

“A limber elf” : Coleridge and the Child

Reggie Watters

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First, a glimpse of two eighteenth century children living in what might be called a proto-Pantisocratic paradise:

Thus passed their early childhood, like a beautiful dawn, the prelude of a bright day.... [Their] minds had never been wearied by lessons of morality, superfluous to bosoms unconscious of ill. They had never been taught that they must not steal, because every thing with them was in common....

Paul and Virginia had neither clock nor almanack, or books of chronology, history, or philosophy. The periods of their lives were regulated by those of nature.... They knew no other historical epochas than that of the lives of their mothers, no other chronology than that of their orchards, and no other philosophy than that of doing good, and resigning themselves to the will of Heaven.

The book is *Paul and Virginia*, in the 1796 translation of Helen Maria Williams probably first read by William and Dorothy Wordsworth at Racedown and almost certainly brought with them to Alfoxden a year later. It had been written by Jacques Henri Bernardin de St. Pierre, who, after living three years in Mauritius, had returned to Paris and a friendship with Rousseau. It was a best-seller. Williams explains in her Preface how she turned to translating it as a distraction from: “the terrors of Robespierre’s tyranny... and I found the most soothing relief in wandering from my own gloomy reflections to those enchanting scenes”. The story itself is a tragic one of innocence destroyed by the outside world. This idyll of island children, raised by single mothers, one noble, one of peasant birth, is, from the first, overhung

by a sense of impending doom. It has been suggested that the book gave to William the idea for ‘The Ruined Cottage’ and to Dorothy the direct style of her *Journals*. It also proclaimed to young Romantics just how threatened must be the child’s pursuit of natural happiness.

Another glimpse, this time through an anecdote dated from July 1797 and placed in Coleridge’s cottage garden at Stowey:

Thelwall thought it very unfair to prejudice a child’s mind by inculcating any opinions before it should have come to years of discretion and be able to choose for itself. I showed him my garden and told him it was my botanical garden. ‘How so?’ said he - ‘it is covered with nothing but weeds.’ ‘O’ I replied — ‘that is only because it has not yet come to its age of discretion and choice. The weeds, you see, have taken the liberty to grow, and I thought it unfair in me to prejudice the soil towards roses or stawberries.’

Telling the story in the *Table Talk* more than half a lifetime later, Coleridge of course made sure he won all the tricks. There is throughout a gentle mockery of Jacobins and other libertarians, like Dr Erasmus Darwin, whose popular title *The Botanical Garden* names the place where weeds ‘have taken the liberty to grow’. The whole tone, commonsensical (even ‘down-to-earth’?), suggests a later STC, and even reminds me of another famous Lichfield ‘Doctor’. Sam Johnson himself has suddenly turned up in Stowey, and is disproving Berkeley to his own satisfaction by kicking a stone into the gutter! The comparison, however, must give us pause. Walter Bagehot once began a celebrated essay by announcing that Hartley Coleridge was not like the Duke of Wellington. Should we need to remind ourselves that his father was not much like Samuel Johnson? Let’s take another look at the context of that anecdote.

Back in July 1797, Coleridge and Thelwall shared a good many democrat ideas by which any self-respecting 18th century Tory would have been horrified. And the debate they engaged upon in STC’s garden was one of the central debates of their day. The Thelwall position is not dissimilar to that of Paul and Virginia. It might

conveniently be called ‘Rousseauesque’, a view that Children should just naturally develop their bodies before coming to develop their intellects. Talking thirty three years later, Coleridge cast himself in a more instructional role. But if we look back at the 1790s, his position becomes, as so often with Coleridge, a little less clear-cut.

Plucking up weeds and teaching the young idea how to shoot was close to the methods of those Unitarian educators like Mrs Barbauld and the Edgeworths, whom, as we shall see, Coleridge came to mistrust. Yet in the 1790s, STC went on heroine-worshipping visits to meet Anna Barbauld, and, as for the Edgeworths, Richard and his novelist daughter Maria, they were related by marriage to Coleridge’s Bristol mentor Thomas Beddoes, and very much part of the intellectual climate in which he thrived. Their popular book *Practical Education* he warmly recommended to his wife Sara from Germany in September, 1798:

I pray you, my Love! read Edgeworth’s Essay on Education—read it heart and soul—and if you approve of the mode, teach Hartley his Letters.

