

TELLING HER OWN STORY

Sara Coleridge and the 1850 *Essays on His Own Times*

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I

In Molly Lefebure's most recent book, *The Bondage of Love: The Life of Mrs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, the years spent at Nether Stowey are singled out for special attention. [1] That period of domestic happiness, brief though it was, becomes the measure by which Lefebure charts the complicated fluctuations of the Coleridges' tumultuous marriage. Although more concerned with matters biographical than critical, Lefebure's study provides a convenient entry into the issues I would like to consider this morning, for *Bondage of Love* emphasizes time and again the crucial relationship between the domestic and literary economies of English Romanticism, between household management and literary labour, between female work and male creativity. The fragile balance between domestic and literary labour involves nothing less than a kind of collaboration, the most famous example of which has to be Dorothy and William Wordsworth. But the interwoven stores of Sara and Samuel Coleridge are no less remarkable. Coleridgean guilt, for example, discussed yesterday by Ken Johnson primarily as a literary phenomenon, must be seen first as familial. Coleridge, after all, abandoned his wife and children at crucial junctures in his career, repeating with a difference the patterns of abandonment of which he himself had been a childhood victim.

Today, I would like to think about issues of literary collaboration from the perspective of one of Coleridge's own victims -- his daughter Sara. Although in many ways the most Coleridgean of Coleridge's offspring, Sara was first and foremost the daughter of Greta Hall, of Southey and Wordsworth and the indefatigable Mrs Coleridge, all of whom took responsibility for young Sara's education and helped to make her the resident wunderkind. By

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the age of twenty-three, she had mastered five languages and published two books, the first a translation from Latin, the second from medieval French. Sara left the Lake District in 1829 when she married her first cousin Henry Nelson Coleridge. Like her father, she spent the remainder of her life in London, where, after her husband's death in 1843, she became one of Coleridge's most historically important editors. Of her numerous noteworthy editions, *Essays on His Own Times* (1850) stands out as a remarkable contribution to Coleridge studies. This morning I would like to use her assessment of her father's early political writings in order to rethink the political and literary complexities of editorial revision and transmission.

II

In the early weeks of 1849, Sara Coleridge, daughter of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, decided in favour of publishing a memoir of her brother Hartley. It was for Sara a decision as predictable as asking for a lock of Hartley's hair, an attempt to memorialize her talented sibling, to do for him what he was unable to do for himself by editing a neat and orderly selection of a literary life gone inexplicably awry. Like all of her editorial projects, it was an attempt to put the Coleridgean house in order, to systematize the fragmentary remains of a decidedly immethodical family. Not all of Sara's friends, however, thought her brother's

memoir a worthy project. Neither the Wordsworths nor the John Taylor Coleridges, for example, felt that Hartley's accomplishments warranted the telling of his sad and often pathetic failures. Nevertheless, Sara persisted, maintaining that the merits of Hartley's writings would redeem his errant ways. To her cousin, she explained:

. . . a sensitiveness about any exposure of private matters to the public . . . I cannot now quite sympathize [with]. A serious, anxious concern on such points is hardly worth while . . . it is but an ostrich-like business of hiding one's head in the sand . . . it is politic to tell our own story, for if we do not, it will surely be told for us, and

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always a degree more disadvantageously than truth warrants. The desire to be the object of public attention is weak, but excessive dread of it is but a form of vanity and over-self-contemplativeness . . . I cannot help thinking that we should so order our lives, and also our feelings and expectations, that we may be . . . independent of the opinions and judgments of our fellow men . . . [\[2\]](#)

Rejecting as an editorial criterion the honoured Victorian distinction between public and private, Sara recognized the need to make herself "as far as possible independent of the opinions and judgement of [her] fellow men." The whims of public morality were to be discarded in favour of "truth[ful]" self-expression: "It is politic," she argues, "to tell our own story" rather than play the "ostrich . . . hiding one's head in the sand." To be properly "independent" thus necessitated not a retreat from the public arena but a mastery over it, a complete disclosure through which the private and the public selves conflated into a spiritually minded "order" neither desirous nor fearful of "public attention." Paradoxically, such a mastery could be achieved only by participation in that which was to be transcended -- in other words, by publicly expressing private "truth," by "tell[ing] our own story."

