

Robin Schofield

reads

The Regions of Sara Coleridge's Thought: Selected Literary Criticism

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

edited by Peter Swaab

PETER SWAAB'S PIONEERING PUBLICATION of Sara Coleridge's *Collected Poems*, in January 2007, revealed an all-but-unknown and hitherto unpublished Coleridgean poet.¹ The previous year, Jeffrey W. Barbeau had suggested the scope and significance of Sara's 'largely unknown theological work'.² Interest in all aspects of Sara Coleridge's life and writings, as poet, novelist, philosopher and theologian, has grown significantly, and there have been papers on different aspects of Sara's work at recent Coleridge Summer Conferences. Alan Vardy's book, *Constructing Coleridge*, published in September 2010, showed Sara's importance in literary history: as STC's editor, Sara 'was the most significant single individual in the long history of constructing Coleridge' (xviii).

That Peter Swaab has produced a volume of Sara Coleridge's literary criticism is very much to be welcomed: this new book will add significantly to Sara's growing reputation. It contains a broad selection of Sara's letters, extracts from her diaries, journal, marginalia, and her editions of STC's works, out of print since the nineteenth century; there are also extracts from Sara's reviews for the *Quarterly Review*, including passages that the editor, Lockhart, 'for reasons of literary politics', cut from her review of Tennyson's *The Princess* (101).³ Swaab has recovered most of the texts in the book from manuscript, and they appear in print for the first time. The interest and significance of *The Regions of Sara Coleridge's Thought*, therefore, should not be underestimated. For, as Swaab contends, Sara's literary criticism 'has an enduring claim on our attention. She writes as a critic across the range of her prose, in letters, journals, essays, and editorial work: criticism was a central, lifelong concern' (x). By the end of her life, moreover, in 1852, Sara was an established figure in London literary circles: her friends and acquaintances included William Gladstone, Thomas Carlyle, Erasmus Darwin and Thomas Macaulay, as well as publisher John Murray, and F. D. Maurice, Christian Socialist. In 1845 Sara met Emerson—'a very pleasing person' (175); and in 1849, Elizabeth Gaskell—'her manner rather commonplace' (185). This circle of acquaintance indicates the vitality and range of literary interests revealed in Sara's letters, which form 'a remarkable commentary on her generation', as E. L. Griggs, Sara's mid-twentieth century biographer, commented (xi). '[W]hen all her remarks are pieced together,' Griggs asserted, 'there emerges a considerable body of literary criticism' (x).

¹ *Sara Coleridge: Collected Poems*, edited by Peter Swaab (Manchester: Fyfield Books, Carcanet Press, 2007).

² Jeffrey W. Barbeau, 'Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian: Between Newman's Tractarianism and Wesley's Methodism', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 28 (Winter 2006), 29 - 36, p. 36.

³ The issue of literary politics was *The Quarterly Review's* long-standing hostility towards the 'Cockney' poet, Keats.

Sara observes that the 'period' between the 1834 edition of STC's poems, and that of 1852, prepared by her with assistance from Derwent, was 'long enough' to have brought about 'many changes in literary opinion' (81). Sara is acutely sensitive to changes in literary sensibility, audience, and the conditions of authorship. She traces influences and cross currents in movements from Romantic to Victorian literature. In poetry, for example, Sara places Elizabeth Barrett's work in 'the Shelley, Keats and Tennyson school'; and praises it for possessing 'much of the power and beauty by which [that school] is characterized' (147). Similarly, Sara detects a Romantic influence in 'very dissimilar forms and modes of manifestation' in early Victorian prose: 'The *practical* sameness of the teaching of Carlyle with that of Pusey and Newman (for *here* it is Pusey first—and so far the popular voice is right) with Coleridge at the bottom of all, is to me very striking' (155). Sara regards Carlyle's writings in the same light as 'all the best' of 'Wordsworth's poetry': as 'Christianity presented not as outward revelation, but as a power in the soul of man'; and therefore open, 'unjust[ly]', to 'the same charge' of showing 'man a way to heaven not pointed from above' (155). Swaab rightly contends that Sara 'deserves to be heard as a passionate and sophisticated contributor to debates about culture and literature in the Victorian period' (x).

