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

The lines are very well-known, and often cited as Wordsworth's grandest evocation of the 'One Life' - an idea just as frequently canvassed in terms of Wordsworth's relation to Coleridge's philosophical and religious thought. Thelwall's *Essay* opens a new perspective on the poem, however, such that some of Wordsworth's verses read as if they were a recollection of and response to the concluding paragraphs of the pamphlet. Thelwall had marshalled contemporary scientific and medical knowledge towards a rational, materialist definition of vitality as 'a something ... whose agency, in so many of the phenomena of Nature, we are daily detecting!' Wordsworth gathers from his own experience of the 'phenomena of Nature' an awesome sense of omnipresence - 'something far more deeply interfused', 'A motion and a spirit' - restoring to the 'vitalist debate' the spiritual power banished in the closing pages of Thelwall's *Essay*.

The verbal echoes in *Tintern Abbey* are intriguing, although the question of whether or not Wordsworth was acquainted with *An Essay* is ultimately not very important. What does matter, I think, is the relation of essay and poem to the politics of the day. I've already suggested how the materialist arguments of Thelwall's lecture might be used to vindicate his progressive view of human society, a point that is taken up in details in the *Life of Sir Astley Cooper*:

[Thelwall] never intended to follow medicine as a profession; his object, therefore, in attending these lectures, was probably merely to accumulate information to substantiate his peculiar tenets of materialism, to which, by an ill-directed mind, the study of physiology and anatomy might easily be rendered subservient. [\[15\]](#)

Given Thelwall's intellectual commitment to philosophical materialism, his idea of the French Revolution as 'the triumph of reason' might equally well have described his view of contemporary scientific and medical progress. [\[16\]](#) Indeed, in the 'Preface' to the second volume of the *Tribune* Thelwall points to the rational principles linking his political and scientific interests as a lecturer:

what can be so important as to generalise, by the most expeditious means, those maxims and principles by which the science of politics can be rendered most subservient to its great end- the interest and happiness of the whole?

-an argument that William Godwin accepted, but swiftly turned back upon Thelwall in a criticism of all forms of public lecturing:

It is not, for the most part, in crowded audiences, that truth is successfully investigated, and the principles of science luminously conceived. But it is not difficult to pronounce whether the political lectures that are likely to be delivered by an impatient and headlong reformer, are entitled to approbation. [\[17\]](#)

Godwin was writing after the ‘Gagging Acts’ had passed into law, at a period when Thelwall - and the reform movement more generally - had been forced into retreat. It was, arguably, the same forces of political repression and consequent disillusion that encouraged Wordsworth’s turn towards poetry from 1795 onwards. In place of the rational progressive politics of former years, Wordsworth reaffirmed the vitality of the human heart:

sensations sweet,

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,

And passing even into my purer mind

With tranquil restoration: - feelings too

Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,

As may have had no trivial influence

On that best portion of a good man’s life;

His little, nameless, unremembered acts

Of kindness and of love.

As I've argued elsewhere, in *Tintern Abbey* 'kindness' focuses the vital principle of nature as a power subtly conducive to personal and social regeneration. [18] Wordsworth 'sees into the life of things', as Thelwall's Essay had formerly endeavoured to do, in order to discover a basis for hope in the disappointed, post-revolutionary world. At the time Wordsworth was composing his poem in July 1798, Thelwall was also dedicating himself to a career on the Coleridgean and Wordsworthian pattern - that of a writer living in retirement.

Poems on Various Subjects: Thelwall's Poetic Career

Throughout his life Thelwall wrote poems, and published them as contributions to magazines and periodicals, and in his own collections of poems. In 1787 he published the first of two projected volumes of *Poems on Various Subjects* (a title later adopted by Coleridge for his 1796 collection). Following his imprisonment, trial, and acquittal, he printed his *Poems Written in a Close Confinement in the Tower and Newgate*, which contained his sonnet 'The Cell', dated 24 October 1794 and written just before the treason trials began at the Old Bailey:

Within the Dungeon's noxious gloom

The Patriot still, with dauntless breast,

The cheerful aspect can assume –

And smile- in conscious Virtue blest!

The damp foul floor, the ragged wall,

And shattered window, grated high;

The trembling Ruffian may appal,

Whose thoughts no sweet resource supply.

