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## Invasion and Subterfuge in 'Frost at Midnight' (1798)

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### Abstract

*Coleridge repeatedly revised 'Frost at Midnight' publishing different versions of the poem. The poem that is widely read today is actually the final version of 1829. This essay focuses instead on the neglected and very different first version of 1798. Where the version of 1829 is meditative, the version of 1798 is political. Where the version of 1829 returns to the icicles forming in the darkness of a winter's night, in the version of 1798 the persona and his family leave their home to enjoy the breaking of a bright new day. Poems as published works are as much the expression of the individual as of the society for which they are produced, so, theoretically, Coleridge's revisions could be indicative as much of the changes to his ideological makeup as of his social context. My study intends to demonstrate how the 1790s engendered the very different poem of 1798, which begs the question: why do we persist in thinking of 'Frost at Midnight' when we should be thinking of 'Frosts at Midnights'?*

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This is a tale of two poems, both written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, both called 'Frost at Midnight'. One is widely read today as an artefact of English Romanticism, as a work in which university students and cultured readers around the world are encouraged to see the tenets of the Romantic period operating *in situ*. As part of a body of literature acknowledged by scholars as the canon, it is regarded as a work from which universal truths about Man and his World may be drawn. This text of 'Frost at Midnight', reprinted in numerous editions of Coleridge's poetry, was actually first produced in 1829. The other 'Frost at Midnight'—the version I am interested in rehabilitating—was originally published in 1798 with two other poems as a slim 30-page pamphlet entitled *Fears in Solitude, Written in 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion. To which are added France, an Ode; and Frost at Midnight*. You are unlikely to find this poem by walking into your local bookshop; I know of only three circumstances by which you will find it: in the 200-year-old pamphlet itself, in an expensive and rare facsimile reprint of the 200-year-old pamphlet by Woodstock Books, or in this essay. There are no universal truths to be gained from reading the lesser-known 'Frost at Midnight'. My aim is to convey something of the specific conditions under which the poem was originally written: a certain configuration of the social and the political that is distinctively of its time.

Before proceeding, it is important to consider what 'political poetry' means. Every poem has its politics, but not every poem is political. To be political, a poem has to allude to a specific historical circumstance for the purposes of undermining or supporting the social cause of a specified target or

community. The first version of ‘Frost at Midnight’ was published when the nation was at war with France, when—as we have so often seen with warring states—the government had instituted a whole series of repressive measures to crack down on dissent in the name of national security. Large public gatherings were made illegal, and people could be detained with trial (for a brief historical outline, see Butler, 1982, p. 11-38). Nevertheless, political activism was in ascendance and there was widespread civil unrest both at home and abroad. In 1797, there was a general mutiny in the British Navy; in 1798, the Irish were in open rebellion against English rule. The leading issue of the times was Catholic Emancipation, which united the opponents of the Tory establishment. In Parliament, the Whigs—a party of liberal aristocrats and industrialists aligned with the Crown Prince—and the Anglo-Irish supported it because they felt it was essential to win the loyalty of the Irish populace against the French. Among the middle classes, Catholic Emancipation could count on the support of the Unitarians and other religious dissenters, who were barred with the Catholics from holding public office. The democrats and Irish republicans amongst the working classes also supported it, seeing it as a stepping-stone towards greater civil liberty (including Irish Independence). These agitators of legislative reform, now broadly referred to—perhaps misleadingly—as the ‘English radicals’, were then just as broadly targeted by the government as ‘Jacobins’ hungry to bring to England the revolution that had occurred in France. It is this context—‘Frost at Midnight’ as a political poem for a political time and place—that I now turn to. The 1798 and 1829 texts of ‘Frost at Midnight’ have been reprinted at the end of the essay (see Appendix) to facilitate comparison.