By the age of twenty-two, Sara had mastered six languages, was widely read in English, European and Classical literature and had published two books. Her own formative experiences, under Robert Southey's scholarly and enabling influence, inform the curriculum she plans for her daughter, Edith: 'the main points will be the bible, sewing and learning the ancient languages', knowledge of which 'enhances the pleasure taken in literature [...] gives depth and variety to reading, and makes almost every book in whatever language more thoroughly understood' (153). Earlier in this letter, Sara implies that there is no reason for conventional 'housekeep[ing]' duties such as 'sewing' to interfere with literary and intellectual pursuits. In the early 1820s, as a result of Southey's encouragement, Sara's attitude to authorship is committed and professional: she writes of proof-reading and correcting; the importance of 'keeping [her] hand in' as translator; and considers the feasibility of publishing in instalments 'a Tale by Cervantes' in *Knights Quarterly Magazine* (3). Despite early indications of her prodigious literary talent, Sara had not yet acquired that depth of expertise in philosophy and theology that would define her pioneering achievements as Coleridge's editor. Swaab's volume reveals the extent of her intellectual development, and growth in confidence, between the mid-1820s and the 1840s. It is surprising, in 1825, to find Sara admitting that 'much of STC's *Aids to Reflection* was 'worse than Greek' to her (30). Eighteen years later, immersed in her father's religious philosophy, using his ideas as a basis for her own thought, Sara published her *Essay on Rationalism* as an appendix to the fifth edition of *Aids to Reflection*; comprising almost all of the second volume, 'it may be the longest Appendix C in English literary history' (xix).⁴ Similarly, as late as

⁴ S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character*, fifth edition, edited by H. N. Coleridge (London: Pickering, 1843), 2 vols. Sara Coleridge, *Essay on Rationalism*, ii, 335–556.

1837, Sara confides to her husband: 'If I were a man I should above all things like to review Newman' (11). Ten years later, however, in her authoritative introduction to *Biographia Literaria*, Sara critiques his ideas with supremely confident assurance, in the light of principles developed from STC's Christian philosophy.

Sara's contributions to theological debate through the 1840s become increasingly bold. This reflects her growing sense of independence following the death of her husband, Henry Nelson Coleridge, early in 1843. Sara's editorial projects, hitherto shared with him, she now found therapeutic, a palliative for grief, as well as a familial duty. As head of her household, and sole guardian of the Coleridgean oeuvre, she developed what she calls a 'new, old-womanish tough state of mind', firmly directed towards 'matters of business'. As widow, she adopted a posture of self-assertion, resolving not to defer 'to the judgment of others', either in literary or familial matters: she would 'take her own path from the first' (42). She defends her ideas robustly, for instance, in letters to her traditionalist brother-in-law, John Taylor Coleridge, expressing herself with a firmly dignified poise that concedes nothing of deference to the eminent lawyer. John's disapproval of female scholarship, she suggests, is 'akin' to narrow 'German notions of etiquette': this plays deftly on his prejudice against Germanic ideas in her own and her father's work. In a similar way, writing to a friend sympathetic to Tractarian views, Sara turns the tables on Oxford divines: she cites an 'unworthy' image from the work of 'Bishop Andrewes', a 'high favourite' of Tractarians, remarking triumphantly: 'Now would not this be pronounced highly profane by the Luther-haters, had it been found in a book of Luther's?' (122).

As Sara's intellectual confidence grew, so her early diffidence about female authorship, and doubts about 'the appropriate sphere of interest' for women writers, diminished (xiii). Sara's editorial work enabled her to overcome the limiting assumptions of early Victorian gender politics, as Swaab explains: 'She made room for her own authorial designs within her editorial role. The bringing to publication of family memoirs was an unimpeachably feminine genre [...]. Sara skilfully seized the opportunity this gave her to discourse [...] in areas of literary and theological controversy' (xxiii). Her editorial work, and its reception, broadened Sara's perspectives. Referring to Harriet Martineau in 1833, Sara had described 'Political Economy' as 'entirely out of the way' of 'topics that [...] present themselves to a woman's mind'; and thought it 'unfeminine' to 'write on politics at all' (137). In her introduction to *Essays on his Own Times*, published in 1850, however, Sara 'bring[s]' STC 'down to the present hour', and 'imagine[s] what his view would be of subjects which are even now engaging public attention' (79). In applying Coleridgean principles, and developing them in context of her own day, Sara engages at length with political topics: the nature of the English constitution; the British in America; and the Irish crisis of the 1840s; one section on which is titled, 'Present Management of Ireland, and Principle of the Poor Law' (79). In mediating and developing STC's ideas, Sara writes on 'politics' and 'Political Economy' with

confident authority.