But he, unaw'd by guilty fears,
(To Freedom and his Country true)
Who o'er a race of well—spent years
Can cast the retrospective view,
Looks inward to his heart, and sees
The objects that must ever please.

The poem is slight and conventional (as Thelwall himself admitted) [\[19\]](#) , and it has obvious affinities with Coleridge's *The Dungeon* and Wordsworth's *Convict*, in that each poem explores the psychological effects of imprisonment, and the inner resources of memory and imagination which may alleviate 'the Dungeon's noxious gloom'. All three poems represent the liberal, whig tradition that had also informed William Cowper's account in *The Task* of 'the most forlorn of human kind' incarcerated in the Bastille,

Immured though unacused, condemn'd untried,
Cruelly spared, and hopeless of escape

(V.398—9)

—Indeed, Southey's edition of Cowper's *Life and Works* glossed Cowper's Bastille passage with a footnote quotation from Coleridge's *Dungeon*. [\[20\]](#) Perhaps one is also justified in relating the 'retrospective view' in Thelwall's poem with the (more subtle and complex) memorial poetry written by Coleridge and Wordsworth in the years of political defeat and isolation after 1796, for example *This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison*, *Frost at Midnight* and *Tintern Abbey*. At moments of solitude and extremity each poet sought an ideal release through recourse to 'objects that must ever please' - a gesture of imaginative vitality and liberty which Thelwall had identified with (persecuted) patriotic virtue.

Some years later, in his sonnet 'Nuns Fret not at their Convent's Narrow Room', Wordsworth further develops the (traditional) analogy between the 'cell' and the formal limitations of the sonnet. Embracing the 'sweet resource' of imagination that had comforted Thelwall during his imprisonment, Wordsworth nevertheless dooms himself to the formal 'prison' of the sonnet as a desirable limitation. Verbal associations carried-over from the 1790s identify Wordsworth's generic choice as an ideological revolution, construing 'too much liberty' as oppression when compared with the 'solace' of deliberate and welcome self-disclosure. The sonnet has some charm, but it already announces the subservient imagination of the *Ode to Duty*, which 'supplicates for controul' as a 'Bondman':

Me this unchartered freedom tires;

I feel the weight of chance desires:

My hopes no more must change their name,

I long for a repose which ever is the same.

(37-40)

This inertia of spirit indicates the distance of *Ode to Duty* from the more vital optimism of *Tintern Abbey*, a poem which - at a period of 'dereliction and dismay' - had nevertheless affirmed a 'dare to hope' for the future. *Tintern Abbey* was composed about 13 July 1798, almost exactly one year after Thelwall's visit to Nether Stowey - a moment when he had contemplated settling in the village and devoting himself to a life of farming, poetry and philosophising. Coleridge moved swiftly to frustrate Thelwall's plans in this respect, warning him that 'even riots & dangerous riots might be the consequence' (*Letters*, i . 343-4).

As a result Thelwall eventually settled on a farm at Llyswen, on the banks of the River Wye. His 'Lines, Written at Bridgewater' is dated to 27 July 1797, just after his visit to Stowey, and the poem indicates how the idea of a rural settlement (at Stowey or in South Wales) was important to him for reformulating his political ideals:

my soul

Is sick of public turmoil - ah, most sick
Of the vain effort to redeem a Race
Enslav'd, because degenerate; lost to Hope,
Because to Virtue lost - wrapp'd up in Self,
In sordid avarice, luxurious pomp,
And profligate intemperance - a race
Fierce without courage; abject, and yet proud;
And most licentious, tho' most far from free.
Ah! let me then, far from the strifeful scenes
Of public life (where Reason's warning voice
Is heard no longer, and the trump of Truth
Who blows but wakes The Ruffian Crew of Power
To deeds of maddest anarchy and blood)
Ah! let me, far in some sequester'd dell,
Build my low cot; most happy might it prove,
My Samuel! near to thine, that I might oft
Share thy sweet converse, best-belov'd of friends!
Long-lov'd ere known: for *kindred sympathies*
Link'd, tho far distant, our *congenial souls*.
Ah! 'twould be sweet, beneath the neighb'ring thatch,
In *philosophic amity* to dwell,
Inditing moral verse, or tale, or theme,
Gay or instructive; and it would be sweet,
With *kindly interchange* of *mutual aid*,

