

Hartley Coleridge: Son of the Mariner, King of Ejuxria

Andrew Keanie

HARTLEY COLERIDGE said, perhaps most famously, in his sonnet, 'Long time a child':

For I have lost the race I never ran:
A rathe December blights my lagging May;
And still I am a child, tho' I be old,
Time is my debtor for my years untold.

(*Complete Poetical Works*, [ed.] Ramsay Colles, 7.)

Many critics consider that sonnet to be a justly limiting snapshot of Hartley the failure—a picture that surveys the disordered state of Hartley's accounts, as it were—as Hartley Coleridge in a nutshell, but no longer with the potential to count himself a king of infinite space.

Shortly after hearing that Hartley had effectively been dismissed from his prestigious Fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford, Hartley's father said:

of all the *Waifs* I ever knew, Hartley is the least likely and the least calculated to lead any human Being astray by his example. He may exhibit a warning—but assuredly he will never afford an inducement.

(Quoted by E.L. Griggs, *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 112.)

Well, with the influence of Colin Wilson's book, *The Outsider* (1956), in mind—that rationalisation of the psychological dislocation so characteristic of Western creative thinking into a coherent theory of alienation—a reassessment of the value and significance of Hartley Coleridge's marginal status is long overdue.

Today, there are many more talented individuals than ever before who wander like waifs in the midst of milieus in which applause is reserved for professional accomplishments and spousal acquisitions. The popular philosopher, Alain De Botton, has recently published *Status Anxiety* (2004), amongst many pages of which he discusses the phenomenon of the outsider—the person too clever to fit into everyday society and accept the jobs that other people do, but not clever enough to be a scientist or an artist and create his own niche. De Botton recognises that many of the so-called 'losers' of modern life feel that they are losing the races they are not running. One of the main reasons they are not running those races is that they find them ugly and peopled with unpleasant participants: the physiognomy of the individual on the make is not normally beautiful to behold, and the thought of mingling and jostling with a number of such creatures on a daily basis will at best sober (and at worst depress) the sensitive young person about to embark on his or her career. Arthur Schopenhauer's enthusiasm for gregariousness was never more than exceptionally discreet. He declared himself a pessimistic networker in beautiful prose at once urbane and astringent, as in the following example:

Now, to be a useful member of society, one must do two things:

firstly, what everyone is expected to do everywhere; and, secondly, what one's own particular position in the world demands and requires.

But a man soon discovers that everything depends upon his being useful, not in his own opinion, but in the opinion of others; and so he tries his best to make that favourable impression upon the world, to which he attaches such a high value. ('The Wisdom of Life', Chapter IV, Section iv, *Essays From the Paregera And Paralipomena*.)

To run, and win, the race, one must manage to impress those concerned with one's basic clarity of will or lucidity of desire; if the race happens to be in pursuit of, say, an academic Fellowship, one must acquire enough social and academic tact not to wrongfoot oneself, but to take in one's stride, for example, dealing with the psychic cost involved in parrying and distributing throughout the workplace the various counterpointing moods of the other ambitious individuals.

Hartley Coleridge considered himself to be an outsider, a 'loser' (to borrow De Botton's sympathetically ironic label). Most critics have since agreed with him. In 1929, Earl Leslie Griggs concluded *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work* thus:

Weak of will, not against moral obligations, not against personal actions, but against the unceasing demands of life, Hartley Coleridge ran his strange race, unadjusted to the last to the world about him. He could not find pleasure in the senses and in a successful combat with the world, but, introverted as he was, he sought his pleasure in the realm of his imagination. And there we must leave him. (*Life and Work*, 227.)

On the contrary: for the modern Coleridgean, there we must join Hartley, for an important reason. Hartley Coleridge, the neglected 19th century poet, the genuine Romantic article, belongs much more integrally to our cultural inheritance than does the list of Fellows (*Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 84 note) who, for him, represented the Oxford to which he was persuaded to aspire. The same misguided aspirations (or inevitable process) would turn thousands besides Hartley into displaced persons, without caste or orientations.

