

# The Literature of Fear in Britain

## Coleridge's *Fears in Solitude* and the French Invasion of Fishguard in 1797

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**Abstract** This essay reads Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 poem, *Fears in Solitude*, in the context of the letters, memoirs, pamphlets, prints and caricatures that were produced in Britain during the 1797-98 French invasion scare. The essay will explore the ways in which these written and visual products attempted to evoke, express and even suppress feelings of fear, anxiety and terror and aims to understand Coleridge's 'fears' in the context of these feelings. In particular, the essay will examine how Coleridge's poem responds to the heightened alertness following the Fishguard landing in February 1797. In *Fears in Solitude*, Coleridge is deeply ambivalent about his stance towards his own country and his attitude towards the French. Reviewers and scholars have long been debating the poem's pro- or anti-war stance, and whether or not it is part of a contemporary alarmist discourse. Many broadsides, handbills and pamphlets published during this period warned about the horrors of a possible French invasion. They were funded by royalist associations with the sole aim of propagating fear across the nation. While these publications contributed to a widespread discourse of alarm, others, especially the visual culture of the period, challenged and ridiculed such fearmongering. Military and naval accounts and other first-hand narratives gave voice to the feelings pervading this time of psychological warfare, and explored the extent to which the horrors of war did come home intimately to affect the individual body and mind during this time. Read in the context of such contemporary texts, Coleridge's poem emerges as an artistic discourse designed reflectively to manage his own and the nation's fears instead of perpetuating the feeling itself.

**Summary** 1 Fishguard and the French Invasion Scare. – 2 Coleridge's *Fears in Solitude*. – 3 Conclusion.

**Keywords** Coleridge. Fishguard. Fear. War. Invasion. Propaganda. 1790s. Politics. Feeling.

## 1 Fishguard and the French Invasion Scare

This essay offers a reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, *Fears in Solitude, Written April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion*, in the context of a variety of publications (including personal accounts, pamphlets, broadsides, caricatures and propaganda writings) that were produced in Britain during the French invasion scare in 1797-98. The essay will explore the ways in which these written and visual products attempted to

evoke, express and even transform feelings of fear and panic and understand Coleridge's 'fears' in the context of these feelings. Many broadsides, handbills and pamphlets published during this period warned about the horrors of a possible French invasion. While these publications contributed to a widespread discourse of alarm, others challenged and ridiculed such fearmongering. This article will argue that when read in the context of such contemporary narratives, Coleridge's poem emerges as an artistic discourse designed reflectively to manage the nation's fears instead of further perpetuating these feelings. I will propose that Coleridge in this poem encourages his reader to embrace a more productive and self-reflective form of fear. This fear forces one to confront one's individual ethical stand in order to influence and re-shape the body politic, and thus pre-empt the national catastrophe embodied in the poem by a successful French invasion.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Fears in Solitude* was composed in Nether Stowey, Somerset, in April 1798 during 'the alarm of an invasion'. It was written in the aftermath of the French landing at Fishguard in February 1797, which was followed by a heightened nationwide preparedness for another invasion in the West Country. The period of 1796-1805 is known in Britain as the Great Terror. The plan to invade Britain goes back to 1796, when Lazare Hoche, Napoleon's most formidable rival at the time, organised an expedition to Ireland with the purpose of using the Irish unrest and hostility to the British crown to his advantage (Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 31). The stormy weather, however, dispersed the French ships before they could have landed. Hoche gave the command of the second invasion force to the American William Tate, an elderly man of Irish origin, who had previously fought in the American war of Independence. A substantial portion of Tate's 1400-strong army were ex-convicts, who had been released from gaol specifically for this attack and were therefore inexperienced in military affairs. Convicts were bound to be unruly and were disposable, and, if captured, would have had to be kept at the expense of the British government - which, as some speculated at the time, could have been Hoche's intention. As one commentator jokingly observed: "The English send their convicts to New South Wales, the French land theirs in old South Wales" ("The Invasion of England", 1860).<sup>1</sup>

Hoche's method was psychological: to "spread the panic as generally as possible". As he writes in his instructions to Tate:

and the troops being supplied with combustible matter, Col. Tate is to advance rapidly in the dark, on that side of Bristol which may be to windward, and immediately to set fire to that quarter. If the enterprize to be conducted with dexterity, it cannot fail to produce the total ruin of

1 "The Invasion of England in 1797. By a Native" (1860). *Saturday Evening Post*, 11 Feb.

the town, the port, the docks, and the vessels, and *to strike terror and amazement into the very heart of the capital of England*. (Hoche quoted in Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 54; emphasis added)

By Hoche's orders, Tate's troops were to take on shore minimum supplies only to last for four days: "Your soldiers are to carry with them nothing but their arms, ammunition, and bread: they will find everywhere clothes, linen and shoes; the inhabitants must supply their wants, and the seats of the gentry are to be your magazines" (Hoche quoted in Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 58). The purpose of the expedition was manifold. Firstly, they aimed to create an insurrection amongst the poor by planning to distribute money and drink and agitating against the government. Another aim was to create a distraction and thus to interrupt commerce and enable a larger invasion (*The Fishguard Invasion* 1892, 36; Baker 1797, 6.). Accordingly, Hoche ordered that "all impositions should be laid on peers, the men of rank and high fortune, the clergy, those who serve as officers in the army and navy, and especially in the militia" (*Annual Register* 39, 1797, quoted by Horn 1980, 3). Hoche's assumption was that he would be able to rely on the support of the poor and turn their discontent against the wealthy by organising a form of guerrilla warfare once in Britain and then enabling them to form a republican government. Tate's troops were therefore under strict orders never to pillage cottages but were encouraged to destroy the property of the rich (Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 52).

Tate's expedition, however, did not go according to plan. As Commodore Castagnier notes in his journal, the landing in the Bristol Channel had to be abandoned due to unfavourable tidal conditions. Instead, they decided to head for their second choice for landing, Cardigan Bay on the Welsh coast (Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 59-60). The enemy ships were spotted by the magistrate of the county of Pembroke, Thomas Williams, near Saint David's Head on 22 February 1797. Williams instantly sent a warning to Fishguard Fort (*An Authentic Account* 1842, 5; Bullen 1997, 9). A sense of panic and confusion followed rapidly amongst the locals:

Soon the news spread over the surrounding countryside and many farmers and cottagers, in panic, began to gather together such as livestock, implements and personal belongings as they could muster to move them inland towards Haverfordwest. The dread of the French in those days was so great that it 'amounted almost to black despair'. (Horn 1980, 5)

Many first-hand accounts of the invasion similarly testify that "there was no mistaking an invading foe; and thus every other passion thus became swallowed up in fear" on first spotting the enemy (Baker 1797, 1).