Sara's "own story," however, was still very much a part of her father's, for unlike Hartley, who enjoyed all the benefits of male privilege, Sara had never been encouraged to compose, much less publish, expressly for her own personal and intellectual satisfaction. Although she had distinguished herself intellectually time and again, it had been assumed that marriage would end what Southey condescendingly termed her "amusements." When she did marry in 1829, her intellectual "amusements" were indeed discouraged, and Sara endured ten years of uninterrupted pregnancy and nervous hysteria. The onset of her husband's illness in 1839 marked the end of pregnancy and depression and the beginning of a remarkable editorial campaign designed to rescue Coleridge's reputation from widespread charges of intemperance, obscurity, and plagiarism. Rhetorical and logical

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skills were sharpened in letters and informal essays and then tested in introductions and appendices affixed to and legitimized by her father's words. The latter were by no means, however, "modest" productions: her appendix to the 1843 *Aids to Reflection* was a 250-page essay, "On Rationalism," that required its own separate volume, as did her 180-page introduction to the 1847 *Biographia Literaria*. Her essay "On Rationalism" became well known to members of the Oxford Movement: and the defence of Coleridge as outlined in the introduction to the *Biographia* remains one of the most important, if underrated, essays in the history of Coleridge scholarship. Nevertheless, such commentary always defended against a prior attack or clarified an earlier misunderstanding: authority was not assumed but

borrowed, and never would Sara admit to writing publicly for her own pleasure or at her own instigation.

Regardless, then, of Sara's accomplishments, she still very much needed her father's fragmentary remains as the occasion for and the justification of her authorship. This dependence upon a precedent authority, however, by no means involved only self-effacement; for if self-effacing when compared to male authorial practice, Sara's editorial strategies were also self-aggrandizing when considered in the context of strictures against female intellectuals. In the 1847 *Biographia*, for example, she had transformed the public veneration of her father into a private redemption --in effect, co-authoring his "story" -- his literary life -- and in the process redefining the very patrimony to which she swore allegiance. By 1849, however, co-authorship of that variety was less attractive than it once had seemed, and Sara was considering new ways to "tell [her] own story."

During the spring, Sara made plans for what she hoped would be the last project in her ongoing attempt to transform her father from the flawed Romantic rebel into the wise Victorian sage. Her intention was to collect

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all of Coleridge's political writings, all of his long-forgotten contributions to the *Morning Post* and the *Courier*, and thereby demonstrate both his moral seriousness and worldly altruism. Sara's project became, of course, *Essays on His Own Times*, and it has received justifiable acclaim. Today, I would like to read a crucial displacement enacted within its introductory essay to argue (1) that this displacement, in addition to revealing a complex psychodrama between father and daughter, also reveals a paradoxical complicity between author and editor; (2) that this complicity effectively redefines the romantic notions of literary production and reception that continue to structure both our critical enterprise in general and our understanding of canon formation in particular; and (3) that Sara Coleridge's work provides not a unique example of marginalized writing but represents instead the efforts of an entire class of literary women who used the Victorian publishing industry to exercise considerable power over the cultural market-place.

III

When the three volumes of *Essays on His Own Times* appeared during the fall of 1850, they included a seventy-five-page introduction in which Sara Coleridge defends her father as a "patriot and political philosopher." Calmer, less strident, and more self-assured, the essay marks a significant departure from the unrelenting thrust and parry that characterized her earlier tributes. It opens with clearly stated editorial intentions: the collection, she explains, "will both corroborate former defenses of (Coleridge's) political honesty and establish his claim to the praise of patriotism and zeal on behalf of his fellow countrymen, especially . . . the Poor" (1: ix). It will also serve "as a vindication of him from contemporary charges affecting his private life and conduct, as that of indolence and practical apathy." Most importantly, the collection will

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counter accusations of Coleridge's political inconsistency by demonstrating his philosophic rigor: "S. T. Coleridge of 1796-97," Sara argues, "differs from S. T. Coleridge of 1816-17 less in principles and sentiment than in their application . . . The spirit of his teaching was ever the same amid all the variations and corrections of the letter" (xxiii).