Even some of Hartley's most affectionate commentators seem to imply that Hartley has got through to them via their non-rigorous, non-analytical weakness for waifs in general. Aubrey de Vere's enthusiasm comes to mind:

It was a white-haired apparition... He could scarcely be said to have walked, for he seemed with difficulty to keep his feet on the ground, as he wavered about near us with arms extended like wings. Everything that he said was strange and quaint, while perfectly unaffected, and, though always amusing, yet always represented a

mind whose thoughts dwell in regions as remote as the antipodes... It was a strange thing to see Hartley Coleridge fluctuating about the room, now with one hand on his head, now with both arms extended like a swimmer's. There was some element wanting in his being. He could do everything but keep his footing, and, doubtless, in his inner world of thought, it was easier for him to fly than to walk, and to walk than to stand. There seemed to be no gravitating principle in him. One might have thought he needed stones in his pockets to prevent his being blown away... and he might, perhaps, have been more easily changed into an angel than into a simply strong man. (Quoted in *Complete Poetical Works*, Introduction.)

I am currently putting together a book that is growing out of the conviction that the writings of Hartley Coleridge deserve much more serious attention than merely fond smiles of approbation. Hartley possessed a spellbound imagination to which he flew for comfort when the world got the better of him (which was nearly always), and from the shelter of which he often witnessed worldly people react to his behaviour in bewilderment. Even Hartley's best apologist, his brother Derwent Coleridge, was unable to contain his irritation with Hartley when he heard that Hartley (probably drunk) had set fire to his own bedclothes:

Would not this be playing a part, justifiable only toward a child, or a lunatic? My dear, dear Brother, there are those who regard you in one or both of these lights—some with kindly feelings, that they may excuse that which they must else condemn... And would you shelter *yourself*, would you wish *me* to shelter you under such a plea? (quoted by Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, 200.)

But what of that spellbound imagination that made Hartley behave in such a way? It must be worth studying. Hartley knew, like his father, that the surface of the endlessly unfolding veil of nature is not necessarily solid. He said, in his essay, 'Atrabilious Reflections upon Melancholy':

This world is a contradiction—a shade, a symbol—and, spite of ourselves, we know that it is so. From this knowledge does all melancholy proceed. We crave for that which the earth does not contain... (*Essays and Marginalia*, I, 58).

For Hartley, the knowledge that existence may build its forms over an abyss can exhilarate and terrify, as in the sonnet which begins:

Let me not deem that I was made in vain
Or that my being was an accident. (*Complete Poetical Works*, 112.)

He did sense how unsteadily the phenomenal world is held together, how thin

the texture of its appearances, and how easily torn it is to let in nothingness. The sensible world coheres not by physical but by mental agency:

And there are thoughts, that ever more are fleeing...
 Are these less vital than the wave or wind,
 Or snow that melts and leaves no trace behind? (*Complete Poetical Works*, 37.)

At best the sensible world coheres precariously; there is nothing inherently safe or solid about the sensible world, even though normally, at least by daylight, and in adult life, we accept it for real without giving the matter a thought. Hartley often reassesses received wisdom, such as the concept of 'Time', in such a way that the 'efficiency' with which we 'measure' time as 'days', 'months' and 'years' appears to wobble less convincingly across the shuddering, transient flux of the reality (whatever that is) behind 'Time':

A New-Year's day—'tis but a term of art,
 An arbitrary line upon the chart
 Of Time's unbounded sea—fond fancy's creature,
 To reason alien, and unknown to nature. (*Complete Poetical Works*, 37.)

Big philosophical questions often inform equally his contemplation of the vast and the minute:

Was there a time, when, wandering in the air,
 The living spark existed, yet unnamed,
 Unfixt, unqualified, unlaw'd, unclaim'd,
 A drop of being, in the infinite sea,
 Whose only duty, essence, was to be?
 Or must we seek it, where all things we find,
 In the sole purpose of creative mind—
 Or did it serve, in form of stone or plant,
 Or weaving worm, or the wise politic ant,
 Its weary bondage—ere the moment came,
 When the weak spark should mount into a flame? (*Complete Poetical Works*, 74.)