To delve our little garden plots, the while
Sweet converse flow'd, suspending oft the arm
And half-driven spade, while, eager, one propounds,
And listens one, weighing each pregnant word,
And pondering fit reply, that may untwist
The knotty point- perchance, of import high-
Of Moral Truth, of Causes Infinite,
Creating Power! or Uncreated Worlds
Eternal and uncaus'd! or whatsoe'er,
Of Metaphysic, or of Ethic lore,
The mind, with curious subtilty, pursues
—Agreeing, or dissenting, sweet alike,
When wisdom, and not victory, the end.
And t'would be sweet, my Samuel, ah! most sweet
To see our little infants stretch their limbs
In gambols unrestrain'd, and early learn
Practical love, and, Wisdom's noblest lore,
Fraternal kindness; while rosiest health,
Bloom'd on their sun—burnt cheeks. And 'twould be sweet,
When what to toil was due, to study what,
And literary effort, had been paid,
Alternate, in each other's bower to sit,
In summer's genial season; or, when, bleak,
The wintry blast had stripp'd the leafy shade,

Around the blazing hearth, social and gay,
To share our frugal viands, and the bowl
Sparkling with home-brew'd beverage:-by our sides
Thy Sara, and my Susan, and, perchance,
Allfoxden's musing tenant, and the maid
Of ardent eye, who, with *fraternal love*,
Sweetens his solitude... [\[21\]](#)

(emphases mine)

Thelwall emulates the blank verse idiom of Coleridge's 'Effusion XXXV' and *This Lime-Tree Bower* (the latter poem was mailed to Southey on 17 July 1797, the day Thelwall arrived at Stowey, *Letters*, i.334-6). And there are other debts to Coleridge evident here too: the 'Race/Enslav'd, because degenerate...wrapp'd up in Self,/In sordid avarice, luxurious pomp' recalls the 'smooth Savage' in *Religious Musings* (1796; read closely by Thelwall), who 'roams/ Feeling himself, his own low Self the whole' (171-2). [\[22\]](#) In other respects Thelwall's sickening at hopeless 'public turmoil' anticipates the manner of Coleridge's *Fears in Solitude*, written and published the following year.

'Lines Written at Bridgewater' marks Thelwall's move away from reformist politics, then, and also expresses some of the many facets of his relationship with Coleridge at this complex moment. In effect, the poem gives us Thelwall's idea of Pantisocracy at Stowey, a community representing social ideals and aspirations that had been deadlocked in 'the strifeful scenes / Of public life': 'kindred sympathies ... congenial souls ... philosophic amity ... kindly interchange ... mutual aid ... sweet converse ... Fraternal kindliness ... fraternal love' (see emphasised passages in the quote above). The wider circumstances of this community (or, rather, Thelwall's generous interpretation of it) was the repressive behaviour of the 'Ruffian Crew of Power' - who had in fact 'roughed up' Thelwall when he was lecturing at Yarmouth in 1796. [\[23\]](#) By July 1797 Thelwall had been forced to abandon his lecturing career; following years of political activity, he might appear to have been in retreat at this moment. But, as this poem - and E.P.Thompson - remind us, he was 'not in retreat all that *much*'. [\[24\]](#) A couplet from Thomas Mathias's *Pursuits of Literature* noted Thelwall's departure from London to lecture in the provinces,

When Thelwall, for the season, quits the Strand

To organize revolt by sea and land...

-and an accompanying footnote, dated July 1797, observed: 'This indefatigable incendiary and missionary of the French Propaganda, *John Thelwall*, has now his *Schools of Reason* in country towns'. [\[25\]](#)

By July 1797 the terms of revolutionary idealism (liberty, equality, fraternity) had been associated with the 'little plots' of personal territory, local ground, and private relationships: revolutionary progress was now to be accomplished through the 'kindly interchange of mutual aid'. It is notable too that among the topics of Thelwall's 'sweet converse' was the subject he had formerly broached in his lecture on 'Animal Vitality' to the Physical society at Guy's Hospital,

The knotty point—perchance ,of import high-

Of Moral Truth, of Causes Infinite,

Creating power! or Uncreated Worlds

Eternal and uncaus'd! or whatsoe'er,

Of Metaphysic, or of Ethic lore,

The mind, with curious subtilty, pursues...