The vicar Daniel Rowlands, who claimed to have witnessed the landing when he was fifteen years old, accounts for "a very real fear":

I will not deny now, after the lapse of so many years, that my heart at this moment beat unpleasantly fast. I had already watched the landing of some of the French troops, but from a considerable distance, and there had been something unreal about the scene, something like to play-acting, or a dream; but now that I actually heard their voices, the effect was very different. They were really here, close by; there was no mistake about it. I had an almost overwhelming desire to take to my heels and run for it. (*The Fishguard Invasion* 1892, 67-8)

Another account emphasises how newspapers initially reinforced such feelings, by one paper mentioning

the terror and alarm into which the metropolis had been thrown by news just arrived, that a number of French frigates had appeared off the coast of South Wales, and succeeded in landing there a large body of troops. ("The Invasion of England" 1860)

Fishguard is a small and remote town, which many at the time considered an unlikely place for a major military event. Its small fort was ill-supplied with ammunition and unsuitable for fending off a more serious invasion. Unaware of the state of the town's defences, however, when the French heard shots fired from the fort, they immediately set sail out of Fishguard bay to land nearby at Carreg Wastad point (Baker 1797, 2). This is a remote foreland with rugged cliffs, which made landing particularly difficult. One of their boats capsized during the landing, and the hilly landscape made it hard to push barrels of gunpowder on shore. Also, Pembroke was at the time an area where large-scale smuggling took place (Bullen 1997). As the French soldiers discovered large quantities of alcohol, order and discipline rapidly degenerated into a state of drunkenness and chaos (Horn 1980, 7). The invasion attempt was fended off quickly by the local militia and volunteer forces: the Fishguard Fencibles, the Castlemartin Yeomanry Cavalry and the Cardiganshire Militia organised under the command of a local landowner, Lord Cawdor. Their numbers only amounted to a few hundred, including groups of local volunteers who joined the defence with improvised weapons. The *Annual Register* noted that "not one of these men had ever fired a musket, except for amusement, yet they proceeded against the enemy with the most cheerful alacrity" (quoted in Horn 1980, 8). Still, Tate's troops quickly realised that the local support that they had expected did not materialise. Discipline amongst the French broke down; and, believing they were outnumbered by the British, once their ships sailed off and a retreat was therefore made impossible, they unconditionally surrendered on Goodwick Sands on 24 February.

The invasion threat in the 1790s was complicated by divided political sentiments at home. Following the French Revolution, the conservative

British government's fears of treason, conspiracy and Jacobinism led to a climate of heightened surveillance and repressive measures. The execution of Louis XVI in 1793 was an evident wake-up call to royalists in Britain. In light of emerging republicanism at home, some feared the possibility of a similar fate for George III. In consequence, William Pitt's government curtailed civil liberties, resulting in the suspension of Habeas Corpus, the treason trials and the Two Acts of 1795. The invasion threat raised the question of whether the government could trust the loyalty of its own subjects in resisting the French. Opposition to the war was strong in radical circles. Many, including William Frend and Joseph Gerrard, emphasised the economic devastation that war was threatening to bring. And motivating the labouring poor to leave their home and family and to voluntarily sacrifice their lives in the service of the government's war effort also proved to be hard.<sup>2</sup>

The loyalist answer to the challenges posed by the divided sentiments coupled with a foreign invasion threat was a large propaganda effort. There was an outpouring of broadsides, pamphlets, caricatures, prints, popular songs and other ephemera between 1797 and 1805 responding to the possibility of an invasion (Philp 2006, 2, 126). Most of this material was sponsored by the government or loyalist associations, often – especially in the 1803-05 period – with the aim of mobilising the poor against the French. In 1797-1798 the government was somewhat reluctant to call for volunteers, fearing an armed nation that would be equipped to turn against the establishment (Philp 2006, 6). The majority of these publications were dominated by an alarmist discourse, aiming for the perpetuation of fear amongst the masses. Those published in 1797-1798 were often aimed to warn against factions within the political elite and against those who sought to agitate for reform. The discourse of pamphlets, broadsides and other propaganda material circulating across the nation was quite distinctive with recurring tropes and an imagery of horror and merciless violence. They depicted the French as savages who would murder, rape and pillage if allowed entry into the country. In 1798, for instance, the Bishop of Llandaff worried that “Great Britain will be made an appendage to continental Despotism” and warned that:

They everywhere promise protection to the poorer sort, and they every where strip the poorest of every thing they possess; they plunder their cottages, and they set them on fire when the plunder is exhausted; they torture the owners to discover their wealth, and they put them to death when they

<sup>2</sup> See William Frend's appendix to *Peace and Union*, “The Effect of War on the Poor”, which was published days after hostilities began in February 1793. Joseph Gerrard also emphasised the economic devastation that war was threatening to bring in “A Convention the Only Means of Saving us from Ruin” (1793).

have none to discover; they violate females of all ages; they insult the hoary head, and trample on all the decencies of life. (Watson 1798, 8)<sup>3</sup>

Whilst during the 1790s the government's paranoia focused on possible internal enemies, during the second period of invasion scare, 1803-05, the focus was on the external threat associated mainly with the person of Napoleon as a national enemy. The period 1803-05 saw the most sustained threat of a French invasion, where Napoleon's 80,000-strong army was camped along the Channel with additional reinforcement further inland. A large flotilla of barges and boats was constructed at this time with the intention of transporting troops across to England (Philp 2006, 1). Several 1803 loyalist prints presented a choice between 'freedom and slavery' and exhorted that 'Britons never will be slaves' to Napoleon – pictured by many sources as mad, blinded by ambition, a heartless murderer even of his own sick soldiers, and the slaver of Europe.<sup>4</sup> A broadside titled "The Fate of Labouring Men, and the Poor, in Case of Invasion" (1803) warned that:

