

Visions of Fatherhood in Coleridge's Early and Late Poetry

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I INTEND TO FOCUS THIS DISCUSSION of some of Coleridge's early and late poems through the birth of his son Hartley in 1796, and his subsequent alienation in 1822. I will consider how some of the themes, recurrent motifs, and language of Coleridge's poetry at both points were shaped by his changing relationship with his first-born child in whom he invested his keenest hopes. Many of the sentiments expressed in poetry from the beginning and end of Coleridge's career seem to be inspired by his experience of fatherhood, by the joys and the grief of this role and relationship as he travelled from the hopeful and joyous beginnings of Hartley's life to his son's eventual disgrace, losing his fellowship at Cambridge through alleged drunkenness. I present Hartley's arrival in, and departure from, Coleridge's life as events which frame, like living book-ends, the latter's development as a man, philosopher and creative artist, from energetic idealist to a more chastened maturity.¹ I shall consider the *visionary* element in Coleridge's relationship with his son and how this was expressed in ideas, images and mythical conceits which persist, or are more *darkly* reinterpreted in later writings.

I begin by visualising two familiar scenes from either end of this spectrum. These are two domestic interiors with a man in solitary contemplation. The first picture I want you to conjure is the familiar domestic Romantic tableau of a young man in the early stages of married life keeping watch with his first born child in a rented cottage in rural Somersetshire; the second, the same man as a paying guest and friend in the home of James and Ann Gillman in Highgate, from 1816 until his death in 1834, a man who often 'sate alone' at his desk, suffering 'those most weary Hours,/ When Life seems emptied of all genial Powers', even though within reach of the busy social scene of the metropolis.² Significantly, perhaps, the domestic circumstances in each picture represent a suspended or temporary condition redolent both of possibility and insecurity, states which may impart the visionary intensity and vulnerability that informs the poems. The sentiment conveyed most keenly in the first is one of promise, in the second, a more sombre poignancy. In the first we see a 23 year-old husband and father, of creative energy and ambition, facing the uncertain but enticing possibilities of creative or intellectual achievement; in the second a man separated from wife and children, subdued by a sense of loss and failure, though buoyed by a stubborn resilience.

We will return to those two scenes, but I now go back to consider the birth of Hartley and the feelings they prompted. Although the poetry inspired by Hartley could be seen to track a journey from elation to ultimate loss, the course of Coleridge's feelings and relationship cannot be charted as a

¹ The echoes and correspondences between the themes and sentiments of the early and late poetry are acknowledged in the titles chosen by Coleridge's biographer Richard Holmes in his two-part study of Coleridge: *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989; paperback edn, London: HarperCollins, 1999) and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins, 1998; paperback edn, HarperCollins, 1999)

² PW 652; and see Holmes, *Darker Reflections*, Chapter 9, 'Climbing Highgate Hill', p. 423.

predictable progression from hopeful expectation to disillusionment. That more conventional pattern is challenged by the anxious, negative sentiments expressed in some of the earliest poems prompted by the experience of fatherhood. His feelings at the start, although unusually heightened, were, as for most of us in similar circumstances, ambivalent and mixed. Because of Coleridge's intense emotional investment in personal relationships, these would always present a complicated challenge, and provoke extreme and contradictory responses. To illustrate this, I shall return to the poems that he composed in 1796 on first learning of Hartley's birth *before* the winter night soliloquy in the company of the sleeping child at Nether Stowey.

