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“even now,/ Ev’n now”: Coleridge’s Interval

Simon Swift

This essay focuses on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem of 1798 *Fears in Solitude* in order to explore the peculiarities of a thinking of the present time as an interval between past and future in Romantic lyric poetry. Where Modernist prose might be understood, after Hannah Arendt, to describe the present as a gap or lag between different historical epochs, Coleridge’s lyric present finds ways to make the past and future iterable within a presentation of the “now” as a moment of suspension. It does so through its play on a number of temporal markers such as “still,” “yet,” “meanwhile” and “even now,” and through its uses of grammatical tense (especially the present perfect) in scoping forms of time. I situate Coleridge’s present tense in relation to the topographical verse of the earlier Eighteenth Century from which he took inspiration, and point to some of the ways in which he anticipates a sense of the present as both urgent and empty time in later thinking about political and ecological states of emergency. Ultimately, I argue, Coleridge’s interval yields a time of the now in which the sources of comfort become difficult to distinguish from the sources of vulnerability, and in which the prospect of redemption becomes entangled with the prospect of catastrophe.

Keywords: lyric, Romanticism, present tense, catastrophe, war

Even now, now, very now.....
— *Othello* (1.1.88)¹

[T]he poem stands fast at the edge of itself; it calls and brings itself, in order to be able to exist, ceaselessly back from its already-no-longer into its always-still.
— Paul Celan, “The Meridian”

¹ My thanks to Roy Sellars for suggesting this reference.

In her extraordinary 1946 review of Hermann Broch's historical novel *The Death of Virgil*, a fictional account of the last 24 hours of the Roman poet's life, Hannah Arendt describes a peculiar "historical no man's land" that exists at certain turning points or moments of crisis in history (Arendt 158). The birth of the new, Arendt argues, does not always follow immediately upon the death of the old. Instead there is often a delay, pause or interval between them, the time or space of the "No Longer and Not Yet" that gives her review its title. Broch, in Arendt's account, understands the last day of Virgil's life as a space between life and death, with death understood as an "ultimate task instead of as an ultimate calamity" (161). The novel's style, she writes, is shot through with "concentrated tension," and is marked by a "passionate urgency" that nothing of importance should be missed, even as its exciting descriptions of the natural world come across as "a long and tender song of farewell to all Western painters." It is as though those descriptions "embraced all that is beautiful or all that is ugly, all that is green or all earthly dustiness, all nobility or all vulgarity" (160). If the death of Virgil marks, in Arendt's reading of Broch, the end of Classical antiquity's last great golden age and the imminent arrival of a new, Christian order, Arendt finds a similar transition between historical epochs to be discernible in more recent history, during and after the First World War. So too, she finds the best writing about that turning point in history to involve a tender farewell to the old that is also a passionate effort to record things as they are.

But the Twentieth Century's interval, according at least to Arendt, is altogether more like a void or a no-man's-land than a last, passionate invocation of created nature. Turning, as she often does, to European literature to provide an index of the meaning of what would otherwise be overwhelming historical and political realities, Arendt tries to make sense of what she calls her own century's "abyss of empty space and empty time" by drawing a contrast between the work of that literature's two greatest masters (159). Marcel Proust, her author of the "no longer," offers in his work, Arendt says, "the last and the most beautiful farewell to the world of the nineteenth century," whereas Franz Kafka wrote as though "from the vantage point of a distant future, as though he were or could have been at home only in a world which is 'not yet'" (159). Both untimely, Proust and Kafka, are bridged, in Arendt's account, by Broch's capacity to describe the very gap or empty interval that divides them, just as Virgil, for Broch himself, took up his historical place in the transition between the ancient and the Christian worlds. While Broch shares with Proust "a deep fondness for the world as it is

given to us," he shares with Kafka a belief "that the 'hero' of the novel is no longer a character with certain well-defined qualities but, rather, man as such" (159). This triangulation of writers from the space between past and future suggests that Modernist literature, here as elsewhere in Arendt, is not only able to describe the untimeliness of modernity, its reaching toward a future that hasn't yet happened and its staying with a past which is already gone; it is also able to make the interval between them somehow habitable.

