CHAPTER 1

'Democracy' in Somerset and beyond

The political impact of the French Revolution in England was strangely oblique, even when one remembers that it was largely being experienced at one remove. My concern here is not only with some examples of that oblique reaction but with language generally, and with the manner in which the growing questioning of authority during the period reflected a more profound alteration, taking place over a much longer period – a movement from what might be termed the language of fidelity to the cultivation of dialects that could be regarded as more critically oriented. To put the matter another way, whereas in medieval times writers had been so close to the religion of their surrounding culture that they did not need to think about the possible religious implications of their language, by the middle of the twentieth century, they would have become so self-conscious and self-critical that they could not write anything containing such implications and not be aware of possible commenting voices ranging from the harshly critical to the warmly favourable. The 1790s, I shall maintain, provided a crucial juncture for this development.

In addition, however, attention may be drawn to recent emphases in the writing of history by which the possibility of concentrating on a small and particular detail and expanding one's attention from there can be explored, or, alternately, one may begin by proceeding to the widest possible extreme and moving inward.

To begin with a 'snapshot' approach: on 23 October 1799, the Rector of Over Stowey in Somerset, William Holland, recorded in his diary a visit to the neighbouring parish of Nether Stowey, where, he said, he

> . . . Saw that Democratic hoyden Mrs Coleridge who looked so like a friskey girl or something worse that I was not surprised that a Democratic Libertine should choose her for a wife. The husband gone to London suddenly, no one here can tell why. Met the patron of democrats, Mr Thos. Poole who smiled and

chatted a little. He was on his gray mare. Satan himself cannot be more false and hypocritical . . .[1]

For a moment a shaft of light falls across a scene in which an old world is confronted by a new. The settled life of Somerset, an agricultural area deeply conservative in its ways, is being entered, perhaps violated, by figures of a different kind: Samuel Taylor Coleridge had already acquired a reputation in nearby Bristol for his advanced views in politics and religion; his wife Sara, a young woman brought up in Bristol, was evidently happy to exhibit her advanced tendencies by not dressing like the other women of the village; nearer home the views of Thomas Poole, well known as the local tanner, were believed to be not entirely patriotic.

What is also notable about this account is not only that it expresses a local immediate suspicion of someone who is known locally as a 'Democrat' but that when Thomas Poole appears a short while afterwards – to be labelled as 'the patron of Democrats' – the immediate description that comes to Holland's mind relates him to Satan. In his traditional universe, where good and evil are polarized, forces identified as 'Democratic' are automatically assumed to be on the side of evil.

Certain reservations must be made here. It would be easy, for example, to assume that Holland must have been a very old man at the time, yet he was still in his early fifties. Tom Poole, towards whom he shows hostility, was respected locally for his championing of local workers and for establishing a book club to help educate them, which survived for many years. Over the years Holland learned to work alongside such people and to live peaceably with them. But at the time he evidently did not at all like these new voices, or what they portended. It was only a few years since news of the French Revolution had reached English shores, with all its distressing possible implications for British politics; already there were fears that French troops might invade England – perhaps even make their way across and inside the Somerset coastline. The prospect of people like Poole and the Coleridges, given their reputation as 'democrats', perverting the minds of pious country folk with their ideas was seen as dangerous and unwelcome.

The fear reflected in some measure the alarm that had overtaken many upholders of conventional values as a result of the Revolution. During the

[1] *Paupers and Pig Killers: The Diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson 1799–1818*, ed. Jack Ayres (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), p. 15. In addition to the living of Over Stowey, to which he returned in 1798, Holland held that of Monkton Farleigh near Bath, and may have heard there of Coleridge's earlier activities in the areas of Bath and Bristol.

century the very word 'democratic' had been less current, in reaction against the levelling views that had been abroad at the time of the Civil War. The bogey still existed, however: in 1775 Boswell wrote of a contemporary, Dr Joseph Towers, that he was willing to do justice to his merits since, although he abhorred his 'Whiggish democratical notions and propensities' (which, he said, he 'would not call "principles"'), he esteemed him as 'an ingenious, knowing, and very convivial man'.[2]

