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# Coleridge and the British Slave Trade

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## I.

POLITICALLY Coleridge opposed the British slave trade while it flourished between 1780 and 1807. However, he apparently changed his attitude to slavery during these years. The year 1795 saw Coleridge's lecture on the slave trade in Bristol, in which he not only condemned the moral degradation of slave traffickers but also branded as unpardonable the social idleness and political negligence of the British government, which had failed to prevent this trend. His enthusiasm, however, dwindled gradually in later years, ironically coinciding with the rejuvenation of the antislavery movement in anticipation of the Emancipation Act of 1833. Coleridge's subtle shift in his stance towards the abolition debate revealed on the one hand his complex nature and his reluctance to engage in social protest, and on the other hand, a vulnerable aspect of the English Romantic mentality that could collide with social evolution. This change in attitude says a great deal about the complexity of the slavery issue in Britain from 1789 to 1833, when the abolition debate was being hotly discussed both within and outside of the British parliament.

Abolitionism was one of a series of movements alongside the French Revolution in which movements tried, in the current of its energy, to spread the egalitarian sensibility in 1790s Europe. The events of the French Revolution served to sharpen public awareness of egalitarian ideals among Europeans. Robespierre's polity aimed to represent the Rousseauesque ideal of "the perfect," republican society where people could live in liberty and equality. It was Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-2), rather than William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793) which represented the revolutionary sensibility in England; Paine's detailed understanding of the reasoning behind the French Revolution as *en principe* "a renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man, and combining moral with political happiness and national prosperity"<sup>1</sup> was in fact more practical than Godwin's theory. France was then "the first metropolitan area" in Europe which maintained its abolition of the colonial slave system in 1794.<sup>2</sup> Paine challenged the existing concept of slave traders and plantation owners as English men of property. Motivated by morals rather than politics, Paine insisted on the importance of human rights for slaves. In *Political Justice* (1793) Godwin, who professed himself the follower of Paine, argued in political terms that exploiting the property of the poor created economic prosperity among the rich. These Lockean discourses on human freedom and equality, which claimed that men were supposed "to be free because that was appropriate to their status as rational individuals,"<sup>3</sup> not only represent the philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (London: J.M.Dent, 1993) 144.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 52. Nevertheless, France restored slavery and the slave trade in 1802 and again in 1814.

<sup>3</sup> John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 217.

climate concerning the issues of human liberation which were prevalent in late eighteenth century Europe, but also mark a notable change in the moral evaluation of the modes of human existence.

Coleridge was the ardent supporter of the revolutionary sensibility in the 1790s. Coleridge first met Godwin in December 1794 and also grew to know his intellectual social circle. The members of this group, which included George Dyer, William Frend and John Thelwall, were at the time arduously demanding Parliamentary reforms. Godwin's influence could be observed in Coleridge's 1795 lectures on politics and religion, which made a claim for the necessity of a new and active role for radical ideologies. Coleridge's public discussion of egalitarian ideals in London and Bristol and his criticism of social injustice were remarkably outspoken. His radicalism was discussed, however, in terms of ideological necessity and more typically in terms of religious enlightenment rather than social reform itself. Godwin's anarchist stance was what Coleridge could not easily adopt. For Coleridge, Godwin's theory looked sophisticated, yet it failed to impact on him as strongly as it had on other members in the circle. In this respect, Coleridge's ideas did not exactly match those radical and practical theories by Thelwall and Frend, either. Nevertheless, Godwin's ideal society for humanity was what Coleridge expected as the final goal of social reform. Coleridge's stature as a reformist became keener and more refined during the 1790s.

Religious groups, particularly the Quakers, contributed much to the development of the anti-slavery movement in Britain. The protection of the basic human rights of slaves was the main interest of the Quakers when they presented their petition to the government. Reinforced by this movement, the London abolition committee was founded in 1787<sup>4</sup> and frequented by William Wilberforce, who was preparing an abolitionist petition for Parliament in 1789.

