

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 33 (NS) Summer 2009

© 2009 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Sara Coleridge: Poems and Their Addressees

Peter Swaab ¹

I

MOST OF Sara Coleridge's poetry remained unpublished in her lifetime, a situation she shares with many poets in the long Romantic period, from Blake to Emily Bronte. Often her readership extended no further than her immediate family. Her verses would be first read or heard by addressees linked by family ties—her cousin Henry Nelson Coleridge when during their long courtship he opened his fiancée's letters, her children Herbert and Edith Coleridge when their mother read to them. Later, in her widowhood, her crucial addressee was the young Irish poet Aubrey de Vere, again generally within letters, and she seems to have wistfully entertained the romantic prospect of making him part of the family too. Some poems were hidden from all other eyes, even family ones, in private notebooks perhaps meant to be found after her death.

A number of her poems did make it into print, but without a blazon of attribution to Sara Coleridge. Thirty-five were included in the children's book *Phantasmion*, but this was an anonymous publication, and the poems were songs of figures in the story. A few appeared in her lifetime in editorial footnotes and addenda, in for instance the 1848 sixth edition of *Aids to Reflection* (and only there), or the 1849 second edition of *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*,² only visible as *her* poetry to readers with the curiosity or stamina to trace them back to her editorial pen. At times she hoped that her poetry would reach a wider readership, but she also had doubts whether it truly deserved one. She gathered most of her poems in a bound volume and suggested to her brother Derwent that they might be collected, as he had done in editing Hartley's poems with an introductory memoir in 1851; but he didn't take the hint (*SCP* 4-5). Sara's daughter Edith included some poems in the 1873 *Memoir and Letters*, but her selection concentrated on Sara as a theologian and figure of piety and tucked most of the poems away as footnotes. It was not until 2007 that a volume of Sara Coleridge's *Collected Poems* first appeared in print under her own name.

She presents us with a special case of the writer's relation to an audience or a readership. Unpublished poems refigure the imponderable distances between addressee and reader involved in the process of publication. The addressee of a poem meant for publication is only in a partial sense the real addressee: there is the public too. The readership which has acquired the book may include the addressee of the poems, but is not limited to him or her or it. In one version of this relationship the addressee is presumed to hear, while we the readers overhear. In another, poetry is more radically solitary: 'eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*', as John Stuart Mill put it in a famous formulation

¹ This article is an extended version of a lecture given to the Coleridge Summer Conference in July 2008.

² Sara Coleridge, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter Swaab (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), pp. 186-188, 230. Further references will be included in the text as *SCP*.

from 'What is Poetry?', published in 1833, the same year as some of Sara's early poems.³ Such overhearing is a more distant possibility in unpublished poetry, when the readership may not extend beyond (or even to) the addressee; but here too there may be possible further addressees outside the world of print or in posterity. Manuscript poems might in a quite practical sense be either 'the utterance that is overheard', as Mill calls poetry in the same essay, or an utterance not heard at all.

Many of Sara Coleridge's poems, within *Phantasmion* and elsewhere, are about being unheard or overheard. My topic in this essay is the creative use to which she puts her situation as a poet unlikely to be published, and which she makes of the questionable and shifting status of the literary addressee. There is for instance the twist given to a poem entitled 'Song' when it is encountered in the pages of a book, and without music; the difference between addressing someone on paper and vocally; the gap between how children might hear their mother's verses and what they mean to her as writer (still more so when the verses are addressed to a baby, or—in one case—a 'babe unborn'). Most of Sara Coleridge's poems have addressees, usually her husband, children or friends, and as I have suggested they were generally first read or heard by these addressees, a coincidence between reader and addressee more characteristic of manuscript writing than publication. The history of Sara's life and publications (I'll call her Sara and her father STC) gives particular salience to the issue of her audience. I will briefly outline the readerships for her verse before going on to look at a number of poems which represent some of her best writing and some of the different ways she imagines a reception for her poems in a notably diverse poetic oeuvre.

II

Sara wrote verses all her life. Her early poems were children's exercises and translations of Horace and Petrarch. A few years later, like many accomplished young women of her day, she and her friends wrote verses in each other's albums.⁴ Often celebrating a visit or lamenting its end, these verses tended to be commemorative and retrospective. Sometimes they were enclosed in letters instead of albums, or in letters before being transcribed in albums. Such epistolary poems, with their inbuilt link between letter-writing and the absence of the addressee, were a schooling in thinking about distance and how to bridge it through acts of sympathy in writing.

Sara's albums were of course out of the ordinary in that they contained extracts and signatures from the likes of Southey, STC and Wordsworth, the Lake poets in the family, together with a circle of acquaintance that included

³ 'What is Poetry?' (1833), reprinted together with 'The Two Kinds of Poetry' as 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties'; see John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, edited by John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 348.

⁴ Three of her albums are among the Sara Coleridge collection in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas.

Rogers, George Crabbe, Joanna Baillie and others. Album verses tend by their nature to involve tight-knit circles of family and friends. But when your family circle was hers, the public ear was not so very far away. At the same time as some of these album verses, for instance, Sara was working on her first, translated book, a translation of the Latin of Dobrizhoffer's *Account of the Abipones*, published in three volumes when she was 20. Her uncle Robert Southey posted a favourable notice in the *Quarterly Review*⁵. In a way she was brought up to the literary lights, and was evidently something of a celebrity when she visited London in 1822 as a young woman, both for brains and beauty, and even more for what was felt to be the unlikely combination of the two. 'On one occasion', Griggs relates, 'every one stood up at Sara's entrance into a public gathering enraptured at her beauty'.⁶ Even if apocryphal, the story suggests something about her *éclat* and reputation. After such an auspicious debut she may have expected more of the literary limelight than came her way.

