

## Coleridge's Understanding of the Irish and Catholic Questions

Koichi Yakushigawa

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was much concerned not only with literature especially with poetry but also with religion, politics, social and philosophical problems from his boyhood days in a Devonshire vicarage to his last years at Highgate. Above all the church's role in society had been a matter of his concern. According to John Colmer, editor of the *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, "The issue that raised the question of Church and State in so acute a form during Coleridge's lifetime was Catholic Emancipation, itself a part of a larger problem, the Irish Question. These twin issues dominated English politics for over a century."<sup>1</sup> And Coleridge's rudimentary idea of Pantisocracy along with his sophisticated concept of Imagination seems to loom behind his idea of the *Church and State*. Now in this paper I will illustrate how much his literary theory has to do with his political ideas and with contemporary political and religious affairs, especially with the Irish problem.

As early as March 17, 1796, we find Coleridge opposing a new Bill against the Irish Insurrections on his Watchman No. III, quoting a short abstract of it.

"It is a melancholy truth that the spirit of insurrection, in the Sister Kingdom, requires a strong remedy, but we prophecy, that it will not be found in statutes that entrench on (violate) Constitutional Liberty. The curse of a bad system is come upon the country. The debasement of a whole class of men by laws abhorrent to reason, together with the state of misery in which they are held, has made them desperate."<sup>2</sup>

We can find here his sympathy with the Irish people and his opposition to the English domination over Ireland. Nevertheless, he soon turned against the Irish people and their religion. This might have resulted from his belief

in Unitarianism, the chief attraction of which, according to Colmer, "apart from its close connexion with revolution and reform societies, lay in its luminous rationalism, its freedom from superstition and mystery, its humanistic message, and its absence of traditional dogma."<sup>3</sup> And when I read the following sentences:

"Whoever is at all familiar with the records and materials of English History, from the reign of Henry VII. to the present hour, will remember little with regard to Ireland, but sad complaints and gloomy anticipations. By one writer of Elizabeth's reign it is styled the Achilles' heel of our Empire, by another the scourge reserved by Providence for the hour of its vengeance and our punishment."<sup>4</sup>

I can easily understand that Coleridge had long been troubled with the Irish Problem and had a historically right understanding of the problem. And buried under his uneasiness was his rejection of the *imperium in imperio*, that is, "an empire within an empire." Coleridge once said to A Friend in the Church and State, "If I met a man, who should deny that an *imperium in imperio* was in itself an evil, ---" and "he should deny that the Romish Priesthood in Ireland does in fact constitute an *imperium in imperio*."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless the fact is that Coleridge was not opposed to Catholic Emancipation, as he himself declares<sup>6</sup> in the Advertisement of the *Church and State*. Then what did he fear? Did he find something to fear in the Act of Union of 1800? Did he fear the Romish Priesthood itself? Let us first consider the Act for the Union 2 July 1800.

It is true as John Colmer has correctly pointed out that "What he (Coleridge) feared most ---was that once Ireland attained Emancipation, it would sever all connection with England and constitute a perpetual threat to English security."<sup>7</sup> Coleridge himself stated in *The Courier*: 2 August 1811 that the Catholics are not restricted in the exercise of their right to worship their Creator. "They are excluded from some offices of State and from the Legislature, not on account of their religious tenets, but because they involve in their religion a numerous and most powerful magistracy, --- which

magistracy will not suffer itself to be placed under either the control or superintendence of the Sovereign, while they swear allegiance to a foreign Sovereign.”<sup>8</sup> It might be safe to say that this may have been a chief cause to drive Coleridge to write the *Church and State*.

But the point may be why Coleridge feared an *imperium in imperio* so severely. Was it just a political, religious and social problem? No, it has much to do with his doctrine or faith in his own Poetics itself. But now I would like to trace a rough background of the Act of Union.

In 1719, eighty years before the Act for the Union, The Declaratory Act was passed by the Irish House of Lords. The Introduction to Part X “Ireland” in the English Historical Document says, “This measure formally asserted the legislative dependence of Ireland upon the Parliament of Great Britain. From time to time protests were made in Ireland against the complete control of Irish affairs by the English Government.”<sup>9</sup> This was an Act for the better securing the dependency of the kingdom of Ireland upon the crown of Great Britain. It was natural that the Irish people should protest against the Act and want it to be repealed. But it was not until 1782 that this act was eventually repealed.