In his twelve propositions on the slave trade, which Wilberforce presented to Parliament on 12 May 1789, he claimed that the slave trade was impermissible and that the British people shared involvement in inhumanity that demeaned the slave traders themselves:

We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others . . . When we reflect it is we ourselves that have degraded them to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification of our guilt . . .<sup>5</sup>

He was supported by leading politicians such as William Pitt, Charles James Fox and, particularly Edmund Burke, who agreed with Wilberforce, and claimed that the slave trade was “so horrid in all its circumstances, that it was

<sup>4</sup> “The Quakers constituted three-quarters of the original 12-man membership of this committee,” Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Marshall Howse, *The Saints in Politics, the Clapham Sect and the Growth of Freedom* (1953; London: Allen and Unwin, 1971) 35.

impossible a single argument could be adduced in its favour".<sup>6</sup>

Wilberforce's proposals, however, were neither agreed with nor turned down; instead, they were carried over for further discussion for almost the next eighteen years. A response by an MP to Wilberforce's proposals, which maintained that the slave trade should be regulated instead of being abolished totally,<sup>7</sup> represented a significant portion of opinion claiming both realism and compromise. This argument was a frequent topic of parliamentary debate throughout the 1790s. Edmund Burke, who in 1789 had supported Wilberforce, changed his attitude towards gradual abolition in 1792, and implied that the "proper regulations" of the slave trade would lead to its eventual abolition.<sup>8</sup> These modifications were partly due to the realisation of the fact that the British economy still relied on slavery and slave-produced commodities.

Despite a concerted effort on the part of abolitionists, Pitt's government once rejected Wilberforce's proposal for an abolition bill in 1791. One of the reasons for the gradual loss of momentum in the abolitionist movement during the 1790s was closely connected with the sense of failure in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which had left not only the entire political and social systems but also people's sense of liberty in turmoil: the Jacobin Reign from 1792 to 1794 was a terrorist reign responsible for massacres and regicide. This made the British people afraid of making any moves towards social reform. Claiming the rights of liberty and equality, even in the terms of the abolitionist regime, was regarded as politically dangerous. Paine's *Rights of Man* was deemed "seditious libel," and Paine was judged to be "guilty and outlawed".<sup>9</sup> There was undoubtedly a regressive change in the minds of the British people from enthusiasm for reforming the social order to the more conservative position of retaining social stability. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) captured exactly this shift in public sentiment. In it, Burke condemned the revolution as a subversion of the social fabric: "Laws overturned; tribunals subverted; industry without vigour; commerce expiring; the revenue unpaid, yet the people impoverished; a church pillaged, and a state not relieved; civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom . . .".<sup>10</sup> His attitude was typical of the views expressed against social reforms including the slavery debate of the 1790s. Following the beginning of the war against France in 1793, the government repressed reform movements much more forcibly. In December 1795 Pitt enacted the Two Acts in a bid to repress reform movements of all kinds: the "Treasonable Practices" Bill prohibited criticism against the monarchy, while the "Seditious Meetings" Bill limited the size of

<sup>6</sup> *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol.28 (London: T. C. Hansard, 1816) 69.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol.28, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, "Sketch of the Negro Code" (1792), *The Abolition Debate*, ed. Peter J. Kitson, *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, gen.ed.s. Peter J. Kitson and Debbie Lee, 8vols. vol.2 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999) 177.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge The Radical Years* (1988; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 83.

<sup>10</sup> Burke, *Reflections on Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986) 126.

public meetings. The difficulties facing the abolitionist movement lay in this political climate, in which actions were regulated by rigid control. Following the 1791 slave revolt in St. Domingue, the situation worsened still. Although the leader of the revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, was imprisoned and died, Haiti finally became independent in 1804. This put planters and slave owners, especially those in the West Indies, on their guard against a "potential slave rebellion," making them tighten their control with military help.<sup>11</sup> This event made Europeans realise that claiming liberty and rights would come only at a high price, and also made them question whether it was sensible to emancipate slaves. In this light, Pitt's regulations seemed justified. The proponents of slavery often tried to bring together abolitionism and political radicalism, especially after the execution of Louis XVI in 1793. The journalist William Cobbett, who opposed the abolition movement, emphasized in the "Summary of Politics" in *Political Register* of 12 June 1802 that slaves were a "brutal and bloody race".<sup>12</sup> He went on to denounce the leaders of the French Revolution who tried to establish freedom for all nations including the West Indian colonies, resulting in "spreading ruin and desolation" throughout France and her colonies.<sup>13</sup> These events caused people who had hitherto supported abolitionism to become more cautious about their activities.