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s letter of March 10, 1798, to George Coleridge (Griggs, 1956, p. 394-398) is remarkable for several reasons. One of his longest letters for the year, it effectively ends what seems to be a three-and-a-half years’ silence with his brother. He is responding to concerns about his political radicalism, and given the distance between them, George’s ‘kind and interesting Letter’ must have been prompted by the recent appearance of Coleridge’s prose and poetry in the *Morning Post*. The *Post* was a prominent London newspaper opposed to the Tory government and the state of war with France. Coleridge’s act of addressing George’s concerns, then, is evidence that this profile caused uneasiness even in his private life.

Publicly, Coleridge’s association with the *Post* elicited the opprobrium of the pro-government press. The most notorious of these attacks came in July, when a poem extending over six of the *Anti-Jacobin*’s eight pages labels as sycophants of ‘LEPAUX’ the papers ‘*Couriers and Stars... Morning Chronicle*, and *Morning Post*’, and ‘five ... wandering Bards’ named ‘C-----DGE and S--TH-Y, L--BE and Co’ (July 9, 1798). This work subsequently inspired a James Gilray caricature of the English radicals — ‘New Morality’ — that was published in the first monthly issue of the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* (July 1798). The lines that I have highlighted were reprinted in the forty-line quotation at the bottom of the cartoon, as well as in the thirty-six-line extract given by the magazine itself. Coleridge also appears in the caricature with long donkey-ears proclaiming his ‘Dactyls’; of the ‘Bards’ only he and his friend Robert Southey (i.e. the kneeling ass) are visually distinguishable, indicating his status — in Tory eyes at least — as an important agent for the ‘Jacobin’ movement.

On May 28, Coleridge had argued for ‘anonymous Publications’ with a telling justification: ‘Wordsworth’s name is nothing — to a large number of persons mine *stinks*’ (to Joseph Cottle; cf. Griggs, 1956, p. 412). Literary scholarship has, logically enough, connected this well-known declaration with the anonymous publication on October 4 of the *Lyrical Ballads*. It does beg an interesting question however:

why then did Coleridge put his name to the pamphlet of poems appearing at about the same time — *Fears in Solitude*?

*Fears in Solitude* is a slim but elegant quarto volume containing, in addition to the poem 'Fears in Solitude', 'France, an Ode' and 'Frost at Midnight'. Joseph Johnson published it, and, if we weigh the evidence, with some enthusiasm. Coleridge, writing to his wife in September, maintained that 'Johnson, the Bookseller ... purely out of affection conceived for me, & as part of any thing I might do for him, gave me an order on Remnant at Hamburg for 30 pound', but he goes on to mention giving Johnson to print 'in Quarto a little Poem' of his (Griggs, 1956, p. 417). In his next letter to her, he told how 'Johnson ... who received me civilly the first time, cordially the second, affectionately the third ... finally took leave of me with tears in his eyes' (Griggs, 1956, p. 420). An exaggeration, perhaps, but Johnson's generosity is striking considering the luxurious presentation of *Fears in Solitude* and the fact that Coleridge received £30 for just three poems (William Wordsworth wrote eighteen poems for the *Lyrical Ballads*, but received only thirty guineas; according to Stillinger, 1994, p. 15). Johnson — the most famous radical publisher of the 1790s — was, like Coleridge, held in suspicion by the ruling establishment. The former had been convicted on July 17 for selling Gilbert Wakefield's *Reply to... the Bishop of Llandaff's Address*. Johnson was found guilty, despite the sworn statement at the hearing claiming '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' (Magnuson, 1991).

The reason why Coleridge puts his name to the *Fears* pamphlet is no doubt the same as Johnson's for wanting to publish it: a conciliatory gesture to their enemies in the press and the government. 'France, an Ode' had already been published in the *Morning Post* on April 16 (as 'The Recantation, an Ode. By S. T. Coleridge'), and the *Anti-Jacobin* noted on April 23 how that newspaper 'has wisely shrunk from our severity, reformed its Principles in some material points, and in more than one of its last columns, held a language which the *Whig Club* and *Corresponding Society* will not soon forgive'. Together the three poems offer a pose of recantation and patriotism, which could prove useful to the two marked men. For Coleridge: the opportunity to improve the odour of his name. 'I have snapped my squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition & the fragments lie scattered in the lumber-room of Penitence' (Griggs, 1956, p. 397), he had declared to George on March 10, and six months later, after telling his wife he has 'desired Johnson to print in Quarto a little Poem' — he insists in the same line — 'one of which Quartos must be sent to my Brother' (Griggs, 1956, p. 417). For anxious George at least, *Fears in Solitude* is unmistakably meant as a demonstration that 'he has ceased to deserve' the tag of 'Democrat & Seditionist' (Griggs, 1956, p. 397).

