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'Amaranths' and 'Poppies':
Sara Coleridge, Poet's Daughter and Poet

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SARA COLERIDGE received her early education from her mother and her Uncle Southey; their nurture and influence, in different ways, would sustain her through life. In maturity, Sara became 'a follower […] of the principles of STC […] because', she said, 'they seem the *very truth*'.[1] Conversely, she recognised in herself and her father the same constitutional weakness, diagnosing 'the great misfortune of both' their 'lives' as 'want of bodily vigour adequate to the ordinary demands of life even under the most favourable circumstances'.[2] Coleridge's constitution, 'originally full of life', was, in Sara's view, 'full of death also from the first'.[3] The divided legacy extends from 'amaranths' of visionary achievement to the 'poppies' of addiction and dejection. Wordsworth saw this inheritance as disabling: 'but for being their father's children', he wrote, both Sara and Hartley 'would be larger figures in English Literature'.[4] Virginia Woolf concurred, describing Sara's dedicated editorial scholarship as 'her opium', a self-muting soporific; her identity hidden within her father's 'vanished radiance'.[5] Acknowledged in her own day as 'the inheritrix of Coleridge's genius',[6] as her American correspondent, Henry Reed, put it, Sara has since been recognised principally for filial devotion, not as an independent voice. As Jane Spencer comments: 'the literary daughter was liable to be scolded for forgetting her place, if she aspired to inherit the father's estate. Daughters were not supposed to be heirs'.[7] I will suggest, however, that Sara Coleridge achieved her individual voice as poet; enabled by, yet distinct from, the paternal legacy.

Sara's earlier phase of poetic maturity—the 1830s—spans the period of her marriage. The poems of this time, including a surprising number of those for children, and the narrative and verses of *Phantasmion*, reflect the dark inheritance of illness, anxiety, depression. For example, in *The Pair that will not meet* (the pair are 'Love' and 'Health') Love's long-anticipated 'richest banquet' yields, in reality, a paralysis of desolate alienation:

> Youth stole away and Health with eye askance

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1 Letter to Hon Mr Justice Coleridge, July 1843, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (London: Henry King, 1873) 2 Vols. Vol 1, p.281

2 Sara Coleridge, *Autobiography*, printed in Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 249

3 Sara Coleridge, *Biographical Supplement*, S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of my literary life and opinions . Prepared for publication in part by the late Henry Nelson Coleridge; completed and published by his widow*. 2 vols, edited by Sara Coleridge. (London: Pickering, 1847). Vol 2, p. 409

4 William Wordsworth, cited in Kathleen Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood* (London: Virago, 1997) p. 329

5 Virginia Woolf, *Sara Coleridge*, in *Death of The Moth and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1961, first published 1942) p. 102

6 Henry Reed, *The Daughter of Coleridge*, L.N. Broughton, *Sara Coleridge and Henry Read* (New York: Ithaca, 1937) p. 1

7 Jane Spencer, *Literary Relations: Kinship and The Literary Canon 1660-1830* (London: OUP, 2005) p. 189

Froze every glad desire and genial thought
And left me gazing in a joyless trance.[8]

Sara's tendency in later poems, however, will be to salvage from dejection an idiom of survival, spiritual resilience, and an ethic of care.[9]

Poppies, published in *Pretty Lessons In Verse for Good Children*, 1834, marks a significant moment in Sara's poetic development, as she confronts the inherited 'misfortune' of infirmity and opium use, and introduces the next generation to this legacy. *Poppies* avoids the extremes of drug-induced exuberance and opium-benighted suffering encountered in her father's work. Bringing us into the territory of *The Pains of Sleep*, *Poppies* offers revised perspectives on 'sorrows of the night'. The ironic difference is that, for Sara, drug-induced 'slumber soft' will effect a release into peace from the restlessness of illness; while the effects of opium for Coleridge render sleep

Distemper's worst calamity, (PW, 335, 36)

and reduce him to a desolate pleading.

To be beloved is all I need (PW 335, 51)

is his helpless cry. In her *Introduction* to *Biographia Literaria,* Sara cites the concluding lines of *The Pains of Sleep* as expressing that damaging 'turn of mind' which persisted through Coleridge's life: what she calls his 'morbid intensity and tenacity of feeling'.[10] Sara's laudanum poem, however, presents an image of watchful parenting, to be reciprocated in due time by filial solicitude:

O then my sweet, my happy boy
Will thank the Poppy-flower,
Which brings the sleep to dear Mama,
At midnight's darksome hour. (Swaab, p. 71)

The poet's son, in contrast with the childlike abasement and egotistical dependency of her father, will anxiously care for another's health: and, just as his mother has nurtured his 'bright' young life, will value the medicine which relieves her.