Modern lyric poetry, for its part, is particularly adept at both creating and pointing to a sense of the present moment through its use of what Susan Stewart calls "the deictic now" (Stewart 197-208). It may describe the present as the kind of gap between what is over and what is yet to come that Arendt discerns in Broch's novel. It may also, consequently, maintain the separation between backwards and forwards deixis that accounts, in Arendt, for the contrasting styles of Proust and Kafka. Yet the modern lyric's imagining of the now often appears as an anticipation of what is coming or held in prospect (Arendt's "not yet") which is filtered through a sense of shock or surprise that the anticipated thing, is in fact *already* happening, already underway in ways that it can be difficult to discern. At the same time, this surprise sits alongside of another form of awareness: that what is supposed to be past (Arendt's "no longer") leaves traces and signs of its ongoing presence. I want to suggest in what follows that this particular overlap between past and future characterizes especially the lyric poetry of the Romantic period. It is as if the Romantic "now" cannot quite tell the difference, to coin another Arendtian phrase, between past and future. Much of the affective charge of Romantic poetry grows out of the surprising collision of past and future in the time of the now that it describes; a time which is somehow still perceived as a moment of lag or interval.

My main example will be Samuel Taylor Coleridge's topographical poem *Fears in Solitude*, which finds a supine Coleridge imagining in prospect the ravaging of a peaceful English landscape by an invading French army (the poem is subtitled "Written April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion"). In line with the topographical genre's tendency to reflect onto the landscape moral and historical questions about how an uncertain future is being produced out of a morally dubious past, Coleridge reads the anticipated invasion as a punishment for Britain's moral failings, especially its involvement in a globalized economy, including the trade in human beings and wars of colonial aggression, and the ways in which the media have made of these latter an entertaining spectacle which morally degrades the spectator. But perhaps more unusually,

Coleridge also wants to read the coming invasion as an opportunity to undo the very corruption that caused it, through a morally strengthening and purifying effort of national resistance. Also passing through his call to arms is Coleridge's attempt to publicly distance himself from his own earlier radicalism and reputation as a Jacobin sympathizer.

I focus here especially on the ways in which Coleridge's poem increasingly and intentionally mixes up traces of the past and the future in its articulation of the now. It is not alone in doing so; Charlotte Smith's topographical poem *Beachy Head*, first published posthumously nine years later in 1807, is equally haunted by a sense of the now as a shocking collision between a realization that what had been thought over is still ongoing or present in its latency, recalled to mind by current events, whether for good or ill, and another realization that what is anticipated is in fact already happening. These realizations cut, in Smith, between public anxiety about the ongoing threat of invasion and personal crisis.² Perhaps there is something in the experience of time in modern lyric poetry that steers it toward this strange conflation of past and future. Writing recently about the modern lyric's "longing for the now, for a kind of presentness if not always a present tense," Matthew Bevis also describes the lyric's realization that "[k]nowledge, unlike experience, is never *now*" (Bevis 587). I want to bring Bevis's subtle thought about the lyric's inhabiting of what might be described as an unknowing now into contact with the thought, in Romantic writing and some of its philosophical and political descendants, that this complex temporal sense is produced under the pressure of public events, or at least under the pressure of their threat. Any conference which uses words such as "field" and "environment" in its call for papers, as did our SAUTE conference on "The Challenge of Change" in 2017, necessarily calls for a treatment of climate change. While my essay is about a war poem rather than be-

² Many examples from Smith's poem might be offered; to focus on the idea of a past brought to presence again under the pressure of current events, Smith describes how Pevensey Castle on England's south coast "frowns even now/ In vain and sullen menace" over its bay (Wu 125); while "With fond regret I recollect e'en now/ In spring and summer what delight I felt/ Among these cottage gardens" (Wu 131). Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's identification of the present as both "beforehand not yet" and "afterwards no longer," Jonathan Sachs has recently drawn attention to how *Beachy Head* "uses a lyric present, an enduring sense of the now, to unfold the rich layers of time accruing beneath the present" (Sachs 11, 23). I turn to Coleridge's own uses of the lyric present towards the conclusion of this essay; but where Koselleck's account of progress involves a temporal acceleration into an "open future" predicated on the arrival of new and unprecedented experiences, my claim is precisely that lyric poetry in this period serves to undermine the notion of an unknown, open future by making anticipation difficult to distinguish from recollection.

ing directly about the current ecological crisis, I hope at least that through the kind of phenomenology of time that I will examine here, and especially through a study of the shock that anticipation of war figures in Romantic poetry, I can begin to describe something of the peculiar relation between lag and catastrophe that shapes our experience of the present, including the temporal phenomenon of climate change.