In the long perspective of the 1790s Thelwall's idea of a fraternal community at Stowey marks the possibility of a new beginning, where the rational discourse that formerly characterised the *Essay on Animal Vitality* had been assimilated to a congenial, organic interchange of 'kindred sympathies'. Thelwall's erudite audience at the Physical Society, and the massed ranks of reformists at his political lectures, become in his poem the 'little infants' playing before him in 'gambols unrestrain'd',

early learn[ing]

Practical love, and, Wisdom's noblest lore,
Fraternal kindness.

Like the babe Hartley in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', the infants in Thelwall's 'Lines' bring the promise of an ideal future — 'far other lore,/ And in far other scenes!'. For Coleridge that 'other lore' was associated with 'Fraternal kindness', but also with the all-informing presence of God 'who from eternity doth teach /Himself in all, and all things in himself': a 'vital principle' indeed, inspiring a corresponding 'animal vitality' in the child's excited response to the icicles, which

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. [\[26\]](#)

Afterword: Coleridge as Viewed from Llyswen, March 1798.

On 3 March 1798 Thelwall wrote from Llyswen to Dr. Peter Crompton at Liverpool, discussing the activities and prospects of their mutual acquaintance Coleridge. [\[27\]](#) A short passage from the letter was quoted by Thompson in 'Disenchantment or Default?' [\[28\]](#) but, so far as I know, Thelwall's full account of Coleridge in the letter has not yet been reproduced in full. Thompson emphasises how by 1798 Thelwall knew Coleridge well enough 'to understand his enthusiastic ebullitions with affectionate good humour'; indeed, his letter to Crompton gives us a very incisive account of Coleridge's circumstances, character, and behaviour at this period. The relevant section of the letter begins by repeating information from Coleridge's letter to Thelwall of 30 January 1798 (*Letters*, i. 382-3):

I am surprised you have not heard the particulars of Coleridge's good fortune. It is not a legacy but a gift. The circumstances are thus expressed by himself in a letter of the 30th Jany. 'I received an invitation from Shrewsbury to be the Unitarian Minister,& at the same time an order for 100f from Thomas & Josiah Wedgwood -

I accepted the former, & returned the latter in a long letter explanatory of my motives, & went off to Shrewsbury, where they were on the point of electing me unanimously & with unusual marks of affection, when I received an offer from T and J. Wedgewood[sic] of an annuity of 150£ to be legally settled on me. Astonished, agitated, & feeling as I could not help feeling, I accepted the offer in the same worthy spirit, I hope, in which it was made; & this morning I have returned from Shrewsbury'. This letter was written in a great hurry at Cottle's shop in Bristol, in answer to one which a friend of mine, had left for him in his way from Lyswen to Gosport, & you will perceive that it has a dash of the obscure not uncommon to the rapid genius of C. Whether he did or did not accept the cure of Unitarian Souls, it is difficult from this acct. to make out - I suppose he did not - for I know his aversion to preaching God's holy word for hire, & which is seconded a little I suspect by his repugnance to all regular routine & application- I also hope he did not - for I know he cannot preach very often without travelling from the pulpit to the Tower - Mount him upon his darling hobby horse 'the republic of God's own making', & away he goes like hey go mad, spattering & splashing thro thick & thin & scattering more levelling sedition, & constructive treason, than poor Gilly, or myself ever dreamt of. He promised [sic] to write to me again in a few days; but tho' I ansrd. his letter directly, I have not heard from him since. [\[29\]](#)

