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Hartley Coleridge and his Art of Dovetailing Miscellaneous Particulars

Andrew Keanie

> Had I access to books I might indeed be a useful compiler, for I have the knack of dovetailing miscellaneous particulars into something like continuous compositions in a readable style.[1]

HARTLEY seems to have felt that writing—or at any rate *his* writing—should flourish from an immediate impulse towards self-expression or communication, and should wither with the passing of the impulse. He seems to have determined that all the poetry and prose he would produce should spring directly from the mysterious, irrational source of power within him. Such feelings put him at odds with society, his friends and, eventually, his family. The feelings even put him at odds with himself because, whilst part of him was the wild poet, arriving from time to time with messages for us from the dark, another part of him felt apologetic about his not emulating the wise and productive middle age of a Southey or a Wordsworth.

Consider the forms into which Hartley has cast his work. They immediately suggest a reason for the neglect from which his reputation has suffered. Much of his work consists of poems and essays which, until his brother Derwent Coleridge posthumously edited them in the early 1850s, remained either scattered up and down the back numbers of various periodicals or simply unpublished. So, the public long lacked an opportunity to judge Hartley's work as a whole; and even after the publication of *Poems* (1851) *Essays and Marginalia* (1851), and *Lives of Northern Worthies* (1853), the lack of homogeneity—the general effect of Hartley's eccentric and erratic improvisation—presented by the collections, prevented that uniformity of impression which is so necessary to the growth of a reputation. As Wordsworth, STC, Byron, Keats and Shelley were beating their luminous wings, Hartley was positioning himself in relation to the (or any) age at an ineffectual angle.

Here is one passage of Hartley's prose in which he is exercised about the state of education:

> The world is still too much in the habit of confounding the absence of regular tuition with positive ignorance; though we do hope that the preposterous folly of dignifying a little, a very little Latin, and very, very, very little Greek (forgotten long ago), with the exclusive name of learning, is far gone in the wane. Indeed, there is more need to assert and vindicate the true value of Greek and Roman lore, than to level the by-gone pretensions of its professors. [2]

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[1] *The Hartley Coleridge Letters: a calendar and index* (by Fran Carlock Stephens, 1978) 61

[2] Coleridge, Hartley, *Lives of Northern Worthies* (edited by Derwent Coleridge, 1852) III 3

But in that instance Hartley discusses education at some length in what was after all supposed to be a biography of Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759-97) patron, William Roscoe (1753-1831). Hartley continues with stimulating and provocative writing (albeit irrelevant to the subject of Roscoe):

> This age has a sad propensity to slay the slain, to fight with wrath and alarm against the carcase of extinct prejudices, because some two or three men of genius, and perhaps a score of blockheads, are striving to galvanise them to a posthumous vitality. Admitting, however, that Shakspeare could not, with the assistance of grammar and dictionary, construe an ode of Horace, (which is a pure and rather improbable assertion, for Latin was then taught far more generally than at present), he certainly was not unacquainted with the ancient authors, most of which were translated early in Elizabeth's reign, rudely and incorrectly enough it may be, (there was little or no accurate scholarship in England before Bentley), but still so that neither the feelings nor the thoughts were wanting…
> (*Lives of Northern Worthies* III 3-5).

Hartley does something similar in his piece on William Congreve (1637-1708):

> We admit, therefore, that up to a certain point, an established order of learned men is absolutely necessary for the conservation of literature and the prevention of barbarism; and that this order can only be preserved by the power of the state, or by the superstitious reverence of the people,—that is, while the people remain so ignorant as to be incapable of conceiving the true value of knowledge, or till knowledge is so far perfected as to demonstrate its own value by its practical results. (*Lives of Northern Worthies* III 308-9.)

In the next paragraph, Hartley explores his own understanding of what can and cannot be taught. The writing is wise and wry, but, again, strictly speaking, in a biography of Congreve, irrelevant:

> Science has made man master of matter; it has enabled him to calculate the revolutions of nature, to multiply his own powers beyond all that was dreamed of spell or talisman: and now it is confidently prophesied that another science is to remove all the moral and political evils of the planet; that by analysing the passions we shall learn to govern them; and that, when the science of education is grown of age, virtue will be taught as easily as arithmetic, and comprehended as readily as geometry—with the aid of wooden diagrams. (*Lives of Northern Worthies* III 309.)