What took place in that garden in 1797 was not just an amusing anecdotal moment to be told by STC as his own Boswell. It was a real debate about the child Hartley, who was closest to him at that time, and about the education of the child. To the questions of this debate Coleridge himself had no easy answers, despite his later Johnsonian bow-wow manner. But the debate involved him in the central issues of his being: Faith, Moral Instruction, Innocence and Joy;

[5]

matters which were to exercise his most fundamental optimisms and pessimisms about Nature and Human Nature throughout his life.

Let’s shift our ground once more. In July, 1797, the very month of the STC-Thelwall debate, Tom Wedgwood, one of the heirs to the potter Josiah’s wealth, wrote a letter to William Godwin. In it he outlined some ideas of his own about education. They were based upon a theory of the Association of Ideas which STC respected at this time. Wedgwood was struck by the sheer incoherence of sense-impressions which bombard a child in its formative years. “What a host of half-formed impressions and abortive conceptions blended into a mass of confusion.”

Surely, he suggested, it must be possible to do better. With the help of radical thinkers like Godwin, Beddoes, and others, Wedgwood proposed to fund a scheme for the rationally controlled education of a young genius. Once he had found the right programme, he would need:

One, or two, superintendents of the practical part. The only persons that I know of as at all likely for this purpose, are Wordsworth and Coleridge. I never saw or had any communication with either of them. Wordsworth, I understand to have many of the requisite qualities and from what I hear of him, he has only to be convinced that this is the most promising mode of benefiting society, to engage him to come forward with alacrity. the talents of Coleridge, I suppose are considerable &, like Wordsworth's, quite disengaged. I am only afraid that the former (viz. Coleridge) may be too much a poet and religionist to suit our views.

[For complete letter see 'David Erdman, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Wedgwood Fund', *Bulletin of New York Public Library*, vol. 60 (1956)]

[6]

Wedgwood had almost certainly heard of Wordsworth from their mutual friend Basil Montagu, whose small son the Wordsworths were fostering at the time. By September, 1797, Wedgwood was staying at Alfoxden with the Wordsworths and presumably discussing his scheme with them. Alas, the flies on the Alfoxden walls have left no trace of their conversation. But perhaps we can reconstruct.

Here is Wedgwood again, outlining his ideas to Godwin: the child's sense-impressions must be carefully controlled in a "nursery [with] plain, grey walls with one or two vivid objects for sight and touch" and "the gradual explication of nature would be attended with great difficulty; the child must never go out of doors or leave his own apartment". Shades of the prison-house certainly enclose the growing boy in Wedgwood's educational vision! As a counter-blast of fresh air, here, famously and gloriously, is Dorothy Wordsworth describing their education of little Basil Montagu in a letter of a few months later:

Till a child is four years old he needs no other companions, than the flowers, the grass, the cattle, the sheep that scamper away from him when he makes a vain unexpected chase after them, the pebbles on the road, &c. &c.

Hardly surprising, then, that by January 1798 Coleridge was telling his new young friend Hazlitt how Tom Wedgwood “had expressed a very indifferent opinion of his friend Mr. Wordsworth”.

It was entirely to Wordsworth’s credit that, despite the chance of financial advantage, he turned his back on Wedgwood’s scheme because it offended his principles. My suspicion is that Coleridge was a little more flexible. After all Wedgwood, like the Edgeworths, was a member of the Beddoes Bristol circle, a circle which, like STC, approved

[7]

of educational weeding. Coleridge also badly needed patrons, and Tom Wedgwood, a chronic invalid with an intestinal complaint which was to carry him off in early life, may have seemed to Coleridge both a congenial friend and a potential Raisley Calvert. By the close of 1797, Coleridge, the “religionist” in Wedgwood’s words, was responding to the Bristol Unitarian minister Mr Estlin’s promptings and investigating the prospect of a ministry at Shrewsbury. But he had also written to Estlin in December that “another plan” had “presented itself”. He might join Basil Montagu “in a project of Tuition”. A scheme which he described as “singular & extensive”, and which had a grand Coleridgean ring about it:

we proposed in three years to go systematically, yet with constant reference to the nature of *man*, thro’ the mathematical Branches, chemistry, Anatomy, the laws of Life, the laws of Intellect, & lastly, thro’ universal History, arranging separately all the facts that elucidate the separate states of society, savage, civilised & luxurious: singular, for we proposed ourselves, not as Teachers, but only as Managing Students.