Holland's hostile account also directs us towards the sense of a fault line that had been developing in British culture for some time. Up till then it had been held together by a kind of loose unity, provided by institutions set up in a series of settlements – sometimes compromise settlements, but still in some sense unified. What had now affected the situation was the growth of a scientific body of work and knowledge that would underlie the new development of industrialism. William Holland and those who thought with him knew little of such developments; but when they saw newcomers in their village such as Mr and Mrs Coleridge they sensed the presence of an alien culture which they instinctively rejected. And once one looks further into the Coleridges' background, one soon senses the further causes for such concern. Sara Coleridge had been brought up in Bristol, by now a thriving commercial centre, and was evidently au fait with the latest fashions and new modes of thinking. Her husband, meanwhile, having been brought up in Ottery St Mary, a more conservative part of the country, had first been sent away to school in London and then from there to Cambridge, another traditionally conservative part of the world, but one which had long been penetrated by the new movements of thought initiated by Newton's theories and where religious ideas were being influenced by liberal-minded thinkers, including a fellow of his college, William Frend.

Holland's hostility evidently owed much also to the response of a neighbour, the Reverend John Poole, who happened to be Tom's cousin, and who lived in Holland's parish of Over Stowey. In general, the Poole family were well regarded. (It is probably no accident that the purpose of Holland's visit to Nether Stowey that day had been to buy a gown for his wife from 'Mr Frank Poole'.)

Tom Poole, on the other hand, had long had a reputation for radicalism. Like other people of the time, he had been able to contemplate with equanimity the deposition of the French king from his position of absolute

[2] See the discussion of 21 March 1775 in his *Life of Johnson*.

rule, even if he was now unhappy with the further possibilities that loomed. To a friend in London who was, like himself, a tanner he wrote:

> I do execrate as much as any man that unnecessary instance of injustice and cruelty perpetrated in France, and should be happy to see every man who voted for the king's death brought to condign punishment. But 'tis not Louis' death, nor the Scheldt, nor the decree of November that are the causes of the war. It is a desire to suppress the glowing spirit of liberty, which, I thank God, pervades the world, and which, I am persuaded, all the powers on earth cannot destroy . . .
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> Many thousands of human beings will be sacrificed in the ensuing conflict; and for what? To support three or four individuals, called arbitrary kings, in the situation which they or their ancestors have usurped. I consider every Briton who loses his life in the war as much murdered as the King of France, and every one who approves the war, as signing the death-warrant of each soldier or sailor that falls. But besides these motives, what shall we not suffer in other respects? This country for some time past may be considered as the workshop of France; we have been growing rich by their confusion. And had Government, instead of the measures they have taken, promoted a rational reform according to the spirit of the constitution, we had, indeed, been a happy people. But now, adieu to all reform! There is no alternative between absolute quiescence or the most violent extremities. In the reign of Charles I, France had some shadow of liberty left; but the artful ministers of Louis XIV alarmed the people of that country with the view of the excesses of parties in England, and induced them to make their monarch despotick. I trust in God there is no similarity between the people of this country and of France at that time. The excesses in France are great; but who are the authors of them? The Emperor of Germany, the King of Prussia, and Mr. Burke. Had it not been for their impertinent interference, I firmly believe the King of France would be at this moment a happy monarch, and that people would be enjoying every advantage of political liberty.
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> The contemplation of this subject gives me great pain, and I think your sentiments will in general coincide with mine. The slave trade, you will see, will not be abolished, because to be humane and honest now is to be a traitor to the constitution, a lover of sedition and licentiousness. But this universal depression of the human mind cannot last long . . .[3]

Earlier in the autumn – it must have been soon after receiving the news of the September massacres – Tom Poole had already expressed to the same friend his grief and anxiety at the bloody turn that events were taking in Paris. Characteristically enough, he begins not with the madness of the people but with the crimes of kings:

> Poor Poland, I pity her fate! Is there no vengeance from heaven for the Empress of Russia? Are her gray hairs to go down to the grave in peace? I trust not. I trust

[3] Elizabeth Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1888), I, 40–2.

that mankind will be shown that there is a punishment, even in this world, for such abominable tyranny. Louis XIV succeeded as well as the Empress of Russia, yet he lived to see his power lessened and his pride humbled. But Louis XIV, though he exhausted and desolated his own country, never was guilty of what this woman has done.