Her poems to her fiancé Henry Nelson Coleridge make up the main verse output of her earlier years up to her marriage in 1829. These poems record and indeed conduct a substantially epistolary courtship between London and the Lakes during their long engagement of seven years—verses from the Lakes rather than the Sonnets from the Portuguese. During the 1830s she returned to versification as a mother, writing many hundreds of little poems for the pleasure and instruction of her children, Herbert born in 1830 and Edith two years later. Sara suffered from severe post-natal depression after Edith was born, and then again after the death of her twins shortly after their birth in January 1834. Her most severe psychological crisis came in autumn 1835, between the writing of *Phantasmion* and its revision: returning from a visit to her in-laws in Devon, she had a complete collapse and holed up alone for a month in an inn in Ilchester, sending the children back to Devon and resisting all her husband's attempts to bring her home, fearful that return to London would be the death of her. Her misery and her despair of intelligibly communicating it were her urgent plight in these years. Anxiety and depression are the frequent topic of her poems from this time. In them she creates a space to record her unhappiness and perhaps to establish a context of sympathy and understanding.

Her verse-writing slows up, though it does not stop completely, in the years between *Phantasmion* (1837) and her husband's death in 1843. She returned to the writing of poetry again in the years 1843-5, prompted by her romantic friendship with Aubrey de Vere, a fervent admirer both of Wordsworth and the young Tennyson. As Robin Schofield shows in this issue, (p.65-73) the poems of these years have a wider canvas and new qualities; they include translations, and reflections on theological controversy, matters of

⁵ *Quarterly Review* 26 (1822), pp. 277-323

⁶ Earl Leslie Griggs, *Coleridge Fille: A Biography of Sara Coleridge* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 38-9

public concern, and the history of literature; they give evidence of new engagements and energies, together with an intellectual commitment to domestic duties and spiritual fortitude. I will look at some of these poems at the end of this essay, but want first to turn to the poems of the 1830s.

III

Among the first poems Sara wrote after her marriage in 1829 are the ‘Verses written in sickness 1833, before the Birth of Berkeley and Florence’ (*SCP* 62-3). In these she imagines her death and describes at length her ‘anguished hour’ and ‘sickening fears’. Although the first thirty-five lines lament her misery, the eighth and final stanza begins ‘My griefs are not to be expressed’. The suggestion is that the poem can’t go so far as ‘expressing’ her grief. Even if it says more than she is able to in the silent misery of her life, it cannot realize an adequate circuit of communication from speaker to addressee. But although the line is partly a statement that her griefs outrun her powers of expression, it also implies more hopefully that her poetry will still endeavour to give expression to hidden feeling. According to her mother, remembering Sara’s ‘maiden days’, she spent much of ‘the latter 10 years of that state—*weeping*—’,⁷ and her depressions in the first half of the 1830s often rendered her, apparently, incapable of speech. Writing in October 1832, Sarah’s mother lamented that ‘Before she left H. she wd. sit in a Carriage... and never speak one word to the poor babes the whole time’, and again, ‘Sara cannot talk’.⁸ The writing of a poem improves this incapacity into something communicable, and it affirms at least the wish to explain.

The manuscript transmission of this poem gives a small history of the familial relations it struggles to maintain (see *SCP* 216-7). When she transcribed it in her manuscript volume, Sara added a note which specified ‘Sara Coleridge to her Husband, Mother and Children. Written on my Mother’s bed, November 7th 1833, Hampstead’. She further noted ‘By SC, copied out by her dear mother’. Together with the title, these notes place her illness as an affliction undergone and survived, with the help of the family which she feared she was leaving. The poem itself is addressed first to ‘My babe unborn’, and then to her living children. The headnote amplifies that its address is ‘to’ her family, apologizing, explaining, bringing together the family in an understanding that her grief is not a voluntary withdrawal but an experienced affliction. It embodies a promise that her depression was not completely estranging, and not the kind of abandonment of family carried out in her own early years by STC (still alive when this was written). The poem ends ‘I ne’er shall find a steady rest, / Till, torn from all I love the best, / I seek the distant

⁷ Sarah Fricker Coleridge, note affixed to a letter from SC to Emily Trevenen, 12 August 1832; quoted in Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 58.

⁸ *Minnow Among Tritons: Mrs. S. T. Coleridge’s Letters to Thomas Poole 1799-1834*, ed. Stephen Potter (London: Nonesuch Press, 1934), p. 172, p. 174.

unknown shore'. These last lines are ambivalent: 'torn' gives one version of her death, in which she is a victim, 'seek' another, in which she is a pilgrim. The latter makes her affliction into a pilgrimage, one in which moreover her children consolingly remain 'all I love the best'.

The only volume of Sara's verse to appear in her lifetime was the *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children*, published anonymously in 1834 at the initiative of Henry Nelson Coleridge, and mainly put together out of the little 'Herby cards' on which she would write verses for her son. But even in this 'pretty' volume we find some of her darkest poems. The collection begins with 'Benoni. / Dedication'.⁹ In Chapter 35 of Genesis, Benjamin, the son of Jacob and Rachel, was called 'Benoni' by his mother who died giving birth to him. The word is Hebrew for 'son of my sorrow'. Even the precocious Herbert at 4 years old probably would not have taken on board the implications of the allusion, but he might do when encountering the book later—indeed, as he was its dedicatee, he could hardly avoid it: and a child, unlike a more public figure, is not able to decline the position of dedicatee. Sara both does and doesn't want him to get drawn into the world of her sorrow:

No anxious pitying love I ask of thee—
Be thoughtless still while swift thy childhood flies.
Hereafter thou, my Herbert, wilt discern
 With tender thoughtfulness this heart of mine,
That asked no present love, no full return; (SCP 64)

She may not be asking for 'present love' or 'full return', but in declining the idea of reciprocity she necessarily raises it too, together with the pain of its lack. 'Thoughtless', a Wordsworthian word, focuses different feelings about her son's innocence and happiness: a happy blitheness for a season, but also a heedless ignorance. Something resentful can be heard in the lines: if they are not exactly aggressive, surely they are as we now say 'passive-aggressive'. 'You have a good time, don't mind me, I'm just suicidal', they seem to say.