*Fears in Solitude* was reviewed by the *Analytical*, Johnson's own publication, six months before any other periodical noticed it. The circulation of the pamphlet may have been small, but if the review by the *Analytical* was a form of advertisement to raise its profile: it worked. The *Monthly* and the *Critical*, two major liberal publications, as well as the Tory-aligned *British Critic*, examined it in 1799. Of the three poems in the publication, 'Frost at Midnight' received the least attention. Nevertheless, if the *Analytical* were allowed to function as a guide to the *Fears* pamphlet, all three poems read together would have offered a comprehensive response to the critics of the English radicals. Let us make a case study of the *Anti-Jacobin*'s (July 9, 1798) 'New Morality' poem:

The New Philosophy of modern times —  
... French PHILANTHROPY — whose boundless mind  
Glows with the general love of all mankind.

Philanthropy — beneath whose baneful sway  
Each patriot passion sinks, and dies away.

Taught in her School t'imbibe thy mawkish strain,  
CONDORCET, filtered through the dregs of PAINE,  
Each pendant Prig disowns a Briton's part,  
And plucks the name of ENGLAND from his heart.

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WHAT shall a name, a word, a sound, controul  
Th' aspiring thought, and cramp th' expansive soul?  
Shall one half-peopled Island's rocky round  
A love that glows for all creation, bound?  
And social charities contract the plan  
Fram'd for thy Freedom, universal Man?  
No — 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 ...  
For the crush'd Beetle, *first* — the widow'd Dove,  
And all the warbled sorrows of the grove.  
Next for poor suff'ring *Guilt* — and, last of all,  
For Parents, Friends, a King and Country's fall.

Mark her fair Votaries — Prodigal of Grief,  
With cureless pangs, and woes that mock relief,  
Droop in soft sorrow o'er a faded flow'r;  
O'er a dead Jack-Ass pour the pearly show'r ...

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Anyone who sought to change society could be branded with Jacobinism. 'The *New Philosophy* of modern times' is, in a word, 'French'. It is a measure of the success of the Tories at associating the voices of dissent with France that even in a personal letter, before clarifying his differences, Coleridge found it necessary to declare his 'own opinions ... utterly untainted with French Metaphysics, French Politics, French Ethics, & French theology' (to George Coleridge, March 10, 1798; in Griggs, 1956, p. 395). The *Fears* pamphlet certainly carries Coleridge's 'differences', notably through the poem 'Fears in Solitude' that condemns his fellow countrymen for being

A selfish, lewd, effeminated race,  
Contemtuously of all honourable rule;  
Yet bartering freedom, and the poor man's life,  
For gold, as at a market. (Coleridge, 1798, p. 4)

Every reviewer of the *Fears* pamphlet quoted these four lines, and, as in the letter, Coleridge's objections

are counterbalanced with an equally hostile rejection of the French: 'Impious and false, a light yet cruel race, / That laugh away all virtue, mingling mirth / With deeds of murder' (1798, p. 7). Tory propaganda had determined such an influential 'pro-English / anti-French' binary that in order to validate his position of dissent he felt it necessary to repudiate for himself its demonised 'anti-English / pro-French' corollary. 'France, an Ode' ostensibly performs this function within the collection, by dramatising how — in the words of the *Analytical* (December 1798) — 'the poet reconciles to the strictest consistency, his former attachment to French politics, with his present abhorrence of them'.

