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reads
Hartley Coleridge:
A Reassessment of His Life and Work
(Palgrave 2008)
by Andrew Keanie

THE POET DON PATERSON is a notable champion of Hartley Coleridge, while acknowledging his seemingly inevitable invisibility: ‘There are always scores of poets you’d love more people to read’, he wrote in 2005: ‘I’ll mention [...] one dead white male, Hartley Coleridge (these guys are always impossible to resuscitate if their reputations aren’t already made)’.¹ Following the lead of Lisa Gee’s selection of Hartley’s poems in 2000,² Andrew Keanie aims to revise critical perspectives and create a context in which Hartley’s ‘resuscitation’ may finally be achieved. He establishes Hartley’s claim to the sustained attention which his work has long and unjustly been denied. The last full-length study of Hartley was published in 1931;³ and although there have been no significant new discoveries about the facts of Hartley’s life since then, the influences of modernism and post-modernism have changed fundamentally ‘our perception of Romanticism’ (ix). Keanie’s project is to free Hartley’s work from the limiting stereotypes of literary history, bringing to light its enduring uniqueness: he defines new approaches by which Hartley’s ‘commitment to miniaturism’ (144) and ‘wisdom of the affectionate intellect’ (176) may properly be understood. Hartley Coleridge emerges, therefore, as ‘a figure who [...] transcended the prevailing modes and concerns of his period’ (x); whose unmoralizing selfless art speaks directly to our own uncertain condition. For the alienated individuals, the ‘uninvited Ghost[s]’ (178) of the twenty-first century, Hartley Coleridge ‘has finally arrived’ (144).⁴

In his prefatory chapter, Keanie discusses the legacy of ‘longing’ bequeathed to Hartley by the poetic brilliance and ‘preternatural urgency’ of his father’s *Kubla Khan* (5). It was Hartley’s misfortune that his infancy coincided with STC’s most intense period of creativity. For, as idealized ‘fairy elf’, epitome of ‘exquisite’ wildness, even enlightened seer,⁵ Hartley was subject, and subordinate, to the unpredictable volatility of STC’s aesthetic and

¹ Don Paterson, ‘The Poet Speaks’, *The Guardian*, 9/4/05, p. 25.

² *Bricks Without Mortar, The Selected Poems of Hartley Coleridge*, edited by Lisa Gee (London: Picador, 2000).

³ Herbert Hartman, *Hartley Coleridge: Poet’s Son and Poet* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931). Hartman’s book was preceded by Earl Leslie Griggs’s *Hartley Coleridge: His Life and Work* (London: London University Press, 1929).

⁴ Of his own alienation and disillusion, Hartley wrote, in a poem addressing a young child: ‘Nor will I come, an uninvited Ghost, / To tell thee, all thy charms are transitory’. Keanie comments on these lines: ‘There are many ‘uninvited Ghost[s] in society today – individuals who wander like waifs in the midst of crowds whose applause is reserved for professional accomplishments and spousal acquisitions’ (176).

⁵ Frederick Burwick shows Hartley in *The Nightingale* as enlightened spiritual guide of his father and the Wordsworths: ‘Responsive to the presence of the “universal Teacher” in nature, little Hartley [...] alerts the adults: “he would place his hand beside his ear, / His little hand, the small forefinger up, / And bid us listen”’. Frederick Burwick, ‘Coleridge’s Conversation Poems: Thinking the Thinker’, *Romanticism* (Volume 14.2, 2008), p. 177.

intellectual agenda (33). This was also the period in which STC began to speak and write openly of his domestic misery. Keanie presents Hartley with finely balanced sympathy, as a child 'half-unwanted', psychologically adrift amid the 'emotional violence' of a household deeply troubled (27). Moreover, as the bleak domestic situation gradually and irretrievably weakened STC's confidence in his own poetic powers, the father's hopes, in the loneliness of insecurities and frustrations, centred increasingly on the son. Hartley was consequently subjected to an intermittent and undue pressure, as STC 'alternately neglected and hectoring him' (40). Yet, the Coleridgean legacy also afforded Hartley an escape from the damaging paternal contradictions of intensive 'needy' attention and preoccupied neglect. For Hartley would escape into a world of creative imagination: his invented kingdom of 'Ejuxria'. This retreat would prove to be psychologically and artistically decisive: throughout his life, Hartley remained committed to the imaginative sanctuary of secret places; to the hidden unregarded beauty of the world; and the contemplative solitude of 'calm regions of the mind' (43). In contrast with STC's poetic disposition, 'habituated to the vast' (19), Hartley's creative sensibility was uniquely attuned to the 'small', the secret, and the 'personal' (18).