Romantic poems often figure the present as a moment of delay or lag before the sudden onrush of an anticipated, spectacular or catastrophic change. But they just as often stage a realization that that anticipated, violent change has already always been underway in quieter, less noticeable ways. This temporality of the now is marked in those poems by appeals to a clutch of words and phrases such as "while," "meanwhile", "even now," and "yet now," that mark this realization. Yet these words, alongside another of Romanticism's key terms, "still," do double duty by also figuring the equally surprising failure of the past to close itself off from the now. These markers of time are inherited from the meditative and topographical verse of the earlier Eighteenth Century, as I hope to show in what follows, but Coleridge, especially, makes them conspicuously self-divided. This divided temporality, and pathos, of the now also shapes our imagining of climate time. However much we may want to think of climate change as a catastrophe that lies up ahead, that we are yet spared from, it is in fact something that is affecting our lives, even now. But at the same time, we continue to think that there may still be hope that our behaviour around its threat to so many forms of life might change, and that hope too forms part of the present's structure of feeling.

The surprising discovery that something which has been ongoing in the past is *still* possible, "even now" or that something remains true in spite of other changes, sometimes brings comfort in Romantic poems. When Keats writes that "in spite of all,/ Some shape of beauty moves away the pall from our dark spirits" in *Endymion*, we are to feel comforted that a thing of beauty is a joy forever, still a joy, despite other, implicitly bad changes (Keats 107). But a realization that something heavily anticipated is already happening can be a discomfiting thing. It is in this latter sense that Coleridge uses the phrase, "even now", twice in succession, in "Fears in Solitude." While Coleridge's phrase is in direct dialogue with poetic precursors like Thomson and Cowper, as I hope to show, it is also worth noting as an aside that there is a deep theological time at play in his phrasing. Twice in the Gospel of John in the King James Version of the Bible the phrase "even now" is used to warn that the Antichrist is already among us. Yet in the same Gospel, Martha says

to Jesus, just before his raising of Lazarus, “But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give *it* thee” (John 11:22). “Even now” denotes in John both that a bad possibility that is heavily anticipated, the presence of the Antichrist, is in fact already happening, and that a good but remote possibility, the raising of a dead person, is still possible, even now, after their death.

Coleridge’s poem is still alert to the theological coding of time. In his poignant appeal, mid way through, to “spare us yet awhile,/ Father and God! Oh spare us yet awhile!” the time of the now seems like a kind of remnant or saved time before catastrophe (Wu 656). The urgency of the now, both here and in the gospel, is balanced by a different mode of time in John, that is also audible in Coleridge’s desperate plea; the time of the interval, the “little while longer” that Jesus tells his disciples, shortly before crucifixion, they must wait before his disappearance and the arrival of the comforter or Paraclete. “Yet a little while [*et in micron*] and the world seeth me no more,” (John 14:19) says Jesus to the disciples. While the figure of the Paraclete helped Geoffrey Hartman to account for the powerful sense of time running out in Andrew Marvell’s “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun,” in Anne-Lise François’s recent homage to Hartman, the phrase “a little while” (which also occurs at key points in the contemporaneous verse of Coleridge’s friend Wordsworth) shapes the time that remains of our current ecological crisis: facing catastrophe and yet spared, like Coleridge, for a little while longer (Francois 178-82).

1.

Coleridge opens his poem with a picture of a beautiful and harmonious English landscape, apparently at early morning, before suddenly shattering its peaceful silence with the thought, or rather with the anticipated sound, of an expected French invasion. Describing himself in the third person as a “humble man,” Coleridge writes:

oh my God,
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 undetermined conflict – even now,

Ev'n now, perchance, and in his native isle,
Carnage and screams beneath this blessed sun! (Wu 654)

