

Hartley Coleridge

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There are strong reasons for Hartley Coleridge to be represented in this study weekend. He was born on the nineteenth of September 1796, so his two hundredth anniversary is in just under two weeks time. In any case, there is no-one who better deserves a place in a study weekend on the Romantic Child, because in a very real sense Hartley was *the* romantic child. His birth was very close in time to the birth of Romanticism, and Wordsworth, Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Hazlitt, Hartley's uncle Robert Southey of course, and later Thomas De Quincey, were all involved, most of them deeply involved, in Hartley's childhood. But the strongest reason of all for calling Hartley the archetypal romantic child is that so much of the greatest romantic poetry about childhood was directly inspired by, and about, Hartley Coleridge. In Coleridge's poetry, he is the child of 'Frost at Midnight', 'The Nightingale', the ending of 'Fears in Solitude', and the Conclusion to 'Christabel'; in Wordsworth's poetry he is the subject of 'To H.C., Six Years Old' and the child in the Immortality Ode. Surely no particular child, not even the child whose birth is celebrated in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, ever had so much beautiful and genuinely great poetry written about him as did Hartley before he was seven years old.

Two images and a question dominate most of what has been said and written about Hartley. The first picture is of an enchanted childhood: of the sleeping baby in 'Frost at Midnight', and his father's hopes and dreams for him; of the three year old boy whose 'spirit dances on an aspin leaf', as Coleridge described him to Humphrey Davy, [1] of the 'little child, the limber elf,/Singing, dancing to itself' in the Conclusion to Part II of 'Christabel'; of Wordsworth's portrait of Hartley at six - the 'faery voyager' who 'fittest to unutterable thought / The breeze-like motion and the self-born

born carol'; of Charles Lamb's 'little philosopher', and of David Wilkie's portrait of him at ten. The second picture is of Hartley the adult, living in the Lake District a life with a touch of poverty, loneliness and vagrancy, and more than a touch of alcoholism, much loved by everyone who knew him, and much loved in the community of Grasmere and Rydal, but regarded as a failure; a failure in having disappointed the high expectations held out for him, and a failure in coping with the ordinary mechanics and economics of living. This was not only the view others took of him as an adult: it was a view which no-one held more strongly than he did himself, and a sense of exile and failure pervades with a deep sadness much of his own poetry:

A lonely wanderer upon earth am I,
The waif of nature—like uprooted weed
Borne by the stream, or like a shaken reed,
A frail dependent of the fickle sky.
Far, far away, are all my natural kin...
So far astray hath been my pilgrimage. [\[2\]](#)

And again, in one of his best known and most tragically moving sonnets 'Long time a child':

Nor child, nor man,
Nor youth, nor sage, I find my head is grey
For I have lost the race I never ran:
A rathe December blights my lagging May.

So those are the two images — the enchanted child, the failed adult, who has lost the race he never ran, and the question which has always been asked is 'What went wrong?'

I shall hint at one answer to that question, but I shall first give you a brief account of Hartley's life. He was born in Bristol, three weeks prematurely, and perhaps as an augury of what was to come, his father was away in Birmingham. We'll hear later about the sonnets his father wrote on his way home, but in general over the first year of Hartley's life we have a picture of family love and contentment which

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never recurred. In December, when Hartley was three months old, the family moved to the cottage at Nether Stowey — small, damp, and mouse-infested, but where we recall Coleridge's description of himself as the domesticated father, sitting with a diaper on his knee, warming it in front of the fire while he composed verses. [3] He was planning that Hartley should have a simple rustic upbringing: 'You don't mean to make an actual ploughman of him?' asked Charles Lamb. [4] Above all, we have the picture at this time of the peacefully sleeping baby in 'Frost at Midnight'. When Hartley was seven months old, Wordsworth and Dorothy came to Alfoxden, and the poetical annus mirabilis for Coleridge and Wordsworth began. In May 1798, Hartley's brother Berkeley was born, and a few months later, the Wordsworths and Coleridge sailed for Germany, leaving Sara Coleridge with the two very small children. She had the kind but not very insightful Thomas Poole on the doorstep, but there is little doubt that she was lonely and probably depressed, which is a bad combination for a mother of small children- wretched for the mother and bad for the children. But far worse was to come for her. In the autumn, Berkeley was inoculated against small pox and became desperately ill. Sara was beside herself with anxiety; Thomas Poole wrote to Coleridge that it was all a fuss about nothing, but at the age of ten months Berkeley died. Coleridge clearly felt very guilty about being abroad when this happened, but one manifestation of his guilt was to delay even longer his return home. Then there was the uncertainty about where the family was to live. Coleridge had a period as a journalist in London, but in the summer of 1800, he took Sara and Hartley north, to live at Greta Hall in Keswick. There, Derwent was born in 1800, and Sara in 1802. From 1804 to 1806, when Hartley was between the ages of seven and nearly ten, Coleridge was in Malta: soon after his return, he and Sara Coleridge finally separated. From then on, Coleridge could be no more than an occasionally, though often heavy-handedly, involved father.

