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Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian: Between Newman's Tractarianism and Wesley's Methodism

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J. ROBERT BARTH'S *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* broke new ground in 1969 with a full, systematic treatment of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's religious thought. He accomplished something rather astounding—he took S. T. Coleridge, the Romantic poet, and helped readers to see him in a fresh and powerfully instructive way—as *a theologian*. In many ways, Barth's work has been formative for my own studies, and I owe him a tremendous debt. This paper emerges from both admiration and inspiration, for I will consider the possibility that S. T. Coleridge's daughter, Sara Coleridge, was not only a writer, translator, and an editor of her father's works, but also *a theologian*.

The Reception of Sara Coleridge's Theology

"If bad arrangement in S. T. C. is injurious to readability, in S. C. it will be destructive."¹ Although Sara Coleridge (1802-1852) did not grow up with her father, it would seem that she at least inherited something of his distinct style of writing. But his intellectual genius? That is a lingering question. Historical neglect seems to have substantiated Sara's self-assessment of her essay, *On Rationalism*: "As to my own production (*much as I admire it myself*), I do not expect that it will be admired by any one else. It makes larger demands on the attention of readers than I, with my powers, have perhaps any right to make, or can repay."² Hartley Coleridge clearly disagreed: "Dear Sara's treatise on Rationalism is a wonder. I say not a wonder of a woman's work—where lives the man that could have written it? None in Great Britain since our Father died. Poor Henry was perfectly right in saying that she inherited more of her father, than either of us; and that not only in the amount but in the quality of her powers."³

On Rationalism, the focal point of this article, first appeared as an appendix of more than two hundred pages—without any chapters or subheadings—in the fifth edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1843).⁴ It has largely fallen out of sight since. The major obstacle to its appreciation—both then and now—is access: to my knowledge, the essay was only printed in full on one other occasion: it reappeared in the sixth edition of *Aids to Reflection* in 1848, with the added feature of ten subheadings, several interpositions of varying significance, and a further seventy-five pages titled "Extracts from a New Treatise on

¹ Sara Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 202 (XI.xii/July 1843 [due to changes in pagination among editions, I will include the assigned chapter, letter number, and date of each letter]). Henceforth I will refer to Samuel Taylor Coleridge as "S. T. C." and limit the use of "Coleridge" for Sara alone.

² Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 202.

³ Earl Leslie Griggs, *Coleridge Fille: A Biography of Sara Coleridge* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 131.

⁴ Sara Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, "Appendix C" of *Aids to Reflection* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1843), II, 335-556. On editions of *Aids to Reflection*, see John Beer's Princeton edition (AR, 546-47). I wish to thank Harvey Shoolman for his observations related to these editions.

Regeneration.”⁵ However, *On Rationalism* did not appear in Derwent Coleridge’s seventh edition of *Aids to Reflection* in 1854. Derwent hoped that Sara’s essay, which he admired, would later be published in a more suitable context, “reproduced as an independent treatise with the other literary remains of the lamented writer.”⁶ But Edith Coleridge’s 1873 collection of Sara’s letters left off the essay once again. Despite these facts, however, the essay plays a decisive role in the story of her life, and I believe that when one begins to delve deeper into Sara Coleridge’s *On Rationalism*, yet another layer of her life emerges—what Virginia Woolf calls the “dots” of an intervening ellipses that need to be filled in.⁷

