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Coleridge and the Unitarian Ladies

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I WANT TO START with a well-known exclamation of frustration from Coleridge's notebook: 'Socinianism Moonlight—Methodism & A Stove! O for some Sun that shall unite Light & Warmth'.¹ That exclamation, first written in 1799 and retranscribed in notebook 21 in 1802, has often been taken as representative of his difficulties with the chilly rationalism of Unitarian thought, and with what Peter Kitson has termed 'the weaknesses and dangers of... propertied dissenting belief'.² But the neatness of that 'Socinianism Moonlight' formulation encourages us to ignore the 'Light and Warmth', the valuable encouragement, that the Unitarian community *did* offer Coleridge in the 1790s. My focus today is not on Coleridge's changing attitudes toward Socinian theology: instead, I'd like to go some way toward more fully contextualising Coleridge's Unitarian relationships, and to show how sociability, friendship, and domestic affection were a crucial part of his attraction toward Unitarianism. In particular, I focus on Coleridge's relationship with two Unitarian ladies: Elizabeth Evans, part of the Strutt family of Derbyshire, and Anna Letitia Barbauld. Both women encouraged the young Coleridge in different ways—one practical, the other literary—and this encouragement is intertwined with their shared Unitarian beliefs.

To understand his relationship with Elizabeth Evans, we need to go back to early 1796—to a fervent Coleridge on a tour of the Midlands and the North, drumming up support for the *Watchman* and firing the provinces with his sermons '*preciously peppered with Politics*'.³ As he told Josiah Wade, his whistle-stop tour went from Birmingham to Derby, to Nottingham, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, London, and Bristol: 'Ah, what a weary way! My poor crazy ark has been tossed to and fro on an ocean of business, and I long for the Mount Ararat on which it is to rest' (*CL* I: 176). That letter finishes with an image of one—albeit temporary—refuge which he had found on this weary pilgrimage, in the family of Mr. Barr, Dissenter and porcelain manufacturer, on whose connections with Coleridge Robin Whittaker has written so illuminatingly: 'What lovely children Mr. Barr at Worcester has! After church, in the evening, they sat round and sang hymns so sweetly that they overwhelmed me.[...]It seemed a picture of Heaven, where the different orders of the blessed join different voices in one melodious allelujah' (*CL* I: 178).⁴ The movement of that letter, the lonely storm-tossed pilgrim finding sanctuary in a heavenly domesticity, suggests how powerful a hold the concept of family

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 9 vols. (London: Routledge, 2002; originally published: London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), vol. I, 467.

² Peter J. Kitson, 'The Whore of Babylon and the Woman in White: Coleridge's Radical Unitarian Language', in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J.B. Beer*, ed. by Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), p. 6.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), vol. I, p. 176. Hereafter, referred to in text as *CL* vol. #: p #.

⁴ 'Tourist, tradesman—or troublemaker? Coleridge's visit to Worcester, 1796', Robin Whittaker, *Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 21, Spring 2003, pp.47-54.

affection had over Coleridge, and how very closely it was linked with worship. As Whittaker has shown, these comments on the Barrs, and on the ‘matronly, motherly figure of Mrs Barr eulogised at the heart of her family group’, connect with Coleridge’s idealisation of family groups and the maternal at this time.⁵ The description of the Barr family offers an image of retreat which is also, through the hymn-singing, sociably and religiously engaged with others. Although the Barrs were themselves members of a Congregational church in Worcester, denominational differences during the period were not clear-cut, and this image of family affection exerted a powerful charge in Dissenting literature of the time. For the Unitarian Enfield in his *Sermons for the Use of Families*, for example, family affections ‘are the foundation of all social virtue’; ‘domestic peace and love’ offer in Enfield’s sermons a model of divine, as well as social, harmony.⁶