In order to demonstrate her father's "steady coherency of thought," Sara posits two "undeniable" premises:

. . . first, that in him an understanding strong and perspicacious was united with a temper of spiritual susceptibility; secondly, that he was at all times singularly free, by position, from external bias, having the world of political judgement before him, where to choose, unimpeded by the fetters of favour or the burden of emolument. (xxii-xxiii)

As the Miltonic reference suggests, Coleridge the journalist, like Adam and Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*, followed his solitary way through a postlapsarian "world of political judgement" at once corrupt and unavoidable, a world inferior to the paradise of abstruse metaphysics but no less necessary. "[U]nimpeded by the fetters of favour or the burden of emolument," he was free to choose a Godly path, for he too could claim Providence his guide; he too brought a sadder and wiser faith into a fallen world. Sara then confirms her father's authority as divinely sanctioned by concluding her opening discussion with an argument for Coleridge's "gift of political prophecy." "[T]he sagacity of Coleridge," she writes, "is illustrated by the fact of his having distinctly foretold the restoration of the Bourbons" and by his insistence on "the internal stability of the English constitution" (xxxii).

Transfigured by his daughter's essay into a Miltonic hero, Coleridge the prophet suddenly disappears from the introduction. After a brief discussion of her father's views on Ireland, Sara begins her own lengthy discussion of the English/Irish situation, a discussion predicated upon allegiance to paternal authority but one without the slightest reference to

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Coleridge or his opinions. Thus, although her father is the reason for and the presumed subject of her introduction, Sara displaces him as commentator and writes an extended analysis of a contemporary political problem neither he nor his generation could remedy. Paradoxically, this moment of interpretive freedom is situated within and defined by a prior subservience: Sara's displacement of paternal authority is both its subversion and continuation, for she speaks independently of her father only by assuming his voice as her own.

Sara's 30-page analysis of the "Irish question" allegorizes the family drama in which she herself participates. In the same way that Irish submission to English rule would, according to Sara, relinquish a conflicted nationalism in favour of harmonious union whose "justice" guarantees freedom as it abolishes autonomy; so her own filial submissiveness to the genius of her father has resulted in the expression of "just" opinions neither exclusively his nor entirely hers. As she explains,

In the foregoing sections I have noticed some salient points of my Father's opinions on politics, -- indeed to do this was alone my original intent; but 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 I have come to feel so unified with him in mind, that I cannot help anticipating a ready pardon for my bold attempt: nay even a sympathy in it from genial readers . . . (lxxxiv)

Contrary to her "original intent," Sara's "stream of . . . thought" carried her "almost involuntarily" into a discussion of contemporary politics seemingly unrelated to her "Father's opinions." But her 30-page digression was less an independent foray into uncharted waters than it was an "imagin[ative]" continuation of an already established parental "current." Sara was "so deeply interested" in bringing Coleridge "down into the present hour" and "so unified with him in mind" that her discourse relinquishes its claim to individual authorship and becomes the outward and visible sign of a

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spiritual and intellectual union between father and daughter, past and present, male and female.

Thus, Sara's "own story," her analysis of contemporary politics, transforms the freedom of expression into the servitude of mimicry in an attempt to transcend both. Like Ireland, which will discover true "justice" only by renouncing rebellion and embracing the "moral" governance of England, so Sara discovers the voice of truth by renouncing authorship and embracing paternal authority. The resulting discourse belongs neither to Coleridge nor to his daughter yet somehow to both: it brings the voice of the dead philosopher "down into the present hour," redeeming his reputed indolence and demonstrating his political "sagacity;" it also gives voice to the muted opinions of a woman brought up to believe in the impropriety of female authorship. Coleridge is cured of his unjust reputation; his daughter is cured of her sex. Even so, Sara's presumption necessitates a polite apology: "genial readers," she concludes, will readily pardon "my bold attempt."

Sara's "bold attempt," her "own story," claims transcendent unity: in a predictable romantic gesture, father and daughter, past and present, male and female, all disappear into the harmonizing space of the primary imagination. That sublime unity, however, is predicated on an initial displacement: the voice of the father, the voice of patriarchal law and privilege, must first be banished before it can be reclaimed. Thus, we do well to remember that Sara Coleridge's transcendent union with the spirit of her father is, to use Jerome McGann's description of romantic transcendence, "another illusion raised up to hold back an awareness of the contradictions inherent in contemporary social structures and the relations they support."

