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Suffering Servant: Grief and Consolation in Sara Coleridge's Poems

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SARA COLERIDGE'S poems explore the relationship between earthly suffering and heavenly, divine comfort. Two years ago at this conference I argued that Sara Coleridge is the consummate *theologian of the heart*—a thinker devoted to the integral power of the wholly active mind perceiving the relationship between nature and the supernatural.¹ I maintained that Sara is one of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's most intentional disciples, seeking to develop his theology not merely as a defense, but as an extension of a system of thought that she regards as truth.

In this paper, I wish to extend my portrait of Sara's work by turning to the matter of grief and consolation, chiefly through her poetic compositions. Sara knew many of the deepest pains of life, most notably through a series of losses due to untimely deaths, an experience she shared with many Victorians in England. Sara's pains were legion: the frailties of childhood that led her to study in her Uncle Southey's library, the distance from her father in youth that seems in some sense to have weighed on her throughout her life, and more seriously the loss of three children in infancy, the early death of her husband Henry Nelson Coleridge, the sudden passing of her mother Sara Fricker Coleridge, as well as her own adult illnesses—including severe depression, opium addiction, and a slow, painful deterioration from breast cancer—that led to her own untimely death at the young age of forty-nine.

As with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:5 (“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”), Sara Coleridge was a woman acquainted with grief and suffering. Her experience of grief as well as her attempt to address her pains with a reflective, theological and philosophical system—a theodicy—finds expression in a series of poems among her writings.² Repeatedly, Sara's poetry explores suffering, death, and eternal hope through the lens of maternal care for a child. The relationship of a mother and her children is not merely biographical, it becomes an extension of and, in my opinion, a metaphysical departure from her father Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

On the Pains of Children

For Sara, children do not experience grief and pain in the same manner as adults. A marked contrast exists in her description of children and adults that simply cannot be ignored. First, Sara exhibits extraordinary sensitivity to her

¹ Jeffrey W. Barbeau, “Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian: Between Newman's Tractarianism and Wesley's Methodism,” *The Coleridge Bulletin: The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge* n.s. 28 (2006): 29–36.

² Many of Sara's poems have recently appeared in Peter Swaab's groundbreaking collection, *Sara Coleridge: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007) (hereafter: Swaab). I have benefited immensely not only from Swaab's edition, but also from a Pforzheimer Fellowship to work on Sara's manuscripts at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

children's needs. The private writings that have survived from her early relationship with Henry Nelson Coleridge—writings, including their love letters, that were largely destroyed or heavily blotted out by their children after their deaths—provide a portrait of just how caring and deeply attached to children Sara really was. In a surviving *c.* 1827 note from Henry in Sara's commonplace book, Henry describes in glowing words Sara's affection for babies:

Yes! my dear Sara, I know the beatings of your heart on this interesting point. Your fondness for children is the very maternal instinct; for you take pleasure in holding a mere baby for an hour in your arms;—that cannot proceed from anything but a natural swell of passion towards the helpless nursling, which both in kind and degree *can* only be experienced by a woman.³

What the intervening years may have meant for Sara's disposition is not wholly clear. Quite possibly, Henry's comment is no more than the youthful expression of romantic love—he perceives that Sara is a fit romantic partner and potential mother of future children. Yet the passage of time, including the experience losing three children around childbirth, and raising two children, Herbert and Edith, translated an apparently youthful affection into a more hardened view of the psychological state of children.

Sara's poem "Children" (1845) begins to develop a fascinating oscillation between innocence and grief in several of her works:

When little children weep we smile upon their tears,
And a truer, brighter smile on the dewy face appears;
Oh! Grief that comes so fast and makes so little stay,
Is like the snow of Springtide, which falls to melt away.⁴

The presence of tears in the poem serve a symbolic function for the interior experience of the heart. All tears are not the same. A fundamental difference exists between the tears of children and those of adults. Children shed tears that are temporary and capable of being assuaged with gentle strokes and material pleasures. Even the grief of a child is best compared to "the snow of Springtide, which falls to melt away." Philosophically, Sara associates the sorrows of children to the enslaving power of "fancy," which "does them wrong" and "binds the unresisting soul with fetters hard and strong." A child's tears may be contrasted with the tears of adults who suffer from grief and pain. In the adult, the reflective capacity has developed and the slavery to the senses in children has been cast off. As a result, grief is experienced as a

³ From here *heavily blotted* in "Commonplace Book 3," which contains mostly love poems between Sara and Henry Nelson Coleridge around the time of their courtship. Notably, many pages are blank following, as if reserved for these special days; page 2 heavily blotted out—apparently due to its risqué nature.