E. L. Griggs, the editor of S. T. C.’s *Letters*, wrote the first major biography of Sara Coleridge in 1940.⁸ It is a sympathetic and thoroughgoing treatment of Coleridge’s life. But, for all the merits of Griggs’s work, he devotes only scant and largely damning attention to *On Rationalism*. Sara’s work, in Griggs’s judgment, is largely in the Coleridgean mold, particularly insofar as it follows S. T. C.’s views on the Understanding, faith, and baptism. Where Sara’s essay extends beyond the works of her father, however, Griggs is largely unimpressed. He questions her emphasis on the relation of the Understanding to regeneration, her alleged tendency to disagree with seventeenth-century divines and early church fathers, and, ultimately, her perhaps unconscious effort “to make her father an ally in her rejection of Anglo-Catholic dogma.”⁹ But instead of examining the text, Griggs considers the stylistic qualities of the work and merely dismisses Sara’s essay with faint praise mixed with blame: “While the intellectual power in the *Essay on Rationalism* is evidenced on every page, one notes, nevertheless, a lack of mental discipline. The essay wanders and digresses in a hundred directions . . . Sara Coleridge seems to have lacked (as her father did) the power of self-discipline in argumentative or philosophical prose. Her mind was too flooded with distinctions and ramifications, and, one is tempted to add, metaphysical trivialities, to write clearly and to the point. Her *Essay on Rationalism* is therefore, a brilliant but rather dry and unreadable document.”¹⁰ It was Griggs’s biography that led to

⁵ Sara Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, “Appendix C” of *Aids to Reflection* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1848), II, 13-248. The second version of *On Rationalism* demonstrates her continued attention to the piece and the doctrine of regeneration.

⁶ *AR*, 547.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Sara Coleridge,” in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays* (London: Hogarth, 1942), 73.

⁸ Henry Reed, one of Coleridge’s American correspondents, provided one of the earliest public assessments of Sara’s intellectual contribution: “The ‘Essay on Rationalism,’ involving a discussion of the subject of Baptismal Regeneration, though in form simply a prefatory note to the ‘Aids to Reflection,’ is a treatise which, as the composition of a woman, may be pronounced unparalleled: there is no instance in which a woman has traveled so far and so firmly into the region of severe study or sustained such continuous process of argumentation,—the subject demanding too extensive research in doctrinal theology” (Henry Reed, “Reed’s Memoir of Sara Coleridge,” in *Sara Coleridge and Henry Reed*, Cornell Studies in English, 27 [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1937], 33). Cf. Prof. James M. Hoppin’s long article on Sara Coleridge’s “original thought” in theology (“The Letters of Sara Coleridge,” *The New Englander* 34.131 [April 1875]: 201–22).

⁹ Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, 145.

¹⁰ Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, 145. Griggs clearly wished to provide a critical and fair-minded assessment of her work, but he overtly preferred her role as an editor and linguist (see Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, 198). For an example of Griggs’s attempt to provide a critical account of her judgment, see *Coleridge Fille*, 215–16.

Virginia Woolf's noted essay on Sara Coleridge, and her comment that "Mr. Griggs has written her life, exhaustively, sympathetically; but still . . . dots intervene."¹¹

More recently, Bradford Keyes Mudge has written an insightful examination of Coleridge's life that attempts to fill in the latent mystery that Woolf perceived.¹² Mudge moves Sara's story forward, especially by recognizing the enlivening effect of her theological study. He notes, in particular, how the turn to theology marks a decisive shift "of her own talents as writer and thinker."¹³ He describes *On Rationalism* as "an extended meditation . . . on [John Henry] Newman's 'house divided' and a vigorous defense of Coleridgean 'Reason.'"¹⁴ But, despite Mudge's initial interest, the essay quickly falls from sight without any discussion of its central claims or theological purpose. Rather, he employs the occasion of the essay for a particular task in his story: it demonstrates Sara's emerging theological prowess and illustrates the anxiety she felt about her intellect.¹⁵

The scholarly contribution of these two writers deserves special notice. Griggs provided the first detailed biography. Mudge advanced Sara's story with a critical appreciation for her interest in theology. *On Rationalism* thereby proves crucial to Sara's current reception, as it has simultaneously formed the existing portrait of Sara's intellectual ability while, as far as I know, largely eluding direct analysis.