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Nevertheless, when Hartley was ten, he had what he would afterwards call his *annus mirabilis*, when he and his father stayed at Coleorton with the Beaumonts, and then Wordsworth took him to London, where he met Charles Lamb, Walter Scott, and Humphrey Davy, and had a wonderful time visiting the theatres and the sights - even though he remembered that Wordsworth was too parsimonious to show him the crown jewels in the tower. [5]

Now I have given you a very flat and factual chronology of Hartley's first eleven years, and said nothing about the enchanted and enchanting child we meet in the poetry, the letters, and in Coleridge's notebooks. That I shall return to, but the point I am emphasizing at this stage is that though Hartley's childhood has been represented as magical, it was certainly very unsettled. At twelve, Hartley went with his brother Derwent to Ambleside School, a boarder during weekdays, and usually spending weekends with the Wordsworths now at Allen Bank. Then in 1810 came the dreadful estrangement between Wordsworth and Coleridge, deeply upsetting to both the boys, though it did not affect the kindness the Wordsworths always showed them.

In 1815, Wordsworth, Southey, Thomas Poole and the Beaumonts clubbed together to send Hartley to Oxford, having decided Coleridge would take no very active steps in his further education. Of Hartley's undergraduate career we have only one clear incident. He entered for the Newdigate prize for English verse, and pinned all his hopes on winning it, which he was convinced would make his name and bring him popularity, especially with the young women, with whom he was painfully shy. Pinning one's hopes on winning the Newdigate is about as unrealistic as being convinced one's finances will be rescued by winning the National Lottery, and Hartley didn't win. His brother Derwent believed it was a blow from which he never wholly recovered. He graduated with a second, which was better than his father, or Southey or Wordsworth had achieved, and then he triumphantly

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succeeded in the competition for a fellowship at Oriel, to the pride and joy of his family and friends, and his old school. But this was soon followed by the disaster from which he certainly never did recover, in self-esteem or in making any settled career. After his probationary year at Oriel, the Principal and fellows, who included John Keble and Thomas Arnold, decided to terminate his fellowship. They found him eccentric, unreliable in the not very onerous duties and in

conforming with the social customs of the common room, and too much inclined to drink. The rights and wrongs of this have been much debated. The college paid him £ 300 in compensation, which suggests that a modern industrial relations court might not have upheld their decision, but reading all the letters about the affair, one feels a good deal of sympathy with both sides. Hartley was devastated; Coleridge even more so. He tried desperately but unsuccessfully to get Hartley reinstated.

For a year after the Oriel disaster, Hartley tried his hand as a journalist in London, writing essays, but during this time he began a lifelong propensity to disappear for weeks at a time on drinking sprees. Coleridge took an authoritarian line that Hartley must return to Ambleside, to his old school, to teach. It was a terrible comedown for Hartley who hated teaching, was frightened of adolescent boys, and did not want to return to the Lake District from London. But there, except for two brief spells elsewhere in the North of England he was to remain, feeling an exile, for the remaining twenty seven years of his life. And one of the saddest and most extraordinary facts about this story is that from that time on he never saw his father again. They probably never even wrote to each other again. [6] Two or three years after Hartley came to Ambleside, the school failed: it's unclear whether this was any fault of Hartley's—probably not, but he was again without a regular job, and he now drifted into the pattern of existence he would follow for the remaining twenty four years of his life. He lodged with a series of