Although Sara becomes increasingly aware that 'human qualities' are 'mixed', that 'the mind of man and woman' may be 'a subtle alchemy' (137), she retains a conviction that success in particular literary genres is determined by gender. This is reflected in her equivocal view of Elizabeth Barrett: 'she possesses much that goes towards making a poet [...] but women are not good poets' (159). Were Barrett's 'writings from the hand of a man', they would 'never' have 'made a tenth part of the *noise* which as the *poems of Miss Barrett* they have created' (187). Sara has the same view of Joanna Baillie, whom she rates highly as a female writer: 'Mrs. J. Baillie has done wonders - But Tragedy is beyond the powers of a woman - Her works are only very wonderful *for a woman*'. The same is true, according to Sara, of 'Epics and Lyrics and Dramatics by female authors', which, 'at most are but *splendid failures*' (187). There is, however, a genre in which 'women have [...] power and originality and [...] perfect success': the 'novel of every day life' (187). Some of Sara's most glowing praise among her contemporaries, therefore, is reserved for Jane Austen, 'the best female writer, the most faultless, the most successful': *Emma*, in Sara's view, exhibits 'very *perfection*', is 'incomparable' (202). STC and Southey had held 'an equally high opinion' of Jane Austen, Sara recalls; though Wordsworth 'could not be interested' in her novels, because they lacked, he felt, 'the pervading light of Imagination' (135).

Swaab's volume serves to emphasize the decisive importance of Wordsworth in Sara's personal, intellectual and literary development: 'I knew dear Mr. Wordsworth perhaps as well as I have ever known any one in the world', she wrote near the end of her life; 'more intimately than I knew my father, and as intimately as I knew my Uncle Southey' (96). She adds that her 'mind and turn of thought were gradually moulded' by Wordsworth's 'conversation' and 'the influences' under which 'she was brought by his means in matters of intellect' (96). Sara's mature responses to Wordsworth's poetry would evoke some of the best of her critical writing; particularly in her edition of *Biographia Literaria*. Here, as Heidi Thompson has explained, Sara 'stage[s] a complex encounter between STC's reading of Wordsworth, and her own reading of Wordsworth through the lens of her father's reading of him'.⁵ Sara's close readings of Wordsworth are particularly revealing. In discussing a passage from *There was a Boy* ..., for example, Sara endorses her father's preference for the earlier version of the lines; and, invoking 'the logic of poetic passion', rejects the prosaic 'languor' of Wordsworth's revision (60). Similarly, Sara prefers the earlier version of *The Blind Highland Boy*, and regrets Wordsworth's 'elaboration of his three stanzas about the household tub [...] into nine describing a turtle-shell. Sara comments: 'The new stanzas are beautiful, but being more ornate than the rest [...], they look like a piece of decorated

⁵ Heidi Thomson, 'The Construction of William Wordsworth in Sara Coleridge's edition of *Biographia Literaria*, 1847' in *Grasmere, 2009, Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference*, compiled by Richard Gravil (Penrith: HEB, 2009), p.118

architecture introduced into a building in an earlier and simpler style' (60).⁶ Sara's observation reflects one of her key critical principles, developed in response to the early Wordsworth: the greatest poems are 'organic wholes', expressive of 'the individual spirit' of which they are an 'efflux' (97). Sara's readings of Wordsworth, her valuing the early over the later work, tend to anticipate the consensus of posterity. She anticipates, too, the projects of future scholars to restore original Wordsworthian texts: 'The bard's alterations, and his putting poems of later date among those of his poetical era, disturb me sadly. O for an early edition where the poems stand in their original order: presenting [...] a map [...] of his poetical mind during its most vigorous season' (85). In the poems of Wordsworth's 'most vigorous season', Sara asserts, 'objects' are not 'change[d]' in 'form and lineaments so as to render them unrecognizable'; they are 'transfigured', to be 'exalt[ed], refin[ed], illuminat[ed]' (87).

In contrast with passages of high seriousness, Sara's letters often show a warm sense of humour: their 'affectionate playfulness', Swaab suggests, 'owes something to the epistolary example of Robert Southey' (xxix). Swaab selects as one of Sara's best comic moments a conversation between her teenage son Herbert and the Dean of Chichester: 'He told me how he had astonished my Herbert by betraying his ignorance of a character in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. He knew nothing about Sary Gamp! "When he heard this", said the Dean, "he turned his bright eyes on me with such a look of wonder not unmingled with contempt!" I, on the contrary, think it was quite to the Dean's credit that he was pure of Dickens' (xxix). Sara's genial irony reflects the comprehensive warmth of her comic observation. Swaab draws attention to other engaging moments: 'Because she had a capacity for reverence, a particular pleasure attaches to her moments of irreverence' (xxx). Against Wordsworth's comment, 'I am for the most part uncertain about my success in altering poems', Sara's marginal remark is, 'He might well be' (xxx). Admired by Sara in other contexts as sublime poet of 'the heart and mind of man' (87), Wordsworth, as love poet, is target for caricature: 'He stalks along with portentous stride and then stamps his great wooden foot down, in the clumsiest manner imaginable. That sonnet among the Duddon ones, about crossing the brook, attempts to describe loverish feelings, but even that is forced and sexagenarian—the loves are brought in to clap their wings from a neighbouring rock. At what shop did he buy those ready-made Cupids?' (xxx).