Fatherhood was initially a daunting, even unwelcome, prospect, as he reveals in 'On Receiving a Letter Informing Me of the Birth of a Son':

When they did greet me Father, sudden Awe
Weigh'd down my spirit! I retired and knelt
Seeking the throne of grace, but inly felt
No heavenly visitation upwards draw
My feeble mind, nor cheering ray impart.
Ah me! before the Eternal Sire I brought
The unquiet silence of confused Thought
And shapeless feelings: my o'erwhelmed Heart
Trembled: & vacant tears stream'd down my face.
And now once more, O Lord! to thee I bend,
Lover of souls! and groan for future grace,
That, ere my Babe youth's perilous maze have trod,
Thy overshadowing Spirit may descend
And he be born again, a Child of God! (PW 134)

A not very promising prelude to the new experience of fatherhood, perhaps, but an honest expression of natural apprehension, even fear. Coleridge's powerful conception of his new role and relationship is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of the responsibility that it entails—'sudden Awe/ Weigh'd down my spirit!' Allowing for rhetorical exaggeration, intensified by the many exclamatories, the sentiments express a personal intensity and truth, all the keener for not being precisely understood or articulated. Coleridge admits to a feeling of confused bewilderment and disorientation at learning of his first child's birth. He is dumbstruck, and plunged into 'The unquiet silence of confused thought/ And shapeless feeling.' And his natural anxiety is not optimistic, but negative: 'My o'erwhelmed Heart/ Trembled & vacant tears stream'd down my face.' This strikes a more sombre and disquieting chord than the excited apprehension that a new father might, more predictably, experience, and articulate an acute *spiritual* crisis. Indeed, the prayer-like: 'I retired and knelt seeking the throne of grace', with its reference to being born again recalls the anguished outpouring of the evangelist or new convert consumed by a sense of sinful inadequacy. Coleridge's acute sense of new

responsibility stems from a self-identification which sees his own life in that of Hartley, with all its promise and potential for grief and failure. The line: 'O Lord! To thee I bend' is a plea for redemption from someone who feels challenged to resurrect himself and struggles to shape a stable identity. It is a plea from no sanguine youth, but from someone who has already experienced challenge and disillusionment.

This sonnet communicates a self-focused anxiety that is associated with the vulnerable life of the new child. The 'presageful fear' that Coleridge describes intimates his own sense of inadequacy for the task which faces him, while implicitly acknowledging the precariousness of a child's life. It conveys the *religious* framing of his relationship with Hartley in its intensity and centrality. Hartley was an emblem of the spiritualised values by which Coleridge sought to achieve renewal and redemption. I have no wish to reduce the complexities of Coleridge's feelings to a familial psychological paradigm, but many fond parents fail to acknowledge the essential separateness of offspring in whom they see their own lives continued or validated. When children are viewed as a means of fulfilling personal aspiration, disappointment and a sense of personal betrayal is inevitable. The foreboding that Coleridge expresses indirectly anticipates this outcome.

This fearful melancholy persists in the second of the birth poems, 'Sonnet, Composed on a Journey Homeward...':

Oft o'er my brain does that strange fancy roll
Which makes the present (while the flash doth last)
Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past,
Mixed with such feelings, as perplex the soul
Self-questioned in her sleep; and some have said
We liv'd, ere yet this robe of flesh we wore.
O my sweet baby! when I reach my door,
If heavy looks should tell me thou art dead,
(As sometimes, through excess of hope, I fear)
I think that I should struggle to believe
Thou wert a spirit, to this nether sphere
Sentenc'd for some more venial crime to grieve;
Did'st scream, then spring to meet Heaven's quick reprieve,
While we wept idly o'er thy little bier! (PW 135)

Coleridge's new experience of fatherhood is shadowed by an intimation of death and failure. This is in part a rational fear of infant mortality, and in part a persistent spiritual anxiety. There is a sense of doomed predestination, represented as visionary revelation or supernatural intuition in which Hartley is potentially sacrificed for, or condemned by, sins already committed: 'Some have said/We liv'd, ere yet this robe of flesh we wore'.

There is an unquiet sense of self-connection here, in which the birth of Hartley serves to revive and reinforce Coleridge's own insecurities and presage

the cycle of failure that he was actually to observe. Coleridge's assertion that he 'should struggle to believe /Thou wert a spirit' denies the child spiritual reality and confers on him a potential symbolic failure which may be more Coleridge's than his, and which sees his both his and God's fatherhood as an unrealized vision.