A favourite target in Tory discourse is the ideal of universal love, which it identified as an ideological source of radical activity from the anti-war stance to the push for inalienable rights. The 'New Morality' poem combines this ideal with egalitarianism, supposedly another source of radical activity, to create a satirical version that is so impersonal and uniform that it undermines patriotism. Indeed, this love is depicted to be a 'SENSIBILITY' of such 'Prodigal' proportions that it has no special allegiance to king or country, friends or parents, or even to species! The Pantisocratic pathos expressed in lines 140-143 — the appearance of Coleridge and Southey in the cartoon as braying donkeys — are facetious allusions to Coleridge's 'To a Young Ass'. A brief quotation from 'To a Young Ass' (1797, p. 45) to illustrate the connection:

It seems to say, 'And have I then one Friend?'  
Innocent Foal! thou poor despis' d Forlorn!  
I hail thee BROTHER — spite of the fool' s scorn!  
And fain would take thee with me, in the Dell  
Of Peace and mild Equality to dwell ...

The allusion to this mawkish poem is cutting given the juxtaposition with the human cost of the French revolution that immediately follows in 'New Morality' :

But hear unmov'd of Loire's ensanguin'd flood,  
Choak's up with slain; — of Lyons drench'd in blood;  
Of crimes that blot the Age, the World with shame,  
Foul crimes, but sicklied o'er with Freedom's name;  
Altars and Thrones subverted, social life  
Trampled to earth — the Husband from the Wife,  
Parent from Child, with ruthless fury torn —

Coleridge, then, has been virtually singled out as one of these prodigal 'Votaries'; as a poet and writer, for him to remain silent is to 'hear unmov'd'. So what happens? Putting 'Fears in Solitude' and 'France, an Ode' together, he becomes almost loquacious on the horrors that occur (or might occur) to his 'human brethren' in England and France. 'Fears in Solitude' directly responds to the 'unbounded' sentiment in the 'New Morality' poem by affirming his very ties of country, friends and family, which concludes in an image of enclosure (1798, p. 9):

But, O dear Britain! O my mother Isle!  
Needs must thou prove a name most dear and holy  
To me, a son, a brother, and a friend,  
A husband and a father! who revere

All bonds of natural love, and find them all  
Within the limits of thy rocky shores.

And what 'Fears in Solitude' merely tells, 'Frost at Midnight' shows through the dramatisation of close human relations in enclosed spaces.

Being domestic does not disqualify 'Frost at Midnight' from being political. Recent scholarship suggests that domestic narratives from the mid to late 1790s comment on political issues (Magnuson, 1989, p. 206-207; see also Guest, 2000, p. 271-339). 'Frost at Midnight' is a political poem because of its political context, because of its connection to the two political poems that accompany it, and — as we shall see — because its politics may have been the most radical of the three poems in *Fears in Solitude*.

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How Coleridge sets out his politics in that letter of March 10, 1798, to his brother provides a curiously accurate prolepsis of the way he has set out the poems of *Fears in Solitude*. His strategy of disassociating himself from both the Tories and the Whig Opposition ('You think, my Brother! that there can be but two parties at present, for the Government & against the Government. — It may be so — I am of no party') is broadly the strategy of 'Fears in Solitude' where he criticised English society and sounded a war cry against France. He employed a political metaphor of clothes in the letter ('The Opposition & the Democrats are not only vicious — they wear the *filthy* garments of vice') and in the poem (1798, p. 8-9):

As if a government had been a robe,  
On which our vice and wretchedness were tagg'd  
Like fancy-points and fringes, with the robe  
Pull'd off at pleasure.

Next comes the assertion of his recantation ('I have snapped my squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition' etc), which enacts a state of 'Penitence' in keeping with the *Analytical Review's* reading of 'France, an Ode'. Finally, towards its end, Coleridge presented himself leading the life of contemplation and contentment that 'Frost at Midnight' exactly emulates.