Walter Benjamin wrote powerfully of National Socialism in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “[t]he current amazement that the things which we are experiencing are ‘still’ [noch] possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history that gives rise to it is untenable” (Benjamin 249). What for Benjamin would be a conformist effort to treat the National Socialist state of emergency as the exception, rather than as the rule, is supported here by an affective state of shock or amazement. The kind of stupor that in thinking of that state of emergency as a “throwback” to a condition of “barbarism” wants to quarantine National Socialism from a progressive, liberal idea of history, and thereby to keep thoughts on the move into the future rather than to countenance their arrest. Shock, we might say, makes war on stillness in the name of forward movement, and against it Benjamin sets the dialectical arrest of what he calls the “time filled by the presence of the now” [*Jetztzeit*] (Benjamin 252-53).³

While it might seem tempting to read Coleridge in just the way that Benjamin condemns, as an advocate for a conformist view of history that puzzles over the historical anachronism of a French invasion, as if it were surprising that the events of 1066 should still be possible in 1798, in fact Coleridge’s temporal sense, and in particular his sense of what might still be possible is much more complex. On the one hand, he reads the threat of invasion as a kind of divine punishment for Britain’s own recent wars of imperial aggression, and the public’s revelling in war

³ For the Arendtian phrase “not yet” that I have been working with, but also for Benjamin’s intensification of the “still,” compare Martin Heidegger’s hyphenated phrase “this not-yet” (*dieses Noch-nicht*) in *Being and Time*. According to James K. Lyon, Heidegger “was making a basic poetic move by using a hyphen [...] to turn what had been literal into figurative language and abstract concepts that had not existed before the creation of this new compound form” (Lyon 15-16). Heidegger’s own time of the now also chimes with Arendt’s; in *Explications of Hölderlin’s Poetry* he describes “the time of the departed gods and the coming God” as a “desolate time because it exists in a double deficiency and nothing: in the no-longer of the departed gods and the not-yet-of –that-which-is-to-come” [*im Nichtmehr der entflohenen Götter und im Nochnicht des Kommenden*] (Lyon 57). The fact that this definition of the now occurs in a work on Hölderlin is suggestive of the Romantic roots to the thinking of the time of the now in Heidegger and Benjamin that I’m trying to point to here. Coleridge is certainly closer to Benjamin’s sense of the now as, not an idle or desolate interval between different theological regimes, but rather itself shot through with chips of messianic time under the pressure of a state of emergency which has become the rule.

as a mediated spectacle, or what Coleridge calls “The best amusement for our morning meal!” (Wu 656). But at the same time, to defend Britain against the coming invasion is understood by Coleridge to constitute another, different kind of war, closer to a holy war, that will undo the guilt brought about by the violence of the first. Coleridge in his poem imagines a form of defensive violence that, like Achilles’ lance, as Jean-Paul Sartre famously put it, “can heal the wounds that it has inflicted” (Fanon 25).

It would be easy to read this poetic argument as contradictory, and many have written about Coleridge’s struggle in this and associated poems over his public recantation of radicalism. My claim in what follows will be that Coleridge is not blind to this contradiction, but actively pursuing it: like predecessors, especially James Thomson in his great poem of landscape from 1730, *The Seasons*, Coleridge is actively drawing attention to the problematic idea of a clean, empty future which arrives on the scene to act on or even to redeem a degraded past. Coleridge’s investment in the past, and its relation to the time of the now, then activates a critical sense of history.

The very word “still” (*noch*) that organizes Benjamin’s attack on progressive historicism is, in fact, a key site of repetition in *Fears in Solitude* and related verse. Just two months earlier in February 1798 in the conversation poem *Frost at Midnight*, Coleridge recalls his childhood hopes of a visitor from home while at school. He writes that “still my heart leaped up,/ For still I hoped to see the *stranger’s* face!” (Wu 646). The repetition might alert us to the possibility that “still” is a word that refuses to keep still; that its very reiteration of continuity might shelter change in repetition. The lines themselves are in fact repeating a use of “still” from another poem published three years earlier, Book 4 of William Cowper’s blank verse epic *The Task*, titled “The Winter Evening.” Both poets are referring to the common superstition that the flaring up of a flame in the grate of a fire is prophetic of the arrival of someone at the door - “prophesying still,/ Though still deceiv’d, some stranger’s near approach” as Cowper has it (Favret 71). Coleridge’s repetition of his own and of Cowper’s use of “still” happens in a poem which, as recent critics have noted, is concerned with states of quiet, stillness and the inert, figured by the poem’s environment of a frozen midnight (Favret 98-116, Jager 1-30).