⁴ "Children" (Swaab 185) [1845?].

reality that requires a parallel or coordinate work of divine grace to bring adequate comfort.

The contrast appears in a series of poems from around 1834. For example, in "To Herbert Coleridge. Feb 13 1834," Sara's maternal role functions almost stereotypically as a caricature of the needy mother who compares her own suffering with the happiness of an ungrateful child:

My hand is weak, beloved child
But I will use my hand for thee:
To write what thy dear tongue shall speak
That pleasure still is left to me. [...]

My heart, dear child, is often sad,
But thou shalt laugh with mirth and glee
At quaint conceits which I'll devise;
Sweet music is thy voice to me.⁵

The poem places in opposition the state of the parent and that of the child. The mother uses her final ounces of strength in an effort to make a better way for the child. The child thoughtlessly laughs. Her only reward is the experience of his laughter, which is "Sweet music" and a comfort to her soul. Her own self remains unfulfilled, however. Her head is "confused," she is "unfit for serious themes," and she can only use her "dull" thoughts for his pleasure. The mother functions as a domesticated Christ figure—she labors and suffers for the benefit of one whose active will remains bound by sensual pleasures and unformed through training.

Sara's mother-figure in "To Herbert Coleridge," may indicate nothing more than the image of a doting mother—and perhaps something of a co-dependent—but the maternal figure reappears in numerous other poems as well, such as "Benoni":

My Herbert, yet thou has not learnt to prize
Parental love, that hovers o'er thee still;
No heavy hours has thou—no sorrows fill
Thy childish bosom when thou hear'st my sighs;
But thy fresh cheeks and pretty gleaming eyes
Thy careless mirth, bring happiness to me;
No anxious pitying love I ask of thee—
Be thoughtless still while swift thy childhood flies.
Hereafter thou, my Herbert, wilt discern
With tender thoughtfulness this heart of mine,
That asked no present love, no full return . . .⁶

⁵ "To Herbert Coleridge. Feb 13 1834" (Swaab 63-64) [1834]. This is the dedication appearing on the inside cover of Sara's mss collection of children's verse.

⁶ "Benoni. Dedication" (Swaab 64) [1834].

Again, the mother examines her own sorrows and compares them with her son's. She observes his playfulness and carelessness. Her love for him is "tender." His carelessness brings her "happiness." But Sara's poem, notably, does not stop at the commonplace image of the parent who happily sacrifices her self for that of the child. Sara instead presses on to explore *why* parents suffer and *why* children fail to recognize it. Why, philosophically, or, one might say, *constitutionally*, do children not recognize suffering and grief in the same manner that adults do? Sara surely realizes that children do suffer. Sara's *Memoir* records her own pitiful cries as a child—"I'se miserall!"—and her perpetual fearfulness at night.⁷ But Sara's daytime hours, despite poor health and an allegedly weak constitution, simultaneously indicate her fearlessness and "daring" in almost every childhood situation.⁸ Sara's solution to the disparity between adult and childhood experiences of suffering depend at least in part upon a Coleridgean distinction on the role that the senses play in human development. Children rely on the materiality of the world for comfort in a way that adults apparently cannot. Earth is a place of joy because the child remains a slave to the senses, benumbed by the external world that delights human fancy.

The difference becomes clearer in Sara's wonderfully haunting poem "Poppies." For the child, the poppies are lovely, fresh, and interesting, but inevitably "nothing more/ Than other brilliant weeds." The child enjoys "their colors fresh and fine," but fails to understand their latent power. To his mother, the poppy *is* something more. She looks down upon her son and laments that he has no idea either of the "gay blossom's power" or the "sorrows of the night" it temporarily assuages:

When poor Mama long restless lies,
She drinks the poppy's juice;
That liquor soon can close her eyes,
And slumber soft produce:

O then my sweet, my happy boy
Will thank the Poppy-flower,
Which brings the sleep to dear Mama,
At midnight's darksome hour.⁹

Although the poppy is a source of comfort for the mother, it remains that which is necessary only because of the darkness of night. The poppy brings sleep to one who suffers and cannot find the rest she longs for. The child's happiness is thereby contrasted with the sadness of the mother; his activity and playfulness as if running through the bright, sun-filled meadow is contrasted to

⁷ Sara Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 36, 49. I owe thanks to Sara Nyffenegger for drawing my attention to Sara's childhood pains in this respect.

⁸ Sara Coleridge, *Memoir*, 49.