Any idea about writing Hartley off as a stylist, as someone whose talent may be lovely to look at but remains essentially a frippery, a non-essential luxury, is a cliché of misunderstanding. And yet he did, by his own admission, have what he called a 'girlish love of display.' That is not surprising. It is a love he inherited from his father. People read the informal writings of STC and accept his sillier moments as the strange excrescences that the prolonged strain of his intense discipline will throw off: 'I would overwhelm you with an avalanche of puns and conundrums caused by a sudden thaw in the Alps of my

Imagination', STC (as he flopped about in his verbal mud bath of recreational drollery) told John Prior Estlin; yet Coleridgeans know that the Alps of STC's Imagination will just as suddenly freeze back into mountain-ranges which only habitual breathers of the rarefied esteesian air will be fit enough to traverse. Hartley's imagination¹ is more consistently, or, one might say, more thoroughly, thawed through.

As a donkey ridden by a prelate in pre-Elizabethan days, Hartley Coleridge (if one is to believe his pretended belief in metempsychosis) caused the death of his rider:

[The prelate] used to ride me in his full canonicals, which enveloped my body, leaving my fore legs to appear like those of my rider, and my hinder parts emerging to complete the Reverend compound, indeed it was impossible to tell where the Prebendary ended and the Ass began... [I] kicked so furiously as to throw the Prebendary over my head into a ditch—this caused his death, and so grievous a sin it is, that I am now a man, such as you see me. (Quoted in *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 169.)

In accordance with the progress of souls comically suggested by the above passage, quadruped Hartley effectively earned biped Hartley² the punishment of being, in his next life, the joker, the boozier, the failed academic, and the poet of minor consequence.

But of course Hartley did not enter, or re-enter, life as a man. He entered it as a child. There lies the esteesian rub. As a young boy, Hartley does seem to have irritated his father with a consistency that permeated his father's dreams (though contained in the private space of his notebooks):

Frid. Morn. 5 o'clock—Dosing, dreamt of Hartley as at his Christening—how as he was asked who redeemed him, & was to say, God the Son/ he went on, humming and hawing, in one hum & haw, like a boy who knows a thing & will not make the effort to recollect it—so as to irritate me greatly. Awakening (gradually [I found] I was able completely to detect, that) it was the Ticking of my Watch which lay in the Pen Place in my Desk on the round Table close by my Ear, & which in the diseased State of my Nerves had *fretted* on my Ears—I caught the fact while Hartley's Face & moving Lips were yet before my Eyes, & his Hum & Ha, & the Ticking of the Watch were each the other, as often happens in the passing off of Sleep—that curious modification of Ideas by each other... I arose instantly, & wrote it down—it is now 10 minutes past 5. (*STC Notebooks* [1803 entry])

Hartley's father alternately neglected and hectored him, in a way similar to the

¹ I say 'imagination' (with a small i) with a hint of Hartley's irony (rather than his father's Irony).

² To add to the Hartleys that the five-year-old Hartley told Dorothy Wordsworth about in 1801: 'Picture-Hartley', 'Shadow-Hartley', 'Echo-Hartley' and 'Catch-me-fast-Hartley' (quoted in *Complete Poetical Works*, Introduction).

guilty, anxious way in which he dealt with himself.³ In 1807, STC wrote Hartley a letter, in a way which was, for any time, a surprising way for a father to communicate with his ten year old son. Ostensibly laying down a set of guidelines for his son's conduct during a projected visit to Hartley's uncle (STC's brother), George Coleridge, STC enumerated his son's many shortcomings—such as daydreaming, self-delusion, 'procrastination', making excuses, and standing 'between the half-opened door' when 'speaking, or spoken to'—and drew them into an elegant—not to mention unchallengeably authoritative—diagnosis of his son's central problem:

Nothing that gives you pain dwells long enough upon your mind to do you any good, as in some diseases the medicines pass so quickly through the stomach and bowels as to be able to exert none of their healing qualities. (Quoted in *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 43.)

