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ENG 4354-King

Coleridge, Politics, and the Role of Government

The rare item is a letter written by Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Thomas George Street on October 2, 1813. Street was the editor of *The Courier*, a Tory-friendly newspaper. This letter is a part of the Armstrong Browning Library's extensive collection of nineteenth-century letters. Coleridge wrote to Street so as to get his opinion on the events of the War of the Sixth Coalition involving England and her allies fighting France. The letter provides information about Coleridge's personal views in two forms. First of all, the letter provides support for his continued belief, fifteen years after the French Revolution, of man's depravity and wretched nature. Consequently, he distanced himself from ardent support of the revolution to a less partisan, more cautious support of the traditional English Tory party. Second, coinciding with this caution, the letter provides evidence for an implicit hope that, despite the debacle of the French Revolution, the established social institutions are capable of the societal change that the revolution aimed to bring about.

Coleridge's experience with the French Revolution led to a loss of idealism in the glories of wholesale political revolution. He had, along with many others, believed that the Millennial Reign of Christ was upon them: "Speed it, oh Father! Let thy Kingdom come!" (Coleridge 613). However, the Reign of Terror convinced them they were wrong and Coleridge became more thoroughly convinced of man's wretched nature. The letter indicates that this view stayed with him throughout his life. This attitude is found in his doubts about the ability of France to learn from the mistakes of the pre-Revolutionary monarchy. Knowing that nothing would stop the rise of the French monarchy, he lamented,

“if only terms were proposed by them guaranteed by G. Britain, terms wisely deduced from the two great results of the French Revolution (namely, the Volcanic Horrors of the governments founded, in Hysterics at Court, on the mere personality of Man, instead of civil rights property, birth, religion, &c—& on the other hand, the indispensable importance of a public, --of the influence, direct & indirect, of a gradation of all ranks, --in the formation & on the operations, of the actual government in being” (1-2).

His doubt reveals that man, despite the knowledge of the French Revolution, will not adjust in the way government is run to in order to create a better society. Instead he will walk the same path as before and potentially recreate the scenario for another French Revolution.

His experiences pushed him to a more cautious and less partisan relationship with politics. The letter reveals that he supported neither England nor France with any strong sense of fervor. For example, he criticizes England (and her allies) for their military blunders and France for not capitalizing upon them. England and company put themselves in a losing situation, “tho’ they had the glaring instance of Frederick the Great in the 7 years War” (3). Yet the French army, represented by the Bear (Napoleon), in making a great defense at Dresden, prevented itself from taking advantage of the mistake; “the Bear thrust his head & shoulders into the Wedge. The Wedge could not follow, but only retain what was left behind” (3). England and its allies ignored previous military history and France, in preparing for the attack, could not capitalize on the mistake. His criticism of both indicates his acknowledgement that neither country was above reproach.

Lastly, Coleridge, in the above quotation from the letter, makes a small caveat that England could confirm terms made by France to create new foundations for the French

monarchy, revealing a glimpse of hope. While improbable, Coleridge notes that Great Britain could help France bring about the ideals of the French revolution through the established government. Coleridge is not naïve enough to argue that the French monarchy will not likely become a tyranny again but the caveat does indicate that the only possible solution would be the use of the English and French institutional governments to ensure a foundation of civil rights and the influence of the people in the government. That this is a possibility at all for these institutions indicates a new hope. The hopes of the revolution are still alive in Coleridge in this letter.

The letter provides a useful insight into how Coleridge's views of human nature and political experiences made him more conservative, politically, and change his view on how political reform could be achieved while maintaining a hope for societal change. There is still much to be researched, however, particularly in regards to the legibility of the text. There are several instances, including the word "Histerics" on page 1, where the transcript is either unclear or potentially incorrect. Therefore, students could (and should) spend a great deal of time researching to resolve these textual ambiguities.

Works Cited

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement." *Romanticism: an Anthology*. Ed. Duncan Wu. 4th ed. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 613. Print.