Well, we have moved from the world of Infant Sensations to the Open University.... But perhaps STC’s scheme of education with Tom Wedgwood’s friend shows how his new acquaintance with Wedgwood himself was affecting his

thinking. Perhaps it also helps to explain why, by January '98, the Wedgwood plan for funding a Godwinian education had turned into an annuity for financing Coleridge's genius. All of which gives an intriguing context within which to place that debate about education and the child, that age-old tug-of-war between Nature and Nurture, which STC was conducting with his friends in the late 1790s.

What helped transform Coleridge's own approach was,

[8]

undoubtedly, his growing responsiveness to his first-born son, David Hartley, born in September, 1796. The three sonnets he wrote about that experience of two hundred years ago are interesting personal documents, and the third is even a good sonnet. They suggest just how disturbing Coleridge found the whole matter of parenting, and how desperately honestly he attempted to register his reactions to it. The third sonnet closes with the lines in which he describes his response to returning home and seeing for the first time his young wife with their new-born child in her arms:

I seem'd 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.

It was that image of the child at its mother's breast which transformed STC's experience. One of the oldest clichés of Western Religious Art was also to be one of the definitive images of Coleridge's West Country poetry.

The effect of any major crisis in Coleridge's life was to make him even more introspective, and it is surely no accident that in the first year of Hartley's existence his young father turned to writing that celebrated sequence of autobiographical letters to Tom Poole recalling his own childhood. Among their many vivid and familiar details we have the matter of STC's childhood reading.

First, how, from his aunt's Crediton shop, he gained an early knowledge of the popular chapbooks of his day, "Tom Hickathrift, Jack the Giant-Killer &c. & &c. &c. &c." After reading these stories, Coleridge tells us, he would run up and down in the churchyard acting over all he had read on the docks, the nettles, and the rank-grasses. (Lecturing on Education at Bristol in 1813, he is reported as saying he valued such stories because they made children forget themselves. Moving their imaginations beyond their own limited sphere of action,

[9]

such tales were far better than modern educational books about Master Billy and Miss Ann.)

Then, at the age of six, he tells Poole, he discovered *The Arabian Nights'* *Entertainment*:

one tale of which (the tale of a man who was compelled to seek a pure virgin) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my mother was mending stockings) that I was haunted by spectres, whenever I was in the dark—and I distinctly remember the anxious & fearful eagerness, with which I used to watch the window, in which the books lay—& whenever the Sun lay upon them, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, & bask, & read—. My Father found out the effect, which these books had produced—and burnt them.

The role of Coleridge's father in these autobiographical letters has long seemed to me paradoxical. Here the father's actions are crassly obtuse—likely, as John Beer pointed out, to leave the effects of the books as an unresolved trauma. Yet, again and again, STC was at pains to *identify* with these images of the father which he creates, and the persona of the denying clergyman was something he carried with him all his life.

The Poole letter of 16th October returns to his father and the *Arabian Nights* in a different mode. When the father explains the workings of the planets his son understands him through the educational effect on his little mind of those very books the father had burnt.

I heard him with a profound delight & admiration; but without the least mixture of wonder or incredulity. For from my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c. &c.—my mind had been habituated to the Vast—and I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conception

[10]

not by my *sight*—even at that age.

“Even at that age” is interesting. Coleridge’s claim is not that the child comes to this life already an inspired idealist. Quite the reverse. Without the enlarging effects of *fantasy*, which a reading of tales like *The Arabian Nights* will stimulate, the small child must remain a petty materialist. Without that stimulus, the weeds of the child’s garden will remain weeds and nothing more. That was a crucial ingredient in the debate about education which Coleridge and his friends were conducting. And the next passage in the letter to Poole brings me back precisely to my theme.

Should children be permitted to read Romances, & Relations of Giants & magicians & Genii?—I know all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative.—I know no other way of giving the mind a love of ‘the great’, & ‘the Whole’.—Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro’ the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense I possess—They contemplate nothing but *parts*—and all *parts* are necessarily little—and the Universe to them is but a mass of *little things*.

“Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro’ the constant testimony of their senses” suggests the rationalists, like the atheist Thelwall, to whom STC had used similar phrases in a letter of two days earlier. The need for Christian Faith and Christian Doctrine as a defence against a frightening Nihilism was a particular need for Coleridge. But, as his father might have suggested, it was a little paradoxical to call in *The Arabian Nights* to help strengthen a child’s Christian enlightenment!

I'm sure many of us must have been struck by the number of English writers who tell us their childhood imaginations were fed by that strange hybrid expression of "Otherness"

[11]

known as *The Arabian Nights*. Antoine Galland's French version first appeared in 1704, and was translated into English by 1715. By the 1790s the English Galland had reached eighteen editions. Among its notable readers had been Pope, Addison, Swift. Blair, Beattie, Gibbon, Sterne, and the Wartons. Yet the book was often dismissed as suitable only for women and children.

Richard Hole, in his *Remarks on the Arabian Nights Entertainments* (originally given as a paper to the Exeter Literary Society which Coleridge also addressed in the early 1790s), conceded that the tales' "grotesque figures", "fantastic imagery", and "wild and diversified incidents" were "seldom relished but by children, or by men whose imagination is complimented at the expense of their judgement." Yet, as early as 1789, in the preface to his *Arthur: or The Northern Enchantment*, Hole had claimed the time was ripe for a re-translation of *The Arabian Nights* as a book for *adults*, since through its strangeness they might discover "a strength of genius" and "liveliness of imagination". As with the "innocent" Mauritius of *Paul and Virginia*, a detailed pursuit of this subject would lead us into complex fields (in the age of Edward Said one is tempted to say minefields) of Orientalism and European colonial exploitation. For my purposes now it is enough to recall that, if STC might claim *The Tales* led a reader into a world of Pure Imagination, in late 18th Century England Eastern Tales were one of the generally acceptable Moral-Free Zones, where one might wander into an exotic wilderness governed by arbitrary chance and filled with all manner of sensuous and sensual delights. There were moral dangers about such a world with which a religionist like Coleridge had serious problems. [For a fascinating view of fairly recent academic work in this field see Peter L. Caracciolo (ed.) *The Arabian Nights in English Literature*, Macmillan, 1988]

[12]

One of the most neglected of STC's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, illustrates this point neatly. 'The Foster-Mother's Tale : A Dramatic Fragment'

was taken from the play which Coleridge had recited when he visited the Wordsworths at Racedown. The *Lyrical Ballads* 'Fragment' is a dialogue between Maria and her Foster-Mother, who tells the story of a baby boy discovered in the wild and brought home to be reared at the expense of a Spanish nobleman.

And so the babe grew up a pretty boy,
A pretty boy, but most unteachable
And never learnt a prayer, nor told a bead,
But knew the names of birds, and mock'd their notes,
And whistled, as he were a bird himself.

Placed under the care of a Friar (not, significantly, a Foster-Mother), the boy learns to read, but becomes obsessed with reading:

Till his brain was turn'd - and ere his twentieth year,
He had unlawful thoughts of many things.

In Coleridge's Gothic vision of Catholic Spain, of course, this means the boy becomes condemned and imprisoned as a heretic. However, he escapes, and the Tale closes with an almost Shelleyan description of the boy's ultimately untamed wildness:

He went on shipboard
With those bold voyagers, who made discovery
Of golden lands....
the poor mad youth,
Soon after they arriv'd in that new world,

... seized a boat,
And all alone, set sail by silent moonlight
Up a great river, great as any sea,
And ne'er was heard of more: but 'tis suppos'd
He liv'd and died among the savage men.

[13]

The whole poetic pressure of this Romantic fragment seems to show how ambivalent was Coleridge's attitude to the problem of Natural or Nurtured Imagination. The components here are strangely like those of the great meditation on the child and education, 'Frost at Midnight'. Yet they have here subtly different weightings. The boy is wild and, ultimately, unteachable. But the body of instruction he rejects is that Old Faith of the Roman Church which Coleridge himself rejected and saw as riddled with superstitious practice. (On a personal level, the Friar might even carry undertones of STC's imprisonment at the old Greyfriars school of Christ's Hospital—perhaps he is Brother Bowyer, if you like!)