Thelwall did not hear from Coleridge again until December 1800 ('I should have ruined a richer man than you or myself, if I had written to you as often as I have thought of you with tender recollections...' *Letters*, i. 655-6). His letter to Crompton deserves attention in that it gives us a first-hand account of Coleridge from one who had come to know him very well. The mention of Coleridge's 'rapid genius', his 'dash of the obscure', his 'repugnance to all regular routine & application' have the authentic ring of personal experience. Besides repeating Coleridge's letter of 30 December about the Shrewsbury Unitarian Ministry and Wedgwood annuity, Thelwall's letter also agrees with Hazlitt's recollection, in 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', of Coleridge preaching at the Unitarian chapel in Wem: 'The sermon was upon peace and war; upon church and state... He made a poetical and pastoral excursion...to shew the fatal effects of war...'. [\[30\]](#) As Coleridge himself admitted, his 'sermons, (great part extempore) were preciously peppered with Politics' (*Letters*, i. 176). Thelwall offers a new sidelight on Coleridge's career in the 1790s as a political radical and unitarian, reminding us of just how outspoken Coleridge's public statements could be at this time. The echo of *Tristram Shandy* ('his darling hobby horse') serves to emphasise Coleridge's absorbing preoccupation with politics and religion, reinforcing Thelwall's belief that his preaching might well carry him swiftly 'from the pulpit to the Tower'. Thelwall, who had been charged with 'constructive treason' in 1794, knew what he was talking about: after the Gagging Acts of December 1795, Coleridge's 'extempore' political sermons brought a genuine risk of prosecution on a charge of sedition or treason. In later

years Coleridge would seek to play-down the extremity of his political radicalism in the 1790s, but it is evident from Thelwall's letter that his contemporaries took a very different view of the matter.

Coleridge had begun his first letter to Thelwall, April 1796, by claiming fellowship with the most prominent radical of the day: 'Dear Thelwall Pursuing the same end by the same means we ought not to be strangers to each other...' (*Letters*, i.204). Both were convinced of the necessary progress of humanity, although Coleridge's religion meant that they differed over the spiritual significance of this. Both had been active as political lecturers. They shared an interest in contemporary scientific and medical discoveries, as the *Essay on Animal Vitality* and Coleridge's letter of 31 December 1796 demonstrate (*Letters*, i.293-5). And both shared literary ambitions. For a while, in the years 1796-8, Coleridge's friendship with Thelwall was a genuine meeting of minds; yet Thelwall's letter of March 1798 shows that he had sensed the instability of Coleridge's personality and intellect, 'rapid genius...repugnance to all regular routine & application...tho' I ansrd.his letter directly, I have not heard from him since'.

Coleridge's later career is well known. For Thelwall, the road from Nether Stowey led to various enterprises as an elocutionist and speech-therapist, poet, and literary lecturer. With the revival of reformist agitation after Waterloo, Thelwall again took up the cause as political journalist and editor of *The Champion* magazine, denouncing in articles and editorials the 'MILITARY VIOLENCE AND MASSACRE!!!' at Peterloo in August 1819. [\[31\]](#) A little later that year an anonymous letter, dated 20 July 1819, was published in the *Monthly Magazine* under the heading 'Mr. Coleridge's "Biographia Literaria"'. The correspondent 'finds [Coleridge] somewhat forgetful relative to his opinions' in the mid-1790s, and takes leave 'to set his memory right in one or two particulars':

Speaking of those who knew him about the period to which he alludes, viz. about the years 1794, 5, and 6, he says, 'they will bear witness for me, how opposite, even then, my principles were to those of jacobinism, or even democracy.' I, sir, for one, can bear him no such witness; for, on the contrary, I very well remember what his sentiments were, at the time that he, Southey, Lovell, Burnett, and some others, talked of going to America, and there founding a system of Pantisocracy; and I can very well remember, that they were, both by word and writing, positively and decidedly democratic. ... If ever a democrat existed, Mr. Coleridge was one at the period of which I am writing. [\[32\]](#)

Who was the anonymous correspondent to the *Monthly Magazine*? George Dyer is an obvious possibility, but then so is John Thelwall: he had recognised the tendency to ‘obscurity’ in Coleridge’s letter about the Shrewsbury business and the Wedgwood annuity. This isn’t the moment, though, to reopen the question of Coleridge’s ‘jacobinism’ and subsequent ‘apostasy’. What one can say, I think, is that close attention to Thelwall’s career may enrich our sense of Romantic culture in the 1790s and beyond, while offering unsettling glimpses into a period of Coleridge’s life that is all too frequently assumed to be a closed case.

Kilve Court, July, 1993

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[1] See the ‘Prefatory Memoir’ to John Thelwall, *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* (Hereford, 1801), xxx.