## II

Coleridge was a complex figure in the abolition debate in Britain during the period from 1795 until 1833. He was a most keen member of the abolitionist regime in Bristol when he gave his anti-slavery lecture there in 1795, Bristol being at the time prosperous through slave trading *and* at the frontline of the proslavery campaign. Nevertheless, the outspoken condemnation of the sins of slave trading was a dangerous activity in Bristol, but Coleridge ignored the dangers for the sake of his protest:

. . . nine millions of slaves had been consumed by the Europeans—add one million since . . . and recollect, that for one procured ten at least are slaughtered . . . Who are these kidnappers, and assassins?<sup>14</sup>

Despite the strong emotional expressions he deliberately used to impress the cruel image of the slave trade upon the British mind, the five answers to the issues he summarised as objections to the abolitionist claims were put logically and clearly: the proslavery claims were: I. Abolition would be useless, since though Britain should not carry it on, other nations would; II. The Africans are better treated and happier in the Plantations than in their native country; III. Revenue would be greatly injured; IV. The Right of Property would be invaded

<sup>11</sup> James Walvin, *Black Ivory* (1992; London: Fontana Press, 1993) 256.

<sup>12</sup> William Cobbett, "Summary of Politics" in *Political Register*, vol.1, *Theories of Race*, ed. Peter J. Kitson, Kitson and Lee, vol.8, 268.

<sup>13</sup> Cobbett, "Slave Trade" in *Political Register*, vol.1, *Theories of Race*, ed. Peter J. Kitson, Kitson and Lee, vol.8, 376.

<sup>14</sup> "On the Slave Trade" in *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) 137.

[if slaves were set free]; V. This is not a fit opportunity [to stop the slave trade]: and the answers provided by Coleridge for them were: I. Somebody should begin; II. Slaves are much happier in their country since the black people multiply well in their country; III. The slave trade was more often a losing than a winning trade because of the high mortality of slaves and seamen. Coleridge's cautious attitude towards the existing rights of slavers could be found in his propositions towards objections IV and V. In his answer for IV, Coleridge suggested that the law of Abolition should leave the estate and every thing on it "untouched,"<sup>15</sup> and in proposition for V, Coleridge appealed that abolishing the slave trade would turn to Britain's advantage as political weapons against other European countries that had colonies. Clearly the plea involved a nationalist stance as well as a moral one: he affirmed that the British people should have the priority to preach "man's rights" to slaves:

We make war there more effectually as well as economically by sending over a few adventurous officers to preach the rights of man to the Negroes, and furnish them with weapons to assert those rights.<sup>16</sup>

What Coleridge had in mind was a moral superiority over France in the abolitionist campaign. France was then a powerful country with a strong missionary movement in the West Indies and America. Moreover, as a political force, France promoted colonialism as Britain did.

It was also in verse that Coleridge established a nationalist, anti-slave trade critique in "Fears in Solitude" (1798) which was published with "France: An Ode," written when France invaded Switzerland in January 1798. The poet's moral indignation in both poems was towards the aggression shown by France's undeniable imperialist ethos. He denounced France, calling it the "adult'rous blind" that "mockest Heav'n" (l. 78).<sup>17</sup> The poet's disappointment was obviously double-edged: disappointment towards France with its potential for the realisation of human equality and liberty and disappointment with its imperialist sentiment that would allow power politics and the sense of discrimination, inclusive of slavery as a social system in the name of Christian culture. Coleridge had to recognize that his expectations for France were after all "profitless." A power-oriented policy, for Coleridge, cannot provide a country with moral superiority. The nationalist stance, which he indicated was principally moral, and the anti-slavery movement should prove a country's moral superiority. The Anglo-Africanist rhetoric was ethically degrading for Coleridge; Britain itself was in this sense a target and Coleridge ventured to blame it on its people "playing tricks with conscience [and] dare[d] not look / At their own vices" (ll. 159-160).<sup>18</sup> By presenting the illustration of the

<sup>15</sup> "On the Slave Trade," 135.

<sup>16</sup> "On the Slave Trade," 136.

<sup>17</sup> "France: An Ode" in *Poetical Works, Poems: Part 1*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) 467.

<sup>18</sup> "Fears in Solitude" in *Poetical Works*, 475.

historical specificity of the slave trade by Britain, Coleridge condemned colonialist desires:

... my countrymen! have we gone forth  
 And borne to distant tribes slavery and pangs,  
 And deadlier far, our vices, whose deep taint  
 With slow perdition murders the whole man,  
 His body and his soul!

(ll. 50-54)

The poet castigates the deeds of the British slave traders as “vices” to taint their bodies and souls. Coleridge realised that he should admit this aspect of the moral degradation of Britain’s imperialist policy. To Coleridge’s mind, the deeds of the British slave traders destroyed the human dignity in both themselves and the slaves, not unlike the situation of the French invasion of Switzerland.