This poem of dedication has more than one addressee, although his name does not alter: he is both the thoughtless Herbert of now and the discerning one of hereafter. This seems to be a hereafter imagined without mother, with a fantasy of the older Herbert's tender sufficiency of feeling. He remains 'my Herbert' to Sara, in an affectionate continuity which persists beyond her implied disappearance. Insofar as he is the addressee—insofar as the book is 'to' him and not just 'for' him—he is the older child. The Latin dative case to which Sara would pedagogically introduce her children can equally signify either 'to' or 'for', but Sara was sensitive to the difference between them. The

⁹ The 1834 edition of *Pretty Lessons* has no contents page, but in the fifth edition of 1853 the title appears on the contents page as 'Dedication'. On the page where the poem itself appears in 1834, it is headed 'Benoni. // Dedication.', with the two words printed on separate lines and separated by a horizontal line. See *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children* (London: John W. Parker, 1834), p. [5].

unpublished verses on the inside cover of her first children's volume are titled 'To Herbert Coleridge. Feb 13 1834', and they begin: 'This little Book, my darling boy, / I well may dedicate to thee' (*SCP* 63). The counterpart on the inside cover of her second children's volume, however, is titled 'Sara Coleridge for Herbert and Edith. April 19th 1834' (*SCP* 87), and its quiet measured eloquence comes from a sense that these are words *for* her children later and not *to* them now:

A mother's love can never change or die
 Yet sometimes gazes with a heavy eye.
 Partaking of the body's sore distress
 It lives for sorrow not for happiness.
 This chiefest sorrow my affliction knew
 That suffering stole so many thoughts from you. (*SCP* 87)

A temporal doubleness around the question of addressee plays a powerful part, again, in one of Sara's better-known and best poems, 'Poppies'.

The Poppies blooming all around
 My Herbert loves to see;
 Some pearly white, some dark as night,
 Some red as cramasie:

He loves their colours fresh and fine,
 As fair as fair may be;
 But little does my darling know
 How good they are to me.

He views their clust'ring petals gay,
 And shakes their nut-brown seeds;
 But they to him are nothing more
 Than other brilliant weeds.

O! how shouldst thou, with beaming brow,
 With eye and cheek so bright,
 Know aught of that gay blossom's power,
 Or sorrows of the night?

When poor Mama long restless lies,
 She drinks the poppy's juice;
 That liquor soon can close her eyes,
 And slumber soon produce:

O then my sweet, my happy boy
 Will thank the Poppy-flower,
 Which brings the sleep to dear Mama,
 At midnight's darksome hour. (*SCP* 70-1)

'Poppies' pivots around a dramatic change of address at the start of the fourth verse, away from the third person 'he' to the second person 'thou', bringing the child closer to the troubled adult feelings of the speaker. The addressee is both the Herbert of 'now' and of the future 'then', the poem the passage from one time to another. 'Then' (line 21) seems to include both a near future and a further one—both the innocent child addressee glad that his mother is able to sleep, and the older child he will become, with more understanding of her suffering and its narcotic relief. This older 'thou' who may one day read the poem will lose his innocence in direct relation to his understanding of what he reads. But he will also gain in sympathy, and the imagined later moment of his reading the poem will reparatively transform the phrase 'Poor Mama' (line 17) so that it becomes suffused with his pity instead of her self-pity. His compassionate gratitude for the opiate will supersede her more troubled tribute to its power.

Sara had a sense of the incongruity of 'Poppies' in *Pretty Lessons in Verse*. In a letter to Emily Trevenen dated 1 January 1835—or rather in a note at the top of the letter,¹⁰ above 'My dearest Miss Trevenen'—she wrote: 'Will you tell Mary that the Poppy poem in "Pretty Lessons" should have been left out—some other doggerel substituted—but I was poorly and Henry in a hurry when the small vol. was arranged'.¹¹ 'Poppies' remained part of the collection, however, in the five editions which appeared between 1834 and 1853: she did not altogether want it left out. A poem in praise of opiates would have been a sensitive matter in January 1835, especially to any reader who saw behind the anonymity of the publication to an author with the surname of Coleridge. STC had died in July 1834, two months before *Pretty Lessons in Verse* came out. The fact of his opium dependence was already widely known, and it was fully ventilated, with skilful malice, in De Quincey's biographical study, published between September 1834 and January 1835 in successive numbers of *Tait's Magazine*. Sara's troubles with the drug grimly echo those of her father.¹² Like him, she was troubled by poor health for much of her life, and opium at first brought relief from illness and restorative sleep. Again like him, she succeeded for long periods in doing without it. But at various times of her life, especially when her fragile health was at its worst, she was heavily dependent on laudanum and suffered severely from its side-effects. Her journals in the mid-1830s and the diary she kept between 1848 and her death in 1852 record agonizing and persistent problems with the drug, both when she took it and when she tried not to. However, she always thought of opium in balance-sheet terms, weighing its advantages and disadvantages as she does in 'Poppies'. She was no doubt thinking of herself as well as her father in arguing against De Quincey in her edition of *Biographia Literaria*:

¹⁰ Many of Sara's letters overflow their space and continue onto any available blank bit of paper, or sometimes onto the envelope. Often it is the tricky and crucial material that has to squeeze its way in.

¹¹ To Emily Trevenen, 1 January 1835 (MS, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center). 'Mary' is Mary Pridham Coleridge, the wife of Sara's brother Derwent.

¹² See *Coleridge Fille*, p. 153, and *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter*, pp. 36-37 and 147-148.

If my Father sought more from opium than the mere absence of pain, I feel assured that it was not luxurious sensations or the glowing phantasmagoria of passive dreams; but that the power of the medicine might keep down the agitations of his nervous system, like a strong hand grasping the jangled strings of some shattered lyre,—that he might once more ... [be] released, for a time at least, from the tyranny of ailments, which, by a spell of wretchedness, fix the thoughts upon themselves, perpetually drawing them inwards, as into a stifling gulf.¹³

'Poppies' bears witness to the part of her that wished her own use of the drug to be known, and known as something not shameful.