He often seems to spin himself into cobwebs at the corners of the subject. He concludes the paragraph above by snapping out of his ironic reverie and making his own view explicit: 'Let us not be deceived… The tree of knowledge

is not the tree of life.' (*Lives of Northern Worthies* III 309.) Did Hartley seek to induce forgetfulness in his readers, many of whom, it can reasonably be imagined, must have picked up the piece in the first place because they were interested in Congreve?

Byron had been able quickly to produce Oriental tales after the French novelist and critic, Madame de Staël (1766-1817), had advised him: 'stick to the East; the public are orientalising'.[3] Shelley, in his drive to stretch and sculpt his thoughts into poetic templates for future human behaviour, had an almost non-human brightness of purpose. (Leigh Hunt likened him to a bee.)

Hartley was unable (or unwilling) to collect and steer his imaginative and intellectual energies on a fixed course that would see through to completion an unequivocally substantial piece of work. He had conceded as much with the publication of this sonnet:

> How long I sail'd, and never took a thought
> To what port I was bound! Secure as sleep,
> I dwelt upon the bosom of the deep
> And perilous sea. And though my ship was fraught
> With rare and precious fancies, jewels brought
> From fairy-land, no course I cared to keep,
> Nor changeful wind nor tide I heeded ought,
> But joy'd to feel the merry billows leap,
> And watch the sun-beams dallying with the waves;
> Or haply dream what realms beneath may lie
> Where the clear ocean is an emerald sky,
> And mermaids warble in their coral caves,
> Yet vainly woo me to their secret home; –
> And sweet it were for ever so to roam.
>
> (*Complete Poetic Works* 8.)[4]

The above sonnet first appeared in the *London Magazine* in 1823, when Hartley was staying with the Montagu family in London, his life having recently gone spectacularly wrong at Oxford. One can more easily imagine sonnet-length bursts of inspiration interrupting Hartley's sorrow, than any overmastering enthusiasm to see a book-length project through to completion. His mother was at a loss as to what he could do, or what could be done for him:

> Poor H. is preparing a volume of Poems for the press, but I fear is at a loss for a publisher; he talks of writing for present support, but *what*, and *how*, Alas, I know [not]. It is impossible for me to have any peace of mind until he is in a regular way of providing for himself. (*Letters* 71.)[5]

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[3] Cristiansen, Rupert, *Romantic Affinities* (1994) 195
[4] Coleridge, Hartley *The Complete Poetical Works of Hartley Coleridge* (edited by Ramsay Colles, 1908)
[5] *Letters of Hartley Coleridge* (edited by Grace Evelyn Griggs and Earl Leslie Griggs, 1941)

In order to (at least try to) pay his own way in life, Hartley had to (at least try to) be efficient and successful. He had to make himself into something other than himself, for money-making purposes, since the failed poet (and, by 1823, also the failed academic) could not hope to survive as such, but only by the help of whatever other self he could extemporize. This is why, having failed as a schoolteacher in the 1820s, he tried to be a biographer in the 1830s.

Yet it was in the sonnet form that Hartley could write about Wordsworth with the level of insight one would wish for in the best biography:

> THERE have been poets that in verse display
> The elemental forms of human passions:
> Poets have been, to whom the fickle fashions
> And all the wilful rumours of the day
> Have furnish'd matter for a polish'd lay:
> And many are the smooth elaborate tribe
> Who, emulous of thee, the shape describe,
> And fain would every shifting hue pourtray
> Of restless Nature. But thou mighty Seer!
> 'Tis thine to celebrate the thoughts that make
> The life of souls, the truths for whose sweet sake
> We to ourselves and to our God are dear.
> Of Nature's inner shrine thou art the priest,
> Where most she works when we perceive her least.

(*Complete Poetic Works* 10.)