One doesn’t have to delve too far into Romantic poetry (just think of Keats’s “still unravished bride of quietness,” the Grecian urn, an excised comma famously shifting “still” from an adverbial to an adjectival use) to notice that Romantic poets are alert to the dangers of think-

ing continuity, aware that any claim to the ongoing, the “still” might actually harbour some form of movement (Keats 344). Working with Book 4 of Cowper’s poem, Mary Favret has recently written about the surprising discovery of what she calls “nodes of stillness” in poetry about the agitation of warfare in this period (Favret 49). She quotes another passage from Book 4 of Cowper, to this effect:

To-morrow brings a change, a total change!
 Which even now, though silently perform’d
 And slowly, and by most unfelt, the face
 Of universal nature undergoes. (Favret 98)

The sense would almost be, in a mode that we have come to associate with Romanticism and its ecological thinking, of a change so mighty that it seems somehow almost unnoticeable, of something that is imagined up ahead being active even now, like the freezing of the whole landscape on a winter’s night that begins, in fact, at “even”, at sunset. A difference is arguably made, though, by knowing or acknowledging this change, whereby the heightened awareness signalled by the phrase “even now” mimes the way that the poem seeks to overcome the kind of forgetfulness that might otherwise take a blanketing of snow as its figure.

As if anticipating Garret Stewart’s stunning recent account of “potential” in the literary text as “not an option somewhere waiting, however near or far off, not a something missing at all, but instead the present absence of the still possible, intrinsic to process rather than exhausted by it,” such moments call up a sense of deathly stillness only to fill it with uncanny motion, to note that anticipation of coming movement is itself a posture of activity, which becomes mindful of what is already happening under the shadow of anticipation (Stewart 48).

2.

We might think of the word “now” as the primal unit through which the coming to be of a narrative event operates against a background of ongoing motion in Eighteenth-Century verse. This typically muscular couplet from Pope’s translation of the *Iliad*, the scene where the Trojans attack the Greek camp with stones, gives a good representative example:

Their Ardour kindles all the *Grecian Powr’s*,
 And now the Stones descend in Heavier show’rs. (Favret 99)

But by the time of Romantic verse, “now” has often taken on what, following critics like Geoffrey Hartman and Anne-Lise François, we might describe as a gentling power, a record of a turning back or even of a not quite happening. Think of *Tintern Abbey* for which “now” signals not so much new event but revival and return:

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
 With many recognitions dim and faint
 And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
 The picture of the mind revives again (Wu 417)

And think too of Wordsworth’s claim toward the end of that poem, “Therefore am I still/ A lover of the meadows and the woods” (Wu 418). Or think of the third, deeply Thomsonian stanza of Keats’s *To Autumn* which softens an event that is still left in anticipation at the poem’s end, the poem’s ending being somehow still *before* action, as

and now with treble soft
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (Keats 435)

Thomson in *The Seasons* is already developing this sense of the deliberately indecisive nature of the now in ways that will be formative for later poets such as Coleridge. In his now-classic study of Thomson across multiple books, John Barrell claimed that *The Seasons* is driven by two contradictory accounts of history: one, in line with Thomson’s Whig Patriot, anti-Walpole politics, of decline from a golden age of innocence into factionalism and a culture of luxury and political disengagement, one a triumphalist account of British industry and empire. Barrell argued that the two views are often closely intertwined; “It is not simply,” he wrote, “that these two, inconsistent accounts can appear side by side in the same book of *The Seasons*; but that many of the terms which are first used to differentiate a primaeval golden age from a modern iron age have been preserved in the second, alternative account of history, and transferred from one age to the other, in a way that calls attention to the inconsistency of the two accounts” (Barrell 56). “Now” itself could well be one of those terms, and it resonates as much through Barrell’s account of Thomson’s poem as it does through the poem itself. Here is Barrell on Thomson’s “Spring”:

. . . according to one account of history, the “first fresh Dawn” of “uncorrupted Man” was the pattern from which pastoral poets have described the

golden age; but now we live in “iron Times.” The mind has now become “distemper’d”; it has lost “that Concord of harmonious Powers,” whereas, before, “Music held the whole in perfect Peace.” The passions are now self-interested only . . . and men’s thoughts are now “partial,” “cold, and avert-ing from our Neighbour’s Good.” (54)