Also in that letter to Wade we have the first mention of the Strutt family, framed by this image of domestic affection, and also by radical engagement. Coleridge tells Wade that he has succeeded ‘tolerably well’ in obtaining *Watchman* subscriptions: ‘Mr. Strutt (the successor to Sir Richard Arkwright) tells me I may count on forty or fifty in Derby and round about’ (CL I: 177). Moreover, Strutt gave him an introduction to Mr. Fellowes in Nottingham where, as he told the Reverend Edwards, he was likely to do a ‘good deal of Business’ (CL I: 179). As those two mentions indicate, the Strutts were an influential force in Derby society. Jedediah Strutt, the father of the family, and the archetypal, prosperous self-made Unitarian Dissenter, had created his fortune through the invention of a machine to knit ribbed stockings. Born in 1726 to a farming family, he married the maidservant of Ebenezer Latham, the proprietor of the nonconformist Academy at Findern. With his brother-in-law, and with the support and practical assistance of his wife, he built up a thriving hosiery business, and went into partnership with Arkwright in Cromford in 1769. Griggs suggests that the Strutt Coleridge encountered was Jedediah, but it may well have been one of his sons, probably William, who was active in the literary and political world of the town and might have been expected to know possible *Watchman* subscribers. William was friendly with Erasmus Darwin, and perhaps effected Coleridge’s introduction to him on the Derby visit when they ‘bantered... on the subject of religion’ (CL I: 177). Coleridge also knew another of Jedediah’s sons, Joseph; describing the brothers in a letter to Thelwall of 1799, he wrote:

William Strutt is a man of stern aspect, but strong, very strong abilities: Joseph Strutt every way amiable (CL I: 306).

Both continued and furthered the family business, and left their mark all over

⁵ *ibid.* p. 53.

⁶ William Enfield, *Sermons for the Use of Families. Vol. I. The Fourth Edition.* By William Enfield (London: J. Johnson, 1772), p. 32.

Derby in the shape of schools, an Infirmary, a Mechanics Institute, and an arboretum. Their social and reforming impulse was clearly shared by their sister, Elizabeth Evans, who, following the failure of the *Watchman*, invited Coleridge and Sara to stay with her in Darley, not far from Derby, for five weeks in summer 1796. Seeking to compensate and to encourage Coleridge, Elizabeth wanted to establish him as tutor to her children. The situation was, Coleridge told Fellows, ‘an object of my highest wishes’ (*CL I*: 227), and Elizabeth Evans ‘a woman of great mind & very great heart!’, who treated him with ‘esteem, & affection, and unbounded generosity’ (*CL I*: 234).

Aside from the £150 a year, why would Coleridge have felt drawn toward Elizabeth Evans? A possible clue to her character is a letter of 1793 in the Derbyshire Record Office, worth exploring because of the insight a document like this gives us, as Tim Whelan and Robin Whittaker have shown, into the ‘political and religious milieu that Coleridge either sought out for himself, or was introduced to by his friends and contacts’.⁷ Elizabeth writes to her brother Joseph:

Mrs Drewry tells me you are impatient to see Godwin’s *Enquiry*.—I am impatient that you should, and therefore send you the first volume which you may be going on with, while I finish the second—and oh my dear Joseph read attentively, meditate, discuss, disseminate these precious opinions, these divine truths, with all the zeal which their importance demands. They have penetrated my heart, may they raise yours above prejudice, enable you to despise riches, and finally dispose you to use all your efforts to ameliorate the condition of mankind. The grand desideratum in Politics is the diffusion of knowledge and morals amongst the poor.—This the manufacturer has it in his power considerably to promote and is culpable in the neglect of it.

The time may be long in coming, but I indulge myself with the delightful hope that it will come, when the tyrants and the slaves of the earth will be converted into one great alliance of friendship and of brotherhood. You may have the pleasure of accelerating that blissful period—and would to God that you would set about it.⁸

The letter was preserved by a descendant, Frederick Strutt, who seems somewhat startled by what he terms her ‘liberal enthusiasm’, commenting, in 1898, ‘perhaps her views here expressed may be too Utopian for these more cautious days’. That Utopianism is the link between Coleridge and Elizabeth Evans. By 1796, of course, Coleridge had abjured Godwinism, but the fervency of Evans’ earlier letter would still have struck a chord. Its emphasis on dissemination and ‘diffusion of knowledge and morals’, on the ‘great

⁷ ‘Tourist, tradesman—or troublemaker? Coleridge’s visit to Worcester, 1796’, Robin Whittaker, *Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 21, Spring 2003, pp.47-54; p. 48. See also Tim Whelan’s ‘Joseph Cottle the Baptist’ in *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* NS No.111 July 2000, pp.96-108.