Sara Coleridge's On Rationalism Considered

Based on the title, one might imagine that *On Rationalism* provides an account of the role of Reason in the religious life.¹⁶ It does, but that is not the focal point of the essay. Others have observed that the essay provides an extended account of the Christian sacrament of baptism, and this is also true. But the heart of this "dry" yet fascinating work is far more ambitious than both of those projects, for *On Rationalism* is Sara Coleridge's attempt to explain the Christian doctrine of justification. The essay is far more than an attempt at a religious epistemology—it is inadequate to simply describe it as a treatment of faith and reason. Her essay cuts to the heart of salvation itself.

Justification was the pivotal doctrine of the Protestant Reformation. The doctrine divided the Protestants and Catholics because each approached the matter of God's forgiveness of fallen humanity differently. Grace alone, *sola*

¹¹ Woolf's ellipses highlight the fact that her autobiography "ends with three rows of dots after twenty-six pages" (Woolf, "Sara Coleridge," 73).

¹² Mudge writes the "Introduction" in dialogue with Woolf's essay (Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989]).

¹³ Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, 94.

¹⁴ Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, 98. The essay is a reflection of the shared theological interests of Coleridge and her father. She connected to her father chiefly through his writings—and not the poetic masterpieces first, either: "he was not the dissolute poet or the irresponsible father, but rather the soaring metaphysician whose immethodical and miscellaneous corpus testified less to human frailty than to powerful otherworldly vision" (Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, 102).

¹⁵ Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, 114–16.

¹⁶ For the purposes of this essay, I will cite Sara Coleridge's original 1843 version of *On Rationalism*.

gratia, became a by-word among Protestants for the act of God in forgiving the individual of sin. Justification is, particularly for Martin Luther, a legal event that absolved the sinner of guilt.

Sara's account of justification presses forward a single point, viewed from many angles.¹⁷ She insists that the grace of God cannot fully transform the human person without the concurrent action of the individual mind. She thereby extends S. T. C.'s pivotal distinction between Reason and Understanding and applies it to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. But, while S. T. C. often seems most interested in the enlightening power of Reason—that “Power of universal and necessary Convictions, the Source and Substance of Truths above Sense”—Sara Coleridge devotes almost all of her energy to the necessary role of Understanding.¹⁸ The problem—as Coleridge sees it—is that if the act of baptism justifies the individual apart from the will, then it would seem that there is no longer room for faith. Since individuals may only be saved by grace through faith, the mind cannot remain passive—but must be active. The conscience must be involved. Thus, while baptism is quite often the locus of spiritual regeneration, it certainly does not have to be. Faith is primary.

Now, regardless of one's convictions on the matter of justification, what I hope to point out is that Sara Coleridge's essay is really quite daring. *On Rationalism* takes on not only the pivotal doctrine of the Protestant Reformation, but—more crucially—one of the leading theologians of the day: John Henry Newman. During the 1830s and early 1840s, Newman's Oxford Movement caused a tremendous stir in England with the publication of a series of so-called “Tracts for the Times.” Newman's *Tract 73*, later republished as “On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Religion,” seems to have been the launching point for Sara's essay. Newman claims that “[t]o rationalize is to ask for *reasons* out of place; to ask improperly how we are to *account* for certain things, to be unwilling to believe them unless they can be accounted for.”¹⁹ Moreover, in a move that is suggestive of the commonplace critique of Coleridge's theological interest in German idealism, Newman further objects to the rationalist tendency to distinguish between objective and subjective truth, and the elevation of the latter to the place of true religion.²⁰

More important for the substance of Sara's *On Rationalism*, however, is Newman's *Lectures on Justification* (1838). Newman attempted to strike a middle way between Roman Catholicism (to which he eventually converted) and the

¹⁷ As with her father, Sara Coleridge hoped to encompass the whole within her consideration of any subject: “I feel the most complete sympathy with my father in his account of his literary difficulties. Whatever subject I commence, I feel discontent unless I could pursue it in every direction to the farthest bounds of thought, and then, when some scheme is to be executed, my energies are paralyzed with the very notion of the indefinite vastness which I long to fill” (Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 148 [VI.ix/October 4, 1837]).