What complicates the poem further is the frame within which its narrative is set. Told by the Foster-Mother to her foster-children Maria and Albert, it is presented as a cautionary tale for the children, of just the kind a Mrs Barbauld might tell: essentially about the ill-effects of the absence of a Unitarian Foster-Mother! Yet the final Rousseauesque escape ("up a great river, great as any sea") suggests a return to some natural idyll, not unlike the Mauritius of *Paul and Virginia* and not a million miles away from the Susquehannah of Pantisocracy. Reading it, I am reminded of that touchingly human note of irritation with his future mother-in-law revealed in STC's letter to Southey of the 3rd-4th November, 1794:

That Mrs. Fricker—we shall have her teaching the Infants *Christianity*, —I mean—that mongrel whelp that goes under it's name—teaching them by stealth in some ague-fit of Superstition.

But to revert to Mrs Barbauld, who was, after all, a more formidable opponent. We all know the anecdote here given in its *Table Talk*, 31 March, 1832, version:

Mrs Barbauld told me that the only faults she found with the Ancient Mariner were—that it was

[14]

improbable, and had no moral.

... I told her that in my judgment the chief fault of the poem was that it had too much moral, and that too openly obtruded on the reader. It ought to have had no more moral than the story of the merchant sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and the Genii starting up and saying he must kill the merchant, because a date shell had put out the eye of the Genii's son.

Again, Coleridge is his own Boswell here. Again, an idol of his early manhood is being treated with the hindsight of later years. In March 1798 (the date of the first completed *Marinere*) Mrs Barbauld had been for STC “that great and excellent woman”. Later, literary bitternesses led him to label her “Mistress Bare and Bald”, and the figure of 1832 is recognisably a Literary Gent's Aunt Sally, slightly obtuse, rather humourless, good for a joke in the Male Club. One has only to glance at her own verses to catch something of her wit, as in the ‘Mouse's Petition’ to Dr Priestley, aiming to dissuade him from using mice in oxygen experiments with a superb example of the argumentum ad hominem:

If e'er thy breast with freedom glowed

And spurned a tyrant's chain,

Let not thy strong oppressive force

A free-born mouse detain.

But, of course, even that witty poem has a moral, and in tackling Mrs Barbauld's objections to *The Mariner*, STC was really facing a part of himself, the part which believed a child of nature might be a dangerous savage, and that *The Arabian*

Nights ought to be burnt because they inculcated a moral view of the universe governed by arbitrary “little” laws and without any overarching, saving Christian Vision.... To consider the matter further I want to turn to another rather infrequently-read poem of the Quantock period. It first

[15]

appeared in the *Morning Post* for March 10th, 1798 - again, exactly the time of the first *Marinere*. (More critical weight needs to be given to Coleridge’s *Morning Post* verses, and this example is no exception.) It appeared after an introductory letter which throws a facetiously mock smoke-bomb:

Sir, — I am not absolutely certain that the following poem was written by EDMUND SPENSER, and found by an Angler buried in a fishing-box....

When it reappeared, in Southey’s *Annual Anthology* for 1800, the poem had acquired the title of ‘The Raven’. In *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) it appears apologetically with an almost Dickensian subtitle, ‘A Christmas Tale, told by a School-boy to his Little Brothers and Sisters’. This has always suggested to me an affinity with those tales the boys told at night in the wards of Christ’s Hospital with the very human intention of frightening one another.... [The Raven of 1817 appears on page 131 of John Beer’s *Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Dent: Everyman, 1993]

As Coleridge’s doggerel verse and its uses gain more critical attention this poem may come to seem more significant. Charles Lamb admired its first nineteen lines, and STC’s note on a possible illustration of line seventeen as a “*round-about* with four seats” helps both to suggest the child associations the poem had for him and to bring alive his underlying sense of the primitive seasonal energies at work within its narrative. As with *The Mariner*, a simple natural harmony is broken by Man. The natural strength of the ruptured life is vividly rendered (for example in the flight of the raven [line 10] or in the strong sense we get of man’s destructiveness here curtailing a whole ecological process). The sardonic power of the poem expresses Coleridge’s bleak fear that the dark side of human nature may undermine whatever hopes we have for social or natural benevolence.