Then Barrell quotes another passage, 500 lines on in the poem, describ-ing a shepherd and his flock:

[. . .]And now the sprightly Race
Invites them forth; when swift, the Signal given,
They start away, and sweep the massy Mound
That runs around the Hill [. . .] (54)

Barrell continues:

“The cheerful Tendance of the Flock” had been one of the pleasant occu-pations, earlier, of pre-Fallen man; now it seems to be an occupation en-joyed by the modern shepherd precisely because the peace of modern soci-ety has left him secure. If in the age of innocence the whole creation was held together in “Consonance” by the harmony of music, now it seems that harmony is enjoyed by this shepherd too, in the “various Cadence” of his flock, but can hardly have been earlier, in “disunited BRITAIN.” (54-55)

It is tempting to suggest that the intensification of the presence of the now by the premodification of “even” is what brings the kind of con-tradiction that Barrell describes to a head – or that perhaps even re-solves it. Certainly, strong iambic poets like Thomas Gray and Oliver Goldsmith writing in the wake of Thomson exploit the trochaic poten-tial of the word to signify a mild sense of discord.⁴ Elsewhere in “Sum-mer,” celebrating Britannia’s “solid grandeur” in what may be consid-ered the source text for Coleridge’s imagining of *Fears in Solitude*’s “crash of onset,” Thomson describes

⁴ Goldsmith, especially committed to an unequivocal narrative of decline in *The Deserted Village* (1770), will maximize this disruptive potential of the phrase for a line of iambic pentameter:

Even now the devastation is begun,
And half the business of destruction done;
Even now, methinks, as pondering here I stand,
I see the rural virtues leave the land. (Fairer and Gerrard 428)

... A simple scene! Yet hence BRITANNIA sees
 Her solid grandeur rise [...]
 Hence, fervent all, with Culture, Toil, and Arts,
 Wide glows her Land: her dreadful Thunder hence
 Rides o'er the Waves sublime, and now, even now,
 Impending hangs o'er *Gallia's* humbled coast; (Thomson 80)

While this is a “simple scene,” it is haunted, as Barrell shows, by the threat of dissipation; that is perhaps why there is an odd note of comfort sounded by Thomson’s traditional invocation of the British navy as a final ballast, that can save us, “even now,” in a scene that otherwise seems one of simplicity and solidity. “Even now” at once acts as ballast, while casting a shadow of threat over the scene’s simple and solid grandeur, as if the sources of both comfort and threat that militarized security emblemata had become indistinguishable. Coleridge, of course, inverts Thomson’s reconciling logic; even in a stiller scene than anything Cowper could imagine, invasion is imminent, available to the imagination. And if for Thomson British history is a spectacle of continual decline and Whiggish improvement, for Coleridge, as I’ve tried to suggest, war is at once an offence against heaven and a way of cleansing that offence. His “even now” stands at once for the running out of time and the possibility of redemption.

3.

Facing, now, the opening of Coleridge’s poem:

A green and silent spot amid the hills!
 A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place
 No singing skylark ever poised himself!
 The hills are heathy, save that swelling slope
 Which hath a gay and gorgeous covering on,
 All golden with the never-bloomless furze,
 Which now blooms most profusely; (Wu 653)

In Spring, the season of dynamic change, springing forth, and potential foreign invasion, the still becomes hypertrophic, the adjectival form rendered comparative. The “green and silent dell” that is the scene for Coleridge’s poem is, in fact, hyper-still; the stiller dell offering a kind of calm which is burying, in a way that perhaps prefigures the death that

the crash of onset is expected to bring to the calm landscape, or even the digging-in of armed resistance, even now.

The comparative form of “still” is bound up here with an odd uncertainty over whether the skylark is really in this place or not, and therefore an uncertainty over the place’s reality, which then blends into the typically Coleridgean double negative of “the never bloomless furze/ Which now blooms most profusely.” If the place is hyper-still, time also appears to be out of joint: now the furze is doing what it is always doing anyway, but doing it in a qualitatively or rather quantitatively heightened way. The “now,” we might say, is an intensification of what is never not happening.