At the age of twelve, Hartley was sent to a boarding school in Ambleside run by Reverend John Dawes. Dawes's sympathetic and relaxed regime afforded ample opportunity for Lakeland rambling, enabling Hartley to continue to enjoy that 'most precious solitude in which he would lose himself' (60).⁶ Keanie covers Hartley's schooldays, university career, and employment at Leeds as professional author, in the one chapter. This enables him to show how Hartley's childhood characteristics shaped his distinctive intellect and imagination, as much as containing the seeds of professional failure. The rich vitality of Hartley's interior life from an early age conferred outstanding intellectual brilliance and erudition; yet rendered him oblivious to practical imperatives. Thus, when he went up to Oxford at the age of eighteen, Hartley was, according to Southey, 'a child' in matters of financial management, but had 'Greek enough for a whole college' (59).

Keanie's discussion of Hartley's appointment as probationary Fellow at Oriel College, Oxford, and subsequent loss of that position, is excellent: sensitive, perceptive and balanced, revising convincingly the moralizing condescensions of earlier commentators.⁷ Keanie shows how Hartley's rejection at Oriel occurred, not so much for 'intemperance', but a fundamental inability to conform: 'he was incapable of impersonating the person he was expected to be' (69). The Oriel Fellows, the men who set the tone for the

⁶ Griggs places a different emphasis on the school's liberal ethos: 'Such freedom probably develops individuality, but can we be sure it did not perceptibly augment his oddities?' Griggs, p. 49.

⁷ For less sympathetic commentaries, see, for example, Hartman: "'He lived'", a fellow student wrote of Hartley at this crucial period, "just for the day, and no more. He got worse and worse". His intemperance seems to have become proverbial'. Hartman, pp. 72-73. See also Anya Taylor, *Bacchus in Romantic England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999): 'He may or may not have been found dead drunk in the road, after consorting with a young woman of low estate. He admits to twice having been too drunk to carry his candle after a wine party, as was reported by a servant' (p. 147). Taylor goes on to describe Hartley as 'the Bastard Bacchus [...] twisted and incomplete' (p. 156).

Oxford Movement, were unusually strict, pious, uncompromising; having less in common with the twenty-first century reader, Keanie contends, than Hartley himself, who 'belongs much more integrally to our cultural inheritance' (176). Psychologically, intellectually, Hartley was out of place in an Oriel profoundly inimical to his idiosyncratic individuality. Keanie offers the arresting insight that, in applying for and accepting the Oriel Fellowship, Hartley felt himself to be 'colluding' in his 'own' relegation to 'mediocrity' and 'sheltering [...] from the real energies of life' (84).

Hartley's failure at Oxford devastated his father. Hartley's brother Derwent, who was present when STC received the news, wrote that he had 'never seen any human being, before or since, so deeply afflicted' (67). What Derwent describes as 'the moral offence' involved in Hartley's rejection brought STC the bitter recognition of his own damaging waywardness repeated in Hartley. From the ensuing pained analysis of Hartley's 'Torpor of Will' (74), arose STC's desperation to place him in a situation which would confer the structure, discipline and regularity his own life had lacked. STC therefore appealed to the Reverend Dawes to employ Hartley as assistant teacher, seeking, in this way, to redeem the failings and disappointments both of the recent, and more distant past. Although this return to Ambleside would remove Hartley from the perilous insecurities of a life of free-lance writing in London ('a city in which he look[ed] unlikely to survive') it would again place him in a deeply uncomfortable professional situation (76). Although STC described Hartley as 'exceedingly good tempered', and excellent 'in the management and instruction of children' (75), he was wholly unsuited for teaching 'unruly' unacademic teenage boys: 'For all the duties of a preceptor [...] I am as physically unfitted as dear papa for those of a horse-soldier', Hartley acknowledged, confessing that 'every hour' he 'spent' with his pupils 'was passed in a state more nearly relating to fear than anything else' (94). Despite his bruising and humiliating struggles as a teacher, Hartley persevered with determined cheerfulness until the school failed financially in 1827,⁸ due to the poor business judgement of Dawes's successor as headmaster. In Hartley's only subsequent teaching post, a temporary position at Sedbergh in 1837, he was respected and admired, by academically receptive students, as a brilliant and charismatic teacher of Classics; and even served as acting headmaster for a term.