The stouter, and the more inured to Labour any working Man is, the better Price will he fetch in the Slave-Market. A rich Man, who cannot handle a Spade or a Pick-axe, who cannot wheel a Barrow, or stand the Furnace of the Melting-house, will only be fit to be killed; but the able-bodied Labourer will be sold for a Slave. (1803, 71)

A gruesome depiction of atrocities committed by the French was common in these publications. This patriotic broadside published around 1803 depicts episodes of rape in order to emphasise French monstrosity in relation to the 1797 Fishguard event:

These wretches are accustomed, whenever they prevail to subject the women to the most brutal violence, which they perpetrate with an insulting ferocity of which the wildest savages would be incapable. To

<sup>3</sup> The prints, political cartoons, caricatures and broadsides cited in this article as 'Curzon' are from the Bodleian Library's Curzon collection. This collection comprises the extra-illustrated volumes of A.M. Broadley's *Napoleon in Caricature* (1911), J.H. Rose's *The Life of Napoleon* (1901) and Lord Rosebery's *Napoleon: The Last Phase* (1900). Broadley was a collector of Napoleonic materials, who 'grangerised' these books into a 28 volume folio. 'Grangerisation' was the practice of extra-illustrating books with original documents and prints. The *Times Literary Supplement* from 19 September 1918 considers it debatable whether "the Grangerizer is a benefactor or a vandal of the deepest dye". See the introductory pages of Broadley and Daniell (Curzon d.25). I am grateful to the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, for permission to reproduce material and digital images from the Curzon collection.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, "Freedom or Slavery: A New Song" (1803); Fitzgerald, "Britons never will be Slaves: An Address to Every Loyal Briton on the Threatened Invasion of his Country" (1803); "The Fate of Labouring Men, and the Poor, in Case of Invasion" (1803).

gratify their furious passions is not however their chief object in these atrocities. Their principal delight is to shock the feelings of fathers and brothers, and husbands! Will you, my Countrymen, which you can draw a trigger, or handle a pike, suffer your daughters, your sisters, and wives, to fall into the power of such monsters? [...] Two Officers went to a house, in which was a woman in child-bed, attended by her mother, who was upwards of Seventy Years old. The French brutes tied the husband with cords, and in his presence, defiled both the wife and the mother!!! (Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 76)<sup>5</sup>

The alarmist broadside “Horrors upon horrors” (1803) (fig. 1) uses a personal account to fuel the nation’s fears, narrating how a Hanoverian blacksmith witnessed the horrific cruelties of the French soldiers. It proposes a “true and faithful Narrative of the Sufferings of a Hanoverian Blacksmith, who died raving Mad, in consequence of the dreadful Scenes of Barbarity, of which he had been of late an Eye-witness” [Curzon b.10(46)]. “An Invasion Sketch” (1803) depicts a national catastrophe, where Napoleon has successfully occupied London and rewards his troops by allowing them to pillage the city for three days:

Churches broken open, and the church plate plundered - The pews and altars converted into stabling - Four Bishops murdered, who had taken refuge in Westminster Abbey - The screams of women and of children mix with the cries of the soldiers - Vive la Republique! Vive Bonaparte! [Curzon b.10(66)]

In the end, important political and military figures, including Pitt and Lord Nelson are tried by a military tribunal and shot in Hyde Park. Britain is compared to a second Carthage and London’s name is changed to “Buonapartopolis” (“An Invasion Sketch” 1803, 66).

The visual culture of the invasion period, however, demonstrates a resistance to the government’s effort by making panic-mongering the object of satire. The *London Chronicle* of 2 January 1798 printed a report by an English sailor, recently returned from Brest, who claimed to have seen “astounding preparations”, including the progress of “one of those immense rafts projected by Citizen Monge” (8). Several sketches followed, attempting to depict what these machines could have looked like, including rafts powered by windmills and watermills (see fig. 2, “A view of the French raft, as

5 *The Saturday Evening Post*’s account from 1860 mentions similar instances of cruelty in relation to Fishguard, but it also cites empowering accounts of the locals standing up to the French. It also depicts the French as ‘panic-stricken’ when they march to surrender.