The three poems form a sequential argument: 'Fears in Solitude' and 'France, an Ode' send out linguistic vibrations later echoed in 'Frost at Midnight'.

Sea, hill, and wood,  
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,  
With all the numberless goings on of life,  
Inaudible as dreams!

'Sea ... hill ... wood' is repeated successively investing the phrase with the intensity of a mantra. On a personal level, it may be intended to remind George of the 'Frost at Midnight' section in the letter where he wrote, 'I love fields & woods & mountains with almost a visionary fondness' (Griggs, 1956, p. 397). For the reader of the pamphlet, this repetition of 'hill' taken together with 'the numberless goings on of life' and the silence also recalls the assertion in 'Fears in Solitude' (1798, p. 3),

that he must think  
 What uproar and what strife may now be stirring  
 This way or that way o'er these silent hills —  
 Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,  
 And all the crash of onset; fear and rage  
 And undetermined conflict — even now,  
 Ev'n now, perchance, and in his native Isle,  
 Carnage and screams beneath this blessed sun!

It is the fear of invasion that underlies the persona's anxiety over his surroundings in 'Frost at Midnight' ; his remaining awake in a household 'all at rest' is, therefore, a state of vigilance. The hooting owl is an additional feature of the domestic poem connecting it to 'Fears in Solitude' (1798, p. 5), where

Forth from his dark and lonely hiding-place  
 (Portentous sight) the owl, ATHEISM,  
 Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,  
 Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,  
 And, hooting at the glorious sun in heaven,  
 Cries out, 'where is it?'

The owl is Coleridge's emblem for atheism in 1798; he regarded atheism as a form of intellectual blindness, which is why the owl in 'Fears in Solitude' flies with its eyes closed ('Atheism is an 'owllet' presumably because it fancies itself wise although new-hatched and only equipped with the night vision of learning, useless for seeing the self-evident truth of religion'; Priestman, 1999, p. 152). As a philosophy, atheism is often linked to France: hence his identifying the French as the 'impious foe'.

Even so, how is France or atheism specifically related to the patriotic and god-respecting household in 'Frost at Midnight'? Nether Stowey — the declared location of the persona — is geographically a most unlikely point for a French invasion, whether directly from France or through Ireland. Moreover, both the conflict and the owl are ostensibly shut out; one by the distance, 'Inaudible as dreams', while the other is simply placed outside. The poem moves on and they are left behind ... but are they?

The thin blue flame  
 Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not:  
 Only that film, which flutter'd on the grate,  
 Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing,  
 Methinks, it's motion in this hush of nature  
 Gives it dim sympathies with me, who live,  
 Making it a companionable form,  
 With which I can hold commune.

The key is the repetition of 'flutter', for this and Coleridge's allusion to the burning soot as 'the sole unquiet thing' recalls the solitary hooting owl. There is a play of meanings on 'unquiet': 'the sole unquiet thing' is just as applicable to Coleridge's uneasy persona. Since the soot is affiliated to the owl, holding 'commune' with the soot ultimately connects Coleridge's poetical persona to the owl. Lines 17-20 support the reading of 'sympathies' as 'affinities', with 'companionable' acquiring the sense of 'matching'

(see ‘companionable’ in Simpson & Weiner, 1991) . So, in the fireside scene, does the ‘motion’ of the soot make it seem alive like the persona, or, as an atheist might have it, does it correspond to him ‘who live’ because life consists in animation? Metonymically at least, there occurs a French invasion of sorts: through the owlet, France is in Nether Stowey, and through the film of burning soot, France infiltrates the persona’s very household.