Following the closure of the Ambleside school, Hartley's next regular employment, five years later, offered him the opportunity of professional authorship. Hartley had continued to publish in magazines through the 1820s, after leaving Oxford; and, despite only 'intermittent productivity', his reputation had grown sufficiently to 'impress' Francis Bingley, a Leeds publisher, who, in 1832, commissioned Hartley to complete a set of

⁸ 1827 is an approximate date for the closure of the Ambleside school, based on Derwent's statement in his *Memoir* of Hartley that the school failed after he had been there four or five years. Griggs records that there is 'no conclusive evidence to be found' of the exact date of the school's closure. Griggs, p. 130.

biographies of eminent northerners (89). In addition, Bingley entered into an agreement with Hartley to publish a book of poems, to be followed in due course by a second volume. To secure a contract for two volumes of poems was in itself a significant achievement in 1832. In the 1820s, when Hartley had been trying to make a living from writing in London, ‘poetry publishing—save for the luxury annuals—appeared to be in a terminal decline’,⁹ a situation which would worsen: ‘By the early eighteen thirties it had become almost impossible to find any major publisher who would make a commitment to poetry’.¹⁰ Even Wordsworth was finding it difficult to publish his poems, having had recourse to selling his work to an annual, as had Southey and STC.¹¹ Moreover, Hartley’s *Songs and Sonnets, 1833* was favourably received, an anonymous critic in the *Quarterly Review* praising Hartley as the most promising poet ‘who has made his first appearance subsequent to the death of Byron’ (110).

Bingley went bankrupt before the end of 1833, however, and the projected second volume of poems never appeared; though *Lives of Northern Worthies* was published, despite remaining incomplete according to its original design. Hartley’s biographies are written with ‘genius and power’, a depth and brilliance of imaginative insight; yet, ‘too digressive, too crammed with observations on life and its problems’,¹² they lack conventional consistency of focus. This was in part because, despite having moved to Leeds better to complete the task, Hartley was, as Bingley admitted, ‘embarrassed by want of books’ (102). Keanie shows, however, that limited access to historical documents was only a part of the issue: more fundamental—and more significant to our understanding of Hartley’s distinctive literary disposition—was his conscious rejection of an authoritative factual style: ‘the fashion of the Bore-all Biography’, as Hartley termed it (104). H. J. Jackson recently defined the problem of biography as ‘how to escape the tyranny of chronological arrangement and the predictable tedium’ of what ‘Johnson wearily described’ as “‘the formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral.’”¹³ Hartley’s approach avoids such ‘predictable tedium’: for factual narrative, he substitutes colour and sparkle, an imaginative vitality, characterised by Derwent as ‘the spontaneous issue of the author’s mind, varied by the varying mood’ (96).

Keanie illustrates Hartley’s creative approach to historical events by quoting at length a passage on the English Civil War, in which the opposing armies are described before battle. With the ‘sweeping generalizations and colourful exaggerations’ of an historical novelist, Hartley creates a vibrant and dramatic impression: ‘The royalists regarded their adversaries with that scorn which the gay and high-born always feel or affect for the precise and sour-

⁹ Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (London: Picador, 2003), p. 310.

¹⁰ Bate, p. 370.

¹¹ See Dennis Low, *The Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pages 11–13.

¹² Griggs, p. 205.