¹⁸ AR, 216.

¹⁹ [John Henry Newman,] “On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Religion,” *Tract 73 of Tracts for the Times* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1840), microfiche, 2 (§1). On *Tract 73*, see Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 120-23.

²⁰ Newman, “On the Introduction,” 4 (§1).

Protestantism exemplified in Luther's writings.²¹ In the tenth lecture, "The Office of Justifying Faith," Newman suggests that faith is only the instrument of justification insofar as it sustains that which has been conveyed through the "primary" instrument of baptism. The sacrament of baptism thereby takes the principal place in the order of salvation: "Faith secures to the soul continually those gifts, which Baptism in the first instance conveys . . . Justifying faith does not precede justification."²² Many believed that Newman reversed the central theological claim of the Protestant Reformation: "we are justified by Faith only."²³

Sara Coleridge certainly thought so, and she devotes herself throughout *On Rationalism* to a rebuttal of Newman drawing on her wide range of theological studies.²⁴ It is not in the interest of controversy but in the pursuit of truth that she takes on Newman's work. Consider the doggedness of her rhetoric:

Do we reject such views because they issue out into mystery, because they involve an admission that things which most deeply concern our peace are yet not contained within the compass of our philosophy?... O no; but because we hold them most intelligibly and expressibly untrue, most sensibly inharmonious with the strain of Scripture; because we think there is no sufficient ground for believing them . . . because we hold them to be founded on no true Catholic consent, no consentaneous attention of competent witness, but, so far as they reflect the mind of early Christians at all, which I think they do only in part, on a prevalent *specific* ignorance, on common sources of misapprehension, and an undeveloped state of the mind of the human race *in a particular province of thought*.²⁵

For Coleridge, if grace fails to penetrate the will, it remains only an appendage.²⁶ Sara attempts to steer her own "middle way," avoiding the error of assigning too small a role for the sacrament of baptism. But the alternative offered by Newman and the Tractarians had severe consequences when viewed in the light of individual salvation: "this doctrine, if conscience did not continually unsay what it says, would make our Baptism a down cushion to fall back and repose upon through life."²⁷ Faith involves the entire being of the human person.

This leads to a perhaps surprising sub-context of Sara Coleridge's essay—

²¹ On the *Lectures*, see Ker, *John Henry Newman*, 151-57.

²² John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification*, third ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1874), 226-27.

²³ Art. 11 of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

²⁴ Sara frequently relies on both biblical and theological sources within *On Rationalism*. Her historical sources—Aquinas, Calvin, Hooker, Taylor, Waterland, Leighton, Kant, and Channing, for instance—provide some sense of her extensive theological study.

²⁵ Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 425-26.

²⁶ Sara suggests that the preacher may be regarded as no less viable an instrument of salvation than baptism. Thus, there is no difference *in kind* between sacraments and preaching since the preacher holds a moral influence over the hearts of a congregation (Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 392).

²⁷ Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 476. Sara admits that the matter is "full of darkness."

Wesley's Methodism. Coleridge knew of the Wesleyan movement not only through personal associations, but also from her Uncle Southey.²⁸ Southey's *The Life of Wesley and the Progress of Methodism* (1820) was a landmark treatment of John Wesley and the Methodist movement. The *Life* is a massive, two-volume tome of over 1000 pages, and it was the first major treatment of John Wesley—who had died in 1791—by someone outside the movement itself. S. T. C. loved the *Life*—it was his “favorite of my Library among many favorites”—and he praised Southey for his unique scholarly capacity, writing in one marginal note, “R[obert] Southey is an Historian worth his weight in diamonds, & were he . . . as fat as myself, and the Diamonds all as big as Birds’ eggs, I should still repeat the appraisal.”²⁹ As a resident of Southey’s household, Sara Coleridge was surely familiar with the book and his sources. That it continued to hold her interest is clear from a letter to her husband, Henry Nelson Coleridge, in October 1841: “What a biography the life of Wesley is! What wonders of the human mind does it reveal, more especially in the mental histories of Wesley’s friends and coadjutors!”³⁰