Sara filled five volumes mainly with children's verses. The second volume begins with a series of intensely dejected poems. Against one of these she has written in a later hand 'Not this one'. Like 'Poppies', it evidently asked to be 'left out'—in this case, left out of the successor to *Pretty Lessons in Verse* which she was planning in 1848 (see *SCP* 4).

Why those tears my little treasure
 Why that sad and piercing cry?
 Yours should be a life of pleasure
 Sorrow's coming by and by.

Care will come and steal your roses
 Grief may dim your sparkling eye,
 Ere your light in darkness closes
 You may feel as sad as I.

Could you see the clouds impending
 O'er the scene so lightsome now,
 See yourself in sickness bending
 Frustrate every anxious vow:

Then your sighing weeping sobbing
 Might have reason like my own:
 Now your tears from me are robbing
 Every joy that is not flown.

Those bright smiles my only pleasure
 Those glad tones my only stay,
 Joyous looks my greatest treasure
 Steal not cruelly away.

Sad experience, strong foreboding
 Make me shudder when you cry;

¹³ *Biographia Literaria* (1847), ii. 410.

Anxious thought my bosom loading
Lest you e'er should feel as I. (SCP 86)

The addressee here seems to be Edith, but although these might be the things her mother *wants* to say to her, they surely aren't things you *could* say to any small child. E L Griggs's biography notes that Sara's maternal duty involved concealment: 'Even when she was most wretched, she spoke "lightly and sportively as long as Herbert was in hearing"'.¹⁴ Such poems as this one represent her concealed feelings, perhaps intensified by that very repression. They express Sara's inner voice projected outwards into a new acoustic, the space of the page. Their eloquence is the suppression of the spoken utterances they seem to represent.

The felt absence of a reply plays its part in these poems, as it does in the dramatic monologue, a form which the young Tennyson and Browning were taking to new heights in this same decade. However, Sara's poems crucially lack the silent interlocutor of the dramatic monologue. Little Edith is too young to be an interlocutor and too grizzly, it seems, to count as silent. And we do not exactly imagine that the words of the poem are spoken out loud, as they would be in a dramatic monologue. Another comparative context from the 1830s may be equally illuminating. Mill's essay 'What is Poetry?', already cited above, argued that 'the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude'.¹⁵ Sara's poem stands a little askew from these suggestive formulations. Hers is an utter consciousness of *not* having a listener, since a young child through no fault of its own isn't really a listener. And although the poem does in a way represent 'feeling confessing itself to itself', its fictional setting is one which calls for a hearer. The loneliness of being a post-natally depressed young mother is exactly *not* having the 'moments of solitude' which Mill imagines.

The tones of 'Why those tears my little treasure' are poignantly fragile and the feelings intense. Sara evidently loved her children very much but was also greatly disturbed by the experience of bringing them up, and her poems express that disturbance with unusual intensity and candour. Yet to my mind this poem is also on the brink of a kind of British comedy of unreasonable grumpiness. 'You think *you've* got problems, wait till you're my age', she seems to say, and again 'it's your job to make me happy, so for heaven's sake stop crying'. Humour, misunderstanding, and grotesquerie are part of the territory of such encounters between innocence and experience. We might think of the lugubriousness of Thomas Gray's 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College' (1747): 'Alas, regardless of their doom, / The little victims play!'. The little victims can't hear—they are too 'distant'—but would not be impressed if they could, as Gray realizes, with a sardonic pity both for himself and them. To

¹⁴ Coleridge Fille, p. 79.

¹⁵ *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, p. 348.

look closer to Sara's own time, however, these are poems that owe something to the encounters between adults and children in the *Lyrical Ballads*, encounters which imply a critique of the adult position. One of the differences, though, is in the tenses. 'Anecdote for Fathers', like 'We Are Seven',¹⁶ is written in the past tense: in the 'Anecdote' the narrator of the poem at the time of writing it knows more than he did when he was its protagonist. The difference is part of what he has enigmatically 'learned' from his talk with his son. In 'We Are Seven', the narrator remains more obtuse, but he has at least had time to reflect on the encounter and make a story out of it, such that he can do the handsome thing of concluding the poem by giving the little girl its last triumphant word: 'Nay, we are seven!'. The arrangement of the poems is alive to the gaps in understanding they dramatise; they do something of the 'carrying every where with him relationship and love' that the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* attributes to the work of the poet: 'In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things gone silently out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time'.¹⁷ In comparison with these world-historical aspirations of Wordsworth, the didacticism of Sara's poems is neither so ambitious nor so indirect. They are written, for one thing, in the present tense, and though they imagine a reparative future, they do not so ponderably imply a ruinous past. They stay in the family, moreover, in ways that point to a particularly maternal domestic setting, especially compared to Wordsworth's 'man speaking to men' with a view to 'the vast empire of human society'. The kinds of community of feeling Sara projects in these poems, some of them unpublished and all of them unprefaced, are not spread in such wide commonalty as Wordsworth aspired to.

Many of Sara's poems of this period look to remedy or transcend domestic loneliness and depressive isolation. But not all of them are unhappy. In 'Herbert looking at the Moon', for example, she fashions a benign filial continuity with Hartley looking at the moon in STC's 'The Nightingale':

While my little prattling treasure
Looks upon the spangled skies,
I with more than equal pleasure
View his sparkling starry eyes:
Those young eyes so blue and bright
Bless me with their joyous light.