This blackness was all the stronger in the poem's original close, which ran (in 1798's upper case):

They had taken his all, and REVENGE IT WAS SWEET!

In *Sibylline Leaves* STC added two moralising lines to soften this stark ending:

We must not think so; but forget and forgive,
And what Heaven gives life to, we'll still let it live.

But his own manuscript note in one copy of the 1817 volume betrays his deep ambivalence about the whole problematic ending:

Added thro' cowardly fear of the Goody! What a Hollow, where the Heart of faith ought to be, does it not betray? this alarm concerning Christian morality, that will not permit even a Raven to be a Raven, nor a Fox a Fox, but demands conventicular justice to be inflicted on their unchristian conduct, or at least an antidote to be annexed.

He needs the bleak view of Nature and needs to amend it, and he needs to protest at his editing moral consciousness. Unfortunately, this consciousness is something *outside* himself—something he calls “the Goody”. By 1817 perhaps none other than Anna Laetitia Barbauld herself!

It was Charles Lamb who, for various reasons, helped turn Coleridge against Mrs Barbauld. Partly this came about because of the mistaken attribution of an unsympathetic review of Lamb's *John Woodvil* to Mrs Barbauld, for which STC vowed he would “cut her to the Heart”. Partly it was the result of a kind of male-

bonding of Old Blues - if you like a bonding of Yellow stockings against Bluestockings....

[17]

The Charles Lamb who enjoyed the original version of 'The Raven' and responded to the trials of 'The Mariner' was the Lamb of *Witches And Other Night Fears*, with his own disturbing evidence for a child's pre-existence in its responsiveness to nightmares—"the archetypes are in us, and are eternal". Lamb's most celebrated attack on Mrs Barbauld and her kind came in a letter of 23 October, 1802 to Coleridge:

Goody Two Shoes is almost out of print. Mrs Barbauld's stuff has banished all the old classics of the nursery; & the Shopman at Newbery's hardly deign'd to reach them off the old exploded corner of a shelf, when Mary ask'd for them. Mrs B's and Mrs Trimmer's nonsense lay in piles about. Knowledge insignificant & vapid as Mrs B.'s books convey, it seems, must come to a child in the *shape of knowledge*, & his empty noddle must be turned with conceit of his own powers, when he has learnt, that a Horse is an Animal, & Billy is better than a Horse, & such like; instead of that beautiful interest in wild tales, which made the child a man, while all the time he suspected himself to be no bigger than a child. Science has succeeded to Poetry no less in the little walks of Children than with Men. - Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil? Think what you would have been now, if instead of being fed with tales and old wives fables in childhood, you had been crammed with Geography & Natural history? *Damn them*. I mean the cursed Barbauld crew, those *Blights & Blasts* of all that is *Human* in man & child.

Great fun, of course, and claiming its place in that Romantic satiric campaign against Utilitarian Education which led to the Boy Bitzer in *Hard Times*, and which certainly needs to be heard in our own educationally hard times. Yet I cannot help feeling uneasy. There's a male tobacco smell about the whole

[18]

passage. More exactly, one wonders what *Goody Two Shoes* is doing on *Lamb's* side of the argument at all. The tone of that very instructional book can be gauged from, say, this extract:

Now, pray little Reader, take this Bodkin, and see if you can point out the Letters from these mixed Alphabets, and tell how they should be placed as well as little Boy Billy.

There seems to me to be rather a large dose of what one might call 'Salutation and Cat Egg-hot Nostalgia' about Lamb here! It was something he and Coleridge sometimes encouraged in each other....

And yet their dispute with Mrs Barbauld was genuine and based on principle, not just on prejudice. Anna Barbauld and her methods of child instruction can be fairly illustrated from *Evenings at Home*, an enormously popular compilation of "Pieces for the Instruction and Amusement of Young Persons" which she produced with her brother Dr Aikin in 1792. Here, for example, is the whole Fable of 'The Wasp and the Bee'.