⁸ Derbyshire Record Office, Strutt MSS, Life of William Strutt D2943, fol. 10/1.

alliance of friendship and brotherhood,' and on an optimistic and progressive movement toward reform reminds us of Coleridge in certain moments of the early 1790. It is evident, in different forms, in the Pantisocratic plan, for instance; or the confidence and optimism of the first draft of 'Religious Musings', 'The Nativity'; or the discussion of reform in *Lectures 1795*, which, as Ian Wylie comments, 'was to be evolutionary, not revolutionary':⁹

not to be procured by the tumultuous uprising of an indignant multitude but this final result of an unresisting yet deeply principled Minority, which gradually absorbing kindred minds shall at last become the whole.¹⁰

The concept of a 'deeply principled Minority', derived here from Coleridge's reading of Priestley and echoing his millenarian attitudes, is also present in Elizabeth Evans' letter, as she urges her brother to use his position as a wealthy employer to 'accelerat[e] that blissful period'. Her encouragement of Coleridge—as he puts it, her 'Love and Veneration' of him (*CL I*: 231)—might have been along the same principles, believing in the power of the poet 'to ameliorate the condition of mankind'.

Moreover, the family setting of the tutoring scheme might also have been a powerful draw to Coleridge, waiting for the birth of David Hartley in September, and always drawn to idealise domesticity and family affection. The letters of the Strutts show the crucial importance of family life, shared reading and mutual education, and an incident recorded by Frederick Strutt gives an idea of the kind of family the Coleridges were considering entering:

Although [Elizabeth Evans] was her husband's first wife, she discovered after she was married and had had a child of her own, that there was another little boy about the place, of whom in fact her husband was the father. [...] Instead of sending the child away, she had him brought up with her own family, and treated him ~~all her life essentially~~ as one of her own children.¹¹

But even in this enlightened family there were problems; not least those caused by Elizabeth Evans' determination to have Coleridge in her house. He wrote to John Fellows that both branches of the family were opposed to the tutoring plan: 'Mr William Strutt was cold, & his arguments (when he used *any* to Mrs Evans) dissuasive - & the Grandfather Evans & Mr Walter Evans decisive in opposition' (*CL I*: 228). 'At length,' he tells Fellows, '[...] she determined, that the sacrifice of her children, which Mammon, gloomy as Moloch, required, should *not* be given—and the plan of education, which I proposed, is to be

⁹ Ian Wylie, *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 107.

¹⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, ed. Peter Mann, and Lewis Patton, *Bollingen Series*; 75 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 218.

¹¹ Derbyshire RO, Strutt MSS, Life of William Strutt D2943, fol. 10/1.

followed' (CL I: 228). But within a few days he received 'an impassioned Letter' (CL I: 232) telling him that her brothers had put a stop to the scheme. In several letters he describes Elizabeth Evans' agitation and embarrassment over this failure, and her 'great liberality' toward the Coleridges: as they prepared to leave her, she pressed £95 into Coleridge's hands, and a great quantity of fine lace baby-clothes on Sara (CL I: 231).

One might speculate that it was not just Mammon, but also Coleridge's 'political notoriety', to borrow his own phrase from a letter of that summer to Estlin, which prompted the Strutt brothers' refusal. It was one thing to assist him with the subscription tour and to effect introductions for him; quite another to make him part of the family, in residence as a tutor. Stuart Andrews has demonstrated the limitations of Derby radicalism, and Paul Magnuson has described the 'duckings and drubbings' endured by Jacobin sympathisers in nearby Nottingham in the early 1790s, where mills were attacked and set alight.¹² In May 1796, there had been particular disturbance in Nottingham when a Derby man, Dr. Peter Crompton, Dissenter and Warrington Academy alumnus, stood for election on a Radical anti-war manifesto. When he lost to the Whig Robert Smith, windows were broken, soldiers had to be deployed to clear the mob, and a Tree of Liberty was planted in the Market Place.

All this might have contributed to the Strutts' reluctance to countenance the tutoring plan. When it failed, it was Crompton who stepped in. He made a proposal to Coleridge to start a day-school in Derby, where he would send his three children. Coleridge went so far as to find a house and convince the landlord to 'Rumfordize' the chimneys for him, before the plan to tutor Charles Lloyd distracted him from the idea. Nevertheless, he retained good associations with Derby: the Strutts were later to subscribe to *The Friend*, and Elizabeth Evans, in particular, stayed in Coleridge's mind. In 1799 he told Thelwall that the visit was

a sunny spot in our Life!—My Sara sits and thinks and thinks of her, & bursts into tears – & when I turn to her, says—I was thinking, my dear! of Mrs Evans & Bessy. —(i.e.) her daughter). [...] She is no common Being who could create so warm & lasting an interest in *our* hearts (CL I: 306).