Speaking of a French despot we naturally turn to French affairs. What are your sentiments on the present crisis? Are all the horrid excesses and cruelties of which we hear necessary? – There is a something, my dear sir, in the character of the French which I thank God Englishmen do not possess. That savage levity which appeared in this late revolution, and, indeed, on a review of their history, always did appear in their civil wars I must abhor; that entire absence of religion and mockery of justice are detestable; but notwithstanding this, I think they did right in deposing the king, and they have an undoubted right, if they prefer it, to choose a Republican government. But why this disgrace to humanity? – As for Christianity, it is quite out of the question. Had human nature any cause to blush during the glorious Revolution in America?

The philosophers and friends to mankind that formed the first French constitution I admire and revere, and that constitution, the most beautiful fabrick that was ever erected by the human mind, gained ground and admirers every day; but it is fled like a dream, and I tremble lest the present excesses may not give a greater stab to liberty than the Tyrants of the world who are combined against it . . .[4]

This was not just a matter of individual countries such as Poland and France, moreover. The more one looks into the factors involved, the more one recognizes their complicated duality. We are, after all, dealing with various cross-currents, playing across relations between all the nations involved. Even if we simplify matters as far as possible, we have at least four bodies of culture interacting: France, Britain, Germany and the newly constituted United States of America; and in the case of each possible pairing the issues change. Each needs to be considered in turn.

In the case of relations between Britain and France, the Revolution came shortly after 1788, a year in which there had been anniversary celebrations of England's own revolution, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that, with the end of the Stuarts and the installation of William the Third and his queen, had initiated a regime of toleration. To those with these events foremost in their minds, the coming of the French Revolution seemed to fall into a very natural sequence: the French were simply learning lessons that the British had absorbed a century before, and could now join them on the path of true liberty. The chief feature of the

[4] *Ibid.*, 42–3.

English Revolution, however, was that it had been conducted with little or no violence. As the events in France began to descend further and further into murderous excesses, those looking on from the sheltered haven of Britain became more and more uneasy, more fearful that fires were being lighted that would be hard to extinguish if they reached the English side of the Channel. So far as the English reaction was concerned, also, feelings were further complicated by the recent impact of the American War of Independence, which had caused mixed reactions in the Britain from which Americans were separating themselves but a more enthusiastic response in France, where there had long been irritation at the success of the British in occupying considerable areas of the North American territory. As the American War of Independence progressed, the French discovered a number of ways in which they could give quiet assistance to the insurgents.

At the same time, those who had the best interests of France at heart were forced to recognize that to follow British developments in certain respects might not be disadvantageous. They could not ignore the great strides being made by the champions of the Industrial Revolution, particularly in the midland and northern regions of England. There were even some hopes that Matthew Boulton and James Watt might be poached from the English Midlands so that they might settle in France and lend their formidable weight to the speedier industrialization of their new homeland Other engineers did come from England to help things along in northern France, but these particular commanding figures proved resistant to temptation and stayed in England: they indeed visited Paris, but it was simply to join in consultations concerning new steam machines that were to be installed in new pumping engines at Marly.[5] Events like these nevertheless meant that in France the long reliance on agriculture was beginning to give way to a mixed economy, which would inevitably change patterns of wealth and distribution – though as we all know, agriculture would continue to the present day to play a significant part in the French economy.