The metaphorical patrolling of Hartley's alimentary canal is a piece of parental impertinence without parallel. After all, no one knew more keenly than STC the difficulty—if not the impossibility—of doing what one is supposed to be doing: 'Why do I always hurry away from any interesting thought to do something uninteresting?'; 'O way-ward and desultory Spirit of Genius! ill canst thou brook a task-master! The tenderest touch from the hand of *Obligation* wounds thee, like a scourge of scorpions!—' (*STC Letters* I 185-186). STC the poet may well have known the pain involved in having otherworldly desires, but it was not beyond STC the parent to do some earthbound finger-wagging:

... never pick at or snatch up anything, eatable or not. I know it is only an idle, foolish trick; but your Ottery relations would consider you as a little thief... it is a dirty trick; and people of weak stomachs would turn sick at a dish which a young *filth-paw* had been fingering. (Quoted in *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 44.)

The imagined sputtering disgust (*'filth-paw... fingering'*) of the 'proper' Coleridges is inscribed lastingly on the young recipient's heart. Such an oddly formal and forbidding letter! Hartley must have felt that there was no mental recess into which he could retreat, so searching, so dazzling, was the light reflected right at him off the Alps of his father's Imagination:

Next, when you have done wrong acknowledge it at once, like a man. Excuses may show your ingenuity, but they make your *honesty* suspected. And a grain of honesty is better than a pound of wit. We may admire a man for his cleverness; but we love and esteem him only for his goodness; and a strict attachment to truth, and to the whole truth, with openness and frankness and simplicity is at once the

³ 'My face, unless when animated by immediate eloquence, expresses great Sloth, & great, indeed almost idiotic, good nature. 'Tis a mere carcase of a face... my gait is awkward, & the walk, & the *Whole man* indicates *indolence capable of energies...*'

foundation stone of all goodness, and no small part of the superstructure. (Quoted in *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 44.)

Hartley was already at the age when he felt the truth right through him, intuitively, of the absolute necessity of cultivating further, rather than giving up, his elusive interior world, in order to deal with his overbearing father:

Lastly, do what you have to do at once, and put it out of hand. No procrastination; no self-delusion; no 'I am sure I can say it, I need not learn it again,' etc., which *sures* are such very unsure folks that nine times out of ten their sureships break their word and disappoint you. (Quoted in *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 45.)

It is easy to imagine that the boy would often slip into a fantasy world, which he had invented specifically for the approach of his father: he had, after all, imbibed the idea (in that wonderful environment of Greta Hall, in which 'the living voice of Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth, Lloyd, Wilson and De Quincey' [Derwent Coleridge, *Memoir*, lvii] often rang in his ears) that he (like his father) could refine and modulate his thinking into a fineness consistently invisible to those inclined to view his eccentricities as inadequacies:

Lady fair,
Thy presence in our little vale has been
A visitation of the Fairy Queen,
Who for a brief space reveals her beauty rare,
And shews her tricky feats to mortal eyes,
Then fades into her viewless Paradise. ('On parting with a very
pretty, but very little lady', *Complete Poetical Works*, 11.)

The 'Fairy Queen' is, to borrow Marina Warner's words, 'both enhanced and concealed by attributes of nebulosity',⁴ and Hartley is capable of following her even as she melts out of one dimension and into another.

As a child, Hartley developed a lifelong longing to climb into the little secret places that had, for him, the numinous quality of sanctuaries: The child, exposed to his father's irritable tongue-lashing, retired into his own world; either remaining out of view... or, when the finer weather came, burying himself in the kitchen garden among thickets of burgeoning raspberry canes and jungles of jerusalem artichokes; daydreaming; inventing a fantasy world of his own: Ejuxria. (Molly Lefebure, *Bondage of Love*, 136-137.)

Hartley never really relinquished the keys to his personal paradise. He never, as he puts it in his poem, 'Leonard and Susan', 'dwell[ed] within the gaol of sense' (*Complete Poetical Works*, 50); in other words, he would never really commit himself to adulthood.

⁴ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 85.

Despite his earlier boasts to his friends about his exquisitely wild, quasi-nitrous-oxide-breathing genius of a son, STC was actually attempting to persuade Hartley to prune his flourishing, tangling impulses, to forfeit what was feral in him:

I pray you, keep this letter, and read it over every two or three days.

Take but a little trouble with yourself, and every one will be delighted with you, and try to gratify you in all your reasonable wishes. And, above all, you will be at peace with yourself... (Quoted in *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work*, 45.)