⁹ "Poppies" (Swaab 70-71) [1834].

her stillness and search for slumber in the dark sadness of night. His joy at seeing the “pearly white” and “red as cramasie” petals differs from the poppy juice she takes in the darkness of night, when only the inward power of the poppy remains effective and the outward beauty is veiled by the shadow of night.

The theme appears in Sara’s poem “The Blessing of Health,” where she reflects on what would happen to a child if he or she were confined to a bed—as she is confined to her room—where the senses are limited and unable to take comfort in the world of nature:

If ever my child were confined to a bed,
With limbs full of pain, and a dull heavy head,
 O how he would think of the days
When, lightsome and free, like a bird on the wing...¹⁰

The happy, healthy child gazes on the world around, breathes fresh air, treads on daisies and bounds through meadows. But confined to “this dull apartment,” all the seasonal changes fail to enter the chamber of the convalescent, where day after day all things remain static and untouched by the world of songbirds, sun, and bright dawns “on the summits of snow.” In the final stanza, Sara recommends that “they that have never known sickness and grief” admire all that is around them in Nature to enjoy. Those who have a chance, should take it: “Make hay while it shines, and enjoy the fresh air,/ Till age sets his seal on your brow.”¹¹

On the Pains of Adults

Sadly, the glee and mirth of childhood slowly fades away. “Darling Edith” (1848/51) illustrates the changes that take place as humans develop. What appears on the surface to be a charming little poem about the growth of a girl into an adult is actually a profound meditation on the developmental psychology of humans:

Darling little Sister Edith
Little knoweth little heedeth,
Little hath and little needeth
 Little hath to fear;
Easy is the life she leadeth
 Life without a tear.

See her soon a busier Edith:
Book and pen and pencil needeth:
Many a pretty lesson readeth
 To her mother dear;

¹⁰ “The Blessing of Health” (Swaab 74-75) [1834].

¹¹ Swaab 75.

Still an easy life she leadeth
Life without a tear.

Now she's grown an older Edith
Now how much she knoweth, heedeth,
Thinking oft of him that needeth
With a heart sincere! –
By the gentle life she leadeth
Drying many a tear.¹²

The child is carefree. She knows little and needs little. Her life is without tears and carefree. But as she grows older, her lessons become a sign of the emergence of her reflective powers. Now she works her lessons and yet, under her mother's watchful eye, she has no need of tears. But when she is older, she not only knows more, but recognizes the needs of others. She recognizes their needs and dries their tears. The older girl enters the realm of grief and suffering, and with this entrance into adulthood comes an awareness of what she has as well as what she needs.

Sara apparently could not bring herself to imagine an adulthood for her daughter of either carefree happiness or wearisome pain. The cares of life may require of Edith what passing years have required of Sara—*tears* over loss of family, children, and illness/suffering within the self. But, if so, Sara fails to give way to the idea that the child's life will be one of misery, admitting only that her daughter's place will be one of caring for others burdened by loss and pain.

Several other poems could be mentioned that further substantiate the contrast. In "Childish Tears," Sara claims that "Childish tears are like the dew."¹³ And, so,

... when simple childhood grieves,
Simplest remedy relieves;
Touched by pleasure's gladdening ray,
Sorrow vanishes away...

The simple remedies and pleasures of the sensory world provide comfort in the child. But, on the other hand, the grief of adulthood arises from a "deeper source." The only profitable solution is to look to the divine source of comfort:

Man was made to mourn and weep,
Doomed the fruits of toil to reap...
Jesus, wipe my tears away!
Teach my heart a worthier sorrow;

¹² "Darling Edith" (Swaab 189) [1848/51]. Swaab's note indicates that the poem originally began (now deleted)

"Farewell my dear little Edith," most likely when Sara was too ill to breastfeed her" (239).

¹³ "Childish Tears" (Swaab 77).

Strength and comfort let me borrow
 For the bitter strife within—
 Strife of weakness and of sin;
 Gracious Master, make me prize
 Happiness beyond the skies!

The pleasures of the material world no longer bring happiness. The senses are no longer so easily dulled. One must seek strength and comfort from a higher place. In prayer, one seeks divine comfort to overcome the struggles of this world. The body, now victim of illness and disease, cannot take refuge in sensuous pleasures, but must seek solace in the spiritual truths of divine promises.