(SCP 108)

Sara depicts a circuit of pleasure here, with the child's starry eyes intermediate between the heavens and his mother. This time her 'more than equal pleasure' suggests the differences between them, but there is no competition and no

¹⁶ *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London and New York: Longman Group, Longman Annotated Texts, 1992), pp. 128-34

¹⁷ *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 77

possibility of begrudgingness in this situation. Instead of gaps there is a reciprocity of pleasure and a close circuit of familial feeling. His eyes ‘bless’ her and her poem blesses him. It ends by imagining Herbert as an old man in his generational turn, soothing his later years by looking at the moon through a telescope, and implicitly looking back to his mother who had been soothed years earlier by looking at him looking at it. Through the sometimes troubled Coleridge generations she imagines the family’s days to be linked each to each by natural piety.

Some day p’rhaps a hoary sage,
Wearing out each youthful hope,
Seeking light to cheer his age,
Peering through his telescope,
He on Luna’s face may gaze,
Soothing thus his latter days. (SCP 109)

However, it is more typical of these 1830s poems to fashion poetic utterance less happily, as a partial substitute for other kinds of communication. Sometimes Sara’s mode of address seems to desert the social world in a reclusive move to the religious one.

My friends in vain you chide my tears
From founts unknown to you they flow:
Thou Lord alone can’st count my fears,
The weight of my affliction know. (SCP 92)

Yet even the move from ‘My friends’ to ‘Thou Lord’ is in its way a social explanation to the friends. At the end of this poem she conceives of the transformation of her tears into agents of true repentance (she was an admirer of Crashaw).¹⁸ The figuration of redemptive weeping appealed to Sara; and at least tears offered more relief than anomie. ‘In my worst state of gloom’, she wrote in 1832, ‘I cannot shed a tear—I seem sealed up—a creature doomed to despair’.¹⁹ In one of her Ovidian poems, ‘The Water Lily’, the flower adorns the lake where ‘a lovely damsel’ drowned, and exemplifies the final truth that ‘This world of tears prepared her for the sky’ (SCP 99). Redemptive tears, again, are the central consolatory figure of a short poem structured like a verse from a hymn:

The hart delights in cooling streams
When noonday suns are blazing high:
In tribulation’s scorching beams
The heart of man is cheered by streams
That flow from Pity’s tearful eye. (SCP 93)

¹⁸ See SCP 173-4, 233.

¹⁹ Cited in *Coleridge Fille*, p. 75.

You can weep for somebody but not *to* them. However, a poem about tears—not weeping but writing—is on some level addressed to a readership, even if it remains unpublished. Perhaps her darkest poem of these years seems to embrace silence, but even in this case its eight lines are lightened by the paradox by which speaking about silence (or even writing about it) is a conversational activity.

No joy have I in passing themes,
I cannot smile my friends to cheer:
Then be it mine to cherish dreams,
And hide, if not repress, the tear.

No more I do a mother's part;
My life's sad scene a weary bed;
Then silent be my breaking heart,
I'll be as still as I were dead.

(SCP 96)

As the stanzas move from the indicative to the subjunctive voice, Sara expresses her divided feelings by the way each one partially undoes its own resolve. To say she will 'hide, if not repress, the tear' is not to hide but to reveal it; to enjoin her heart to be silent is to break the silence she invokes. These eloquent and moving poems manage to communicate her sorrow as well as her desire to escape the burden of communicating at all.

IV

Although Sara wrote poems most years of her adult life, she was most productive during two periods, the first from 1833 to 1835, and then a decade later from 1843 to 1845. During this second period her life had a wider scope, less confined by the demands of young parenthood and the restrictions of her own health crises, though prompted by the grievous fact of her husband's death in 1843. In her own day Sara Coleridge's voice was mainly heard in her editorial work. (She also published two long reviews in the *Quarterly Review* in 1848, but all contributions were anonymous). Showing both filial and familial spirit, she joined forces with her husband Henry Nelson Coleridge in bringing out posthumous editions of her father's works. When Henry died, Sara, who had been helping with the editing of STC's Nachlass, took over the main responsibility for the great project. She carried on the work in grandly scholarly fashion, adding bulky introductions, footnotes, endnotes, and appendices to STC's prose works, bringing them alive into a new age in which, largely thanks to her efforts, they were to have immense influence. Her energy and intellectual capacity were extraordinary, and warmly admired by the small but culturally crucial audience these editions reached. This editorial work played its part in the development of Sara's cultural identity, by giving her

more confidence as a public figure and a wider adult audience to address.

She is probably best known these days for her immense edition of *Biographia Literaria* (1847). It included an 184-page introduction in which with exceptional even-handedness and erudition she weighed up the charge that STC had plagiarised Schelling, and elucidated the philosophy and design of the work. Her introduction and notes have remained the groundwork for subsequent commentary on the book. Even De Quincey, whom she sought to confute, regarded 'her mode of argument as unassailable'.²⁰ Elsewhere he warmly acknowledged the brilliance of her work and her 'great natural endowments and really astonishing attainments'.²¹ Her contributions to the fifth edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1843) four years earlier are less known but in some respects scarcely less remarkable. This new edition ('enlarged') appeared in 1843 in two volumes, of which the second, comprising a preliminary essay and three appendices, included a mere two pages by STC. Sara's contribution, 'On Rationalism', ran from page 335 to page 556, and may well be the longest 'Appendix C' in English literary history. If its unobtrusive status as an appendix is self-abnegating, still its extraordinary length is remarkably bold, even with the prefatory acknowledgment that it was written 'by desire of the late Editor [Henry Nelson Coleridge], in obedience to whose express wish and resolve it is now published with the writer's name'.²² Moreover, when *Aids to Reflection* was again reprinted in 1848, this time under Sara's sole direction, 'On Rationalism' not only remained but was additionally given a detailed index of contents and followed by 'Extracts from a New Treatise on Regeneration'. These comprised some seventy pages from a projected theological work which occupied her last years, so Sara's total contribution to the 1848 *Aids to Reflection* weighed in at 309 pages (vol. 2, pp. 13-322). This, then, was not an author who entirely forbade herself the public arena, and it is possible to exaggerate the extent to which she was stifled by prohibitions against respectable women appearing in public as authors.²³

Sara's other major editorial project deserves comment in this context. This was the redaction from STC's uncollected journalism of the three volumes of *Essays on his Own Times*, published in 1850—once again an extraordinarily distinguished work of editing.²⁴ If this was in some ways less intellectually taxing, it was more so physically. Sara fetched the old copies of the *Morning Post* from Daniel Stuart's offices, and worked through them, identifying the often anonymous contributions of her father, and doing much to consolidate his place as a key political thinker of the nineteenth century. She spoke ruefully about these editorial labours, about the thanklessness of

²⁰ *Collected Writings* (1889), ii.228.