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kindly landladies, first in Grasmere, then at Nab Cottage beside Rydal Water. He wrote occasional essays and reviews, but he was quite unable to support himself financially. He lived on small financial handouts, which came from his mother via the Wordsworths at nearby Rydal Mount, who also acted as a sort of sub-branch of an OXFAM shop, dispensing old clothes to him. [7] Someone once asked him what rent he paid at Nab Cottage. 'Rent' he said, 'I never thought of that'. [8] Probably the Wordsworths took care of that too. Periodically he would disappear on a round of the alehouses in the southern Lakes, sleeping rough in barns and ditches. He was greatly loved by the dalesmen, who found him wise and intelligent as well as eccentric and comical. One of the delightful reminiscences collected by Canon Rawnsley was that many regarded him as very much the literary and intellectual superior of Wordsworth, believing that Wordsworth got all the best ideas for his poetry from Hartley. And in fairness it wasn't only the simple dalesmen who respected his intellect and literary judgement. He was one of the features which literary visitors to the Lakes went to see. When Southey's *The Doctor* began to appear anonymously, one strongly held belief was that Hartley Coleridge was the author. Though not productive in the sense of anything that

would earn a living, he was not entirely idle. He read a lot, annotating his books like his father. He filled many notebooks with ideas, he wrote a lot of verse, with an especial facility for sonnets, and he wrote a lot of letters. There are many records of Hartley in his last twenty years, but it's still hard to make a clear judgement of how far he was an engaging literary eccentric, as the nineteenth century reminiscences suggest, and how far he was the broken down alcoholic vagrant, which the more recent and realistic sounding analyses by Molly Lefebure and Rosemary Ashton describe. Of course the two pictures are not incompatible: it's a question of emphasis. What is clear, from what Derwent published of Hartley's work posthumously, and from the

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great amount of interesting material which was never published, and is now in the superb library of the University of Texas at Austin, that Hartley never went to pieces intellectually, or in literary insight or erudition.

There were two periods when he briefly left the Lakes to do a genuine job. In 1832, a young Leeds publisher, Francis Bingley, contracted with Hartley that he should come to Leeds to write a series of biographies of distinguished northerners, and also to publish some of his poems. 1832 has always seemed to me the real *annus mirabilis* of Hartley's life, because during that year he produced the *Biographia Borealis*, subsequently called the *Northern Worthies* - thirteen very substantial and very readable biographies including Andrew Marvell, Captain Cook, Richard Bentley, and Congreve. It was intended there should be more, but the work as published in 1833 is about 350,000 words long — the size, though not the style, of three-and-a-half Ph.D theses. He also published one volume of his poetry, some of it, especially among the sonnets, very good. It all came to an end, not through any failing of Hartley, but because Bingley went bankrupt.

What had always puzzled me about that year is how on earth did Hartley, with his reputation for idleness and procrastination, manage to produce what would have been a remarkable output for the most assiduous writer. Well, I have to say that the answer, at least in part, is that he didn't. [\[9\]](#) If you look in the catalogue of the British Library under Andrew Marvell, you will find the strange listing *The Life of Andrew Marvell* (1835) by H. Coleridge' and then in square brackets 'or rather by John Dove'. There is also a listing of an 1832 *Life of Andrew Marvell* by John Dove. These two lives are for practical purposes identical, and identical with the Marvell biography which opens Hartley's *Northern Worthies*. What seems to have happened is that Bingley engaged a Yorkshireman, John Dove, to write the biographies, for some reason they had fallen out, and Hartley was really

invited to finish what Dove had begun. [\[10\]](#) So it's uncertain how much of the *Northern Worthies* was really written by Hartley and how much was a very light editing of Dove's work. Certainly he did not write the Lives of Andrew Marvell or Bentley, though that leaves the possibility that he wrote up to eleven other lives. But even if his productivity in that year wasn't as phenomenal as it looks, he still worked hard, and got two works published, and might have done much more but for Bingley's bankruptcy.

There were two other lesser periods of achieving something. In 1837, he went for a few months to Sedbergh as a schoolmaster, to help out the headmaster who was a friend. Unlike his Ambleside experience he seems to have thoroughly enjoyed this, to have been popular and to have done the job well, if a little eccentrically. Then in 1839, Edward Moxon asked him to edit and write the introduction to the *Dramatic Works* of the Elizabethan dramatists Massinger and Ford. Hartley was slow to produce: Moxon asked Wordsworth's help, and Wordsworth, having found that Hartley had made one of his periodic disappearances, wrote to Moxon:

And now, let me give you, in respect of him, a piece of advice, once for all, viz. that you *never* engage him for any unperformed work, when either time or quantity is of importance. Poor fellow! he has no resolve; in fact nothing that can be called rational will or command of himself. [\[11\]](#)

But Hartley did write a lively Introduction, and a series of long discursive, and highly entertaining if not always relevant notes. It was his final publication, except for the works which Derwent put together posthumously and which he made to look like a very respectable corpus of verse and prose: two volumes of poems, three of the *Northern Worthies*, and two of Essays and unpublished marginalia.