Wesleyanism appears in Coleridge’s *On Rationalism*, as well. Much as S. T. C. spent his life in search of a midpoint between the “light” of Unitarianism and the “heat” of Methodism, so Sara Coleridge takes a position between Newman’s Tractarianism and Wesley’s Methodism in the essay. Against Newman, Sara cites the Wesleyans, “who are characterized positively by special fervour in showing the necessity of faith and the spiritual mind, and negatively by a comparative indifference to sacraments . . . by means of them, and the zealous men from whom they inherit their opinions, there has been an influx of living waters into the channel of the church, in which before the stream was so low, so languid in its motion.”³¹ Yet, while Sara praises Wesleyanism as an agency of restoration in the Church of England, she also recognizes that “the freshening tide brought no small portion of impurity with it.”³² The Wesleyans, by breaking away from the visible church and “misunderstanding” the sacraments as signs only, have been effectively tainted with the seeds of error.³³ But, unlike her father—who (reading Southey) laments “the pervading, I, I, I, I” of Wesley—Sara appears more sympathetic to the Methodist (and evangelical) emphasis on salvation as a personal encounter of faith through grace.

In light of the tension between Tractarianism and Methodism in the essay,

²⁸ Her personal contact with Wesleyans is noted in a long footnote: “The character of the Evangelical or Wesleyan school which I have given, is taken chiefly from the books which it has put forth, and the conversation of persons belonging to it whom I have intimately known” (Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 380n).

²⁹ *CM*, V, 134, 153.

³⁰ Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 182 (X.ii/October 13, 1841).

³¹ Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 375–77.

³² Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 376–77.

³³ Even her harshest criticism of Methodists includes a subtle defense and is circumscribed to a footnote: “I have spoken of its characteristic principles, not of the weak and unamiable practices, or the coarse and silly preachings and teachings which these principles have fallen into company with. What else can be the fate of principles which spread among the masses of the people, and lose themselves in the spreading? Even the completest system of truth will not of *itself* draw all men up to it” (Coleridge, *On Rationalism*, 380n).

it may be possible to begin to situate Coleridge's place in the history of Christian theology. Her tendency to avoid excessive dogmatism and her charitable spirit certainly suggest a close alliance with the English Broad Church movement. Her father is frequently looked to as the "Father" of the Broad Church.³⁴ She corresponded with the Broad Churchman F. D. Maurice and believed that Maurice's theology shared her "father's spirit."³⁵ Her letters reveal a widely tolerant regard for theological discussion. She suggests that Christianity is shared even by those who differ logically and, further, that "my own belief is that the whole logical truth is not the possession of any one party; that it exists in fragments amongst the several parties, and that much of it is yet to be developed."³⁶ Yet, her emphasis on faith and the moral change associated with the language of sanctification also intimate a form of "liberal evangelicalism" in both her essay and the letters. While she claims to be a member of the high church, her clear affinity to the liberalizing tendencies of the Romantic movement signal distinctive similarities that ought not be glossed over too quickly.³⁷ In one letter, on "Lukewarm Christians," Sara laments the tendency among fellow Christians to reduce Christianity to works without "zeal," "warmth," and "eagerness": "Be kind to the poor, nurse the sick, perform all duties of charity and generosity, be not religious overmuch . . . Any thing more than this they will throw cold water upon by the bucketfuls."³⁸ Exact descriptions of Sara's system—for these are but tentative observations—will only emerge amidst a far more extensive examination of her theological writings as a whole. Still, what is fully apparent is the primacy of faith in her writings. Sara Coleridge is the consummate *theologian of the heart*—a thinker devoted to the integral power of the wholly active mind.³⁹