²¹ Cited in *Coleridge Fille*, p. 154.

²² *Aids to Reflection* (2 vols, 1843), i.[v]. Jeffrey W. Barbeau discusses 'On Rationalism' in 'Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian: Between Newman's Tractarianism and Wesley's Methodism', *Coleridge Bulletin* 28 (2006), pp. 29-36.

²³ See *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter*, pp. 11-15, 105-6, 133-134, 179.

²⁴ For tributes by later editors, see EOT I lxiii-lxiv and BL I cxv-cxvi. See also Norman Fruman's review essay on James Engell and W. Jackson Bate's edition of BL, in which he writes that Sara's 'intelligence, energy, learning' have 'never received anything like the praise they deserve' (*Studies in Romanticism* 24 (1985), pp. 141-2).

silent avoidance of error, and of following STC's reading through its drearier paths.²⁵ The bosom of anyone who's ever edited anything returns a grateful echo to her sentiments.

In an obituary essay, Henry Reed noted that Sara had 'expended in the desultory form of notes, and appendices, and prefaces, an amount of original thought and an affluence of learning which, differently and more prominently presented, would have made her famous'.²⁶ She must have known the applicability to her own work of her tribute to Wordsworth's 'Postscript' essay, which he included in the 1835 edition of his poetry: 'The essay of which I have spoken, and which appears under the unassuming title of "Postscript", if divided and expanded, would suffice to create a reputation for a new and unknown writer'.²⁷ It is characteristic of Sara not to obtrude the pathos of her own situation but to allow it to be registered by those with ears to hear—and to test the extent of readerly sympathies by dropping this hint. The way in which she wants to be heard and understood, but not to complain out loud, stands in a line of descent from the poems discussed above.

The re-presenting of STC was surely a task worth ten years of anyone's time, and it is hard to think of another nineteenth-century editorial project that was so seminal and transformative. Sara's untimely death means that it occupies a larger place in her oeuvre than it should have done: she was bursting with projects and manuscripts in her final years. And her contribution to the *Essays on His Own Times* was in some ways her most audacious of all, no doubt given confidence by the editorial work already accomplished. Audacious partly because many would have agreed with Sara's own view as expressed thirteen years earlier in 1837 that 'to write on politics at all is rather unfeminine';²⁸ but even more because most of the 82-page introduction is taken up with a subject not canvassed at all in the work she was editing, namely the Irish situation. Sections V-XI comprise eloquent and forthright assessments of the current state of Ireland, holding the English government up to account for its failures of stewardship; they include a number of approving citations of *English Misrule and Irish Misdemeanors* (1848) by Sara's close friend Aubrey de Vere. How did Sara justify her unusual editorial procedure?

once entered into the stream of such thought I was carried forward almost involuntarily by the current. I went on to imagine what my Father's view would be of subjects which are even now engaging public attention. It has so deeply interested myself thus to bring him down into the present hour,— to fancy him speaking in detail as he would speak were he now alive; and by long dwelling on all that remains of him, his poems of sentiment and of satire, his prose works, his letters of various sorts, his sayings and the reports and

²⁵ See *Coleridge Fille*, pp. 155-156, and *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter*, p.133, and pp. 146-147.

²⁶ 'The Daughter of Coleridge', *Literary World*, January 1853.

²⁷ *Essays on His Own Times* (3 vols, 1850), i.lxii.

²⁸ *Coleridge Fille*, p. 168.

remarks of others about him, I have come to feel so unified with him in mind,²⁹ that I cannot help anticipating a ready pardon for my bold attempt.

‘Father! thou shouldst be living at this hour’; but Sara knew herself to be a good substitute. The attempt was genuinely ‘bold’, with its affirmation of filial ventriloquism across the gender divide and across the turbulent sixteen years since STC died.

Bradford Mudge’s biography vividly evokes the authority of Sara in her later years, the ‘forty-five-year-old widow who managed her own household, her own finances, and her own publications without assistance from or dependence on male expertise’. ‘Begun in filial duty’, Mudge suggests, ‘Sara’s labors on the *Biographia* had fostered filial freedom.’³⁰ In what ways did Sara’s freedom, partly enabled by the cultural position which she gained through this editorial work, make itself heard in her poems of the 1840s?

V

Space does not allow me to analyse these 1840s poems in such detail as the earlier work, so I will look at a small number of poems which could be seen as variations on earlier themes. One of her finest, ‘Time’s Acquittal’, is the second of a series of three ‘Dreams’ (*SCP* 160-3). Like ‘Poppies’ and ‘Why those tears’, it considers what children can bring to your life. As in those poems, the main addressee—in this case ‘Time’ itself—isn’t exactly there to be addressed.

Time’s Acquittal

1

I dreamed that, walking forth one summer’s day
 I chanced to meet old Time upon my way,
 And, full of spleen,
 Taxed him with mischief he had done
 To me and thousands more beneath the sun
 Plain to be seen.

2

‘Blush, blush for shame,’ said I, ‘to view this face
 Despoiled by thee!—Canst thou one line retrace
 That erst was there?
 I vow, ev’n I myself can scarce recall
 It’s heav’nly charm!—But I’m assured by all

²⁹ *Essays on His Own Times* (1850), i. lxxiv.