Coleridge’s attitude regarding abolitionism changed, however, during the period beginning around 1808. He criticised his fellow abolitionists as “frantic” in his discussion with Thomas Pringles (June 1833), a member of the Abolition Society in England:

... I utterly condemn your frantic practice of declaiming about their [colonisers’] Rights to the Blacks. They ought to be forcibly reminded of the state in which their brethren in Africa still are, and taught to be thankful for the Providence that has placed them within means of grace.<sup>19</sup>

Coleridge’s assumption that slaves who were brought to British plantations were happier than those in their homelands is obviously contradictory to his own answer II in his lectures of 1795 discussed above. The justification of slavery in terms of Christian discourse as “the process of Humanization” is not without reasons.<sup>20</sup> His estrangement from the anti-slavery ideology became stronger from around 1827 and reached its peak in 1833. Coleridge read many race theories which were intensively published in Europe around the turn of the century, and another factor which influenced him to this change was clearly a reaction to the aftermath of the French Revolution.

European race theories flourished from 1774 to 1840: anatomists, surgeons, philosophers and naturalists presented their opinions about the origin of different human races, their physiognomy, medical features, history, distributions, groupings, and so on. Two predominant views emerged: the monogenist hypothesis claimed that humanity was a single family and that its variety evolved from the original race through differences in climate and surroundings; in contrast, the polygenist hypothesis assumed that human

<sup>19</sup> *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) I, 386.

<sup>20</sup> *Table Talk*, I, 386.

differences resulted from separate origins. Significantly, the racial inferiority of black people was common to both approaches. James Cowles Prichard, the English physician and ethnologist, who supported the monogenist theory, maintained in *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813) the viewpoint that the difference between Europeans and “savage tribes” depended on the ranks of society in which they lived:

The people are here divided into different ranks, and the higher class are very much in the same circumstances, with the better orders of society in the civilized communities of Europe. The savage tribes are all of them completely Negroes, quite black, and the greater number have woolly hair. . .<sup>21</sup>

Others, including surgeons and ministers, shared the opinion that white skin indicated a civilized society, which, in turn, nurtured a prejudice against black people whose colour was deemed uncivilized.

Johann F. Blumenbach, whom Coleridge met in Göttingen in 1798-99, gave an important influence on his notion of black people, above all the race division theory which Blumenbach explicated in his *De generis humani varietate nativa* (*On the Natural Variety of Mankind*)<sup>22</sup> (1775). He divided the human species into five varieties according to his monogenist approach: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American and Malay. He argued that the original race was Caucasian and that all other races were “degenerated” from this norm into two extremes, the Ethiopian and the Mongolian, according to climate and environment. Blumenbach and his theory profoundly affected Coleridge, who wrote to Thomas Poole: “Nothing can be conceived more delightful than Blumenbach’s lectures and in conversation he is indeed a most interesting man”.<sup>23</sup>

Kant was another influence in Coleridge’s newly evolving notion of racial differences. Kant’s theory was also concerned with the effects of environmental factors on the development of races. The point of his “On the Different Races of Man” (1775) lay in the supposition that racial differentiation derived from climatic conditions, and that the Caucasian was the original race from which other races descended. The striking similarity between Blumenbach and Kant is clearly no coincidence, since the same theory had also been examined extensively by other thinkers in Germany in the 1770s. Kant’s theory originally borrowed its main thesis from a French anthropologist, George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. Buffon in his *Histoire naturelle* (*A*

<sup>21</sup> James Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813), *Theories of Race*, ed. Peter J. Kitson, Kitson and Lee, vol.8, 290-291.

<sup>22</sup> In the second edition of this work published in 1781 Blumenbach added the racial grouping of Malay. The third edition was much revised and is “the most complete statement of Blumenbach’s anthology”. See Kitson and Lee, vol.8, 141.

<sup>23</sup> 6 May 1799, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 2vols. (1956; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) I, 494.