What runs through Hartley's writings is a superficial light-hearted, good-humoured and witty attitude to life, beneath

which, and not very far beneath, is a deep underlying sadness that he had failed in what was expected of him and in what he might have achieved. In fact, it is when he is on that theme that we hear Hartley's own genuine voice—much of the rest of his verse, essays and letters seems like imitation or whimsy. He felt himself to be an exile, and after his mother left Keswick in 1829 (Hartley managed not to see her to say goodbye), [\[12\]](#) the only member of his own family he ever saw again was Derwent, clergyman and Principal of St Mark's Training College in London. Derwent paid him a visit in 1843. The two brothers found it hard to adjust to each other, and Hartley wrote a poem after the meeting, beginning

We grappled like two wrestlers, long and hard,
With many a strain and many a wily turn;
The deep divine, the quaint fantastic bard.

It was also Derwent who came up to the Lakes to be with Hartley in his last illness at the end of 1848, and with Wordsworth to bury him in Grasmere churchyard. At Wordsworth's request, his grave was placed with the Wordsworth graves, where you can still see it—a more elaborate headstone than theirs, erected by Derwent and his sister Sara.

So we return to the question: 'What went wrong?'

It's a question to which many people have believed they had a simple answer. The glibbest answer has been one word: drink, and to the simple minded that has been enough; but it's really just an answer which pushes the question one stage back—what made Hartley prone to his undeniable bouts of drinking. Another version of that answer is that the family had an hereditary tendency to addiction, which caused opium addiction in STC, and alcoholism in Hartley. There's no scientific basis for that idea, though Coleridge himself may have believed it and felt guilty about it. [\[13\]](#) The more

sophisticated version of this sort of explanation of Hartley's career was neatly put in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1912, [\[14\]](#) reviewing Eleanor Towle's book *A Poet's Children* [\[15\]](#) :

Jowett is said to have complained that the Coleridges were so numerous that only a man of vast intellect could reasonably hope to distinguish them... It might have aided his memory to divide them into two groups : the Coleridges of talent whose virtues adorned ... public and private stations... [and] the Coleridges of genius, who, in spite of their genius, somehow or other, turned out unsatisfactorily. The great examples - perhaps the only ones - of the latter class are, of course, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his son Hartley. They had no grip on the architechtonics of life, and though endowed with rarer gifts than their successful relatives, signally lacked the ability to turn those gifts to practical account...

The common account of Hartley is that he took to drink and consequently went to the bad... but it may be questioned whether the diagnosis of the pathology is sound... the addiction to drink was not the disease, but the remedy which he sought to palliate and alleviate a disease which he felt to be incurable - a certain incapacity to face the facts of life and adapt oneself to its harsh and unalterable conditions.

Molly Lefebure, whose views on the Coleridge family always need to be taken seriously, attributes Hartley's problems largely to the effects of having a father who was unstable,, opium addicted, frequently and increasingly absent, and unfair and unsupportive to Hartley's mother. There must be a lot of truth in that view.

However, I want to put a different view of Hartley's problem which relates it much more to this weekend's

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theme of the Romantic Child, and to the wonderful poetry we have been hearing. It follows closely an argument developed by Anya Taylor, and it is that the circle of literary geniuses who surrounded Hartley in his early childhood built up a weight of expectation around him which he could never fulfil, and also made portentous forecasts about him from which he could never escape. [\[16\]](#)

We start with the three strange sonnets Coleridge wrote just after Hartley's birth. Now these sonnets are ambiguous, and open to different interpretations. The first

‘On Receiving a Letter informing me of the Birth of a Son’ describes his confused and rather unhappy feelings:

Awe

Weighed down my spirit...

Before the Eternal sire I brought

Th’ unquiet silence of confused Thought

And shapeless feelings

He appears to feel the baby would be safer dead; he prays:

That ere my Babe youth’s perilous maze have trod,

Thy overshadowing Spirit may descend

And he be born again, a child of God.