Although Sara's poem inducts the boy into adult suffering and guilt—as he learns what his carefree childhood costs his mother—both guilt and suffering are redeemed. The Wordsworthian form of *Poppies* determines not only its

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[8] Sara Coleridge, *Collected Poems*, edited with an Introduction by Peter Swaab (Manchester: Fyfield Books, Carcanet Press, 2007) p. 100

[9] Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). Mellor writes that 'women Romantic writers … typically endorsed a commitment to a construction of subjectivity based on alterity, and based their moral systems on what Carol Gilligan has recently taught us to call an ethic of care which insists on the primacy of the family or the community and their attendant practical responsibilities'. Pp. 2-3

[10] Sara Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 1847. Vol 1. Pp. xxxii—xxxiii.

measured reflective tone, but underpins a Wordsworthian outlook. 'Mr Wordsworth opens to us a world of suffering', Sara wrote in 1835; 'but for every sorrow he presents an antidote'.[11] In *Poppies*, while laudanum is medicinal, the real and lasting 'antidote' to suffering will be the healing restorative of family love; the 'simple grandeur', in Mary Wollstonecraft's terms, of 'dignified domestic happiness';[12] such happiness as Sara's mother, herself a follower of Wollstonecraft, had been denied.

Henry's death, in January 1843, brought Sara the responsibilities of single parenthood, which became the principal imperative of her life. 'I had children to consider and act for', she wrote in 1847, looking back over her years of widowhood; 'the sense how cruel and selfish it would be to shadow their young lives by the sight of a mother's tears, was a motive for exertion'.[13] Significantly, Sara associated parental love with her literary and intellectual concerns: 'Things of the mind and intellect give me intense pleasure […] It has seemed a duty, for my children's sake and my own, to cultivate this sense of cheerfulness.'[14] Such comments in letters of her final decade show Sara to have become outward-looking; immersed in what she terms 'the business of life'.[15] She experienced an increasing sense of independence; which, with the struggling resilience of an active Christian faith, invigorates her voice as poet.

Sara's intellectual and poetic autonomy emerges in her poem, *For my Father on his lines called 'Work Without Hope'*. By the end of the first verse it is clear that what we are reading is more complex and passionate than a tribute to a 'celebrated parent' by his 'dutiful daughter':[16]

> Father, no amaranths e'er shall wreathe my brow,
> Enough that round thy grave they flourish now:—
> But Love 'mid my young locks his roses braided,
> And what cared I for flow'rs of deeper bloom?
> Those too seemed deathless—here they never faded,
> But, drenched and shattered, dropped into the tomb.
>
> (Swaab, p. 156)

In the elegiac solemnity of the verse's movement, the final line's funereal procession of 'drenched', 'shattered', 'dropped', coming to rest with awful finality on 'tomb', Sara refocuses language and theme. Her father's poem is about loss of creative will and energy; her own, a response to death.

Work Without Hope was a key text for Sara in understanding her father's

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[11] Letter to Mrs. Henry Jones, July 1835, cited Mudge, p. 218

[12] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792, cited by Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* p. 38. Mellor defines Wollstenecraft's feminism in terms which seem strikingly applicable to Sara Coleridge: 'The rational woman, rational love, egalitarian marriage, the preservation of the domestic affections, responsibility for the mental, moral and physical well-being and growth of all the members of the family—these are the cornerstones of Wollstonecraft's feminism.'

[13] Letter to Miss Erskine, October 1847, *Memoir & Letters*, Vol 2, p. 141

[14] Letter to Miss Erskine, October 1847, *Memoir & Letters,* Vol 2, p. 141

[15] Letter to Frank Coleridge, cited Mudge, p. 123

[16] Mudge, p. 177

achievement in relation to the limitations imposed by his psychology. Her poem was written in 1845, while she was preparing *Biographia Literaria*, an undertaking in which, as Norman Fruman acknowledges, she exercised a 'remarkable sensitivity to the distorting pressures of personal bias'.[17] Sara's dispassionate intellectual rigour underpins both her critical analysis and poetic response. While the overall effect of Sara's *Introduction* to *Biographia* is to present Coleridge as 'intellectual hero', whose 'philosophical principles and religious integrity'[18] triumphed over flaws of character, she is clinical in defining those frailties, which, she argues, gave rise to Coleridge's incriminating borrowings from Schelling: 'The nerveless languor', she writes, 'which […] paralysed his powers both of rest and action, precluding by a torpid irritability their happy vicissitude,—rendered all exercises difficult for him except of thought and imagination flowing onward freely and in self-made channels; for these brought with them their own warm atmosphere to the chains of frost that bound his spirit. Soon as that spontaneous impulse was suspended […] apathy and sadness […] reabsorbed his mind […] and to counteract it he lacked any other sufficient stimulus'. To illustrate this 'nerveless' paralysis, Sara then quotes the final quatrain of *Work Without Hope*:[19]