A few lines later, the skylark (or is it a different bird, the skylark being a hyponym of lark?) comes to manage a further form of continuity, as this odd non-place becomes decisively associated with the ultimate non-place, utopia. This is where Coleridge first figures himself as the humble man who “dreams of better worlds,/ And dreaming hears thee still, oh singing lark” (Wu 654). Even within this dream of a better world something of the real still endures in the form of birdsong. More generally, but in line with this curious disruption of time and place, Coleridge is playing continually throughout the early part of the poem with tense and location. He is continually modulating, in particular, between present and past continuous tenses, enacting grammatically the oddly divided sense of the now. Many examples could be given: here he is describing the relation between moral corruption at home and in export:

Ev’n so, my countrymen, have we gone forth
 And borne to distant tribes slavery and pangs [. . .]
 Meanwhile, at home,
 We have been drinking with a riotous thirst
 Pollutions from the brimming cup of wealth – (Wu 654)

The phrase “Meanwhile, at home” perhaps speaks to the “meantime,” the sense of simultaneity that Benedict Anderson found to exist in the new space of the imagined community of the nation, imagined as it was through newspapers in this period (see Favret 73). But the meantime is subtly divided here. Home wrongs are put in the past continuous (“we have been drinking. . .”) as Coleridge wants to signal incompleteness, wrongs which are still going on. But colonial activity appears perhaps slightly more securely in the past by prioritizing the auxiliary verb in the formulation “have we gone forth. . .,” as if grammar would will the burial of a crime more intolerable and less virtual, but also more remote than spectatorship.

Coleridge is playing off of the multiple senses of the “even,” the sense of urgency or simultaneity but also the evenness of equilibrium or balance that suggests a logic of “this crime here, that crime there, this crime (still now), that crime (please) then” in a set of pairings which serve to heighten our awareness of difference. And the pairing of crimes I’ve just invoked is itself balanced by an image of possible redemption in the present in Coleridge’s description of “the sweet words/ Of Christian promise (words that even yet/ Might stem destruction, were they wisely preached)” (Wu 655). Here we have the inverse of Antichrist “even now among us” in an image of the last chance, the possibility of being spared, even yet; a hope that is brought forth by the very thought of the capacity of words to change history that we have just seen in Coleridge’s playing on tense.

Words, we might say, are managing the transition between past and future in both corrupt and pure ways. The words of Christian promise, if read aright, might even yet stem the tide of corruption. But Coleridge also imagines a different form of reading in his condemnation of the moral crime of turning foreign war into breakfast media to which I alluded earlier. Coleridge writes that we have “read of war”; “read” of course being a verb whose present and past forms are identical. Is this a past or present action? Read (or read) allows itself to be read across time.

As well as making use of different modes of conditional tense, Coleridge also plays with apparently less complex tenses such as the present perfect. His use of this tense speaks powerfully to Jonathan Culler’s recent account of the effect of the “lyric present” as “to make what is reported more than what I am doing in a particular moment.” For Culler, modern lyric’s characteristic use of the simple present tense in relation to a first person creates the effect of “an iterable *now* of lyric enunciation, rather than [. . .] a now of linear time.” Poetic examples offered by Culler include Auden’s “I sit in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second street,” Blake’s “I wander through each chartered street,” and Yeats’s “I walk through the long schoolroom questioning.” Such present actions with lack of temporal specification (such as “I *often* sit in one of the dives on Fifty-second Street” would give) pushes this, for Culler, “distinctive tense in English poetry” more toward a condition of state than occurrence (Culler, 288-89). The simple present tense, according to Suzanne Langer the base form of the verb but seldom used in everyday communication, throws over its familiar lyrical enunciation something like the veil of an “eternal present” (cited in Culler 294). What is striking about Coleridge’s poem is that it makes no use of the

lyric simple present, nor indeed of the first person pronoun itself (relying instead, as we have seen, on the third person figure of the “humble man”), until the end of the penultimate verse paragraph after which there is a sudden accumulation of uses: “I walk”, “I wind”, “I behold”, “I tend”, and, perhaps most stunningly, “I find myself”, all in the space of one final verse paragraph (Wu 658). It is as if Coleridge’s speaker were finding himself in a grammatically perfect present that is oddly uncoupled from eventhood, in a scene which has already, through its hailing us to the “now,” marked out a politically ambiguous space of the eternal present as a site both of suffering and possible, overhanging redemption.