Yet although its intensity invites the opposite sentiment, as Coleridge acknowledges in the parenthetical: 'As sometimes, through excess of hope, I fear', *hope* persists through the gloomy imaginings. This is expressed in the last of the birth sonnets from 1796, "To A Friend Who Asked How I Felt When The Nurse First Presented My Infant To Me"

Charles! my slow heart was only sad, when first
I scanned that face of feeble infancy:
For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst
All I had been, and all my child might be!
But when I saw it on its mother's arm,
And hanging on her bosom (she the while
Bent o'er its features with a tearful smile)
Then I was thrilled and melted, and most warm
Impressed a father's kiss: and all beguiled
Of dark remembrance and presageful fear,
I seemed to see an angel-form appear—
'Twas even thine, beloved woman mild!
So for the mother's sake the child was dear,
And dearer was the mother for the child. (PW 136)

Coleridge's first sight of his little son—although distanced by the impersonal pronoun 'it'—prompts a sad sense of personal incompleteness, 'For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst/ All I had been, and all my child might be!' At the same time this reflection paradoxically invites a hopeful belief in Hartley's potential to redeem past error. The baby is invested with a restorative power that we know his helpless, 'feeble infancy'—and maybe his father's 'slow' anxious 'heart'—cannot sustain.

However, in this last of the birth sonnets, Coleridge's speculative fears finally dissolve before the physical presence of his baby son in loving proximity with its mother. This natural vision of mother and infant,—which, at the same time, in its reverence, recalls classic depictions of the Madonna and child —spontaneously connects Coleridge with the individual *physical* humanity of his son and the reality of his family and his position within it. The emotional engagement is intense, and swiftly moves from melancholy to a joy provoked by the tender image of the feeding child curled in the crook of Sara's arm; as Coleridge described it: 'her eye tearful & watching its little features'. There is a genuine tenderness and delight expressed in the choice of words: Then I was thrilled and melted, and most warm/ Impressed a father's kiss...'

In his letter, of Sept. 24th, 1796, to Thomas Poole describing his response, the word 'FATHER' is emphatically capitalised. It proudly acknowledges his new role and responsibility and the prospect of nurturing intimacy which the future seems to promise. At the same time, Coleridge's persistent tendency to idealise and etherealize child and mother: 'I seemed to see an angel form appear' potentially threatens the reality and solidity of the familial relationship.

So, although these three sonnets can be read as the honest expression of the familiar, fluctuating emotions of new fatherhood, they are distinguished by an anxious intensity which potentially imparts a precariousness to that relationship. Hartley was invested with a curative power, and hence the dangerous possibility of disillusionment, for both son and father. The birth of Hartley and loving connectedness expressed in the final sonnet initiated two years of family closeness and harmony that survived physical privation and the discomfort of the family's circumstances. Here the child positively exerted the 'magic' power with which he was credited by Coleridge. These two years were a time in which future hardship and crisis were serenely and mercifully suspended.

We can now recall that familiar night-time cottage scene sketched earlier. A calmer, more hopeful expectancy is expressed in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', composed in 1797, in which all positive possibilities seem held in suspense in the breathing stillness of the winter night.

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully. (PW 171)

The scene described here is pregnant with holy possibility: 'the secret ministry of frost' evoking a sense of invisible grace working within this young life, or, more fancifully, the blessing of a benign fairy, the gifts bestowed on innocence.

The poem expresses the hope of new beginnings, of renewal and fulfilment. Hartley is the resurrected father who has the chance to begin again, newly blessed; in him Coleridge indeed sees: 'all I had been, and all my child might be'. Chief amongst the gifts which Coleridge prays should be conferred on Hartley is the blessing of freedom from the constraints which he sees as having inhibited his own development, when 'In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim' he 'saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.' This is to be achieved through a healing bond between the child and his natural environment, and through association and example, re-establish his own connection: 'Thou, my babe, shalt wander like a breeze/ By lakes and sandy shore/... so shalt thou hear/ The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language, which thy God/ Utters...'.