The same, rather ambiguous thought occurs in the next sonnet ‘Composed on a Journey Homeward’, the day after Hartley’s birth. It begins with a platonic idea of pre-existence, anticipating Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode. He says the present seems ‘a mere semblance of an unknown past’ and ‘We lived, ere yet this robe of flesh we wore’ — almost a direct quote from Plato’s *Phaedo*. Then he tells the baby

If heavy looks should tell me thou art dead

(As sometimes through excess of hope, I fear)

then he would think Hartley was a spirit who had sprung ‘to meet Heaven’s quick reprieve’.

In the third sonnet he writes movingly of seeing the baby at its mother's breast, and then being able to impress a father's kiss, but still

all beguiled

Of dark remembrance and presageful fear,

I seem'd to see an angel form appear.

Through all three sonnets runs the fear of, and even the wish for the baby's death, and the notion of the divine pre-existent, transcendental, angelic child who is really too good for this world and safer not in it.

The first thing Coleridge did for the baby was to name him David Hartley, after the associationist philosopher, who was at that time the strongest philosophical influence on Coleridge. It is a name which I believe profoundly affected Hartley's childhood, and the attitude those around took to him. The answer to the question 'What's in a name?' is, of course 'A very great deal'. There is no more powerful image in the creation story in Genesis than that of Adam naming the animals, and by naming them defining them and obtaining dominion over them. 'Does the mighty name work wonders in his little frame?', Charles Lamb asked when Hartley was only three months old. Charles Lamb always called the child Hartley 'the little philosopher'; Coleridge and Southey believed the four year old Hartley was a great philosopher and metaphysician. Now you may say they were observing his character, not responding to his name, but before Hartley could possibly have shown any philosophical disposition, Charles Lamb was calling him 'the little philosopher'. It was his name, not his character that originally gave him that title, and the title led to the expectation of a preternaturally wise and philosophic child.

But we must return to Hartley's babyhood, and to the most beautiful poem Coleridge wrote about him - arguably the most beautiful he ever wrote. And in 'Frost at Midnight' you may feel there can be no sinister subtext. We just have the

lovely picture of the sleeping babe

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the interspersed vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! It thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee

And then Coleridge's wish for Hartley's future

But thou, my babe! Shalt wander, like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags

Well, of course, Hartley did finish up wandering by lakes and beneath the crags of ancient mountains, and what is often said about the poetry Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote about Hartley is that it's amazing how they foresaw his future. But did they foresee his future, or did they actually cause it to come about? Hartley never wanted to go back to the Lake District; it was his father who forced him to do so after the Oriel disaster. And Hartley certainly felt himself haunted by that prediction in 'Frost at Midnight'. He opened his volume of poems in 1833 with a dedicatory sonnet to his father, with whom he had not communicated for nine years. It begins 'Father and Bard revered! to whom I owe/Whate'er it be, my little

art of numbers'. He refers to his father's prayer 'in the night-watch o'er my cradled slumbers' and continues:

The prayer was heard: I "wander'd like a breeze",
By mountain brooks and solitary meres,
And gather'd there the shapes and phantasies

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Which, mixt with passions of my sadder years,
Composed this book.

Hartley added a note to this sonnet which quoted the relevant lines of 'Frost at Midnight' and added 'As far as regards the habitats of my childhood, these lines, written at Nether Stowey, were almost prophetic. But poets are *not* prophets.'

So there was a darker side even to the lovely 'Frost at Midnight' and how Hartley saw its effect on his later life. The Lake District was indeed a place where he wandered like a breeze—too like a breeze, for the peace of mind of his friends—but it had also become for him a place of penance and exile.

The other Coleridge poem to which I want to refer is the curious conclusion to Part II of 'Christabel'. It doesn't seem to have a lot to do with 'Christabel', but it certainly refers to Hartley, written when he was four, and sent in a letter to Southey at that time. [\[17\]](#)

A little child, a limber elf,
Singing, dancing to itself,
A fairy thing with red round cheeks,
That always finds, and never seeks,

Makes such a vision to the sight
As fills a father's heart with light;
And pleasures flow so thick and fast
Upon his heart, that he at last
Must needs express his love's excess
With words of unmeant bitterness.