A Wasp met a Bee, and said to him, 'Pray can you tell me what is the reason that men are so ill-natured to me, while they are so fond of you? We are both much alike, only that the broad golden rings about my body make me much handsomer than you are: we are both winged insects, we both love honey, and we both sting people when we are angry; yet men always hate me, and try to kill me, though I am much more familiar with them than you are, and pay them visits in their houses, and at their teatable, and at all their meals: while you are very shy, and hardly ever come near them: yet they build you curious houses, thatched with straw, and take care of and feed you in the winter very often:— I wonder what is the reason.

[19]

The Bee said, 'Because you never do them any good, but, on the contrary, are very troublesome and mischievous; therefore they do not like to see you; but they know that I am busy all day long in making them honey. You had better pay them fewer visits, and try to be useful.'

Coleridge disliked such Fables partly because they had overly specific and utilitarian moral designs on their young readers. He noted later that:

Prudentials not Morals are the End and Butt of Fables—the regulation of Self-love by Self-interest.

[CNB 4, 4832]

But he also disliked them because they falsified Nature. As he wrote in another Notebook entry:

Fables not fit for *Children* nor even for Boys except such as Wordsworth's—& a few delightful as Tale & Image, not as *Fable*, not animals as *Personae*, but if often made use of to be corrected by natural History—but this better taught by itself...

[CNB 3, 3390. My underlining.]

One of the crucial differences between Mrs Barbauld and Coleridge is that *she* was what often passes for an Educationalist, someone with great schematic confidence and a certain adult liveliness of mind, whereas *he* was a born Teacher, an adult with the capacity to learn from children, who could enter imaginatively and open-mindedly into the whole living process of a child's learning. And his awareness began, as I have already hinted, with his observing his children at their mother's breast:

Babies touch *by taste* at first—then about 5 months old they go from the Palate to the hand—& are fond of

feeling what they have to taste —/ Association of the Hand with the Taste—till the latter by itself recalls the former.... March 24, 1801. [CNB 1, 924]

It was from such memories that STC developed his own theories of education:

To trace the if not absolute birth yet the growth & endurancy of Language from the Mother talking to the Child at her Breast... (1804) [CNB 2, 2352]

and his approach was always imaginative.

Query? Whether, in teaching Children to read, it would be worth the while to remove the obstacle of the naming of Letters? Surely, an Obstacle it is—& such as must ... perplex the child.... Ex.gr. DoubleU, Aitch,O,Ess,E Whose? A Conjuror presenting a Plumb Cake and then turning it into an open-mouthed Wolf might impress more terror but not more sense of Unlikeness. [CNB 3, 4324]

His insights were more than educational. The relationship of Mother and child became central to his view of how we acquire a moral sense and a sustaining faith. As he wrote in a note for a chapter on ‘The Origin of the Idea of God’ for his *Opus Maximum*:

Why have men faith in God? There is but one answer. The man and the man alone has a Father and a Mother. The first dawns of humanity will break forth in the eye that connects the mother’s face with the warmth of the mother’s bosom.

However far he personally fell short, Coleridge had the highest possible ideals of Parenthood.

Hartley fell down & hurt himself—I caught him up crying & screaming—and ran out of doors with him.—The Moon caught his eye—he ceased crying immediately—and his eyes & the tears in them, how they glittered in the Moonlight! [CNB 1, 2192]

Hartley, just able to speak a few words, making a fire-place of stones, with stones for fire - four stone= fire-place—two stone= fire -/ arbitrary symbols in Imagination. [CNB 1, 918]

Hartley's intense wish to have Ant-heaps near our house/ his *Brahman* love & awe of Life/ N.B. to commence his Education with natural History-[CNB 1, 959]

Derwent extends the idea of Door so far that he not only calls the Lids of Boxes Doors, but even the Covers of Books/ a year & 8 months/ [CNB 1, 1192]

Derwent (Nov. 6 [1803] Tea time) came in, & all the *Cake* was eat up, & he by no means willing to accept dry Toast & butter as a Substitute. “Don't eat all the Cake!”—Well, we will not tomorrow!—“O but don't eat the Cake! You have eat the Cake! O but don't eat up all the cakes!”—His Passion had compleatly confounded his Sense of Time, & its Consequences—He saw that it was done; & yet he passionately entreated you not to do it—and not for the time to come/ but for the present & the Past. “O but you have! O but don't now!” [NB 1,1643]