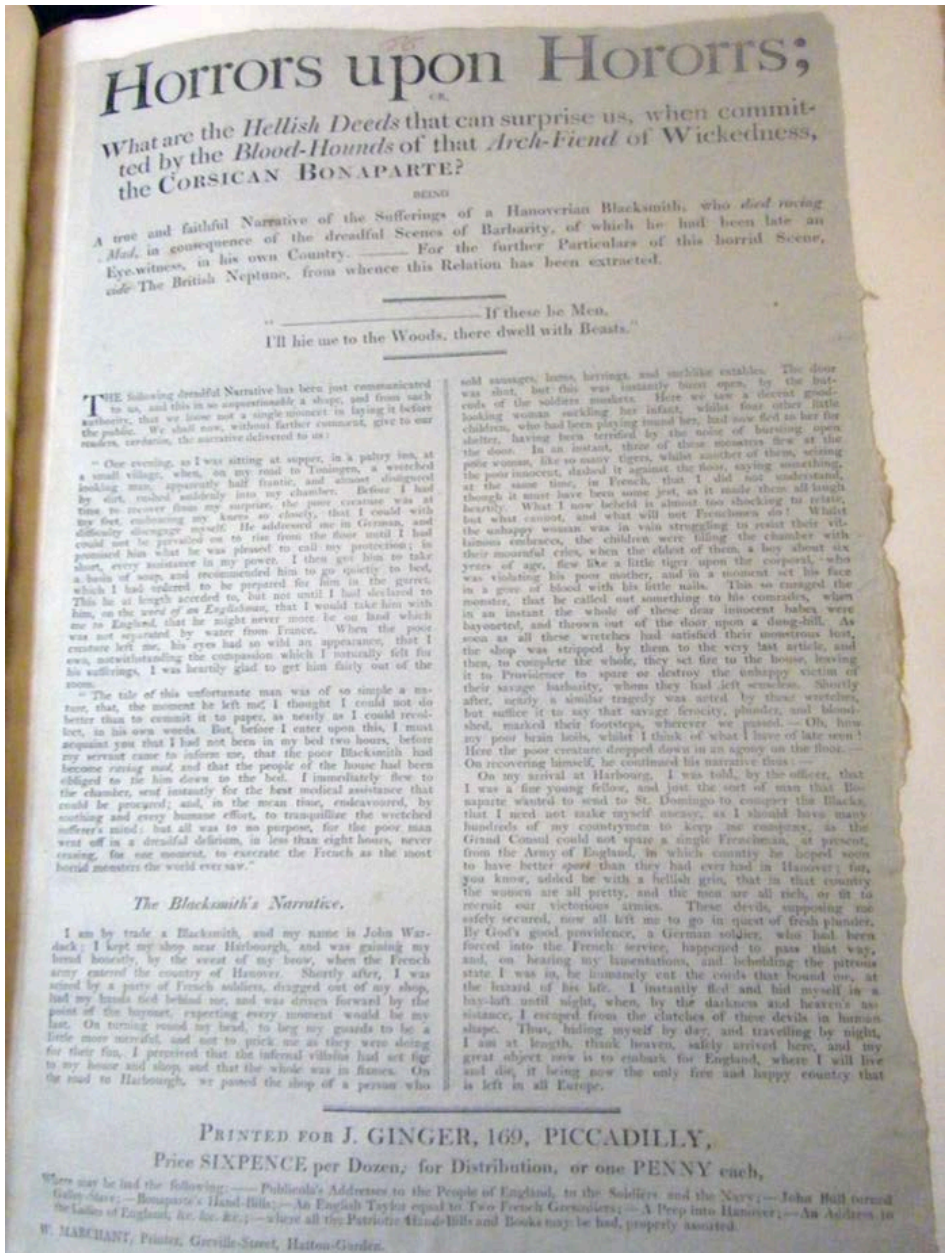


Figure 1. "Horrors Upon Horrors [sic], or What are the Hellish Deeds that can surprise us, when committed by the Black-Hounds of the Arch-Fiend or Wickedness, The Corsican Bonaparte". London: W. Marchant. Curzon b.10(46)



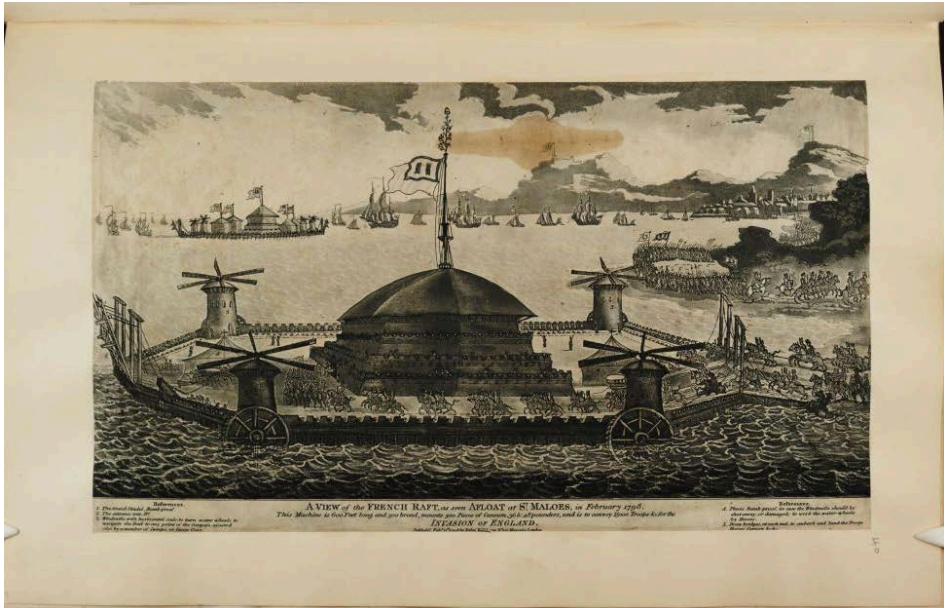


Figure 2 (up). A view of the French raft, as seen afloat at St. Maloes, in February 1798. London: John Fairburn, 13 February 1798. Curzon b.22(40)

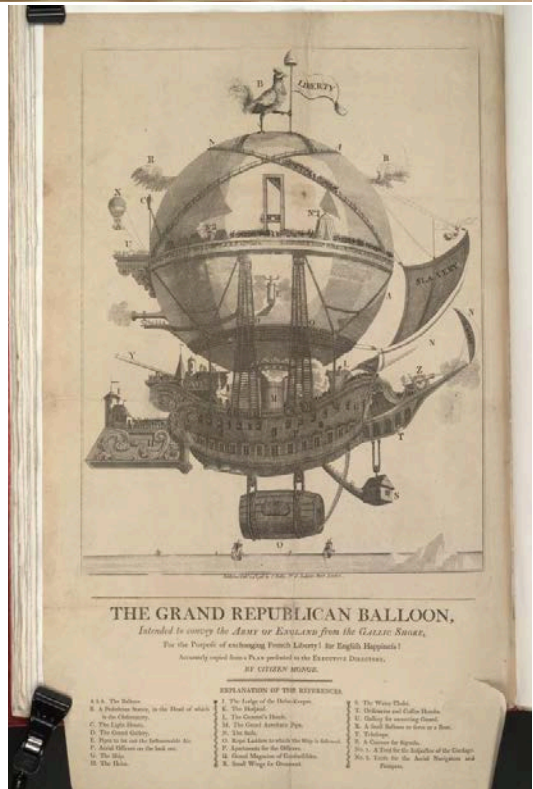


Figure 3 (right). The grand republican balloon, intended to convey the Army of England from the Gallic shore. London: J. Wallis, 24 February 1798. Curzon b.11(40)

seen afloat at St. Maloes, in February 1798").<sup>6</sup> Political cartoonists, inspired by the idea, produced various caricatures on the theme. For instance, "The Grand Republican Balloon: for the Purpose of Exchanging French Liberty! For English Happiness!" (1798) (fig. 3) even had a guillotine on board, and was big enough to carry "the Army of England" across the channel. And as some caricatures demonstrate, not everyone bought into the propagation of danger. For instance, Isaac Cruikshank's "The Budget or John Bull Frightened out of His [Money] Wits" (1796) (fig. 4) portrayed the threat as a convenient excuse for the government to raise taxes (Franklin, Philp 2003, 47).