In comic moments, there is an exuberant vitality in Sara's language: Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoir* of his uncle is 'white neck-cloth'; teenage boys are 'hoity toity, fantastical and crest-perky' (xxviii). Sara's satirical strain

⁶ The lines from *There was a Boy* to which Sara refers were originally published in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800: 'And they would shout / Across the watery vale, and shout again, / With long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud / Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild / Of mirth and jocund din! And when it chanced / That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill, / Then sometimes in that silence -'. Wordsworth revised the lines in later collections as follows: 'And they would shout/ Across the watery vale, and shout again, / Responsive to his call, - with quivering peals, / And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud / Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild / Of jocund din! And when there came a pause / Of silence such as baffled his best skill: / Then sometimes, in that silence -' (59)

shows particular flair: Robert Walpole's *The Doctrine of Holy Baptism* (1849) is 'full of pompous inanity and metaphysical blunderism' (xxx); Joanna Baillie's *View of the Nature and Dignity of Christ* is 'a heap of shallow reasoning and vulgar retention of trite half truths' (xxix); while Gillman's *Life of Coleridge* is 'an absurd hodgepodge of stale and vapid ingredients' (xxix). Equally, Sara's humour is often gently rueful: she dislikes people adding 'h' to her name, she says, as she would 'resent a burr stuck' to 'her crepe skirt'. The humorous simile keeps resentment in check, and, as Swaab remarks, 'turns what might be food for gloom into an occasion for pleasure' (xxix). Writing of Sara in 1912, influenced by Edith Coleridge's *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge* (1873),⁷ Eleanor A. Towle defined Sara's essential quality as 'radiant spirituality'.⁸ Swaab's researches have revealed to us a Sara who, deeply and committedly religious, is at the same time humorous, witty, resiliently practical. Gentle humour would seem often to sustain Sara's resilience of spirit.

Peter Swaab aptly indicates in his title Sara's sheer range of 'thought', which lends unique insight into the literary culture of her times; and gives new insight into dynamic continuities between the Romantic and early Victorian periods. The book presents far more than an afterlife of Romanticism, however: it restores the unknown and neglected critical writings of one of the most active, capacious and learned intellects of the age. The book leaves the reader with two overriding impressions: firstly, that Sara Coleridge should be included on the map of Victorian literature; and that her 'prose writings' should be brought into 'current conversations about nineteenth-century criticism' (x). The second impression is of a prodigious potential cut off by premature death.⁹ As Peter Swaab contends, Sara's work, seen as a whole, would confer on her 'a place alongside Mill and Newman as the ablest thinker of her day'.¹⁰ The current volume does not include all of Sara's prose writings, however: as Swaab rightly observes, her 'theological works deserve a separate volume of their own', and require 'separate specialist treatment' (xxxi). Swaab's editorial contributions do full justice to his subject. His introduction presents an authoritative overview of Sara's intellectual character and interests: it is the best short essay on Sara currently available. Swaab has organized Sara's texts into thematic sections arranged chronologically. This method is judicious: it enables 'biographical considerations to become visible', while showing 'specific aspects' of Sara's 'life as a reader and writer' (xxxi); her breadth of interests and stylistic range are emphasized. The book is most attractively presented, using for its front cover an evocative design based on a portrait of Sara. It is to be hoped that Palgrave Macmillan will publish this excellent and important book in paperback format, in order to reach the wide audience it most richly deserves.

⁷ *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, edited by her Daughter, 2 vols (London: Henry S. King, 1873).

⁸ Eleanor A. Towle, *A Poet's Children: Hartley Coleridge and Sara Coleridge* (London: Methuen, 1912), p. 119.

⁹ Sara Coleridge was born on 23rd December 1802 and died of cancer on 3rd May 1852.

¹⁰ Peter Swaab, 'The Coleridge We Didn't Know', article in *The Daily Telegraph Review*, 3/2/07, p. 10.