*Natural History*) (1749-1804)<sup>24</sup> argued that human species themselves “altered, or degenerated, according to physical, environmental factors”<sup>25</sup> and Kant’s essay was intended as an answer to Buffon’s argument. Coleridge’s idea of racial hierarchy was supported by the monogenist theory. Coleridge’s illustration below, from his *Table Talk* of 1827, shows that he was a faithful successor to this view:

1.  
Caucasian or European
  2. Malay = 2. American
  3. Negro = 3. Mongolian = Asiatic
- (24 February 1827)<sup>26</sup>

Another factor which made Coleridge more cautious about the idea of the emancipation of slaves was his fear of the potential change to the social order that the liberation of slaves would bring about. Coleridge saw the breaking down of idealism through a series of incidents in France following the French Revolution. The zest for freedom among people who supported the spirit of the French Revolution turned into depression and fear. Through his disappointment at the French Revolution, Coleridge tried to assess his idealistic sensibility in the 1790s. He had attempted to erase his Jacobin label, defying his “worst enemy to shew, in any of my few writings, the least bias to Irreligion, Immortality, or Jacobinism”.<sup>27</sup> Coleridge even criticises himself for being enthusiastic about the movement for reform: “I was a sharer in the general vortex, though my little *World* described the path of its Revolution in an orbit of its own”.<sup>28</sup> He continued to recount his belief as “air-built Castles” of the day and balloons of “youthful Enthusiasm”.<sup>29</sup> This illustrates how Coleridge tried to create an ideological as well as a psychological distance from the idea of a changing the social order. He feared the possibility of social chaos after the emancipation of slaves, who had languished for so long at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For Coleridge, slaves were basically uncivilised, who would have difficulty integrating themselves into civilised society once they were given freedom and a sense of equality. This notion is in keeping with his belief in the Christianisation of slaves.

Oddly enough, the notion of civilizing slaves (through de-barbarianism and the Christianisation) was common to both pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions, “a common conviction”<sup>30</sup> shared by those involved in missionary activities in Africa and the European antislavery movements. In the beginning,

<sup>24</sup> Buffon’s work was translated into German in 1771-4. See Kitson and Lee, vol.8, xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Kitson and Lee, vol.8, xiii.

<sup>26</sup> *Table Talk*, II, 55.

<sup>27</sup> *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke, 2vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) II, No.2, 25.

<sup>28</sup> *The Friend*, II, No.11, 146.

<sup>29</sup> *The Friend*, II, No.11, 147.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries* (1982; Barbados: The University Press of the West Indies, 1982) 8.

however, a crucial division had existed between the missionary societies and the anti-slavery movements: abolitionists concentrated on putting a stop to the slave trade and the slavery system, whereas missionaries did not:

The antislavery movement, while it aimed only at abolishing the slave trade, condemned slavery. The missionary societies did not. They regarded slavery as a manifestation of the mysterious working of God.<sup>31</sup>

On a practical level, however, both abolitionists and missionaries agreed that it was to their benefit to give slaves the opportunity of living within the framework of Christianity. In fact, most of the abolitionists were dissenters such as Quakers and Baptists, who actually worked as missionaries in the British colonies, while Anglicanism, which had long disapproved of missionary work, also finally allowed the Anglican doctrine to be preached to slaves in the British colonies in 1813. James Ramsay, an Anglican priest, who presented his objections to the justification of slavery, emphasized the necessity of a Christian education for them. Specifically, he claimed that black people would become more intelligent if European colonialists were to teach them the “infinite power and perfect propriety in the Deity”.<sup>32</sup> In actual fact, however, Ramsay was in theory opposed to the pro-slavery hypothesis that black people were innately suitable to be enslaved because of their savageness. This curious combination of sophisticated logic was typical of the reasoning maintained in race-theorist–cum-abolitionist polemics. On the same issue of the primal necessity of civilising slaves, the pro-slavery campaigner William Beckford Jr. also argued in *Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica* (1788) that slaves should be educated through Christianity. Similarly, Edmund Burke asserted in his anti-slave trade essay *Sketch of the Negro Code* that slaves should be civilized in “religion, morality and learning”.<sup>33</sup>

Coleridge’s view was clearly shown in his 1808 review of Thomas Clarkson’s *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*,<sup>34</sup> while asserting the essential evil of the slave trade, he showed rather more concern with the civilization of Africans:

Privileges, both useful and flattering, should be held forth to such of the African tribes as would settle round each of these forts: still higher honours should be given to the individuals among such settlers as should have learnt our language, and acquired our arts of manufacture or cultivation.<sup>35</sup>

Although Coleridge’s argument—that slaves should learn European culture

<sup>31</sup> Turner, 8.

<sup>32</sup> James Ramsay, “An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies” (1784), *The Abolition Debate*, ed. Peter J. Kitson, Kitson and Lee, vol.2, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Burke, “Sketch of the Negro Code”, Kitson and Lee, vol.2, 185.