In the 1803-05 period as the threat intensified, the satirical tone countering the prevalence of fear persisted. "More Rafts - or, A new Plan for Invading England" (1803), for instance, pictures entire cavalry troops transported in huge swan-shaped machines, which were gifted to the English by the Mayor of Amiens (fig. 5). Amidst the hundreds of patriotic prints, songs and poems pouring out during this period, one can still come across material adopting a more critical or satirical tone. The broadside "Countrymen, The Whole Plot's Discover'd!!" (1803) makes fun of the invasion attempt and exposes Napoleon's power-hunger by picturing him as a megalomaniac who is even prepared to make a quixotic attempt to conquer the Moon. And the conquered British soldier should beware as a diet of soup awaits him in the French army:

Mark what I tell ye! - the prime Youth of your Land are to be led forth to complete the Conquest of the World. That Corpulency which ye have acquired by a natural Attention to Beef and Pudding is to be hastily reduced to the sleeky Size of a Frenchman by a copious Use of thin Soup, Garlic, and Exercise. ("Countrymen" 1803, 75)

In the aftermath of Fishguard the public's fears intensified significantly. Large-scale mobilisation followed, with the roads to Wales overflowing with troops. The atmosphere of hurry and upheaval was mingled with panic blown out of proportion by gossip and misinformation. The Admiralty feared another large expedition, now against Ireland. This climate of hypervigilance led to a series of false alarms on the Welsh coast (Jones 1950, 145-8). According to *An Authentic Account*, when a number of boats were sighted again one night, the "alarm was instantly spread - drums beat to arms in all directions; and the necessity of putting all the French prisoners to death, solemnly debated" (*An Authentic Account* 1842, 35). In the end, they turned out to be coasters robbing fishing nets. Ironically, this event caused a greater alarm across the country than the actual invasion. In response to the threat,

<sup>6</sup> Many of the Curzon collection's caricatures and political cartoons related to Napoleon and the French invasion scare are digitally available via <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.

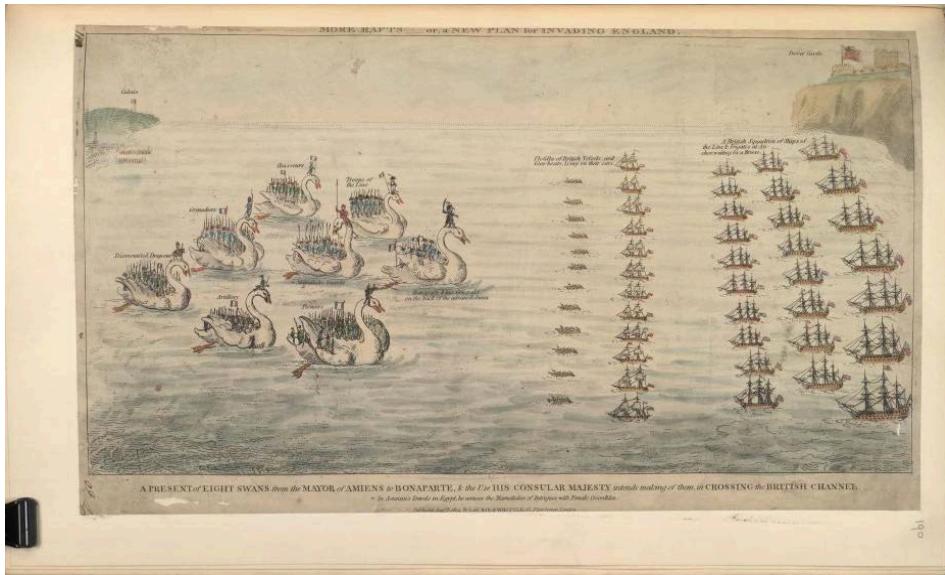


Figure 4. Isaac Cruikshank, The budget, or John Bull frightened out of his [money] wits. London: S.W. Fores, 1796. Curzon b.3(66)

Figure 5. More rafts -- or : A new plan for invading England. A present of eight swans from the Mayor of Amiens. London: Laurie & Whittle, 8 August 1803. Curzon b.23(190)

the Admiralty sent Sir Captain Pellew at Plymouth to cruise in the Bristol Channel. However, the appearance of his *Indefatigable* caused the locals to believe that they were French vessels, causing yet another upheaval of panic: "It would be impossible to describe the scene of confusion and dismay which took place: women in tears, and fainting; -- the men crying, 'to arms! to arms!' [...] and many hundreds of bold determined hearts had assembled in Fishguard, resolved to conquer or die" (*An Authentic Account* 1842, 36).

Fishguard is usually remembered today as a humorous shambles, with a handful of Welshmen and women triumphantly outsmarting the French and making them look ridiculous and incompetent. The event most frequently associated with the landing is the story that the French mistook local women dressed up in traditional hats and red coats for British soldiers and believed themselves to be outnumbered. One woman in particular is celebrated as a local hero: the 47-year-old cobbler Jemima Nicholas, who allegedly captured fourteen Frenchmen and held them until the return of the local defence forces to Fishguard. While the story that Lord Cawdor deliberately used the women to deceive the French is a myth, there is evidence that the French thought that they had been outnumbered and that this was an impression that Lord Cawdor had been trying to promote. The women did play an important part in defending Fishguard for a whole day, and they did gather on the hill - but not to frighten off the French but to watch them surrender. In *The Last Invasion: The Story of the French Landing in Wales*, Phil Carradice traces how the myth of the women taken for soldiers and used for bringing about a surrender emerged in contemporary and later narratives. He examines how the story changed through contemporary eyewitness accounts and later nineteenth-century accounts from the women as merely present and watching the surrender into them actively bringing about the French capitulation (Carradice 1992, 93-101). These narratives explicitly claim to be authentic - which claim is arguably questionable, and there are still speculations in the nineties as to what exactly happened at Fishguard and who, if anyone, invited the French. Sid Walters, in his self-published *'Official' Account, French Invasion, 1797* (1993) comes to the conclusion that the landing at Fishguard was a Catholic conspiracy.