Only Hartley's 'reasonable' wishes would be welcomed by the inhabitants of the real world (in this case, the George Coleridges).

What on earth (if on earth) was he supposed to do? Like the child that burps so loudly and naturally at the age of 2 but is punished for it at the age of 10, the growing Hartley was finding that his eccentricities were no longer appropriate, however natural they had been before. Labouring under the conflicting demands of society's expectations (of the son of STC) and his own unique individuality, Hartley 'failed'. But he documented that 'failure' as the degeneration of the solid potential of his genius into the more common mincemeat of talent. Who could pay close attention to, say, the following (from a letter to Derwent) without at least some melancholy self-recognition?

With few habits but those of negligence and self-indulgence, with principles honest indeed and charitable, but not ascetic, and little applied to particulars, with much vanity and much diffidence, a wish to conquer neutralized by a fear of contending, with wavering hopes, uncertain spirits, and peculiar manners, I was sent among men mostly irregular, in some instances vicious. Left to myself, to form my own course of studies, my own acquaintances, my own habits—to keep my own hours, and in a great measure to be master of my own time; few know how much I went through, how many shocks I received, from within and from without; how many doubts, temptations, half-formed ill-resolutions past through my mind. I saw human nature in a new point of view and—in some measure—learn'd to judge of mankind by a new standard. I ceased to look for virtues which I no longer hoped to find and set perhaps a disproportionate value on those which most frequently occur'd. The uncertainty of my prospects cast a gloom on what was before me. I did not love to dwell in the future, and gradually became reconciled to present scenes, which at first were painful to me. This was not a good preparatory discipline for Oriel [the prestigious Fellowship which Hartley won]. And indeed, from the first moment that I conceived the purpose of offering myself as Candidate, I felt that I was not consulting my own happiness. [Doesn't Franz Kafka's professional life as a civil servant come to mind?] But duty, vanity, and the fear of

being shipped off to Brazil—determined me on the Trial. (*Letters*, [ed] E.L. and G.E. Griggs, 61.)

No one really ever agreed comfortably what to do with him, or what would become of him, when he was alive. In 1818, when Hartley was awarded a 2nd class degree, that was the result of a compromise. Some of the examiners wanted to award him a 1st for the sheer talent and general knowledge he displayed, and others wanted to award him a 4th because of certain deficiencies in his scholarship—that 2nd class degree was the result of a compromise. Now that he has been dead for more than a century and a half, people have still not agreed what to do with him. Rather unsatisfyingly, he tends to be considered either as (a) what amounts to one of Harry Graham's *Splendid Failures* (1913) or (b) worthy of inclusion in the literary palaeontologist's cabinet of curiosities: 'As a lamentable quiz, abortion, louse, donkey, dunce, Hartley is able to write only by positioning himself as a "small poet."' (*Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, 205.)

I wish to react against both of the above suggestions, and instead consider the manner in which Hartley takes issue with the concept of death, just as he had taken issue with the concept of time, in his poem, 'New Year's Day':

Dead? What is that? A word to joy unknown,
Which love abhors, and faith will never own.
A word, whose meaning sense could never find,
That has no truth in matter, nor in mind.
The passing breezes gone as soon as felt,
The flakes of snow that in the soft air melt,
The wave that whitening curls its frothy crest,
And falls to sleep upon its mother's breast.
The smile that sinks into a maiden's eye,
They come, they go, they change, they do not die. (Colles 36-7.)

I believe that Hartley has left for us (in his poetry, essays, marginalia, biographies and letters) much greater writing than the kind one might have expected from the anodyne imp STC's son is supposed to have been. His writing is sure to elicit an intensely comprehending response in readers today. His writing requires to be reread, not dismissively or sentimentally, but with the sort of rigorous sympathy that Hartley himself exercised on the work of Thomas Beddoes:

In the 'Bride's Tragedy,' by Thomas Beddoes, of Pembroke College, Oxon, occurs a hypothetical simile which some prose-witted dunce of a reviewer thought proper to assail with great animosity. Something, I forget what, is

Like flower's voices—if they could but speak.
Whoever feels the beauty of that line, has a soul for poetry.

(*New Poems*, [ed] E.L. Griggs, 6.)