This strange little fragment conveys the ethereal, elf-like, almost weightless quality which both Coleridge and Wordsworth saw in Hartley as a little child—‘a spirit that dances on an aspin leaf’. It also conveys Coleridge’s anxiety about Hartley’s character, and guilt about how he had

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treated him. I must quote two other painful instances of that guilt and anxiety. In 1802, when Hartley was five, Coleridge wrote the Letter to Sara Hutchinson, published in part that year as the Dejection Ode. The unpublished part included the lines:

Those little Angel Children (woe is me!)
There have been hours, when feeling how they bind
And pluck out the Wing-feathers of my Mind...
I have half-wish'd they never had been born!

In fairness, Hartley probably never saw those lines, but everything else I am quoting was certainly well-known to him, as a child as well as an adult.

The second instance is a dreadful letter Coleridge wrote to the ten year old Hartley, in which he most certainly ‘expresses his love’s excess With words of unmeant bitterness’. Coleridge was planning to take Hartley to visit the Ottery relations, and in giving him advice on how to behave, he also listed all Hartley’s shortcomings. [\[18\]](#) He told Hartley:

this power you possess of shoving aside all disagreeable reflections... has...interwoven with your nature habits of procrastination, which, unless you correct them in time (and it will require all your best exertions to do it effectually) must lead you into lasting unhappiness... I take this means of warning you against those bad habits which I and all your friends here have noticed in you.

He warns Hartley against picking or snatching at anything, eatable or not, and admonishes him, when he has done wrong, always to acknowledge it at once.

Among the lesser faults, I beg you to remember not to stand between the half-opened door, either while you are speaking or spoken to.

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After signing himself ‘my dear, my very dear Hartley, most anxiously, your fond father’, Coleridge adds the P.S. ‘I have not spoken about your mad passions and frantic looks and pout-mouthing; because I trust that is all over.’

If it’s ever right to say those things to a ten year old—and it’s a big if—they should surely be said lovingly and in person, seeing the response and responding to the response. Yet what that letter, which is so distressing even for us to read, shows is the extent of Coleridge’s anxiety and guilt about Hartley. And though the two never communicated in the last dozen years of Coleridge’s life, Coleridge still remembered Hartley wistfully as the young child whose spirit danced on an aspen leaf. In a poem called ‘The Pang more sharp than All’, which Rosemary Ashton dates to Coleridge’s final years, [\[19\]](#) he wrote:

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

In Wordsworth's poetry about childhood, it is widely accepted that the child in the seventh and eighth stanzas of the Immortality Ode—the four year's darling of a pigmy size, with his complicated imitative games, the 'best philosopher', is Hartley Coleridge. Coleridge attacked the stanza in the *Biographia*: 'In what sense is a child of that age a philosopher?' [20] But it was Coleridge, after all, who had saddled Hartley from birth with the name and title of a philosopher, and it was Coleridge who described Hartley at precisely that age to Dorothy Wordsworth as a metaphysician. [21]

The Wordsworths, the Coleridges and the Southey's all built huge expectations around Hartley's talents. 'If he live [he will] prove a great genius', Coleridge said before Hartley was four, [22] and at six 'he is an utter Visionary'. [23] The

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letters and biographies are full of profound sayings of the little Hartley and anecdotes of his imaginative world of make-believe. But what I feel brings me closer to Hartley than these second-hand accounts of his brilliance and precocity is a letter in Dove Cottage Library, written when he was just eight years old. He was evidently staying at Park House, the Hutchinson's farm near Penrith, and he was writing to his mother:

My dear mother I am in good health and spirits I hope you are very well—have you had a letter from my father I hope derwent and Sara and little edith are well... park house is a bare ugly place but I like it very well—that is I like it because friends of mine live here. I have been at Penrith they were all very fond of me at penrith. I have got a new book. [24]

and so on for a few more lines. What I find remarkable and rather touching about that letter is its sheer ordinariness—it's a letter that any of our children or grandchildren could have written to us at that age or younger when they were away on a visit. He sounds a very nice, rather ordinary boy. But that doesn't seem quite to fit with the picture we are given of Hartley as being a child of quite exceptional abilities and ideas. What I suggest that in part Coleridge and Wordsworth were doing was to look with real observation and perception at children, and to realize that an ordinary child is really something quite extraordinary. The very process of developing language, for instance, if one looks and listens carefully to what is actually happening, is a breathtaking miracle. Wordsworth and Coleridge did look carefully at children: Coleridge I believe the most perceptively of all. They weren't above doing experiments with children just to see what would happen. Wordsworth once took a servant boy up Claife Heights just to see if he reacted to the view in the same way as Wordsworth himself. [25] Coleridge put the naked four year old Hartley into the River Greta just to see how he

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responded. [26] And the child who was around most, at a crucial time for them both to observe, was little Hartley Coleridge. They looked with their exceptional perceptiveness and sensitivity at the uniqueness, the mystery of growth and development, the potential, the precariousness and unpredictability of the future, and the appeal which are there in all young children, and which no doubt were very striking in the little Hartley.