The purity of the language expresses a hopeful faith in the child's capacity to redeem the father's failures and losses, positively filling the disquieting gaps which may still obstruct peaceful reflection. For there is a precariousness in this suspense; even the stillness exerts some unspecified emotional pressure or sublime power that 'disturbs' and 'vexes' serene meditation. And we cannot ignore the cruel edge of the keen winter air and the icicles in the eaves. The language of the poem emphasises the scene's tranquillity, the fire being the sole *unquiet* thing'. The image of the fluttering flame seems an emblem of the persistent energy and spirit of youth; though 'puny' in size and strength, it guards its warmth and potential power. Yet the flame also seems wayward and unpredictable in its 'flaps and freaks'. And the description of the fluttering orange 'film' making 'a toy of Thought' suggests that it deceptively engages and diverts the speculative imagination. As 'the sole unquiet thing', the fire, while an imaginative stimulus, introduces an element of restless unease that threatens tranquillity.

Through this meditation, Coleridge achieves connection with his child, with the Lakeland environment which, significantly, perhaps, he imaginatively constructs and anticipates from his Somerset cottage, and through these, with his own childhood, remembered in the second verse: 'But O! how oft,/ How oft, at school, with most believing mind,/ Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars...'. The word 'presageful' conveys the speculative tension of the unknown where all possibility is held in tantalising suspense. Coleridge is again dependent on the caprices of time and change, and unknown destiny. He fondly recalls the contented security of youth: 'With unclosed lids already had I dreamt/ Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower...'. But the imagery and the happiness it conjures are idealised and visionary. The lines express nostalgia for an elusive Eden visited through dreams in sleep which acted as a refuge from the challenges of a more complex reality: 'So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,/ Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!'

Coleridge acknowledges the way in which, as he grew, he was severed from the sources of childhood security, and intimates the damaging impact of this estrangement. Hartley will again supply the means of re-establishing this severed connection. He will be a source of healing reconnection with nature, and thus with the natural sources of a divinely inspired creative inspiration.

Hartley may enable Coleridge to recover the security and promise of childhood, but a childhood reconstructed in dreams. With a collapsing of the years that divide the familial generations, Hartley becomes the medium whereby Coleridge's past is connected with the child's future in a mythically idealised projection. At present, this positive perception occludes the more sinister convention of *classical* myth—the inescapable legacy of familial sin in which the sins of the father are visited on successive generations. At the same time, Coleridge's idealised conjuring of past innocence suggests his half-conscious awareness of this fact. His reference to the film in the grate as a 'stranger' recalls the superstition that the flapping flame portends some as yet

unknown visitor (with transformative potential), and reminds the reader of an essential sense of isolation which needs to be relieved through fulfilling human connection. The poem seems a hymn to this ideal, or a prayer for this renewing familial relationship.

Coleridge desired the gift of stillness expressed in the peaceful form of his sleeping child. There is an incipient tension in our knowledge that this infant sleep is an impermanent state, all possibilities of disappointment and distress temporarily suspended. In the closing lines of the poem, the movement of heart and mind, in accordance with the natural rhythms of seasonal change—

[...] all seasons shall be sweet to thee
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch

—is quietly suspended in this hope. Yet one feels the fragility of this idyll. Lamb acknowledged the potential instability of Coleridge's situation and temperament when he expressed his wish: 'Would to God the dancing demon may conduct you at last in peace & comfort to the 'life & labours of a cottage'³.

The joyful capering of Hartley which Coleridge envisages holds the possibility of corruption to a destructive energy. Coleridge's feelings express the conflict which characterised his mental state. He is subject to the fluctuations of hope and doubt, as he confesses in a letter to Poole in December when recalling his mixed emotions at first settling in Nether Stowey. 'Here I found myself all afloat. Doubts rushed in; broke upon me from the fountains of the great Deep,' and fell from the windows of heaven".⁴ The perhaps unconscious use of the scriptural metaphor associated with evangelical pilgrimage emphasises the mental and spiritual challenge which the experience represented.