> With lips unbrightened, wreathless Brow, I stroll:
> And would you learn the Spells that drowse my Soul?
> Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,
> And Hope without an Object cannot live.
>
> (PW 606. 11-14)

Coleridge's poem is about a past and present which preclude possibility of a future; Sara's contrasts past with present in order to adapt and progress. Her upbeat idiom defining the past, 'blest', 'fond', 'tender gleam', shows a poignant joy in recollected experience; indeed, in a letter, she confesses the danger of indulgence in memory, the temptation to 'forget the present in the past'.[20] Coleridge, however, is alienated from the reviving present scene and the landscape of former poetic achievement. He accepts this alienation, casually shedding all marks of distinction, 'unbrightened', 'wreathless'; acknowledging his 'nerveless languor' in the louche apathy of 'stroll'.

> And would you learn the spells that drowse my soul?
>
> (PW 606, 12)

he asks in ironic self-mockery: 'spells', alluding to drug-use, recalls, with the 'the fount' and 'nectar', the lost imagined paradise of *Kubla Khan*, rendered now a bitterly remote illusion by the false promise of what he termed the 'seeming

[17] Norman Fruman, *Aids to Reflection on a New Biographia. Studies in Romanticism*, 24, 1985. p. 141.
[18] Mudge, p.125
[19] Sara Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1847. Vol 1, p. xix.
[20] Letter to Mrs Erskine, October 1847, *Memoir & Letters*, Vol 2, p.142

magic effects' of opium.[21] What Sara lost, though, was a daily paradise of love, which 'shed' a 'tender gleam' across all of life. She states, with decisive emphasis, the finality of loss:

> Nought can for me those golden gleams renew;
>
> (Swaab, p. 156)

her 'shattered wreath' of marital love presented in rebuke of her father's self-absorbed passivity; the apathy with which he accepts the muting of his 'soul'.

The audacious ingenuity of Coleridge's final couplet presents the image of drawing 'nectar in a sieve'. A twenty-first century reader might see in this an absurdist tour de force;[22] and might read the paradoxical success of an innovative sonnet about failure as a statement of Coleridge's anti-Wordsworthian 'aesthetic of inachievement', to borrow Jim Mays's phrase.[23] For Sara, however, the lines indicate 'the chains of frost that bound' Coleridge's 'spirit': and recall the confusions of his damaged self-destructive life, its capacity to inflict 'perplexity and bitterness'; as Sara herself had experienced at age 6, rebuffed by her father for the young Wordsworths.[24]

Coleridge concludes his poem in a stark negative, all effort abandoned. Sara, by contrast, from her statement of loss, carries the verse forward through a decisive syntactic turn, to initiate a strategy of endurance and hope. The 'new […] tough state of mind'[25] Sara defined in a letter of 1847 is given voice in vigorous, even defiant language:

> Yet Hope still lives, and oft, to objects fair
> In prospect pointing, bids me still pursue
> My humble tasks:—I list—but backward turn
> Objects for ever lost struggling to discern.
>
> (Swaab p.156)

The suffering self, practically and spiritually active, asserts 'Hope'. The poet takes on the challenge to create new meaning and identity in 'humble tasks'. These will include the loving duties of parenthood, as well as the editorial work designed to recreate her father's cultural presence; which, in turn, will confer a rich and significant legacy upon her children. Through such uniquely productive cultivation of 'amaranths' round her father's 'grave', the daughter, as editor and poet, will achieve autonomy, expressed in the inspiring active verbs of her concluding line; particularly, the muscular 'struggling'. For Sara, to 'struggle' is itself redemptive: 'I have struggled and am still struggling […]

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[21] *PW* 2, cited p. 753

[22] For example, Eric G. Wilson, who says that the image is 'close to Absurdist Theatre'. Eric G. Wilson, *Coleridge's Melancholia* (Florida: University Press Florida, 2004) p.164