¹³ H.J. Jackson, ‘Life Experiments’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19/12/08, p.8.

mannered: the soldiers of the covenant looked on their enemies as the enemies of Israel, and considered themselves as the elect and chosen people—a creed which extinguished fear and remorse altogether’ (121). In an intriguing parallel, Keanie compares Hartley’s biographical style of imaginative engagement with that of Proust in his essay *On Reading*. Proust elucidates his experience of the past ‘inserted into the present moment’ by referring to the ancient statues in St Mark’s Square, Venice: ‘beautiful foreigners come there from the Orient across the sea they are gazing at in the distance and which comes to die at their feet, and the two of them, uncomprehending of the remarks exchanged around them in a language not of their own land’ (122). Both writers open a ‘wide imaginative perspective’, engaging the reader on levels more subtle and vital than the purely factual: Hartley, as Proust, conveys in his prose a ‘meaning at once precise and manifold’ (122). Such an illuminating parallel places Hartley in a new and striking perspective. He no longer appears the undeveloped figure we have been conditioned by earlier scholarship to expect. Furthermore, in other contexts, Hartley uses verse to convey concise and focused biographical insight. In poems about the writers he loved, Hartley ‘could write the lives of his favourite poets from the inside out: that is, from the perspective of the creative spirit at work’ (100). Hartley’s sonnet about Wordsworth, for example, expresses ‘the level of insight one would wish for in the best biography’ (99):

’Tis thine to celebrate the thoughts that make
The life of souls, the truths for whose sweet sake
We to ourselves and to our God are dear.
Of Nature’s inner shrine thou art the priest,
Where most she works when we perceive her least.

This appreciation of Wordsworth is a ‘condensed blend of the primary aspects of a master-essayist: intimacy and critical distance’ (100).

Following Bingley’s bankruptcy, Hartley returned to the Lake District in late 1833, where he lived unemployed, with the exception of his two terms at Sedbergh, until his death in January 1849; lodging first in Grasmere, and then, from 1837, at Nab Cottage, Rydal. The biographies of Griggs and Hartman show Hartley to have been warmly accepted by the dalesmen and their families: he became a much-loved member of the intimate local community. Yet, in these later years, Hartley was troubled by a deep sense of failure, of having betrayed the visions of his father, and having fallen far short of the hopes of all those who had loved, nurtured and supported him. He was oppressed by the sense of being an outsider, or ‘Quizz’, as he put it: an alienated creature ‘who is an inexplicable riddle [...] whose thoughts and feelings have no intelligible language [...] subject to an alien law, as strange in the wide world as if he were [...] a relic of a previous system, or dropped, like a selenite, from the moon’ (103). Such ‘self-deprecation’ (130) has helped to perpetuate the ‘public perception of Hartley as a wistful, half-made creature’

which 'has lingered for 175 years' (110). It has also made him an easy target for the reductive analyses of 'unkind critics', whose judgements, Keanie shows, have tended to lack the objectivity they purport to uphold (113). The unique qualities of Hartley's work have therefore been overlooked.

One such quality is his combination of 'a sense of wonder and a sense of humour', which animates 'the philosophically serious bond' between Hartley and 'insignificant things' (128). Keanie cites, in particular, the light-hearted brilliance of Hartley's essay, *Pins*, in which he 'has blended the delightful urbanity of a Charles Lamb with the heavyweight thinking of an Edmund Burke' (128). Similarly, Hartley's poems present an originality of perception poised in awareness of multiple perspectives: his 'panoramic feeling of [...] the one, the indivisible aliveness of Everything' (115) coexists with the intuition 'that [...] the incalculably unfolding surface of life is not necessarily solid' (116). Hartley's 'philosophical contemplation' (119), his striving towards meaning and affirmation, takes place in the context of the possibility that existence is 'an accident':

Let me not deem that I was made in vain,
Or that my being was an accident,
Which Fate, in working its sublime intent,
Not wished to be, to hinder would not deign. (117)

Hartley redeems his fear of meaninglessness by minutely detailed observation of a moment of natural life:

The very shadow of an insect's wing,
For which the violet cared not while it stay'd,
Yet felt the lighter for its vanishing,
Proved that the sun was shining by its shade.
Then can a drop of the eternal spring,
Shadow of living lights, in vain be made? (117)

The moment's transience makes the expression of faith—poised in the closing phrase between despair and affirmation—the more moving in its tentative struggle. This sonnet is characteristic of Hartley, because 'the personal anxiety of the individual coincides with a universal problem' (126); and, unlike Shelley, whose work is impelled by an 'implicit faith' in the 'unseen Power' which 'conducts the world' (136), Hartley's 'faith' is fragile, vulnerable and hard-won.