I don't know if Hartley recognized himself in the Immortality Ode. I think he probably did. But the Wordsworth poem in which he and every one else undoubtedly recognized Hartley, because it was addressed to him, is 'To H.C., Six Years Old'. In my mind it is always associated with David Wilkie's picture of Hartley, though actually that was made four years later. The poem opens with the ethereal Hartley of 'the breeze-like motion and the self-born carol'

Thou Faery Voyager! that dost float

In such clear water that thy Boat

May rather seem

To brood on air than on an earthly stream...

O blessed Vision! happy child!

That art so exquisitely wild

An enchanting picture of a graceful, light-footed, carefree child. But then we go on to Wordsworth's brooding fears and predictions for Hartley:

I think of thee with many fears

For what may be thy lot in future years.

I thought of times when pain might be thy guest.

But then he chides himself for 'vain and causeless melancholy', and he takes comfort in the extraordinary consolation that either Hartley will die, or he won't actually grow up.

[20]

Nature will either end thee quite;

Or, lengthening out thy season of delight,

Preserve for thee, by individual right,

A young lamb's heart among the full grown flocks

And then the final metaphor of the dew drop:

Thou art a Dew-drop, which the morn brings forth,

Not doomed to jostle with unkindly shocks...

A Gem that glitters while it lives,
And no forewarning gives;
But at the touch of wrong, without a strife,
Slips in a moment out of life.

That image comes from Andrew Marvell's lovely poem 'On a Drop of Dew' which in Marvell also contains the idea of a divine pre-existence. 'To H.C.' is a most exquisite poem, but my question today is, what did it do to Hartley? It was published in 1807, and in Hartley's adult life was the poem most often quoted about him. Folk said, wasn't it amazing that Wordsworth exactly foresaw Hartley's life in the Lake District: a young lamb's heart among the full grown flocks. The point I am again putting is that Wordsworth did not so much foresee as cause this outcome. Hartley saw it as his destiny:

Long time a child, and still a child when years
Had painted manhood on my cheek.

And lest again you think I am exaggerating the effect of a poem, I offer two other pieces of evidence. Derwent Coleridge quotes a long reminiscence of Hartley at twenty-one by Chauncey Hare Townsend. Townsend evidently saw Hartley entirely in the light of 'To H.C., Six Year Old'. [\[27\]](#) Then, after the Oriel disaster, when Coleridge decided to take matters in hand and send Hartley as a schoolmaster to

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Ambleside, he wrote a long letter to the headmaster Mr Dawes, commending and apologizing for Hartley. 'To what better can I appeal' he said 'than to Mr Wordsworth's own beautiful lines addressed to H.C. six years old'. [\[28\]](#) There are different ways of writing references, but I'm not sure that reminding the prospective employer that at the age of six the candidate was 'exquisitely wild' is either very wise or even very relevant. In fact there is far worse in the five drafts of

letters which Coleridge wrote to send to the fellows of Oriel, to persuade them to re-instate Hartley: in one of them he quotes at length both from 'Frost at Midnight' and 'To H.C., Six year Old'. [\[29\]](#)

The thesis I offer you, which Anya Taylor argued so convincingly, is that Hartley Coleridge's problem in coming to terms with adult life was not primarily a question of alcohol. Nor was it just a question of STC's shortcomings as a parent. Certainly, in spite of a lot of real love for his children, especially Hartley, he had shortcomings as a father, but Derwent and Sara survived them a good deal better than Hartley. What I suggest Hartley was not able to survive was the weight of expectation put on him by Coleridge, the Wordsworths, Southey, Charles Lamb and many others, which was paradoxically combined with a weight of ominous prediction about him. Before he went to Oxford, their enchantment with the child had been overshadowed by foreboding about his future, and Hartley himself felt ill-fated before the Oriel disaster. [\[30\]](#)