The Act declared, that

“the said kingdom of Ireland hath been, is, and of right ought to be subordinate unto and dependent upon the imperial crown of Great Britain, as being inseparably united and annexed thereunto.”<sup>10</sup>

Considering how much has been stagnated onto the bottom of the Irish mind since Cromwell's conquest, it is natural that the Irish people would not and could not accept the Act. In 1723 William Wood bought a patent granted in 1722 to the duchess of Kendal for the issue of a new copper coinage in Ireland, without consulting the Irish Parliament. This naturally caused much indignation. And it is a well-known fact that Jonathan Swift wrote “The Drapier's Letter” to blame England for the affair. Swift wrote, “I declare, next under God, I depend only on the King my Sovereign, and on the Laws of my own Country; And I am so far from depending upon

the People of England, that if they should ever Rebel against my Sovereign I would be ready at the first Command from his Majesty to take Arms against them.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the severe regulation of Irish Trade had caused much suffering in Ireland. On June 12th 1779 Edmond Pery, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, expressed his opinion on the commercial regulations.

“The general cause of Distress is undoubtedly the restraint upon the Trade, and consequently upon the Industry of the Kingdom. Ireland is excluded from all direct Commerce with the British Colonies in Asia, Africa and America, ---Ireland is also restrained under the severest Penalties, from sending to any Part of the World any Manufacture made of or mixed with wool. Thus is Ireland in effect cut off from all Trade, at least what deserves the name of Trade, with the rest of the world, ---the Poor are thrown out of Employment, and of consequence become idle and miserable.”<sup>12</sup>

His speech was followed by the two Acts removing restraints and regulations in 1780. This is a rough background to the Act of Union of 1800.

It might be natural that Coleridge should be afraid if the Act of Union brought about the existence of an *imperium in imperio* because of the selfish exploitation by the English Government of Ireland.

Let us move on and consider another point of view. We know that the Imagination was central to his theory of literature. But at the same time we know Imagination is indispensable to his politics. He spoke of the importance of Imagination when he thinks of the slave-trade in his lecture on 16 June 1795. Imagination, he thought, “stimulates to the attainment of real excellence by the contemplation of splendid Possibilities that still revivifies the dying motive within us, and fixing our eye on the glittering Summits that rise one above the other in Alpine endlessness still urges us up the ascent of Being.”<sup>13</sup> In other word, the imagination is to him the driving force of the endless revolution of his mind, as the Ancyent Marinner had to come up to the real world again and again to revivify his sense of

guilt and redemption, but on the other hand he tells us that "we should define Beauty to be a pleasurable sense of the Many reduced to unity by the correspondence of all the component parts to each other & the reference of all to one central Point."<sup>14</sup>

Here if we understand Beauty as the ideal condition to which Imagination leads us, we could say Imagination is a leading force for Coleridge to think of an ideal resolution of any affairs. And the central Point, we could say, is indispensable in his ideal condition, the *causa causarum et causatorum*, that is "the cause of causes and effects". Coleridge would not accept the existence of plural causes or elements within his world. He was looking for not the all but the whole which has one central Point. Or "the still point". as T. S. Eliot once put it. Now, if this is the ideal world which Coleridge wished to attain, we could understand his refusal of the Act of Union and the Catholic Emancipation to be a natural conclusion for him because it must admit the existence of double centre within itself.

If we go back to the Act for the Union.<sup>15</sup> :

The Act states, "And whereas, --- both Houses of the said two Parliaments respectively have likewise agreed upon certain Articles for effectuating and establishing the said purposes, in the tenor following:

The First Article states. ---that the said Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland shall, ---, be united into one Kingdom, by the name of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland;---

The Second Article states. --- that the succession to the Imperial Crown of the said United Kingdom, ---, shall continue limited and settled --- according to the terms of union between England and Scotland.

The Third Article states. --- that "the said United Kingdom be represented in one and the same Parliament, to be styled The Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland."

The Fourth Article institutes the number of the Irish representatives to sit and vote on the part of Ireland in the House of Lords and the House of Commons in the United Kingdom.

The Fifth Article was very important to Coleridge because it refers to the Church and its function in the state. It institutes that “the Church of England and Ireland, as now by law established, be united into one Protestant Episcopal Church, to be called, The United Church of England and Ireland; --- and that the continuance and preservation of the said united Church, as the Established Church of England and Ireland, shall be deemed and taken to be an essential and fundamental part of the Union: ---.