The result of these various factors was to complicate the relationship between Britain and France. On the one hand, French sympathies with the American insurgents and suspicion of British imperialist aims had led to a certain sourness between the two countries; on the other, if the revolutionary events were read as following the British lead, they could

[5] Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 232.

be interpreted more kindly in England – and it must not be forgotten that those French radicals who had been aiming to change things in their country had looked to the development of constitutional monarchy in England as a notable example for imitation.

When one considers the precise history leading up to the revolutionary events in France itself, one must also, of course, trace the domestic issues that led to such an outbreak of destructive passion. A harvest failure in 1788, for example, had resulted in extreme hardship. Simon Schama, who has traced such causes in great detail, pinpoints 'Anger and Hunger' as the main driving forces. The hunger became even more real as the price of bread soared beyond the means of ordinary labourers, while the anger arose from various factors, such as the enclosure of land that deprived peasants of their means of livelihood, or practices whittling away at long-established rights.

Although these were the immediate and pressing causes, however, wider and deeper factors made the prospect of a break with established ways possible and even desirable – notably in the larger cities, where intellectual life in France was being affected by what was happening in Britain and in Europe generally. (Nor should it be forgotten that Britain meant particularly Scotland, with its traditionally strong bonding to France.)

Even in Stowey, which may have seemed a little remote from Europe, some inhabitants were well aware of events elsewhere. This was certainly true of Tom Poole, whose remarkably intelligent and thought-out views have already been quoted, and who was well in tune with English writers as they faced the changes brought about in European thought at the time, having been living in London recently and now spending a good deal of his time in study. In 1794 he shocked his cousins, including John Poole, who was training for ordination, by bringing to the house the latest of his friends, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. John kept a diary in Latin, where he recorded his shocked response:

> Each of them was shamefully hot with Democratic rage as regards politics, and both Infidel as to religion. I was extremely indignant.[6]

In recording Coleridge's religious views Tom himself was more punctiliously accurate:

> His aberrations from prudence, to use his own expression, have been great; but he now promises to be as sober and rational as his most sober friends could wish.

[6] Sandford, *Thomas Poole*, I, 103.

In religion he is a Unitarian, if not a Deist; in politicks a Democrat, to the utmost extent of the word.

Of Southey, on the other hand, he wrote that he was 'more violent in his principles than even Coldridge [sic] himself. In Religion, shocking to say in a mere Boy as he is, I fear he wavers between Deism and Atheism.'[7]

The visit of the two young men left a vivid impression on the family, where the story persisted of how when John Poole brought the news of Robespierre's death to Stowey, it was to find his cousin Tom with these two young men, who did not show the feelings that right-thinking people might have been expected to manifest at such a piece of intelligence. Instead, one of them – Southey – actually laid his head down upon his arms and exclaimed, 'I had rather have heard of the death of my own father.'[8]

There was a different emphasis in the emotions with which another contemporary greeted the latest developments, however. Wordsworth, who had been following events closely, knew more of Robespierre's reputation and its growing ferocity, so that when he heard the latest news while standing by the Leven estuary, his response was rather one of exultation As he watched a group of travellers who had just been guided along the perilous way across the sands there, he found that one of them was eager to make known the latest development.

> . . . the foremost of the band
> As he approached, no salutation given
> In the familiar language of the day,
> Cried, 'Robespierre is dead!' nor was a doubt,
> After strict question, left within my mind
> That he and his supporters all were fallen.
> Great was my transport, deep my gratitude
> To everlasting Justice, by this fiat
> Made manifest. 'Come now, ye golden times',
> Said I forth-pouring on those open sands
> A hymn of triumph: 'as the morning comes
> From out the bosom of the night, come ye:
> Thus far our trust is verified; behold!
> They who with clumsy desperation brought
> A river of Blood, and preached that nothing else
> Could cleanse the Augean stable, by the might

[7] *Ibid.*, 96–7. [8] *Ibid.*, 101.