[23] J.C.C. Mays, *Coleridge's 'Love': 'All he can manage, more than he could'* in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages,* ed. T. Fulford & Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993) p. 50

[24] Sara Coleridge, *Autobiography,* Mudge, p. 261

[25] Letter to Aubrey de Vere, Mudge, p.134

for life', she explained soon after Henry's death: 'the struggle is its own reward […] it calls forth new energies'.[26] Sara's concluding lines, therefore, recall a quality she valued in Wordsworth: 'he shows us how man may endure as well as what he is doomed to suffer'.[27] With spiritual resilience, Sara strives towards redemptive vision. She will not accept defeat: 'Nothing is hopeless except the stagnation of the spirit', she wrote, 'when it lies a prey to the vulture grief'.[28] Sharing her father's constitutional weaknesses, Sara's attitudes in dejection are those underlying *Ode to Duty* and *Resolution and Independence*. Her poetic voice is yearning, but restrained; resilient, though sombre; vulnerable, yet unyielding in a subdued intensity of passion.

While Sara retains an acute sense of the brightness and blessing of the love she lost, she knows that the subtext of her father's poem, putatively addressed to Ann Gillman, is a failure of a different kind of love: the withholding of that therapeutic affection for which he pleaded at the end of *The Pains of Sleep*. 'Gainful popularity', Sara explains, in her *Introduction* to *Biographia*, 'would not in itself have been an adequate object to him, without a further one, more deeply satisfying, a dream of which was ever unbracing his mind, but which life, such as he had made it […] had not afforded'.[29] This failure to attain love's craved-for fulfilment is Coleridge's subject in *The Improvisatore*, a text which would have had poignant irony for Sara, as Coleridge locates himself in a familial context of substitute daughters. The total effect of the prose dialogue, with its verse continuation, is a bewildering, dispiriting uncertainty about the possibility of love. Its grammar is of negatives and conditionals, offering only

> "The certainty that struck hope dead".
>
> (PW, 606, 65)

Sara's emphatic rejection of the negatives of *Work Without Hope*, her 'Hope still lives', is a rebuttal of the self-doubting stance of *The Improvisatore*, too; and particularly of the marginality of role and status which Coleridge assumes, both in his persona in the text, and his position in the marketplace of 1828, originally publishing the work in an annual, taking on the much more popular Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, to whose *Improvisatorice* his title refers.[30] It would be difficult to envisage the hesitant superannuated figure, self-marginalised in *The Improvisatore*, transformed into the guiding and heroic intellectual authority of the age.

Acutely aware of her father's emotional and moral frailties, Sara knows that only those who experience 'nervous sufferings' can properly comprehend them; just as her father responded with sympathy to her own terrors of the

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[26] Letter to John Taylor Coleridge. Earl Leslie Griggs, *Coleridge Fille, A Biography of Sara Coleridge*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1940) p. 117

[27] Letter to Mrs. Henry Jones, July 1835, Mudge p. 218

[28] Letter to John Taylor Coleridge, Griggs, p. 117

[29] Sara Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1847, Vol 1, p. xx

[30] Anya Taylor, 'Romantic Improvisatore and the Difficulties of Loving', *Philological Quarterly* 4, Fall, 2000, p. 501

dark in childhood.[31] Vulnerable as her father to anxiety and neurosis, Sara confronts her own burden of pain in relation to his. When Hartley engages with his father, however, he is oblique: the sonnet in reply to *Work Without Hope*, published in his *Poems 1833*, is evasively impersonal. The optimistic opening,

> All Nature ministers to Hope, [32]
>
> (Colles, p.90)

and the images which follow, counter Coleridge's 'despair' by presenting the hidden benedictory energies of 'healing' Nature. In effect, Hartley summarises a philosophy of faith rooted in his father's long-abandoned Wordsworth-and-Nature-worshipping past. Hartley's confident rhetorical question,

> Why should Despair oppress immortal powers?
>
> (Colles, p.90)

pays tribute to Coleridge, but sidesteps the fundamental issues of emotional and psychological paralysis that are his father's and his own.[33] Unlike Sara, Hartley avoids direct engagement with the inherited infirmity, just as ultimately he ran away from, and shunned, Coleridge's company.[34] Oppressed by his own sense of falling short of 'immortal powers', what he describes, in another poem, as

> the awful weight and
> Duty of my destiny,
>
> (Colles, p.232)