Sara's poems—many more examples could be cited—indicate a notion that also finds substantiation in the notes and essays of her personal papers. The stages of life, including happiness and grief, are especially apparent in a diary entry of April 26, 1835:

Religion. When I was young I could not conceive the possibility of being happy when youth was spent—but I believe there is equal happiness for every stage of life, or rather higher happiness the longer we live, and the more we have reflected if we will but make use of all the faculties, aids, and appliances which God has given or will give us. Thus in this world it is difficult to conceive the happiness of Heaven—on account of our earthly corporeal senses, powers and experiences—but hereafter we shall doubtless find that Heaven does not consist merely of a high degree of such pleasures as we can now articulate, but of something new and inconceivable to us at present.¹⁴

The emergence of reflection and the use of the faculties shifts between childhood and adulthood. Now the individual becomes aware of the world—including its sorrows and pains—as well as of the comforts offered by divine assistance. Notably, human knowledge of heavenly things is limited, but gradual awareness results through the right use of earthly faculties and divinely-gifted aids.

On the Development of Consciousness

In this final section of the paper, I briefly contrast Sara's approach to the problem of pain and suffering to her father's conception of the child's awareness of self. A most pertinent image appears in S. T. Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*, where the baby lying at the mother's breast serves as a key illustration of the connection between pleasure and self-awareness:

Oh! who can tell the goings on of a mother's heart, or interpret thoughts too deep for Words. When the little Being newly nourished,

¹⁴ "Diary: February–May 2 1835" (April 26).

or awakening from its heaving pillow, begins its murmuring song for pleasure, and for pleasure leaps on the arm, begins to smile and laugh to the moving head of the Mother, who is to it its all the World. It knows not what the Mother is, but still less does it know what itself is ... the babe knows nothing . . .¹⁵

Could it be that in reflecting on “the sweet innocent [who] lies before thee on thy Arm, looks up towards thee, and towards thee stretches forth with all its limbs,” Coleridge was thinking of his daughter Sara as a baby?¹⁶ The image is certainly apt. Sara’s *Memoir* records how her mother told her that she would never lie still in a cradle and how she required constant attention, “how I required to be in her arms before I could settle into sound sleep.”¹⁷ Reading the passages side-by-side awakens a powerful image of Coleridge’s young daughter Sara lying at her mother’s breast, feeding, nursing in the sensations that were at once pleasurable and fundamental to her own awareness of existence. Over time, the reflective powers of Understanding and the capacity for Reason developed in the child. In time, Sara became an adult. In her father’s view, however, the material order continued to be important for Sara as an adult in a way that was *not* apparent to Sara. As Graham Davidson indicates in an essay on “Duty and Power” in the *Opus Maximum*, “It is the exclusive use of reason to discover the truths of Reason which Coleridge rejects, and he develops the metaphor of priming a pump to illustrate his point. He is open therefore to reflection on what the senses can bring as aids to Reason.”¹⁸ Pleasures, illustrated so poignantly in the image of mother and child, can serve not only as aids to reflection on existence and the world but also as prompts for the discovery of the higher truths of Reason. This differs dramatically from the tendency of Sara Coleridge’s poetry. While Samuel Taylor Coleridge indicates that sensory knowledge continues to play an important role in the work of Reason, Sara Coleridge devalues sensory knowledge of the material in favor of the immaterial and a distant hope in heaven. Sara’s eyes are on an eschatological future that remains other than the enslaving pains of this life. The senses may recognize the pleasures of others and consume the poppy that brings temporary slumber, but true relief from the nightmarish existence of this world may only be found in the supernatural assistance of divine grace. Both Sara and Samuel unquestionably experienced lives of pain, but their outlook on the relationship between bodily existence and divine assistance appears to depart in crucial ways. Put simply, Samuel and Sara appear not only to have different outlooks on life, but also seem to have distinct conceptions of the development of the individual.

Sara’s experience of suffering throughout life finds voice in poems that

¹⁵ *Op Max* 121.

¹⁶ *Op Max* 121.

¹⁷ Sara Coleridge, *Memoir*, 36.

¹⁸ Graham Davidson, “Duty and Power: Conflicts of the Will in Coleridge’s Creation of the Self,” in *Coleridge’s Assertion of Religion: Essays on the Opus Maximum*, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 126.

distinguish between the carefree joys of her children and the weariness of maternal care. In her children, Sara found that the material order provided a vital source of consolation. In adults, by contrast, Sara finds consolation in the reflective powers of the mind and turns to a distant hope of heaven drawn from the light of higher Reason. Amidst intense bodily pain and persistent grief, Sara's commitment to the reflective capacity of the mind engaging both nature and the supernatural continues to clarify why Sara Coleridge is rightly called a *theologian of the heart*.