It is also worthwhile to examine the transformation of emotion in this series of retrospective accounts. While most first-hand accounts of the Fishguard event mention the initial sense of fear and panic, many of them also describe how these feelings quickly gave way to other emotions and experiences. Even Lord Cawdor notes the initial chaos in his own account of the invasion: "Upon my arrival in that town [Haverfordwest] I found the inhabitants in great confusion and alarm. Many had fled and others were preparing to follow" (Cawdor quoted in Walters 1993, 98). The discussion, however, quickly moves on to highlight how he brought order back to a dire situation by accepting command of the local defence troops. In the same vein, most accounts appear to put an emphasis on how the initial sense of panic was

swiftly controlled by the brave locals stepping up to the task of defending the country. Instead of picturing the French as monstrous, most accounts present an image that ranges from humane to pathetic and weak. *An Authentic Account*, for instance, presents distinct episodes of individual encounter between the French and the Welsh. Owen Griffiths, who served on board a British ship that was captured by the French near Carrig Wastad point, tells his readers about how his initial fears were abated when the French captain reassured him that he would be treated as equal and made comfortable:

Owen then asked the commodore to restore the Britannia to him; -- the commodore replied, "do you not know, that you are prisoners?" at which Owen trembled; when the commodore said, "What are you afraid of, you sir?" at the same time, he gave him some brandy to cheer up his spirits. Owen was taken to the camp that night by the general, who had his bed and pillow spread on the ground, observing, that "he had slept hundreds of nights, in that way, very comfortably;" he then lay down, and bade him sleep behind his back. (*An Authentic Account* 1842, 13)

Later they even let him go home to his family, making him promise that he would return within three hours, which he never did.

Plundering is presented as something done by a few unruly individuals rather than an overwhelming enemy. They are swiftly confronted and effectively controlled by locals, and the victims are said to receive generous government compensation for life (*An Authentic Account* 1842, 16). Instead of raping women, the French act humanely:

a woman was brought to bed at the time of the French landing, and being too weak to be removed, remained, placing her trust in providence. A number of the French entered the house - the poor woman took up the newly born infant in her arms - the enemy endeavoured to soothe the poor woman's fears, and left the house without further molestation. (*An Authentic Account* 1842, 25)

Rowlands presents the French capitulation as a humorous episode, where the French not only have to come to terms with their own incompetence, but are also humiliated by the local women:

It is impossible to describe the chagrin depicted on their features when they realised how trifling (numerically speaking) was the force to which they had succumbed. Still greater was the annoyance they experienced when they discovered that the scarlet flash which had so scared them was produced—not by the red coats of a body of regulars—but by the whittles worn by a parcel of women! [...] these bellicose dames and damsels gathered closely around the Frenchmen, addressing manifold observations

to them in their Welsh tongue, in the use of which most of them possess extraordinary fluency. [...] I was close by when Madame Tate who had accompanied the troops flew at him [General Tate] like a fury. She, too, had discovered the paucity of our numbers, and that Lord Cawdor's "ten thousand men" were—in Spain perhaps—and that the English regulars were—well, very irregular forces attired in scarlet whittles. Her remarks as to the conduct of the campaign were evidently of a most uncomplimentary nature; though I cannot say I understood French, I understood that. In my heart I felt sorry for General Tate. "Look here, mum", I ventured to remark, "if you want to have it out with somebody, here's a lady of your own weight and age. Tackle Jemima." (*The Fishguard Invasion* 1892, 177-8)

In other accounts fear gets projected onto the French, revealing their insecurity and apprehension in moments of stress. In his letter to his wife dated March 1797, Lord Cawdor describes the scene when the officers leading the French invasion are taken prisoner and escorted to Carmarthen under Cawdor's supervision. Cawdor notes that Tate was "alarmed and confused" and "trembled almost to convulsions" when chaperoned through an angry mob. Captain Norris and Lieutenant St Leger were both "greatly frightened". Cawdor calls Captain Tyrell "a stupid Paddy", and Le Brun (Monsieur le Baron de Rochemure, the second in command) "as dirty as a pig, but more intelligent and better manners" (Cawdor quoted in Wheeler, Broadley [1908] 2007, 69; Horn 1980, 12). And according to *An Authentic Account*, during the capitulation, "all the officers remained at Trehowel, their head-quarters, being afraid to go with their men to the sands" (21).

## 2 Coleridge's Fears in *Fears in Solitude*

At the time of the composition of *Fears in Solitude* in April 1798, Coleridge lived in Nether Stowey in the West county, and in the close proximity of Wordsworth, who moved into Alfoxden in July 1797. The poem was published by the radical publisher Joseph Johnson in late 1798 as part of the quarto *Fears in Solitude, Written in 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion. to which are Added France, an Ode; and Frost at Midnight*. Reviewers and critics have long been puzzled by the poem's ambivalence. It has been subject to debate whether *Fears in Solitude* is a pro-war or an anti-war poem, and whether or not it is part of the contemporary discourse of alarmism. Mark Rawlinson (2000, 119) is uncertain whether it is an anti-war polemic or a rather docile call to arms; Paul Magnuson suggests that the ambivalence found in the 1798 collection is understandable in a climate where the pressure on those perceived as Jacobin had intensified: "Coleridge's allegiance to the domestic space – personal and national – seems in this pamphlet to leave itself open to interpretation as a Burkean patriotism",

leaving the collection “deliberately open both to radical and conservative implications” (1998, 67, 70). I believe that understanding the poem’s ambivalence goes hand in hand with unpacking Coleridge’s response to contemporary articulations of – primarily political – fear.

The immediate context for writing *Fears in Solitude* was the climate of intensifying government anxieties regarding a possible new invasion attempt in 1798. This was brought on by the arrest, by Pitt’s government, of John Binns of the London Corresponding Society and two United Irishmen, the Rev. James Coigley and Arthur O’Connor, on 1 March 1798. They found a letter on Coigley, addressed to the French Directory, proposing to conspire in a French invasion of Ireland. They were acquitted of treason, but Binns was sent to prison until Pitt’s fall in 1801. In the wake of these arrests, the government increased pressure on suspected French sympathisers, which led to the suspension of Habeas Corpus (Coleridge 1978, 1: lxxvii).<sup>7</sup> Due to his radical sympathies, Coleridge did not escape the scrutiny of an increasingly repressive establishment. Between 1793 and 1795, both Coleridge and Wordsworth were aligned with mainstream Painite opposition to war (Roe 1988, 126). During the 1790s Coleridge built up a reputation as a radical in the West country, based on his lectures in Bristol in 1795, the *Watchman* of 1796, and the poems and essays that he contributed to the *Morning Post* toward the end of 1797. The home office even sent a spy, James Walsh (nicknamed “Spy Nozy” by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*) to watch Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s allegedly suspicious activities, which involved night-time walks and profuse note-taking in a part of the country that was deemed close enough to Ilfracombe, where the French ships were first sighted in 1797 (Roe 1988, 249 ff.). In the climate of increasing vigilance in the wake of Fishguard, the government’s overreaction is perhaps less surprising. In the spring of 1798 the French invasion was considered imminent by both parties, and both Houses unanimously approved of embodying the cavalry and militia against those who were seen as “disaffected” (Coleridge 1978, 1: lxxxii). Thus, Magnuson argues, the patriotic tone of *Fears* and *France: an Ode* can be understood as a public declaration of Coleridge’s shift from radicalism to patriotism in the face of harsh government repression (1989, 200).