Happy hours can be spent quietly flipping through STC's mental scrapbook like that. What my examples seem to illustrate above all is a sheer exuberance, a raw enjoyment of the Life-force which Coleridge shared with and celebrated in his children. None of us would claim he was an ideal father,

but he must have been great fun for a child to be with. In the last year of his life he recalled in his *Table Talk* how he had always made a point of associating images of cheerfulness with death when instructing his children, and how little Hartley once shocked “a party of very grave persons” by repeating “with great glee” a Resurrection Hymn his father had taught him:

Splother! splother! splother!/Father and mother!

Wings on our shoulders — /And UP we go!

His children’s vitality spoke directly to his spirit and he reciprocated. And because, above all, his was an inquiring Spirit, he inevitably theorised and speculated about what he observed working in and through children. His speculations might be called “educational” but were probably in his own mind theological. He may have had philosophical difficulties with Wordsworth’s application of the Platonic notions of pre-existence and *anamnesis* in the ‘Immortality Ode’. But there seems little doubt that for him children really came into this world trailing clouds of glory. They were evidences and ciphers of the love of God, if only they could be rightly received. But, of course, there was also Original Sin to be balanced in the equation, particularly as the pull of Unitarianism weakened. And simply allowing a Rousseauesque natural wildness was not enough....

I have pointed to Coleridge’s awareness of the dark side of childhood, as of life. In a Fallen World children might be threatened much as *Paul and Virginia* are threatened on their island paradise. There is no need to list all the images of menaced children, all the instances of *Witches and Night Fears* which Coleridge shared with Lamb. That haunting may have led to the noncompletion of ‘Christabel’, possibly his most ambitious poem of “childhood” in its largest sense, in which he sought to confront his own vision of Innocence and Experience through the story of the lost mother and the

[23]

menaced child, a poem in which, as his nephew/son-in-law put it, he attempted the hardest thing in romance—the showing of witchery by daylight. The incomplete version we have closes, you will recall, with another breathtaking yet elusive echo of his own paternal relationship with Hartley:

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 eyes with light;
And pleasures flow in so thick and fast
Upon his heart, that he at last
Must needs express his love's excess
With words of unmeant bitterness.

What strikes me first about this is how it shares with that other remarkable childhood poem of the Quantock period, Wordsworth's 'Anecdote for Fathers', a fine kind of adult honesty. The naked psychological perception of the ending seems to undercut virtually everything else in 'Christabel', a poem in which Coleridge later claimed he had realised a truth of "our inward nature" more fully than in 'The Mariner'. If only he had trusted himself to write the whole poem in that mode perhaps we really would have a Coleridge poem of "Innocence and Experience" to jubilate about.

"Jubilate": the word is like a (somewhat pre-arranged?) bell, tolling us back to Hartley Coleridge. The closing lines of 'The Nightingale' come particularly to mind, an ending which embodies the creative joy of the Quantock period in an image of the nightingales' glistening eyes in their moonlit grove. Then, by a brilliantly imaginative leap, he fuses that mesmeric image with that other *Notebook* memory of his infant son, carried out crying into the moonlight:

once, when he awoke
In most distressful mood (some inward pain
Had made up that strange thing, an infant's dream—)
I hurried with him to our orchard-plot,
And he beheld the moon, and, hushed at once,
Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently,
While his fair eyes, that swam with undropped tears,
Did glitter in the yellow moon-beam! Well!
It is a father's tale; 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....

There is a poignancy about this literary father's faith in the effect upon his son of "these songs"—the natural songs of the nightingales, of course, but also the mediating songs of the father-poet himself. Even at his most optimistic, Coleridge knew that natural beauty will not always dispel the inward pain of the dream, that night cannot always be associated with joy, that we live in a world of Ravens as well as Nightingales. The small community which had formed beside the Quantocks was a fragile Pantisocracy and was already on the verge of breaking up. He knew that. Yet for the moment his image of Hope was a child, with its eyes full of tears, glittering in the moonlight; or a limber elf, stretching and fluttering from its mother's arms, as in the first ending of 'Frost at Midnight': a creature from whom an adult might learn, perhaps, the natural ebb and flow of creative joy.