The sooty film gets established as a presence in the past of the persona, and the owlet with it: the ‘unclos’d lids’ of the day-dreaming ‘school-boy’ echoes the inattentive owlet in ‘Fears in Solitude’ (1798, p. 5) who — flying in broad daylight — ‘Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close’. This venture into the past becomes a quest for ‘sympathies’ of a different kind: ‘For still I hop’d to see the *stranger*’s face, / Townsman, or aunt, or sister more below’d, / My play-mate when we both were cloth’d alike’. From ‘companionable’ soot to ‘stranger’, ‘Townsman’, ‘aunt’, then ‘sister’, his search is not only in an order of increasing closeness of relationship, but simultaneously for a ‘form’ most ‘alike’ himself. The journey reveals the history behind his yearning for a ‘companionable form’, and his hopes for the child sleeping by him:

I was rear’d  
In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim,  
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.  
But thou, my babe! Shalt wander, like a breeze,  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself:  
Great universal Teacher! He shall mould  
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Where the persona is largely constrained by man and man-made structures (‘book ... city ... cloisters’), his child will partake of the limitless *Logos*.

From a portent of ‘the arrival of some absent friend’, to suddenly having a ‘face’ , this progressive humanisation of the burning soot leads to a final startling transformation. The persona discovers the cold air outside has formed ‘icicles’, ‘which’

Like those, my babe ... 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.



It is the repetition of 'flutter' that gives it away. The baby is the logical fulfilment of his mission, for in Hartley the first-born son, he would have the close companion who is simultaneously most like him. Is it not after all the 'living spirit' of the father that is transfused into the 'lifeless soot', which is in turn but a pre-figuration of the child? There is more: for the soot brings in the owlet. As a matter of fact, Coleridge's 'babe' is manifestly bird-like, with the 'shout' echoing the 'owlet's cry'.

To appreciate the implications of this manoeuvre it is crucial to recognise that there are actually two French birds operating in the *Fears* pamphlet; the other appears at the end of 'France, an Ode': 'Thou speedest on thy subtle pinions, / To live amid the winds, and move upon the waves ... O Liberty, my spirit felt thee there' (1798, p.18). 'Liberty' is another ideal closely associated with France, a position the Tories took issue with, as their lengthy tirade on the subject in 'New Morality' (*Anti-Jacobin*, July 9, 1798) highlights:

Foul crimes, but sicklied o'er with Freedom's name ...  
 Such is the lib'ral Justice which presides  
 In these our days, and modern Patriots guides —  
 Justice, whose blood-stain'd Book one sole Decree, 170  
 One Statute fills — 'the People shall be Free.'  
 Free by what means? — by folly, madness, guilt,  
 By boundless rapines, blood in oceans spilt;  
 By Configuration, in whose sweeping toils  
 The poor Man's pittance with the rich Man's spoils,  
 Mix'd in one common mass, are swept away —  
 To glut the short-liv'd Tyrant of the day.  
 By Laws, Religion, Morals all o'erthrown,  
 — Rouse then, ye Sov'reign People, claim your own —  
 The License that enthral, the Truth that blinds, 180  
 The Wealth that starves you, and the Pow'r that grinds.  
 — So, Justice bids — 'twas her enlighten'd doom,  
 LOUIS, thy head devoted to the tomb —  
 'Twas Just claim'd, in that accursed hour,  
 The fatal forfeit of too lenient pow'r.  
 Mourn for the Man we may — but for the King —  
 Freedom, oh! Freedom's such a charming thing.

The 'Freedom' *there* was not 'Liberty' — a word that the pro-government poet notably omitted to use — but 'License'. While events eventually force the persona in 'France, an Ode' to renounce the French, he is loath to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. As the *Analytical Review* (December 1798) understood it, 'He yet remains the ardent worshipper of liberty; it is France — the apostate France, who impiously profanes her holy altars, and deluges them with blood'. The concluding six lines of 'Frost at Midnight' arguably point to this second bird 'Liberty' by breaking the language of enclosure. The poem moves out of the persona's house into open space, and the final image of the son reaching out for even more space works dynamically against the constraint of the mother's arms — indeed — against the closure of the poem itself. An infant boy reaching out from a mother's arms is also the archetypal representation of the Madonna and Child. Using the image in the 1790s to symbolise 'Liberty' is entirely appropriate given Coleridge's opposition to the Test Acts, which prevented Catholics from holding public office. He saw

their abolition as an integral part of a more general emancipatory objective — to quote him in the January 20, 1798 issue of the *Morning Post*: ‘a full, fair, and free representation in Parliament’ for ‘the Irish People’ and ‘at home’ (Erdman, 1978, 17).