<sup>34</sup> *The Edinburgh Review*, (April 1808–July 1808), vol.12 (Edinburgh: D. Willson, 1808) 355–379.

<sup>35</sup> *The Edinburgh Review*, vol.12, 377.

before gaining the freedom of a civilised society—obviously differed from his initial abolitionist claims, it was not necessarily a de-humanising view. Rather, it had a religious basis and expressed his somewhat limited viewpoint and patronising stance of the superior, which highlights the practical limitations of the theories of Blumenbach and others.

### III

Coleridge's criticism against the slave trade was primarily a political protest against injustice in society which was seen as a "vice" that brought about dishonour to the British nation. His sensibility was essentially dissenting: as protester-lecturer in Bristol with a keen sense of public duty he condemned the British government for its slave policy. He was also dissenting in religious terms; as a Unitarian, his anti-slavery campaign was in accord with other religious movements fighting for abolition. The nonconformists such as Quakers, Unitarians and Deists were active in this movement, since denouncing the slave trade as a social vice gave them a rare chance of a well-timed political appeal for dissenters in the late eighteenth century. Coleridge expected in this context the political and social reaction to his anti-slavery arguments and an enlightening of the British mind by humanistic sensibilities. However, the prospect of achieving the goal of human equality between slaves and white people was for Coleridge unrealistic. His awareness of this prospect stemmed from the ideological influence of late eighteenth century humanism. Christian ethics and the intrinsic sense of order in the political and social system were the basic standpoints that sustained the spirit of the British people and their society in this age. This issue of human equality was again the main point of discussion when the Emancipation Act was passed in 1833. Aside from any theoretical concerns over egalitarianism, people's emotional reactions to this matter of the realisation of true equality between white and black were not only unrealistic but undesirable. Their concerns came from many quarters: the influence of race theories (which had developed a general following including politicians who were debating the issue in Parliament at the time), many of which discriminated against the coloured races; knowledge of political failure; contradictions in the attempts at social reform; and even the danger of new thoughts in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Coleridge's shift in attitude towards abolitionism between 1795 and 1833 was fundamentally linked to these sensibilities of the white Europeans.

British Romanticism on the whole shared a similar sensibility with the artistic discourses on slavery—that is, subjects of captivation-emancipation, in which the notions of frustrated freedom, liberty, and equality were the key concepts representing the oppressed situations of those figures. For instance, William Blake in *The Four Zoas* (1804) depicts the slave "grinding at the mill / And the captive in chains" (36:9).<sup>36</sup> The conflict between "captivity and

<sup>36</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 1977) 320.

liberty”<sup>37</sup> was an important theme of the Romantics, whose artistic duty included the task of emancipating captivated human minds, which was to serve as a precursor to delivering human beings out of captivity and into freedom. Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound” (1820) is a study of the nature of slavery, as Asia asks Demogorgon about “the dialectic of mastery and slavery,”<sup>38</sup> “Declare/ Who is his master? Is he too a slave?” (II:iv:108-9)<sup>39</sup> Figurative or not, the basic relationship of human beings in romantic discourse, had the nature of power relationships, such as man and woman, the rich and the poor, the wise and the idiot, and the master and the slave. The ongoing dilemma in its conflict was in fact what sustained the creative energy of the romantic subject.

In the anti-slavery British discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the limitations of the egalitarian viewpoint came to light when the equality of slaves proved almost impossible in practical terms. Although slave trading ceased in 1807, slavery as a social system persisted in Britain despite the sizeable number of anti-slavery controversies which remained in the late romantic period: society accepted the system, and race theories accepted racial discrimination. Historically speaking, this ideological weakness, which accepted slavery but also denounced it as a “necessary evil”<sup>40</sup> must be considered in the context of the racial prejudice against black people which was overwhelmingly sanctioned in society. However, an understanding of the civilized status of black people maintained by anti-slavery campaigners such as Thomas Clarkson and John Newton already existed to counter the compromising trend of British society which accepted slavery. The moral limitations of anti-slavery discourse were not exactly an ideological flaw but rather a matter of historical necessity.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 95.

<sup>38</sup> Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) 30.

<sup>39</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (1971; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 238.

<sup>40</sup> Bryan Edwards in “A Speech Delivered at a Free Conference” (1789) argued the economic necessity of the British slave trade. See Kitson and Lee, vol.2, 325-347.