³⁰ *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter*, p. 134.

Old friends that it was fair.

3

‘Come, thou canst bring it forth again, I know,
In pristine bloom— once more, ere yet I go
 Beneath the sod.
Present me to myself in finest feather
Of youth and health,—as when the mountain heather
 I lightly trod.’

4

Time seemed not all unwilling to comply:
Bade me look forth, and I should soon enjoy
 An apparition.
I looked: like morn slow-kindling in the skies
A dawn of rosy cheeks and sunny eyes
 Enriched my vision.

5

Cried I, ‘This is the strangest thing on earth.
Two faces here I see—both full of mirth,
 And one much bolder
And broader too, like piony dispread,
Than mine, when wreathed in curls and garlanded,
 I looked no older.’

6

My children’s faces! 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. (SCP 160-1)

Sara’s is the only voice we hear, but although ‘Time’ does not speak, it does in a way respond. The unspecified addressee of the first stanza becomes ‘Time’ itself in the final one, now on cordial terms with the acquitting poet. In the unfolding of the dream it becomes something other than a solitary musing. The unusually limber metrics and correspondingly lively play of changing emotions suggest the speaker’s social intelligence and social poise. Sara canvasses a complex range of attitudes to her own regret. First there is the splenetic comedy of bantering ‘old Time’, personifying him as one who’s got it in for her especially. Then a natural sadness about her faded good looks escalates into the exorbitance of celebrating her own bygone ‘heav’nly charm’. In the next verse this swell of nostalgic vanity generates the morbidity of ‘once more, ere yet I go / Beneath the sod’, with middle-aged ruefulness threatening to get plaintively out of hand before the poem turns towards a happier

perspective on experience. Like many of her earlier poems, this one explores the truly Coleridgean theme of the expression and curbing of self-pity; Sara consciously revisits her father's emotional territory and musters a fortitude and resilience which he often lacked.

Many of Sara's poems contrast the world made paradisaical by love or youth with the world darkened by loss or age. This is the territory of her father's 'Dejection Ode' and Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', but 'Time's Acquittal' gives a feminine and a domestic turn to the high Romantic theme. The young Sara had in 1826 written an essay 'On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty'³¹ (hard for any young woman to publish such a title, as it would seem coy and vaunting if like Sara she *was* a beauty, sour grapes if she wasn't). 'Time's Acquittal' might be said to concern the Disadvantages Resulting from Losing the Possession of Beauty. It arrives at a natural supernaturalism which remedies the sense of loss. In the fourth stanza Time points her towards 'an apparition'. In response 'I looked'—a word that tones down the heightening of 'apparition'—and 'A dawn of rosy cheeks and sunny eyes / Enriched my vision'. This 'vision' stands equably between the sublime and the ordinary. It is both what she sees when she looks, an ordinary act of seeing, and also a visionary perception whose light becomes the 'radiance' of the penultimate line. The poem reconciles the heavenly and the mundane. Many of Sara's poems include looking up to the skies, as for instance to the 'clouds impending' of 'Why those tears my little treasure' or the 'spangled skies' of 'Herbert looking at the Moon'. Here the circuit of sight moves from 'the morn slow-kindling in the skies' down to 'the strangest thing on earth', but then back up to the celestial sphere of 'stars new-ris'n'. Sara's parental vision mingles the stoical and the sublime, and it offers not just compensation but something more: 'Two' radiances, not just one, with attributes of both genders, not just pretty hair and flowers but something 'bolder' too.

The narrative shaping of dissatisfaction and resolution in 'Time's Acquittal', and the poem's emotional measure, seem to be indebted to George Herbert, a poet whom Sara admired.³² Another of Herbert's works, the long didactic poem 'The Church-porch', may be an influence on the twelve stanzas of Sara's 'To my Son'. Sara's concluding stanzas give a flavour of her moral gravity and authority, an authority she maintains in the poem without lapsing into self-importance or narrowness.

Goodness is never perfect in one mind,
But widely o'er the earth in parcels spread:
As gold, in fragments to the streams consigned,
Was ne'er discovered in its mountain bed,
So hope not thou, ere from this earth ascended,

³¹ Sara Coleridge, *A Victorian Daughter*, pp. 187-200. Sara D. Nyffenegger discusses the essay below in 'The Mirror, Friend or Foe: Sara Coleridge and the Ill Effects of Society's Judgment on Female Appearance', pp. 90-96.

³² In particular, his poem 'Virtue', to which she twice alludes in her own verse (see *SCP* 166, 179, 231, 235, and see also 233). See also page lxxxii of her edition of *Biographia Literaria* (2 vols, 1847).

To find all virtues in one mortal mansion blended.

Yet some all moral good and evil find in masses
Which no opposing quality doth leaven:
Mankind at large they place in two large classes
The heavenly—and the sort devoid of heav'n—
Sure they see double in their partial kindness
For Virtue on one side have nought but total blindness.

Learn to be true, for 'tis consummate art
From all untruth our thoughts, words, acts to clear:—
Detect the falsehoods of the cunning heart,
Which least of all is with itself sincere:
Small need hast thou with others to eschew
The base deceiver's way while thou to self art true. (SCP 171)