The First and The Third Articles seem to institute the Unity of the Two Kingdoms, but nevertheless, it would be easy for Coleridge to feel that “the one and the same Parliament” must have no one central Point but the two incompatible centres within the sham tranquility, which Coleridge would and could never admit from his indispensable ideal of the one central point.

On the other hand, the Second and the Fourth Article declare that the two kingdoms still keep their own rights respectively in the Houses of the United Kingdom. We can see how Coleridge saw there was neither a central point nor tranquility there but the *imperium in imperio* itself.

And also it is clear to Coleridge that however strongly the Fifth Article declares that the new United Church should be “an essential and fundamental part” of the United Kingdom, it cannot be the tranquil centre of the new United Kingdom. As David P. Calleo said in his *Coleridge and the Idea of the Modern State*, “He (Coleridge) never could accept the kind of pragmatic conservatism that eschews idealism altogether,”<sup>16</sup> though everyone knows, any political activity ought to be pragmatic eventually, while “he remained an idealist, convinced of the need for a positive political faith.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, he was not a revolutionary, but rather a religious conservative. As early as in 1795, he supported the idea of a Jewish republic, saying “If we except the Spartan, the Jewish has been the only Republic that can consistently boast of Liberty and Equality.”<sup>18</sup> In his 1795 lectures Coleridge said that “The Jewish Government was founded on an original Contract. The Constitution was presented to the whole nation by Moses, and each individual solemnly assented to it. By this Constitution the Jews

became a federal Republic consisting of twelve Tribes.”<sup>19</sup>

Instead of the Jewish complete dependence upon God and of the role of the Levites, Coleridge looked forward to the people having the pure mind, which could only result from “the purifying alchemy of Education”<sup>20</sup>. We can see that this idea has its root in the movement of the Pntisocracy and the publishing of *The Watchman* and leads to his idea of Clerisy.

Now it will be clear that the Act of Union would never meet Coleridge's idea of the ideal State nor of the ideal literature because it admitted the existence of the two central points within the Union of the two empires.

We can also see Coleridge's Politics and the Poetics are one and the same and we may say that though it is true that *On the Constitution of the Church and State* was expressing Coleridge's political and religious opinion and was written against Catholic Emancipation and the Act of Union, it is also true that the *Church and State* depends upon *Biographia Literaria* and other lectures on literature. Then we can conclude Coleridge's reading of the Irish Problem should be understood in terms of his poetics and politics at once.

(The End)

## NOTE

- 1 Colmer, John: "Introduction" to *On the Constitution of Church and State, Coleridge Collected Works* (abridged into CCW hereafter) (Princeton Univ. Press, 1976) p. xxxv
- 2 Coleridge, S.T. : *The Watchman* ed. by Lewis Patton, (CCW 2, 1970) p. 118
- 3 Colmer, J. : op. cit. p. xii
- 4 Coleridge, S.T. : "Ireland VII" *Essays on His Time II*, (CCW 3, 1978) p. 280
- 5 Coleridge, S.T. : *Church and State* (CCW 10, 1976) p. 149
- 6 "Here are two questions. To the first, viz. , is it true that I am unfriendly to Catholic Emancipation?" "Advertisement" to *Church and State*, (CCW. 10) p. 6
- 7 Colmer, J. : op. cit. p. xiii
- 8 Coleridge, S.T. : *Essays on His Time II*, p. 243
- 9 English Historical Document (abridged into EHD hereafter) Vol. X ed. by D.B. Horn & Mary Ransom, (eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969) p. 677
- 10 *The Declaratory Act (Ireland), 1719* (EHD, X) p. 683
- 11 "The Drapier's Letters" No. IV (EHD, X) p. 685
- 12 EHD, X p. 687-8
- 13 Coleridge, S.T. : *Lectures 1795*, (CCW, 1) p. 235
- 14 Coleridge, S.T. : *Lectures on Literature 1* (CCW 5, 1808-11) p. 35
- 15 An Act for Union, 2 July 1800 (EHD, XI) p. 197
- 16 Calleo, David P. : *Coleridge and the Idea of the Modern State* (Yale Studies in Political Science, 18, Yale U.P. 1966) p. 5
- 17 Calleo, D.P. : *Ibid.*, p. 5
- 18 Coleridge, S.T. : *Lectures 1795* (CCW 1) p. 126
- 19 Coleridge, S.T. : *Ibid.*, p. 124-5
- 20 Coleridge, S.T. : *Ibid.*, p. 10
- 21 see The Motto of The Watchman:  
     "That all may know the truth:  
     And that the Truth may makes us Free"