'Indeed,' he went on to tell Thelwall, 'she is without exception the greatest WOMAN, I have been fortunate enough to meet with in my brief pilgrimage thro' Life.—' (CL I: 306). Again, the image of Coleridge as pilgrim recurs, constantly seeking religious and domestic refuge. Furthermore, that 'warm & lasting' interest should be set alongside the Socinian moonlight note of the same year, a nice example of Coleridge's very complex relationships with Unitarian ideals and Unitarian practices, swinging between intense admiration

¹² Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism* (Palgrave: 2003), p. 122; Paul Magnuson, 'Subscribers to Coleridge's Poems (1796), or Duckings and Drubbings in Nottingham,' *The Coleridge Bulletin* (Winter 1998): 57-78.

and detached criticism.

This dual approach might seem to be embodied in Coleridge's relationship with another Unitarian lady, Anna Letitia Barbauld. Although her critical recuperation is now very well along the way, Barbauld's association with Coleridge continues to be overshadowed by her infamous complaint, as reported in *Table Talk*, that the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' 'was improbable, and had no moral.'¹³ This again seems neatly to express the strict and stony rationality of Socinianism, a lack of imaginative inflection or capacity for nuanced response. This impression is reinforced by the active hostility which broke out toward Barbauld from Southey, Coleridge and Lamb after they misattributed a critical review of Lamb's play *John Woodvil* to her.¹⁴ 'Why have you not made Lamb declare war upon Mrs. Bare-bald?' Southey asked Coleridge in March 1804. 'He should singe her flaxen wig with squibs, and tie crackers to her petticoats till she leapt about like a parched pea for very torture.'¹⁵ But there was another side to Coleridge's relationship with Barbauld, expressed in a comment in 1800 to John Prior Estlin:

The more I see of Mrs Barbauld the more I admire her—that wonderful *Propriety* of Mind!—She has great *acuteness*, very great—yet how steadily she keeps it within the bounds of practical Reason. This I almost envy as well as admire—My own Subtleties too often lead me into strange (tho' God be praised) transient Out-of-the-way-nesses. Oft like a winged Spider, I am entangled in a new Spun web—but never fear for me, 'tis but the flutter of my wings— & off I am again!— (*CL I*: 578).

Coleridge's imagery seems drawn from Barbauld's own poem of sympathetic response, 'To Mr C[oleridge]', written after their first meeting in August 1797, but not published until 1799, in the *Monthly Magazine*. The poem figures Coleridge as a pilgrim caught, like Bunyan's Christian at the Hill of Difficulty, halfway up the Hill of Science. Here he must beware the 'tangled mazes' and the 'strange enchantments' of abstraction:

Scruples here
With filmy net, most like th'autumnal webs
Of floating Gossamer, arrest the foot
Of generous enterprize; and palsy hope
And fair ambition, with the chilling touch

¹³ *Table Talk* ed. Carl Woodring (2 vols., Princeton, 1990), vol. I, p. 272.

¹⁴ See letter of Sept. 12 1803 from Southey to John Rickman, blaming Barbauld for an article in the *Annual Review*, I (1802), 688-92: 'That ill natured attack upon *John Woodville* is Mrs Barbauld's doing [...] Mrs B. and the brimstone-fingered oatmeal-eaters have both omitted to notice its peculiar beauties'. *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry, 2 vols. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), vol. I, p. 327.

¹⁵ *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey (6 vols., London, 1850). Vol. II., p. 275. See also E. V. Lucas's account of the episode, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols. (London: Methuen, 1921), vol. I, p. 277.

Of sickly hesitation and blank fear.¹⁶

There seems a mixed movement of admiration and defensiveness in Coleridge's appropriation of the web image: 'Oft like a winged Spider, I am entangled in a new Spun web'. An admission, perhaps, that Barbauld's 'great *acuteness*' might have touched on an important truth about his character? But although the poem is a warning, it is also a public assertion of support and sympathy for the younger poet:

Youth below'd
Of Science—of the Muse below'd, not here,
Not in the maze of metaphysic lore
Build thou thy place of resting...

which closes with a blessing, returning us to the concept of family affection and its close link to the divine:

Now Heaven conduct thee with a Parent's love!