Despite the ostensible ambivalence of *Fears in Solitude*, Coleridge’s harsh critique of sensationalist writing might offer a clue to his attitude to fear-generating discourses, even perhaps in a political setting. In his review of Lewis’s *The Monk* he writes:

Situations of torment, and images of naked horror, are easily conceived;

<sup>7</sup> Coleridge had been following Binns’s activities from the beginning. *The Watchman* 4, 127 (Friday, March 25, 1796) gives account of Binns’s first near-arrest for holding a meeting in Birmingham.

and a writer in whose works they abound, deserves our gratitude almost equally with him who should drag us by way of sport through a military hospital, or force us to sit at the dissecting-table of a natural philosopher. [...] Figures that shock the imagination, and narratives that mangle the feelings, rarely discover genius, and always betray a low and vulgar taste. (Coleridge 1797, 195)

Moreover, Coleridge clearly maintained his opposition to the war until early 1798 (Roe 1988, 239). Hazlitt recollects Coleridge give an anti-war sermon on Sunday 14 January that year at Shrewsbury. To “shew the fatal effects of war”, Coleridge

drew a striking contrast between the simple shepherd boy, driving his team afield, or sitting under the hawthorn, piping to his flock [and...] the same poor country-lad, crimped, kidnapped, brought into town, made drunk at an alehouse, turned into a wretched drummer-boy, with his hair sticking on end with powder and pomatum, a long cue at his back, and tricked out in the loathsome finery of the profession of blood. (Hazlitt 1930-34, 108)

But the news of the French invasion of the Swiss cantons, which reached London on 19 March, was seen by many as a betrayal of the Revolution’s ideals by a rapidly expanding military imperialism (Roe 1986, 146). Coleridge’s response was the publication of “Recantation: An Ode” in the *Morning Post* on 16 April 1798, which demonstrated a marked change of attitude towards the French Revolution. In *Fears in Solitude*, Coleridge expresses his disillusionment together with a simultaneous critique of the politics driving his own country, allowing both issues to surface in the poem and contributing to its much-debated ambivalence.

Coleridge’s walks in the countryside, and his peaceful enjoyment of the landscape in a quiet dell on Quantock Hills at the beginning of the poem, are a response to the political turbulence of 1797-98. For Coleridge, this was a time of withdrawal from the public sphere, and an act of taking refuge in the remote quietness of Nether Stowey following his active and radical Bristol years. Coleridge hoped that the healing quality of the landscape would help manage his painful emotions and cultivate positive sentiments. As he writes to his brother, the Rev. George Coleridge, on 10 March 1798:

I love fields & woods & mounta[ins] with almost a visionary fondness - and because I have found benevolence & quietness growing within me as that fondness [has] increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others - & to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction.



He continues by quoting Wordsworth:

[...] for the Man  
 Once taught to love such objects, as excite  
 No morbid passions, no disquietude,  
 No vengeance & no hatred, needs must feel  
 The Joy of that pure principle of Love  
 So deeply, that, unsatisfied with aught  
 Less pure & exquisite, he cannot chuse  
 But seek for objects of a kindred Love  
 In fellow-natures, & a kindred Joy.  
 (*The Collected Letters*, 1: 397-8)

By being immersed in the landscape, Coleridge proposes not to fight bad feelings; instead, he tries not to give them attention. He believes that natural scenery helps develop other-regarding feelings in the individual, who then enables the transmission of such positive emotions to others. This wish to be the instrument of spreading benevolence instead of negative emotion is, I believe, a key component of his poem's emotional dynamic.

On the surface, however, other-regarding feeling and peaceful withdrawal is far from what materialises in *Fears in Solitude*. Coleridge's troubling thoughts about the possibility of an invasion do not leave him in peace, intruding instead into the poet's inner world. After the idyllic start, the poem takes a darker turn:

It is indeed a melancholy thing,  
 And weighs upon the heart, 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 undetermin'd conflict.  
 (Coleridge 2001b, 595-603; ll. 33-9)<sup>8</sup>

The fantasy of a haunting scenario of invasion becomes a psychological threat: the invasion of the mind by an idea. And instead of being a healing force, the landscape also inadvertently contributes to this mental invasion. Coleridge cannot help but notice the "sunny beam" on the "long-ivied beacon" (207-8) – an element of coastal defence built in response to the heightened French invasion scare following Fishguard.

<sup>8</sup> All subsequent citations of this poem are from this volume and will be referenced by line numbers in brackets.

The poem's argument is that the imminent invasion – the one that contemporaries unanimously predicted in 1798 – is the result of (and due punishment for) the nation's own sins and wrongdoings. These include political and religious corruption, the enslavement of other nations, lack of compassion, as well as ruthless warmongering far from home. When waging war at a distance, Coleridge suggests, the sacrifices of the individual remain invisible, looking "As if the soldier died without a wound; | As if the fibres of this godlike frame | Were gor'd without a pang" (118-20). Mary A. Favret argues that the immediate activity of the first major European war remained outside the visual experience of the English public as newspaper reports, songs and poems functioned as a "paper shield" against the "destructive violence of war" (1994, 539). Favret makes use of Elaine Scarry's theory outlined in her book titled *The Body in Pain*. Scarry argues that the "reciprocal injuring" that constitutes war often remains invisible in its representations (1985, 63). The wounding, pain and death suffered by actual human bodies are either missing altogether from war writing or are carefully mediated and transformed by the rhetorical devices of the text. Coleridge's anti-war argument here is similar: when we fight a war at a distance, we become detached from its cruelty. War becomes a form of entertainment or a field of study with its own technical vocabulary when "Boys and girls, | And women, that would groan to see a child | Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war, | The best amusement for our morning meal!" (105-8). When fratricide is routinely expressed through euphemisms, "mere abstractions" and "empty sounds" (116), we have lost touch with all other-regarding feeling that could do justice to the realities of war. The government encourages a form of patriotic enthusiasm for the war effort, which fails to consider the horrific experiences of individuals on the battlefield and the ripple effect of such trauma on their relatives at home. And, as Coleridge implies, we, as individuals – including women and children at home – play along and lose our capacity for sympathy along the way.