The above appreciation of Wordsworth is a condensed blend of the primary aspects of a master-essayist: intimacy and critical distance. The same is true of Hartley's poem on the metaphysical poets, and, in particular, John Donne:

> Love was their theme, but love that dwelt in stones,
> Or charm'd the stars in their concentric zones;
> Love that did erst the nuptial bond conclude
> 'Twixt immaterial form and matter rude;
> Love that was riddled, sphered, transacted, spelt,
> Sublimed, projected, everything but felt,
> Or if in age, in orders, or the cholic,
> They damn'd all loving as a heathen frolic;
> They changed their topic, but in style the same,
> Adored their Maker as they wooed their dame.
> Thus DONNE, not first, but greatest of the line,
> Of stubborn thoughts a garland thought to twine;
> To his fair maid brought cabalistic posies,
> And sung quaint ditties of metempsychosis;
> 'Twists iron pokers into true love-knots',
> Coining hard words, not found in polyglots.

(*Complete Poetic Works* 320-1.)

The above example contains plenty of heterogeneous images yoked by Hartley together. Hartley could write the lives of his favourite poets from the inside out. His best 'biographies' are the poems on his chosen authors. In his actual biographies, he instinctively sought areas little to do with his subject. Or, to put it another way, he would have shuffled off the coil of his subject, or even made of the subject a pupa in which he would wing his words with the impulse of life and poetry. Look at the quoted paragraph from Hartley's biography of the explorer, navigator and cartographer, Captain James Cook (1728-79):

> But the moral greatness of Cook, his perfection of self-command, the power whereby he impressed inferior minds with the feeling of his mental superiority in emergencies, where nothing but such an impression could have maintained obedience, his considerate and manly humanity, his pastoral anxiety for all entrusted to his charge, his industrious zeal for the good of men so far removed from European sympathies and associations, that many would hardly have acknowledged them for fellow-creatures, the strength of his intellect in conceiving and comprehending great ends, his adroitness in adapting, his perseverance in applying means conducive to those ends; all, in short, which constitute the *man*, apart from the *science* and the *profession*, may be rendered intelligible to all; and to these points we shall direct our principal attention.
>
> (*Lives of Northern Worthies* III 118.)

You could substitute from any number of names for the name of Cook. Admiral Nelson (1758-1805), perhaps; or the reformer, campaigner and Vice-President of the Anti-Slave Trade Society, Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846). The end of the quoted paragraph seems to promise a sharpened focus, and the next paragraph begins, 'James Cook was born on the 27th of October, 1728,' but Hartley cannot (or will not) curtail his natural inclination—as natural as self-forgetfulness in a child, and as inevitable as the occurrences in a chrysalis—to emerge and be free.

Hartley sometimes pays lip service to the biographical task at hand, but gratifies his own instincts whilst shimmying round the brute fact that the materials required to write 'authoritative' biographies are nowhere near him. Not many collections of biographical studies contain an admission by the editor that the author was 'embarrassed by want of books' (*Lives of Northern Worthies* I xii).

Hartley's looseness (even lightness) of research has to be set against the fact that he does not aspire to be an 'authority.' Authority is dry and non-digressive. Historians are to Hartley something like scientists were to Blake: their creed is non-deviation from 'plain truths', 'plain prose', factual actuality un-upholstered by wayward, woolly thinking (such as mermaids warbling in their coral caves). Hartley calls the spirit in which many professional intellectuals go about their work 'the hard passionless spirit of enquiry, so

essentially necessary to arrive at those grand principles which convert facts into truths.' (*Lives of Northern Worthies* I xxi.) I am reminded here of a stanza from Paul Magnuson's *Rime of the Ancient Edytor* (1978):

> Research, research everywhere
> 'Twas sad as sad could be
> Research, research everywhere,
> Facts floating all at sea.
>
> (*The Coleridge Bulletin* 29, Summer 2007, 109.)

Study of the strenuously fished, painstakingly dried out, agglomerated, sanded and polished—and canonically embeddable—'truths' of theorisers such as Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), William Godwin (1756-1836) and Edmund Burke (1729-97)

> may, indeed, do no harm, for the same reason that it does no good, viz., because it takes no hold; it glides away like globules of crude quicksilver over a smooth surface, or at most is deposited in the show-room of memory:—because no conclusions, applicable to common life, can be drawn from it; because it excites no sense of reality. It is gone through as a task,—by children on compulsion…
>
> (*Lives of Northern Worthies* I xxiii-xxiv).

Here, Hartley's tremulous, moonlit gift—his transfixing power of language even as the facts float flagrantly beyond the shadow of his idiom—is on display: poetry by other means.