There is a double reassurance in the poem: Barbauld advises Coleridge both from an authorial and from a religious perspective. Lisa Vargo has nicely demonstrated how the poem is 'steeped in Unitarian debates about the role of writing in promoting social transformation': how very closely the argument of the poem overlaps with Unitarian debates about the role of the poet in society and the dialectic between retreat and social engagement.¹⁷ This was reinforced by publication in the *Monthly Magazine*, the journal edited by her brother John Aikin, in April 1799. The *Monthly* was deeply engaged in these debates, featuring articles such as 'Is Private Affection incompatible with Universal Benevolence' by Enfield, writing under the name of the 'Enquirer', and poems by Coleridge, perhaps most famously 'Reflections on Entering into Active Life'. But although Coleridge was contributing to the *Monthly* throughout 1796 and 1797, Barbauld did not publish her poem there until 1799. Vargo speculates convincingly that Barbauld might have been aware, through Estlin, of Coleridge's vacillation over entering the Unitarian ministry, and that the publication might serve in some ways as an admonition, a reminder of his social duties. One might also find a parallel in the way in which Evans urges her brother, in that letter of 1793, toward a sense of social responsibility and community.

As Unitarians, both Evans and Barbauld look toward reform through benevolence and active practical commitment, and their reassurance of Coleridge seems to be similarly based in familial affection. Just as Evans

¹⁶ Anna Letitia Barbauld, *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. Elizabeth Kraft, and William McCarthy (Athens ; London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 132.

¹⁷ Lisa Vargo. 'The Case of Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "To Mr Coleridge."' *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* New Series No. 102 (April 1998): 55-63; p. 58.

attempts to console Coleridge after the failure of the *Watchman* by offering him and Sara a place in her family, so Barbauld seeks to reassure and strengthen his Unitarian resolve through a poem of bracing sympathy. Barbauld and Evans were linked through the Bristol Unitarian minister, John Prior Estlin, a mutual friend. His favourite themes, wrote Barbauld, were ‘the goodness of God, and the great practical duties of Christianity’.¹⁸ It was Estlin who introduced Coleridge to Barbauld in August 1797, Coleridge having walked forty miles from Nether Stowey to Bristol for the purpose.¹⁹ Moreover, the poem ‘To Mr. C[oleridge]’ circulated in manuscript, in Mrs. Estlin’s hand, for the two years prior to publication—as a friend of Estlin, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine the interested Elizabeth Evans being shown the poem.

I want to close with a final ideal Unitarian lady, who might also shed light on the attraction Evans and Barbauld held for Coleridge. Firstly, it’s worth remembering that those mazes and bowers of Barbauld’s Coleridge poem allude to her own earlier essay, the ‘Hill of Science, a Vision’, in the 1773 volume she edited with her brother, *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose*.²⁰ This allegory, with its narrator wandering ‘in a vast extended plain’ searching for a vantage point of truth, then helped to shape Coleridge’s own ‘Allegoric Vision’ which opens the first of the ‘Lectures on Revealed Religion’. Here, ‘in a vast Plain [...] the Valley of Life’, Coleridge’s narrator encounters several allegoric female figures: the Goddess Religion, ‘her features blended with darkness... terrible yet vacant’, and the figure of Sensuality, but, most importantly for his pilgrimage:

a Woman clad in white garments of simplest Texture Her Air was mild yet majestic, and her Countenance displayed deep Reflection animated by ardent Feelings [...] My name is Religion, she said.²¹

‘Deep Reflection animated by ardent Feelings’: the head and heart, light and warmth, are brought together in a typically Coleridgean movements of oppositional union. I think we might place alongside this ideal that early description of Barbauld as steadily keeping her intellectual acuteness ‘within the bounds of practical Reason’, and the image of Evans as ‘the greatest WOMAN, I have been fortunate enough to meet with in my brief pilgrimage thro’ Life!’. It is, perhaps, this figure, formulated in 1795, which shapes those descriptions of Evans and Barbauld, and which shows us the weight of idealism behind his encounters with those Unitarian ladies in 1796 and 1797.

¹⁸ Anna Letitia Barbauld, ‘Memoir of the late J. P. Estlin, LL.D.’ prefixed to J. P. Estlin, *Familiar Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Longman: 1818), p. xxx.

¹⁹ See Richard Reynells letter (CL I: 341) ‘On my arrival at Stowey and at Mr. Coleridge’s house I found he was from home, having set out for Bristol to see Mrs. Barbauld a few days before.’

²⁰ John and Anna Letitia Aikin, *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose, by J. And A.L. Aikin* (Lond., 1773), pp. 30-38.

²¹ Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, p. 91.