If in her poems of the 1830s she wanted something *from* her son (pity, empathy), in these verses of nuanced moral advice she wants something *for* him (integrity, moral acumen). She enjoins a humility partly designed to chasten youthful dogmatism and censoriousness. It is not a poem that draws attention to its own craft, but its metrics are skilful. The last stanza, for instance, pivots around three carefully placed active verbs, 'learn', 'detect' and 'eschew'. Its first line launches on an unexpected trochee—'Learn to be true'—giving metrical impetus to the unpredictable point that being true doesn't come naturally, it has to be learned, and that as a 'consummate art' this is not an easy lesson. Line three begins equally strongly with 'Detect the falsehoods', syntactically parallel to the imperative 'Learn', energizing the idea that self-deception doesn't get policed without effort. The forceful verb in the fifth line, 'eschew', does not begin but instead ends the line. The need to 'eschew / The base deceiver's way' is brought alive by an enjambment but also turned inward: the 'base deceiver' we really have to watch out for is found inside ourselves. Sara's theological writings emphasised activity; she objected to the Roman Catholic doctrine of mystic baptism, as she argued STC had done, because it made the introduction of the spirit into the soul something 'which it passively undergoes, as the dead cage receives the living bird', instead of something requiring an active cooperating spiritual power³³. The metrics of this last stanza dramatize her emphasis on the active nature of moral intelligence. When eventually the poem ends on a quiet cadence, it suggests repose earned by strenuous effort. The last line ('The base deceiver's way while thou to self art true') is a true Alexandrine, whereas the previous stanzas had ended with thirteen-syllable lines culminating in feminine rhymes. The modulation in this final stanza allows the poem to come to rest in a continuing aspiration to integrity.

The poem is addressed 'To my Son' but it also has a wider didactic import.

³³ *Biographia Literaria* (1847), i.lxxxii. See also SCP 188-9, 192-4, and 240-1.

The double address combines the public dignity of Victorian monition with a more intimate parental concern. It avoids the dangers of haughtiness and rhetorical distance to which some of Sara's poems of reproof succumb, scolding the unenlightened or lecturing those out of earshot of her poems. Such poems include 'L'Envoy to "Phantasmion"', especially its first stanza recommending airy dreams to mammonist 'worldlings', or 'O vain expenditure! unhallowed waste!', rebuking the enthusiastic practitioners of infant baptism (*SCP* 177, 188-9). In contrast, Sara's poems of 1843-5 which she marked 'For A. de V' are animated but also given tact by the social context of debating with de Vere, a friend with whom she didn't always agree. It may be, too, that the rhetorical playing-field was helpfully levelled in her mind because her twelve-years seniority in age balanced his cultural authority as a man.

Sara's titled her last poem 'Doggreg Charm'. As in the 'Verses written in sickness 1833', illness here prompts Sara to consider her own death. She calls it 'doggreg', and it is indeed frayed and informal, but even this little poem has its art. The stanzas progress from something said by the self to the self, or to that part of the self which is a tumour (both an enemy within and a part of you), into a last line which sounds like it might come from a hymn.

Split away, split away, split away, split!
 Plague of my life, delay preterm!
 Rapidly, rapidly, rapidly go!
 Haste ye to mitigate trouble and woe!

Crack away, tumour, I pray thee to crack,
 Just now you seem to be on the right track
 But if you're in the wrong, right let me be,
 And promptly submitting to Heaven's decree.

(Lines 1-4, 9-12. *SCP* 198)

She retunes her suffering into the larger calmer world in which hymns are composed and sung, in which afflictions are plural and not just hers. Writing only five weeks before she died, Sara finds in these modestly titled verses a form of address in which to reach for the sense in suffering.

VI

If Sara's poems are as good as I believe, why have they had no audience until now? Simple bad luck has played a part. In the first instance, this was because neither Derwent nor Edith Coleridge was centrally interested in poetry. Then later it may have been a misfortune for both Hartley and Sara Coleridge that Earl Leslie Griggs, the great Coleridge scholar, was the man to write their biographies. Not that these were poor works—far from it, they remain impressive, nuanced and reliable; but Griggs's knowledge of the great writer *STC* made him less than enthusiastic about making the case for the very good

writers that were his children. Griggs's biography was published in 1940, and reviewed by Virginia Woolf in a fine and eloquent essay, but one which influentially cast Sara in the role of martyred daughter—victim alike of father and patriarchy—often reductively and at some cost to the evidence of her actual achievement. Bradford Mudge's important *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* (1989) brought her to the attention of a new generation, interpreting Sara's work and life through a 1980s feminist perspective influenced by Woolf, but Mudge's book took little account of Sara's poetry³⁴. Moreover, Sara's politics, like those of her father in his later years, were those of a radical conservative, and this too may have made her uncongenial to feminist reappraisals of women writers. A further obstacle to Sara's rediscovery may lie in her very versatility: the disparateness of her oeuvre makes her literary achievement elusive, in ways perhaps comparable to the important women of letters who made their mark in the 1780s.³⁵ And maybe—a last point—the 1830s, like the 1780s, have been relatively neglected because they stand between two literary eras, in this case between the fading Romantic one and the emergent Victorian period.

When an author's work is newly published, one of the important tasks for criticism is to suggest helpful terms in which to see and discuss it. That has been my main intention in this essay. In thinking about the issues of audience and addressee, I have been indebted to the critical work of many other writers on the period, including Jon P. Klancher's *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (1987), Lucy Newlyn's *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (2000) and William St. Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004). This essay arrives only at the threshold of recent discussions of the ways in which romantic writers imagine their present and future readerships and articulate ideas of community and constructions of a public sphere. My main focus has been author-centred, thinking about ways to uncover the particular character and interest of Sara's poetry.

I will return a final time to John Stuart Mill's famous distinction between poetry—'feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude'—and eloquence—'feeling pouring itself out to other minds'.³⁶ It is a suggestive distinction, but not quite accurate to the circumstances and reach of a poet such as Sara Coleridge. If Sara ever confessed to herself in solitude, she did so in her private journals.³⁷ The writing of her poetry, with its addressees and its half-implied wider audience, and its generic vistas of other and earlier minds, was a means of controlling and shaping her feeling, a therapeutic activity, a religious discipline, a didactic exercise, and a re-imagining of how she might be heard in—or after—her own life.

³⁴ Katie Waldegrave discusses these perspectives below in 'Sara Coleridge: A Poet Hidden', pp. 74-79.

³⁵ See Roger Lonsdale, 'Introduction' to *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

³⁶ *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, p. 348.

³⁷ The Ransom Center holds some unbound pages of her 1830s journals & five journal notebooks from 1848 to 1852.