IV

However adept at strategies of editorial self-aggrandizement,

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strategies that well illustrate what Elizabeth Janeway has termed "the powers of the weak," Sara Coleridge has of course never been considered a "major" figure by literary historians -- for two reasons. First, her sense of female propriety forbade the forceful assertion of independent "genius," and neither a propitious political climate (as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft) nor financial need (as in the case of Mary Shelley and Jane Austen) forced Sara to violate cultural prohibitions. As a result, all of her various works -- poems, letters, introductions, appendices, reviews, and informal essays -- position themselves by choice in the margins of other more authoritative, precedent texts. Second, her championing of "paternalistic virtues" has proved predictably offputting to revisionist historians who are drawn to more outspoken "minor" writers. Strongly influenced by the very patriarchal standards they wish to revise, many feminists have chosen to ignore the strategies by which the majority of nineteenth-century women deflected and appropriated male power.

Revisionism of this kind usually argues that the "minor" work has been labelled "minor" only because of a previous failure to perceive exactly how the work embodies the scene of its struggles: the "minor" writer is shown to be as complex, subtle, or engaging as the "major" writer but on significantly different terms, the relevance of which becomes apparent only after contextual redefinition. Such revisionism uncritically assumes the primacy of "literary" creation and the power of the imagination, ignoring the complex processes of production and reception that govern what kind of "literary" text is valued at what critical moment and for what reasons.

Sara Coleridge, then, would seem to occupy a unique position among women intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Not only was she instrumental in the production and marketing of a celebrated romantic poet and philosopher; she was also an unacknowledged collaborator, a daughter who used her father's fragmentary remains as an opportunity for the expression

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of her own considerable intellectual talent. She wrote and rewrote his literary life as a way of controlling her patrimony and redefining her marginal career as a woman of letters: she was at once the dutiful daughter and the domineering matriarch, the proper lady and the woman writer. But more important, I think, than these interwoven paradoxes are the ways in which Sara Coleridge's life and work dramatize the importance of literature and literary criticism to the shifting class structures of England's infant industrial economy. The Coleridges, like the Southseys and Wordsworths, were distinctly middle class, and yet the later conservatism of all three poets, a conservatism that Sara vociferously defended, involved the appropriation of aristocratic ethics by a bourgeois literati desirous of a greater cultural influence. The ownership of "high culture" was, of course, crucial to this process. Arno Mayer gives this account:

As part of their effort to scale the social pyramid and to demonstrate their political loyalty, the bourgeois embraced the historicist high culture and patronized the hegemonic institutions that were dominated by the old elites. The result was that they strengthened classical and academic idioms, conventions, and symbols in the arts and letters . . . They allowed themselves to be ensnared in a cultural and educational system that bolstered and reproduced the ancien regime. In the process they sapped their own potential to inspire the conception of a new aesthetic and intellection. [3]

Although Mayer does not discuss the importance of literature to the realignment of class ideologies during the first half of the nineteenth century, the connection to my argument should be obvious: Sara Coleridge inherited middle-class values and championed them throughout her career. She was convinced, she informed her cousin, both "that there should be a class who make literature the business of their lives" and that she herself was of such a class. It was her "duty," her "moral responsibility," to educate her contemporaries and spread Coleridgean truth. The numerous volumes of her father's writings that appeared between his death in 1834 and her own in 1852 offer testimony to her labour.

For Sara Coleridge, then, "the business of life" was a serious affair,

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an affair whose complicities with conservative ideology should give us pause even as we applaud the determination and ingenuity required "to tell [her] own story." Put another way,

Sara Coleridge's life and work should remind us that the modesty of feminine literary production contrasts sharply against the boldness with which women were put to work in factories. Or again, if she forces us to reconsider the complexities of women's roles in the Victorian publishing industry, if she complicates traditional notions of "literary" production and suggests the necessity of alternative methods of mapping the "literary" terrain, then she also reminds us that the search for voice in nineteenth-century literature so analyzed by contemporary academic feminists occupies only one small, elite corner of the cultural marketplace. To recover Sara's "own story," then, is to trace the intricate connections between authorship and collaboration, between empowerment and marginality, between literature and ideology.

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[1] *The Bondage of Love: A Life of Mrs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987).

[2] *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), pp. 372-73.

[3] *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 14.