The birth of Hartley returns Coleridge to his own childhood where he revisits early experiences of joy and distress.⁵ This period of Coleridge's life is vividly reconstructed in memoirs to Thomas Poole where he relates his memory of "the dreadful stormy night" which, as a child of seven, he spent alone by the River Otter after running away from home (1779).⁶ Feelings of joyful excitement are eroded at the edges by negative emotions and troubling memories of near death and sudden rescue.

Coleridge nevertheless delighted in the joyful energy of the growing child, describing Hartley in a letter to Humphrey Davy as one 'whose spirit dances on an aspen leaf', an image which he frequently reiterated. Counteracting a disposition to melancholy is Coleridge's persistent affirmation of the spirit of energy and joy wherever he saw it expressed in nature.⁷ For him it was

³ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, 3 vols, ed. by Edwin W. Marrs, Jr (Cornell University Press, 1978), I 52

⁴ Holmes, *Early Visions*, p. 138.

⁵ *Early Visions*, p.138

⁶ *Early Visions*, pp. 16-17.

⁷ CL.I 612

encapsulated in the image of the nightingale, contrary to some Romantic traditions of the bird's melancholy. His poem 'The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem' (PW 180) is a celebration of the spirit of life and energy which for Coleridge was embodied in the youthful exuberance of Hartley, and with which he personally chose to identify.

The nightingales heard in rambling through the Somerset woods are far more than images of the iconic bird of myth; they are *really* heard and precisely recorded. Coleridge's poem captures the energy of the living bird in its detailed description of the bird's astonishing musical range and resonance which is replicated by Coleridge's musically varied conversational style. The momentum of the descriptive lines in themselves beautifully reflect the energetic fluency of the birds' song:

But never elsewhere in one place I knew
So many nightingales; and far and near,
In wood and thicket, over the wide grove,
They answer and provoke each other's song,
With skirmish and capricious passagings,
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,
And one low piping sound more sweet than all
Stirring the air with such a harmony,
That should you close your eyes, you might almost
Forget it was not day!

The bird is here identified with the affirmative light and active life of day, rather than night. In defiance of the Nightingale's traditional association with melancholy and with the darker myth of Philomel, Coleridge's insists on its joyful spirit:

We may not thus profane
Nature's sweet voices, always full of love
And joyance! 'Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
As he were fearful that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music!

Such descriptions celebrate the youthful energy of noise and movement which Coleridge saw delightfully expressed in his young son. It is the spirit which he defiantly asserted in the face of depression and incapacity.

The bird's song is explicitly identified with Hartley 'Who, capable of no articulate sound,/ Mars all things with his imitative lisp,/ How he would place his hand beside his ear, /His little hand, the small forefinger up,/ And bid us

listen!' Here Hartley seems sympathetically attuned to the bird as to a fellow songster and kindred spirit. The excited movements of the infant are also expressed in bird-like terms in Coleridge's 1798 version of 'Frost at Midnight' where he envisaged the power of natural beauty to 'Suspend thy little soul; then make thee shout,/ And stretch and flutter from thy mother's arms/ As though wouldst fly for very eagerness.'

The latter part of the *Nightingale* nevertheless introduces the image of a child who has grown beyond the innocent oblivion of infant sleep to a sleep disturbed by the dreams of more complex awareness; Hartley awakes distressed by 'some inward pain' which had 'made up that strange thing, an infant's dream...'. These lines remind us of the need, in both father and son, for a refuge from the anxieties and fears which hover at the obscure edges of the conscious mind. With hindsight we know, too, that the bird's song and moon's luminous serenity would not in the long term be able to eclipse personal insecurities or the troubled night of future substance dependency. But this belongs to a future which is not anticipated—only indirectly intimated, and the final emphasis is on joy and hopeful possibility.

But if that Heaven
Should give me life, his childhood shall grow up
Familiar with these songs, that with the night
He may associate joy. Once more, farewell,
Sweet Nightingale! once more, my friends! farewell.