This is what the *Critical Review* had to ask in August 1799 about ‘France, an Ode’: ‘The conclusion ... is very ridiculous ... What does Mr. Coleridge mean by liberty in this passage? or what connexion has it with the subject of civil freedom?’ Coleridge makes perfect sense when we consider ‘Frost at Midnight’ to be the real ending to the poem.

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There is one more linguistic repetition: ‘secret ministry’. It opens ‘Frost at Midnight’ and reappears towards the end to reveal the infant boy as its intended target. But why the secrecy? Just what is the point of the complex subterfuge in the poem? Perhaps it has something to do with the articulation of ideals (such as ‘Liberty’) that have become a lot less acceptable. Portraying his wife and son in the pose of the Madonna and Child is controversial enough without an odious reputation and the context of the recent uprisings in May and June by the Irish Catholics. The nightmare scenario was for the French to land in Ireland and precipitate a successful nationwide rebellion: the subtitle to *Fears in Solitude* reads ‘written in 1798, during the alarm of an invasion’.

Coleridge had motive: to retaliate at the publication that ridiculed him. Of key importance is the use of ‘secret’. The *Anti-Jacobin* associated the word with radicalism. For its section on poetry, it had set itself the double objective of exposing the ‘effusions of the *Jacobin* Muse’ and acquiring ‘by dint of repeating after them, a more complete knowledge of the secret in which their greatness lies’. According to its editor, although ‘it would be endless to chase the coy Muse of Jacobinism through all her characters ... in whatever disguise she appears, whether of mirth or of melancholy, of piety or of tenderness, under all disguises, like Sir *John Brute* in woman’s clothes, she is betrayed by her drunken swagger and ruffian tone’ (November 20, 1797). The 1799 ‘Prefatory Address’ to the magazine version went even further in proposing that it is the defining characteristic of ‘Jacobinism’ to secretly renew itself through transformation:

We know the spirit ... too well to be deceived by any appearances which it may assume that are foreign from its nature; we know its purpose to be fixed and determined; though vanquished in one shape, it will rise up in another; and nothing short of its annihilation can justify confidence, or produce security. We shall, therefore, continue to watch its motions, with anxious solicitude, and incessant attention: we are not unacquainted with its secret recesses; we have traced it from the root, through all its various ramifications, to the very summit; and our efforts will not cease until we have not only lopped off every noxious branch, but felled the hideous trunk itself to the ground.

The *British Critic* saw nothing more in ‘Frost at Midnight’ than a domestic tale of ‘much expressive tenderness’. In the complex packaging and repackaging of ideals and forms, Coleridge takes on the allies of the ruling establishment in their own terms: the point is that the baby of this poem escapes them.

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### Appendix: The 1798 and 1829 texts of 'Frost at Midnight'

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(Coleridge, 1798, p. 19-23)

#### FROST AT MIDNIGHT.

THE Frost performs its secret ministry,  
 Unhelp'd by any wind. The owl's cry  
 Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.  
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,  
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits  
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side  
 My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.  
 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs  
 And vexes meditation with its strange  
 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood, 10  
 This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,  
 With all the numberless goings on of life,  
 Inaudible as dreams! The thin blue flame  
 Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not:  
 Only that film,\* which flutter'd on the grate,  
 Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing,  
 Methinks, it's motion in this hush of nature  
 Gives it dim sympathies with me, who live,  
 Making it a companionable form,  
 With which I can hold commune. Idle thought! 20  
 But still the living spirit in our frame,  
 That loves not to behold a lifeless thing,  
 Transfuses into all its own delights  
 Its own volition, sometimes with deep faith,  
 And sometimes with fantastic playfulness.  
 Ah me! amus'd by no such curious toys  
 Of the self-watching subtilizing mind,  
 How often in my early school-boy days,  
 With most believing superstitious wish  
 Presageful have I gaz'd upon the bars, 30  
 To watch the *stranger* there! and oft belike,  
 With unclos'd lids, already had I dreamt  
 Of my sweet birthplace, and the old church-tower,  
 Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang  
 From morn to evening, all the hot fair-day,  
 So sweetly, that they stirr'd and haunted me

\* *Only that film.* In all parts of the kingdom these films are called strangers, and supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend.