The Relevance of Sara Coleridge's Theological Contribution

In closing, allow me to suggest three points that are worth some reflection:

1. One ought not forget that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's legacy was established, in part, through the intellectual efforts of Sara. It was Sara who helped to guide the early editions of his writings as a collaborator with Henry Nelson Coleridge. While Joseph Henry Green was left responsibility for the unpublished *Opus Maximum*, it was Henry—with Sara—who produced new editions of S. T. C.'s works in the immediate wake of his death: the 1839 and 1843 editions of *Aids to Reflection*, four volumes of the *Literary Remains* between

³⁴ See, for example, Tod E. Jones, *The Broad Church: A Biography of a Movement* (Lanham: Lexington, 2003), 11-50; Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey From Coleridge to Gore*, second ed. (London: Longman, 1995), 43-64.

³⁵ She claims that "Maurice is a profound thinker, a vigorous though rough writer . . . His divinity seems based on the "Aids to Reflection;" and, though no servile imitator, he has certainly borrowed his mode of writing and turn of thought very much from S. T. C." (Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 138 [VI, ii/July 29, 1837]).

³⁶ Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 248 (XIV.i/January 14, 1846).

³⁷ On Romanticism and evangelicalism in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, see David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody*, A History of Evangelicalism, 3 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 139-72.

³⁸ Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 165 (VII.xii/December 1838).

³⁹ See Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 249 (XIV.ii/1846).

1836 and 1839, *The Friend* in 1837, both *On the Constitution of the Church and State* and the *Lay Sermons* in 1839, and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* in 1840.⁴⁰ If Sara Coleridge's deepest intellectual commitments were to theological and metaphysical topics, then, one might ask, should we be surprised to find that her own editorial work in shaping his literary corpus might tend to focus on the later theological and philosophical writings such as *Aids to Reflection* and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*? Sara is an integral part of S. T. C.'s reception history.

2. The essay brings to light Sara's intellectual commitment to the philosophical theology of her father. In one July 1847 letter, Sara explains that Wordsworth and S. T. C. "have given me eyes and ears. What should I have been without them! To my Uncle Southey I owe much—even to his books; to his example, his life and conversation, far more. But to Mr. W[ordsworth] and my father I owe my *thoughts* more than to all other men put together."⁴¹ Sara Coleridge is a thinker who was not only formed by S. T. C.'s writings but—unlike so many others—she seems to carry something of an intellectual heritage. It may be that Sara Coleridge is S. T. C.'s most faithful disciple.

3. Finally, while she is certainly a disciple of S. T. C., Sara Coleridge writes as an independent thinker. She defends her father, but seems to press further in many respects than mere apologetics. Sara has taken the Esteecean system and reworked it for her own purposes. For example, she is often even more biblical in her orientation and has a more robust pneumatology than S. T. C. *On Rationalism* displays an awareness of the sense of the whole with a tenacity and boldness that reflects an independent mind. She did not merely reproduce her father's work, but utilized the germinal ideas of his thought in a new context, amid new controversies. As I have outlined in this article, she did not even shy away from the genius of John Henry Newman.

These three observations, initiated by an evaluation of Sara's essay, *On Rationalism*, indicate that more work remains to be done in the future, especially in recovering Sara's largely unknown theological work. Her writing can indeed be dry—and she certainly needed an editor—but when we take the risk of reading Sara Coleridge's writings on their own theological merits . . . we encounter something deeply satisfying.

⁴⁰ Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, 113–14. Following Henry's death, Sara further produced the second edition of *Biographia Literaria* (1847), *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, and *Some Miscellaneous Pieces* (1849), *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare* (1849), and collected the *Essays on His Own Times* (1850) (see Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, 144, 248).

⁴¹ Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, 315 (XVI.xiii/July 7, 1847).