It is undoubtedly a truism, but nevertheless needs to be said, that any enunciation of the “now” names a moment that is already necessarily in the past by the time that the act of enunciation is over. This was literally true for a period beginning to experience the mass-mediation of war via newspapers, which offered in this period as “news” events that had happened sometimes months earlier. But Coleridge’s disturbances of tense are elongated through the repetition, “even now,/ Ev’n now” which, as I’ve tried to show, marks both anticipation *and* endurance. In a note to his poem *The Thorn* published two years after *Fears in Solitude*, in 1800, Coleridge’s friend Wordsworth defends what he calls “repetition and apparent tautology” by describing them as “frequently beauties of the highest kind” (Wu 519). Wordsworth thinks of repetition and tautology as confirmation that poetry is passion, the effort to communicate impassioned feelings with what he calls an “accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers” (Wu 519). This inadequacy, Wordsworth continues, creates a “craving in the mind” which is what causes us to cling to the same words. The “even now,/ Ev’n now” emits a passion of surprise, I’ve been arguing, that something is still or already happening, and its clinging to temporal sense through repetition perhaps also creates a breathing space in which the unexpected can be managed or absorbed. We might then say that repetition expresses the mind’s straining to make sense of the double time of the now I have been describing. But if the presence of what is expected might also be a continuity of what was already happening, a state of war, then the repetition changes in being brought home, in collapsing the distance between “here” and “there,” and in doing so it holds out an uncomfortable image of redemption. As T. J. Clark argues, “form – repetition – is change” (Garrett Stewart 5). But looking further, the line break that splits this repetition (“even now,/ Ev’n now”) is also suggestive of a peculiar undermining of the surprise or shock that something new is

already happening. Where on the next line we might expect some kind of forward movement or modification of what has been said, what we encounter is in fact nothing more than a slightly modified form of the same words. The repetition of the same at the beginning of the next line where we'd expect progress, turn, or development of some sort is itself surprising, but because it emphasizes the startling repetition of the same. We might say that there is here something like the collapse of the distinction between the exceptional and the mundane. It is surprising simply because nothing has changed, but Coleridge wants to say that everything has changed.

It is also worth thinking in this vein about the slight change that Coleridge does allow: the change in the form of the word “even” which draws attention to that word’s multiple meanings. As well as signalling emphasis and equilibrium, even is also, of course, a form of time –such that “even now” might be read to mean “it is even or evening now.” Coleridge’s poem gives us the sense of having passed through a day, the light on the never bloomless furze suggesting early morning at the poem’s opening, and then dusk towards the end:

But now the gentle dew-fall sends abroad
 The fruitlike perfume of the golden furze;
 The light has left the summit of the hill,
 Though still a sunny gleam lies beautiful
 On the long-ivied beacon. (Wu 658)

Evening is the time of the interval – no longer day and not yet night; but *still* in light, registering an even balance between two states.

We might also say that the repetition of “even now” stands alongside the poem’s work of tense. The conditional present continuous of “may now be stirring” is somehow substituted by the second form of “Ev’n now” in order to make the sheer noise, carnage and screams, emphatic but also somehow timeless, without a tense. This is perhaps the same working to a position somehow out of time and yet meditatively eventful that is enacted by Coleridge’s startling turn to the simple present, and his presencing of himself in place of the “humble man,” at the poem’s end. Coleridge is as aware of the horror of an eternal screaming as he is of the oddly denaturalized finding of himself on the way home at the poem’s end, and refuses to naturalize either of them. If for George T. Wright, the simple present tense gives an effect of “simple, ordinary natural English” which “reports an event that has happened – is happening – happens,” the oddly unnatural way in which Coleridge suddenly bombards his reader with this apparently organic lyric enunciation

in the poem's last paragraph makes us aware of the horror that has preceded it, making dubious any claim to take natural comfort that the poem's late turn to perfect presence might otherwise seem to offer (Culler 294). There cannot be a turning and winding away because something else more sinister may now be stirring. That was going on; it is going on; it will go on. Yet no more than surprise or amazement can be surrendered to a quiet perfection - it is still going on, the people are burning in the tower, even now – the halo of hope that even now horror's collision with a simple present could be annulled keeps shining.

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