Yet the image of youthful charm and innocence which Coleridge reiterated in references to Hartley was to burden and trap his son, and may have contributed to his failure to progress to a mature state of adult responsibility. Like his father, Hartley often dwelt on memories of his childish self. And the most familiar portrait of Hartley to this day remains the wistful, elfin image of the wide-eyed child which was chosen for the frontispiece of the posthumously published 1851 collection of his *Poems*.

So we move on to the other image, mentioned at the start, of Coleridge in the Gillmans' home, where, despite the loyal support of his friends, he was in a sense to see himself 'exiled'. Physically, he is much changed, thickened, slowed by premature infirmity and incapacitated by opium dependency. The late sonnet of 1825, 'Work without Hope', supplies a poignant contrast in the picture that it supplies of this prematurely aged, chastened Coleridge alone with his thoughts in another's home. He sits and absorbs the detail of his surroundings with the same keen powers of observation but senses his static, exiled detachment from the minute life around him:

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair;
The Bees are stirring; Birds are on the wing;
And **Winter** slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!

And I, the while, the Sole unbusy Thing,
Not honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

The industry of the small creatures inhabiting the space compares sadly with his own immobility. He is a valued member of the home he inhabits, but at the same time a guest isolated from his own family. That vital, fulfilling connection with nature which he hoped for Hartley—and for himself through Hartley—is something which he now observes, but is no longer a part of. The personal passivity or immobility implied in ‘sole, *unbusy* thing’ is in significant contrast with the persistent energy (and promise) implicit in the ‘sole *unquiet* thing’ of the flapping flame in ‘Frost at Midnight’. Coleridge can no longer taste, and be nourished by, the fruits of this natural activity.

Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And Hope without an object cannot live.

This grief and pervasive sense of loss colours the tone of later verse. In the last part of this discussion, I shall consider how Coleridge’s late poem of February 1825: “A Pang More Sharp Than All: An Allegory” might be applied to his relationship with Hartley in the mythical motifs and the acute sense of abandonment that it articulates. The allegorical nature of the poem lends itself to various interpretations of the loss Coleridge is suffering.⁸ Both J C C Mays and Richard Holmes suggest that the enigmatic ‘child without a name’ alludes to Hartley, and the love and hope which his father had invested in him.⁹ It is a complex allegory, for it involves three children—the first, who has flitted the nest, is initially unnamed, but the other two, who remain behind, are Esteem, a boy and his sister, Kindness. So, two older boys and a girl, which reflects exactly the family that Coleridge had separated from. It would appear that the flitting child is named in the last line—‘absent Love’—so we have a family of Esteem, Kindness and Love—but only one is lost—Love—symbolized in Hartley, ‘who is seldom’, Coleridge said in 1827 ‘an hour together, out of my head, and still less often *off* my heart.’¹⁰

Read this way, the poem provides a powerful illustration of the unreal, almost mythical attributes which Coleridge had attributed to Hartley, inviting us to question how far he really knew his son or had ever allowed him to be himself. I will quote just two verses from the poem for final consideration here.

He too has flitted from his secret nest,
Hope’s last and dearest child without a name!
Has flitted from me like a warmthless flame

⁸ The allegorical relations of Hope and Love are a persistent theme in several of Coleridge’s later poems—see for instance, ‘To Two Sisters’ (PW 423), ‘The Visionary Hope’ (PW 467) and ‘Love’s Apparition...’ (PW 688); they are sometimes directly related to Anne Gillman, as in ‘Work without Hope’, but often without an evident source.

⁹ See the headnote to PW 412, and *Darker Reflections*, pbk edn, pp.528-9.

¹⁰ CL VI 682

That makes false promise of a place of rest
To the tired Pilgrim's still-believing mind;-
Or like some Elfin Knight in kingly court,
Who having won all guerdons in his sport,
Glides out of view, and whither, none can find!