[2] For Thelwall’s visit to Stowey, see my essay ‘Coleridge and John Thelwall: The Road to Nether Stowey’ in *The Coleridge Connection* , ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (Basingstoke, 1990),60-80. For ‘Lines Written at Bridgewater’ see *Poems Written in Retirement*, 126-132.

[3] See Peter Kitson, ‘The Whore of Babylon and the Woman in White: Coleridge’s Radical Unitarian Language’, in *Coleridge’s Visionary Languages*, ed. Fulford and Paley (Cambridge, 1993), 3.

[4] See *The Life of John Thelwall by his Widow* (London, 1837), 79.

[5] ‘On Friday next my anatomical studies begin’; Southey to H.W.Bedford, 24 January 1794, *New Letters of Robert Southey*,ed.K.Curry (2 vols.,New York and London,1965), i.47.

[6] See Bransby Blake Cooper, *The Life of Sir Astley Cooper* (2 vols., London, 1843), i. 211-18.

[7] Henry Cline gave evidence for Thelwall's defence at his trial for treason, December 1794, stating that he had known Thelwall since 1787. See *Life of Thelwall*, 440-1.

[8] *Life of John Thelwall*, 104. All details of Thelwall's membership and activities are from the manuscript records of the Physical Society, Wills Medical Library Guy's Hospital, London, quoted with permission. I am grateful to Andrew Baster, Deputy Librarian at Wills Medical Library, for assistance with research for this essay.

[9] See *An Essay Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality* (London, 1793), 7, 13.

[10] *An Essay*, 19.

[11] *An Essay*, 20.

[12] *An Essay*, 39-40.

[13] See an excellent discussion in Ian Wylie *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (Oxford, 1989), esp. 66-7, 123-4, 132. See also H.W. Piper, *The Active Universe* (London, 1962).

[14] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs (6 vols., Oxford, 1956-71), i. 294-5; references hereafter cited in text as *Letters*. See also Wylie, 123-8.

[15] *Life of Sir Astley Cooper*, i. 236-7.

[16] See *The Tribune* (3 vols., London, 1795-6), i. 155.

[17] See *The Tribune*, ii. xi, and William Godwin, *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills* (London, 1796), 17.

[18] *The Politics of Nature* (Basingstoke, 1992), 10.

[19] See *Life of John Thelwall*, 224-5, and *The Politics of Nature*, 81-2.

[20] See *The Works of William Cowper*, ed. Robert Southey (15 vols., London, 1835-7), ix. 209-10.

[21] See *Poems Written in Retirement*, 129-131.

[22] Thelwall's blank verse poem 'To the Infant Hampden-Written during a Sleepless Night', dated to October 1797, forms part of this creative exchange with Coleridge and is in many respects a pattern for Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', written the following February. See *Poems Written in Retirement*, 140-1.

[23] See the 'Prefatory Memoir' to *Poems Written in Retirement*, xxx.

[24] E.P.Thompson, 'Disenchantment or Default? a Lay Sermon', in *Power & Consciousness*, eds. O'Brien and Vanech (New York and London,1969), 160.

[25] Thomas Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature. A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues* (8 edn., London, 1798), 'Dialogue the Fourth and Last', 413-4 and n.

[26] Quoted from the text in S.T.Coleridge, *Fears in Solitude... To which are added, France, an Ode; and*

Frost at Midnight(London, 1798), 23.

[27] Coleridge was disappointed to find 'Dr Crompton unluckily was not in Derby' during his *Watchman* tour of January 1796. For his description of Crompton as ' a truly honest & benevolent man' see his letter to Thelwall, 17 December 1797; Letters, i.179, 305.

[28] 'Disenchantment or Default?', 162.

[29] Thelwall to Dr, Peter Crompton, 3 March 1798, from a manuscript at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, quoted with permission. 'Gilly' is Gilbert Wakefield, radical reformer, unitarian, and distinguished classical scholar.

[30] William Hazlitt, *Selected Writings*, ed. Ronald Blyth (Harmondsworth, 1970), 45.

[31] *The Champion and Sunday Review* (22 August 1819). For further discussion of Thelwall and *The Champion*, and his relation to John Keats in 1819, see my essay 'Keats's Commonwealth' in *Keats and History* (Cambridge, 1994) .

[32] *Monthly Magazine*, 48 (1 October 1819), 204.