Without having announced any intention to formulate a metaphysical explanation of the universe, Hartley could say, in a sonnet,

> What is the meaning of the word 'sublime',
> Utter'd full oft, and never yet explain'd?
> It is a truth that cannot be contain'd
> In formal bounds of thought, in prose, or rhyme.
> 'Tis the Eternal struggling out of Time.
>
> (*Complete Poetic Works* 117.)

The accumulation of dry facts required to write 'proper' biographies (to be got at only after much difficulty and labour) was an inert and lifeless thing to Hartley. 'What duller looking volume than a Parish Register?', he exclaims at the beginning of his introduction to the series. He could never occupy himself for long enough with special branches of knowledge, with all their petty details. He had no strong appetite for seeking out subjects difficult of access in order to distinguish himself. His view of the whole industry of biographers comes to mind:

> Letters, diaries, memoirs, family papers, public records—everything in

> manuscript or print—has been rummaged with indefatigable eyes. Every syllable, parenthesis, blank, and erasure, has been tortured—yea exorcised, for intelligence respecting men, of whom their contemporaries hardly thought it worth while to invent anecdotes. Much collateral knowledge has been elicited by the research, and much forgotten literature brought to light; but, with regard to the immediate objects of enquiry, it has rather led to additional doubt of what was heretofore taken for granted, than added to the scanty amount of ascertained facts.[6]

Hartley did not do this. Nor did he make—or challenge—any great theory. He did not, like Blake, call in question the right of discursive reason to dictate to the energies of life. Nor, for that matter, would he—nor *could* he—write a biography with anything like the professionalism of a Southey: 'When I compare Southey's biographical style with my own, I confess I am almost driven to plunge myself over head and ears in the slough of despond.'

(*Letters* 144.)

With regard to Hartley's peculiar approach to—or away from—'the… ascertained facts', here is some anecdotal evidence. Hartley never actually met his brother's wife, and this seems to have suited his taste for (or addiction to?) the deliciously vague:

> Often have I strain'd my imagination to construct for my own mind's eye a perfect image of *your* beloved Mary, but there is a shadow, a reminiscence that baffles still my efforts, a figure which I know is not, cannot be the true one, always presents itself instead. (*Letters* 106.)

Curiously, tellingly, Hartley continued to request that Derwent somehow collaborate with him in protecting the purity of the unspecific:

> I do not desire you to describe my Sister in Law. Prose descriptions create no images, and poetical ones may, but all false. Nothing but deformity can be accurately described. In vain would you schedule her perfections, tell the very hue of her tresses, and communicate to your style the lustre of her eyes, scientifically delineate her facial angles and tell with arithmetical exactness the length, breadth and thickness of every feature. I should never be a whit the wiser.
>
> (*Letters* 106-7.)

One of the things that makes Hartley's work glow with its special private ardour, rather than glitter like the prizes up for grabs in the great world, is his constitutional reluctance to clog up his thinking and writing with too many correlations to reality (whatever *that* is):

[6] *The Dramatic Works of Massinger and Ford, with an introduction by Hartley Coleridge* (1840), xi

> If truth had been a vapour still aspiring
> From passive matter's self-consuming brands,
> A smoky something, while we stand admiring,
> But nothing when you take it in your hands;
> Then would I bid you puff the truth away,
> And watch it thinning from your pipe of clay.[7]

Perhaps the conclusion to the above poem, 'Thoughts While Smoking' (1842), is too lightweight and trite to have been delivered by one of our heavyweight thinkers:

> Where each true man may say unto his brother,
> One thing is true at least, we love each other.[8]

Underneath all the pressures—from his contemporaries, his family, and, above all, himself—to become a working (replaceable, but at least not spare) part in the industry of letters (or school-teaching), Hartley was as pale-handed as any fin de siècle phantom. He learned, ahead of his time, the wisdom of resignation to the fits and starts of his own 'malfunctioning' mind—his 'irregular passions and [his] intellect, powerful perhaps in parts, but ever like "a crazy old church clock, and its disordered chimes"' (*Letters* 163).

[7] Pomeroy, Sister Mary Joseph *The Poetry of Hartley Coleridge* (1927) 109
[8] Ibid.