Friends of Coleridge, I have given you a less celebratory and uplifting talk than you reasonably may have expected to hear for Hartley's two-hundredth anniversary. If it isn't the, talk you wanted to hear, it isn't quite the one I hoped to give either. I do have a real affection for Hartley, but I am not sure that his memory is best served by the jokey patronising jollity of many of -the memoirs of his adult life. There are things to celebrate in Hartley's life. He was an attractive

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and loveable child, of whom we still have an enchanting picture, and also by universal agreement a very loveable, if not a steady or reliable adult. And he did leave some very attractive writing, in his essays, but especially in his poems, and the essays and poems have gone on being published at least until the middle of this century. The best of his sonnets are very good, though sadly many of the best are laments for his own failures, like this one:

When I review the course that I have run,

And count the loss of all my wasted days,

[a very Miltonic opening]

I find no argument for joy or praise
In whatsoe'er my soul hath thought or done.
I am a desert and the kindly sun
On me hath vainly spent his fertile rays.
Then wherefore do I tune my idle lays,
Or dream that haply I may be the one
Of the vain thousands, that shall win a place
Among the Poets, – that a single rhyme
Of my poor wit's devising may find grace
To breed high memories in-the womb of time?
But to confound the time my Muse I woo;
Then 'tis but just that time confound me too

Perhaps the hardest thing for Hartley to face was that however good his poetry might be, he would never produce poetry himself as great as the poetry written about him before he was seven years old.

Whether a study weekend will be commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of Hartley's death in the year 2049, or the three hundredth anniversary of his birth in 2096, I can't be certain. Perhaps time will confound him. But I am certain that the poems written about him will still be read and loved then, and into the century after as well.

[1] 25 July 1800, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs, Vols. 1 & 2 (Oxford, 1956), Vol 1., p.612, hereafter referred to as 'Coleridge Letters'.

[2] Hartley Coleridge, *New Poems*, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford, 1942) p.29.

[3] Coleridge to John Thelwall, 6 February 1797, Coleridge Letters, Vol. 1, pp 305-08.

[4] *Letters of Charles Lamb* 3 vols (London, 1935), Vol 1, p.87

[5] His father also travelled with them to London, but it is not clear whether he was one of the party in London. (E.L.Griggs, *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work* (London, 1929, p.34, hereafter 'Griggs Life').

[6] Rosemary Ashton, *Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford, 1996), p.370 (hereafter 'Ashton').

[7] Molly Lefebure, *The Bondage of Love: A Life of Mrs Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York, 1989), p. 244 (hereafter referred to as Lefebure)

[8] Griggs Life, p.162

[9] Elizabeth Story Donno, 'The Case of the Purloined Biography: Hartley Coleridge and Literary Protectivism', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 82 (1979), 458-86.

[10] *Letters of Hartley Coleridge* , edited by G.E. & E.L.Griggs (Oxford, 1940), 140 (hereafter 'Hartley Coleridge Letters').

[11] Wordsworth to Edward Moxon, 24 Feb, 1840 (Quoted by Herbert Hartman, *Hartley Coleridge: Poet's son and Poet*. Oxford, 1931, p.,134, hereafter referred to as Hartman.

[12] Lefebure, p.246.

[13] Hartman, p.74.

[14] TLS, 28 March 1912, p.127.

[15] London, 1912.

[16] Anya Taylor, “‘A Father's Tale’: Coleridge foretells the Life of Hartley”, *Studies in Romanticism* , 30 (1991), 37-56.

[17] 6 May 1801, Coleridge Letters, Vol. 2, pp., 727-29.

[18] 3 April 1807, Coleridge Letters, Vol. 3, p.10.

[19] Ashton, p.371.

[20] *Biographia Literaria*, edited J.Engell & W.J.Bate 2 vols (Collected Coleridge, Princeton, 1983), Vol.2, p.138.

[21] Ashton, p.194.

[22] Ashton, p.179.

[23] Ashton, p.221.

[24] 9 Jan 1805 (Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage Library, WLMS 14/11).

[25] M. Moorman *William Wordsworth: Early Years 1770-1803* (Oxford, 1957)p. 34.

[26] STC to J. Tobin, 25 July 1800 (Coleridge Letters, Vol 1, pp 612-14).

[27] 'Memoir of Hartley Coleridge by his Brother', in *Poems of Hartley Coleridge*, 2nd ed., 2 Vols (London, 1851), lxxiv.

[28] Griggs Life, p.106.

[29] Hartley Coleridge Letters, p.313.

[30] Hartman, pp.62-68.