Hartley's voice will remain an echo of his father's in articulating incapacity and self-entrapment. His predominant tone is that 'resigned and subdued sadness',[35] which, for Sara, characterized Coleridge's later voice. This is true of some of Hartley's finest poems: the deeply moving devotional sonnet *Multum Dilexit*, for example, in which his posture is of abject passivity, dependent wholly upon external grace:

> I am a sinner, full of doubts and fears,
> Make me a humble thing of love and tears.
>
> (Colles, p.359)

Sara's religious sensibility, though, is committedly active—'to God we

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[31] Sara Coleridge, *Autobiography*, Mudge, p. 266

[32] *The Complete Poetical Works of Hartley Coleridge*, edited by Ramsey Colles (London: Routledge, 1907) p. 90

[33] Colles, Introduction, p. xxxv, writes of Coleridge and Hartley that, 'always dreaming', both 'gave way to procrastination' so that the 'mind preyed upon itself and the power of will was lost'.

[34] See Richard Holmes, *Darker Reflections* (London: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 527

[35] Sara Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1847, Vol 2, p. 419

climb!' she writes in a poem on baptism;[36] and, disagreeing with the Oxford Movement's representation of man 'as the passive […] object of divine operation',[37] she insists on energized engagement of the 'conscious spirit'[38] and 'intelligent will'.[39] Her poem, *On Reading My Father's Youth and Age*, reflects how this active experience of religious commitment informs a distinctive idiom and vision. Rejecting her father's yearning for lost youth, Sara remembers herself as a passive object of admiration when,

> Not much [she] lacked of Spring's enchanting dow'r;
> (Swaab, p. 167)

recalling, perhaps, her visit to London in December 1822, when her beauty caused such a sensation that people at the theatre would stand on their seats to catch a glimpse of her.[40] Age, however, with 'wan cheeks and sunken eye', liberates Sara from passive object to spiritually-engaged subject:

> … let me lose or gain what charms I may,
> Heav'n grants me more and more a heart t'admire
> All beauty that can genial thoughts inspire.
> And though this truth no genuine sage assails,
> 'Less what we *have* than what we *are* avails',
> Herein *to have* is surely best by far –
> To—gaze—to love—and care not what we *are*.
> (Swaab, p. 167)

Sara avoids the intricate metrical dexterity and abrupt transitions of *Youth and Age* to develop an argument carried forward in regular iambics and rhyming couplets; a style of 'noble simplicity', to borrow her own critical term.[41] Sara's ingenuity is conceptual rather than verbal—her conclusion overturning a conventional moral precept to assert an active and spiritual comprehension of love.

In *Time's Acquittal*, which recalls the form and manner of George Herbert's *Time*, and is characterized by a flexible colloquial tone, Sara initially complains of her physical decline and lost looks, asking to be granted a final vision of herself

> in finest feather
> Of youth and health.
> (Swaab, p. 161)

[36] Swaab, p. 193
[37] Letter to Henry Nelson Coleridge, Mudge, p. 97
[38] Letter to Henry Nelson Coleridge, Mudge, p. 97
[39] Letter to Henry Read, 29th November 1850, Broughton, p. 40
[40] See Molly Lefebure, *The Bondage of Love* (London: Gollancz, 1986) p. 235
[41] Letter to J. Kenyon, 1844, *Memoir & Letters*, Vol 1, p. 303

The 'apparition' which materialises is not the poet's past self, but her 'children's faces', apprehended with wonder and delight:

> Time, I did thee wrong
> Thou'st made me doubly blooming, glad and strong! -
> Let my light wane –
> Since stars new-ris'n my downward path are cheering
> And for one radiance, now fast disappearing,
> Thou giv'st me twain.
>
> (Swaab, p. 161)

Loss, dejection, and the decline through age towards death, are to be redeemed by a practical, rational and spiritual exercise of looking outward; expressing self in looking away from self: thinking of, caring for, and loving others, most particularly her children; a viewpoint formed in poetic encounter with her father; owing much to Wordsworth; something to her mother; and, it must be said, to her Uncle Southey.

Sara's poems form a significant element of what Henry Reed called 'her career of authorship'.[42] The cruel tragedy of Sara's premature death was compounded by Derwent's failure to publish Sara's poems and literary remains, as he had done, at Sara's prompting, for Hartley. After the century and a half of neglect, we are now hearing an ardent and committed independent voice, which, thoroughly Romantic in undertone, in mood and emphases becomes distinctively Victorian.

[42] Henry Reed, *The Daughter of Coleridge*, Broughton, p. 1