But Coleridge's poem has another side to it, which appears to contradict this anti-war sentiment. The poem depicts Coleridge's struggles with being afraid when alone – afraid of the productions of his own mind. It articulates the process of the poet evoking and then controlling fears of the destruction of his country. The horrors that he dreams up carry echoes of contemporary alarmist publications. He depicts a vision of English women and children fleeing their home and becoming refugees; and his appeal to a patriotic masculinity mirrors the tone of many contemporary bellicose songs and propaganda literature in the following passage:

O let not English women drag their flight  
Fainting beneath the burthen of their babes,  
Of the sweet infants, that but yesterday

Laugh'd at the breast! [...]  
 Stand forth! be men! repel an impious foe,  
 Impious and false, a light yet cruel race,  
 That laugh away all virtue, mingling mirth  
 With deeds of murder; and still promising  
 Freedom, themselves too sensual to be free,  
 [...]

Stand we forth;  
 Render them back upon th' insulted ocean,  
 And let them toss as idly on it's [sic] waves,  
 As the vile sea-weeds, which some mountain blast  
 Swept from our shores! And O! may we return  
 Not with a drunken triumph, but with fear,  
 Repenting of the wrongs, with which we stung  
 So fierce a foe to frenzy!  
 (132-54)

In his essay "Alarmism, Public-Sphere Performatives, and the Lyric Turn", Mark Jones argues that Coleridge, rather than being alarmist himself, suggests that the real enemy are fear and paranoia, and not the French. The view of the French as monstrous and dehumanised is the product of the scaremongering imagination of British alarmist propaganda. Jones maintains that, for Coleridge, the real threat to liberty in the 1790s was caused by the government's own fear and subsequent acts of persecution. And what perpetuated this threat was the way in which such negative sentiments were transmitted and intensified in the public sphere. Through the medium of contemporary publications, William Pitt's 'Reign of Terror' recreated, and mirrored even, the very terror that it meant to oppose (Jones 2003, 85).

Yet reading Coleridge's poem in the context of the Fishguard narratives allows us to complement previous interpretations. While the poem is evidently aware of alarmist writing, it is more in line with those narrative and visual attempts that challenge such transmission of panic. In this essay a variety of publications have been considered, all of which use fear, but in different ways. Alarmist publications compel their audience to feel it, to get caught up in it, take sides and ultimately to support the war effort. The Fishguard narratives want their reader to see how fear can be controlled, transformed, laughed at and observed in the one whom we fear. Coleridge depicts fear by first picturing it as an idea that presents itself during the poet's meditations, rather than an immediate, felt experience. The object of these fears is something indefinite. The "uproar" and "strife" of the invasion "*may now be stirring | This way or that way*" (35-6), while the hills themselves remain "silent" (36). The invasion in the poem is not imminent, but a possibility of "fear and rage | And *undetermined* conflict" occurring

to the poet on reflection (38-9; emphases added). Whose fear and rage it is remains unclear: the feelings stand there as abstractions. The poem articulates the process of Coleridge evoking and then controlling fears of the destruction of his country. His overwhelming fantasies are resolved by breaking out of his solitude at the end of the poem. The sight of his village and Tom Poole's house rescue Coleridge from the nightmare of his own mental productions. "Society" gives his mind "a livelier impulse", a "dance of thought" (219, 221). But even this does not completely eliminate the oscillation of his desire between society and solitude that haunts the poem's framework, which oscillation also hints at his looming marital unhappiness and adds a personal level to the poem's politically charged ambivalence.

In conclusion, I would like to propose that Coleridge talks about two different kinds of fear in the poem. On the one hand, the fear of a monstrous enemy pictured by propaganda publications, by which the government and loyalist societies attempted to manipulate the population into feeling and acting the way the authorities desired. Coleridge finds a strategy to cope with these terrors by encouraging his reader to feel and embrace a different, more productive kind of fear. He urges his countrymen to return from the victory with "fear" and "not with a drunken triumph" (152) - a pre-emptive fear of one's individual vices and of the disastrous and widespread consequences these wrongs are bound to have on the fate of the nation. In fact, the word "awe" features instead of "fear" in line 152 in two variants of the poem.<sup>9</sup>

While propaganda is designed to induce collective panic, this other kind of fear works first and foremost at the level of the individual, and is a catalyst to reflection. The reader should feel this fear when contemplating the nation's wrongs: slavery, war-mongering and greed. But he also urges us to reflect on the erosion of sympathy in us as individuals, when being caught up in collective negative sentiment and remaining "ignorant" of the "ghastlier workings" of war (91-2). For Coleridge, after all, war never truly happens at a distance; even in his solitary dell war finds a way to intrude on his psyche, showing that a distant war fought by others can come back to haunt the individual in his most intimate moments of creative contemplation. We cannot expect all change from a change of power, he writes: the government is not a "robe | On which our vice and wretchedness were tagg'd | Like fancy-points and fringes, with the robe | Pull'd off at pleasure" (164-7). He is urging his countrymen to take stock and look at what they had become, warning that "never can true courage dwell with them | Who, playing tricks with conscience, dare not look | At their own vices" (158-60). While loyalist publications were designed to appeal to the public's instinc-

9 There are two MS and seven full printed texts of the poem. Lines 130-98 were reprinted with omissions and slight revisions in the *Morning Post* and in the *Friend* (see Coleridge 2001a, 469). For an explanation of the different versions of the text see Coleridge 2001b, 594-5.

tive emotional response, for Coleridge fear becomes an intellectual and artistic subject matter, treated with criticism and reflection, rather than remaining an overwhelming emotion. Aiming to resist an alarmist perpetuation of panic, Coleridge instead presents fear as a productive feeling that forces the reader to evaluate the ethical dimensions of late-eighteenth century British politics, and also, the individual's own private contribution to it.

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