With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear  
 Most like articulate sounds of things to come!  
 So gaz'd I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,  
 Lull'd me to sleep, and sleep prolong'd my dreams! 40  
 And so I brooded all the following morn,  
 Aw'd by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye  
 Fix'd with mock study on my swimming book:  
 Save if the door half-open'd, and I snatch'd  
 A hasty glance, and still my heart leapt up,  
 For still I hop'd to see the *stranger's* face,

Dear babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,  
 Whose gentle breathings, heard in this dead calm, 50  
 Fill up the interspersed vacancies  
 And momentary pauses of the thought!  
 My babe so beautiful! it fills my heart  
 With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,  
 And think, that thou shalt learn far other lore,  
 And in far other scenes! For I was rear'd  
 In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim,  
 And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.  
 But *thou*, my babe! Shalt wander, like a breeze,  
 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags 60  
 Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
 And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
 Of that eternal language, which thy God  
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
 Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould  
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee, 70  
 Whether the summer clothe the general earth  
 With greenness, or the redbreasts sit and sing  
 Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch  
 Of mossy apple-tree, while all the thatch  
 Smokes in the sun-thaw: whether the eave-drops fall  
 Heard only in the trances of the blast,  
 Or whether the secret ministry of cold  
 Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
 Quietly shining to the quiet moon,  
 Like those, my babe! which, ere to-morrow's warmth 80  
 Have capp'd thy 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.

February 1798.

THE END.

(Coleridge, 1829, p. 261-264)

**FROST AT MIDNIGHT.**

THE Frost performs its secret ministry,  
 Unhelp'd by any wind. The owlet's cry  
 Came loud — and hark, again! loud as before.  
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,  
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits  
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side  
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 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs  
 And vexes meditation with its strange  
 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood, 10  
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 Lies on my low burnt fire, and quivers not;  
 Only that film, which flutter'd on the grate,  
 Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing,  
 Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
 Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
 Making it a companionable form,  
 Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit 20  
 By its own moods interprets, every where  
 Echo or mirror seeking of itself,  
 And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,  
 Presageful, have I gaz'd upon the bars,  
 To watch that fluttering *stranger*! and as oft  
 With unclos'd lids, already had I dreamt  
 Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,  
 Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang  
 From morn to evening, all the hot fair day,  
 So sweetly, that they stirr'd and haunted me 30  
 With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear  
 Most like articulate sounds of things to come!  
 So gaz'd I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,  
 Lull'd me to sleep, and sleep prolong'd my dreams!  
 And so I brooded all the following morn,  
 Aw'd by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye  
 Fix'd with mock study on my swimming book:  
 Save if the door half-open'd, and I snatch'd

A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,  
 For still I hop'd to see the *stranger's* face, 40  
 Townsman, or aunt, or sister more belov'd,  
 My play-mate when we both were cloth'd alike!

Dear babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,  
 Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,  
 Fill up the interspersed vacancies  
 And momentary pauses of the thought!  
 My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart  
 With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,  
 And think, that thou shalt learn far other lore,  
 And in far other scenes! For I was rear'd 50  
 In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,  
 And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.  
 But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander, like a breeze,  
 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
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 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
 And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
 Of that eternal language, which thy God  
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach 60  
 Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould  
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,  
 Whether the summer clothe the general earth  
 With greenness, or the redbreasts sit and sing  
 Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch  
 Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch  
 Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eve-drops fall  
 Heard only in the trances of the blast, 70  
 Or if the secret ministry of frost  
 Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
 Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.