Ah! He is gone and yet will not depart!-
Is with me still, yet I from him exiled!
For still there lives within my secret heart
The magic image of the Magic Child,
Which there he made up-grow by his strong art,
As in that crystal orb –wise Merlin's feat,-
The wonderous "World of Glass", wherein inisled
All long'd for things their beings did repeat; -
And there he left it like a Sylph beguiled,
To live and yearn and languish incomplete!

But the paternal sentiment expressed here is more one of sorrowful loss than bitterness. The 'warmthless flame' of the third line:

Hope's last and dearest child without a name!
Has flitted from me like a warmthless flame

is in poignant contrast to the lingering heat and persistent life of the flame flapping in the grate in the cottage at Nether Stowey all those years ago.

Coleridge's choice of allegorical motifs reveal the source of the loss and failure of this relationship. Hartley continues to be mythologised as an 'Elfin Knight in kingly court', and 'Magic child'. In the process, Coleridge reveals Hartley to have been to some degree a creature of his imagination:

For still there lives within my secret heart
The magic image of the Magic Child,

Coleridge acknowledges all that he had invested, and still invests, in Hartley, admitting the role that Hartley had been expected to assume in renewing and fulfilling his own frustrated hopes and achievement; and lamenting how he thus made of Hartley, a false promise of a place of rest/ 'To the tired Pilgrim's still-believing mind...?'

The seductive delusion is acknowledged but stubbornly cherished. Significantly, Coleridge drew on his memories of Hartley's hopeful childhood and elfin charm in his ill-judged, ill-fated attempt to persuade Oriel College Provost, Dr. Edward Copleston to reinstate his son as a Fellow at the college:

never can I read De la Motte Fouqué's beautiful Faery Tale, founded on
a tradition recorded in Luther's Table-Talk, of Undina, the Water-Fay,

before she had a Soul, beloved by all whether they would or no, & as indifferent to all, herself included, as a blossom whirling in a May-gale, without having Hartley recalled to me, as he appeared from infancy to his boyhood -- never, without reflecting on the prophecy, written by me long before I had either thought or prospect of settling in Cumberland, addressed to him then but a few months old in my Poem, Entitled, Frost at Midnight –
(CL V 111)

and Coleridge goes on to quote the lines 44-58, 'Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side' to 'the clouds/ Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores/ And mountain crags.' Needless to say, the Provost was unmoved by this appeal to his sentiment, which must only have seemed to confirm Hartley's unsuitability for a position of mature responsibility.

Hartley has become part of an enticing series of reflections in a magic glass, ephemeral and insubstantial. But Coleridge also mythologises himself. His self-representation as a 'Pilgrim' conjures a figure from legend continually seeking the chalice of fulfilment. He continues to employ for Hartley the spiritualised metaphor of a bird. The poem's opening reference to 'Hope's last and dearest Child' having 'flitted from his secret nest,' and the use of words and phrases like 'secret', 'glide', 'out of view' and 'none can find', convey the elusiveness of a winged creature. Hartley's whimsical creative spirit and musical voice may echo in his father's memory and imagination, but the substance remains elusive, as with the wild and independent creatures of the night and the wood, the nightingale, the wandering voice of Wordsworth's cuckoo even, ironically transposed into the spirit of nature that Coleridge had earlier framed and anticipated in 'Frost at Midnight'. "Meet me back here at six!" as arranged, Coleridge had urged Hartley when he parted from him in a London street after his son had briefly returned home for a fraught visit to help support the family in his brother Derwent's illness. Yet as he looked after his retreating back through a mist of tears, he knew he would not, and indeed, he was never to see him again.¹¹

At the same time, the spiritualised images which Coleridge uses to convey Hartley's elusiveness acknowledges his independence and self-sufficiency. As Holmes expresses it, Hartley was both 'a part of Coleridge, 'and utterly other'. Hartley enriched Coleridge's life by concentrating his positive creative energies, fanning hope like the flame in the cottage grate, but in the process exposing him to the ashes of disillusionment. With his native idealism and resilience, however, Coleridge would no doubt have accepted the price and danger of this faithful pilgrimage of hope.

¹¹ *Darker Reflections*. p. 527.