Of their own helper have been swept away;
Their madness stands declared and visible . . .'[9]

Opposition to the Revolution had already been wakened, first by horror at news of the 1792 massacres, and then by the change of tack which led to the fate of Robespierre. Southey and Coleridge, who were encountering one another for the first time that summer, were so seized by the possibilities involved that they decided to collaborate on a drama, 'The Fall of Robespierre', which, according to their subsequent accounts, was finished at breakneck speed, and in high spirits. The event had not taken place until the end of July, and Coleridge dated his dedication, when it had been written and finally accepted by a Cambridge bookseller, 22 September. Much of August had been taken up with planning a move to America, and the plan of writing the play as a way of raising funds for it was evidently concocted towards the end of that month; the two men were meanwhile rapt in study of current newspapers, the results being evident from the accuracy of the detailed knowledge displayed.

It is significant that they were drawn by the fast-moving events of 1794 to attempt drama rather than any other literary form. It is also evident that although their prime intent was to celebrate the fall of a tyrant, they felt that Robespierre's qualities had been those of a good man perverted – which left them with a dilemma: how could freedom-lovers now proceed?

By this time, Coleridge, who had not only enjoyed the company of free-thinking undergraduates but spent some time as an ordinary soldier, was keenly aware of what had also become evident in France: that the business of government could not readily be undertaken by the common people as such, so that the idea of democracy needed to pass through various filters before there was any chance of its succeeding. Meanwhile, the debates in the country had polarized into the division between those who could be said to side with the 'Aristocrats', and those with the 'democrats', each using the word associated with the other as a term of abuse. The *Annual Register* for 1794 spoke of them as 'those two odious appellations . . . The former, bestowed on those who opposed all changes in the constitution; the latter on those who demanded these, together with an immediate peace with France, and an acknowledgment of the French republic'.[10] Those who sided most firmly with the French were of course proud to go further and adopt the term 'republican'. Thus Wordsworth,

[9] *WPrel* (1850) x. 570–87. [10] Quoted in a footnote to *CLects* (1795), p. 8n.

drafting in 1793 the 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff', which he did not in fact publish, gave the author as 'A Republican'; in a letter to Mathews some months later, he wrote, 'You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall for ever continue.'[11] (Twenty-five years later he would be warning the Freeholders of Westmorland against seeking 'a remedy for aristocratic oppression by throwing yourselves into the arms of a flaming democracy'.[12]) As John Poole saw, both Coleridge and Southey were caught up in the current vehemence, so that Coleridge, asserting his demotic sympathies by undertaking a tour on foot that summer, wrote his 'Perspiration, a Travelling Eclogue', which began

> The Dust flies smothering, as on clattering Wheels
> Loath'd aristocracy careers along.

Returning to university, however, he already showed himself more circumspect, writing the second letter of 'democratic' as a Greek character.[13] In subsequent years, as we have seen, the word could be used as a term of abuse by a Tory such as Holland, though even then its double face meant that it was best reinforced by some further epithet if it were to strike home – hence Holland's 'Democratic Libertine'. Coleridge, defending his political principles to his brother George in 1798, adopted a similar duality: although he acknowledged that despite his rash statements in the past he had now come to a more mature attitude, he still maintained that he could not altogether regret the full process through which he had passed, even if the acquired opprobrium had continued to stick: 'I therefore consent to be deemed a Democrat & a Seditionist.'[14] It was no doubt a similar unwillingness to devote himself unreservedly to the people's cause that had caused him to refuse the term 'democracy' for the scheme he and Southey promoted for their planned settlement in America, developing instead the Greek verbal model, first to 'Pantocracy', then 'Pantisocracy'.[15] Despite its mannered appearance, the term avoided setting up an opposition between 'the people' and 'the aristocrats' by stressing the universality of its offering – to everyone, on equal terms. But the detail of the scheme also made it clear that this was a concept

[11] *WL* (1787–1805), p. 119.
[12] *WPrW* III, 183. Fifteen years later, he wrote, still more apprehensively, at Lowther, 'Hourly the democratic torrent swells . . .' *WPW* IV, 48.
[13] *CL* I, 119. [14] *CL* I, 397. [15] *CL* I, 84, 103.