Hartley's religious and moral commitment is to 'tenderness and compassion' (136) on the level of the personal, the domestic, the local:

I love my country well, - I love the hills,
I love the valleys and the vocal rills;
But most I love the men, the maids, the wives,
The myriad multitude of human lives. (139)

In his introduction to *The Dramatic Works of Massinger and Ford*, Hartley presents the ethic of private devotion which underlies such lines, in opposition to the public culture of his day: 'I am by no means assured that the modern custom of courting fame, for qualities sufficiently rewarded by peace of mind, as approving conscience, and the affectionate esteem of a worthy few, is not one of the worst symptoms of the times. Good people in a private station should be thankful if their lives are not worth writing [...] They can be understood by none, and *known* only to those who love the good beings whom they actuate, - and by loving know them. For in the spiritual world there is no knowledge but by love' (160). Such conscientious refusal to court the public and political animates the nymphs' potent gentleness in Hartley's *Prometheus*:

There is a spell of unresisted power
In wonder-working weak simplicity,
Because it is not feared. (140)

Hartley's commitment to the private over the public, the gentle over the assertive, combined with an instinctive mild Toryism, has gained him no favour with 'critics ever bent on reducing literary works to things they can politicize' (139). Keanie cites, by contrast, the shrewd and sympathetic insight of Mary Joseph Pomeroy, that Hartley 'did not [...] appear as the champion of any class, for it was not humanity that Hartley loved so much as individual human beings' (141). From a moral and religious perspective of principled humility, therefore, Hartley records 'the common psychology of the individual whose sorrows are not Olympian' (171); and strives to express his intuition of 'holiness' and 'beauty inaccessible' (175) in 'the daily round of household things'.¹⁴ For Keanie, Hartley is 'an ideal artist', 'hidden behind his work' (175), able to apprehend 'in the trembling delicacy of the minute' the 'very sights and sounds unseen and unheard by the more prominent poets' (182):

Why is beauty still a bud, infolding,
A greater beauty that can never be,
Yet always is its faint fair self beholding,
In all of fair and good that man may see?

Hartley's intuition of natural order—his apprehension of 'formal structure and dynamic process' is at once spiritual and an apprehension of 'things as they are' (183).

Andrew Keanie's book is a significant achievement in scholarship, and a real delight to read: erudite and incisive, judicious and forthright, it is written with finely perceptive sympathy, and a committed conviction of Hartley's originality. Hartley emerges, therefore, as a striking individualist: 'the first flâneur' (167), anticipating the 'morbid psychology' of Baudelairean disillusion

¹⁴ *A Task Ad Libitum, The Collected Poems of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. Ramsey Colles (London: Dent, 1907), p. 23.

(170); a writer as deliberately and disconcertingly idiosyncratic as the Marcel Proust who ‘did not belong to the same world’ as the publishers who rejected *Du Côté de Chez Swann*; and who, like Hartley, ‘wrote like nobody else’.¹⁵ Keanie regrets that Hartley ‘has never been anywhere near inclusion in the English Romantic canon’; and that his ‘work has not been revisited with the same sense of excitement and humility’ as that of other ‘minor’ Romantics (110). This book, however, should be a significant influence in redressing the balance in Hartley’s favour: it will surely stimulate further interest, and encourage the long-neglected recovery of Hartley’s scattered and haphazard literary remains. In particular, modern scholarly editions of Hartley’s poetry and prose are now required if we are to appreciate his work as fully as it deserves.¹⁶ Keanie’s splendid reassessment will undoubtedly prove indispensable for those who follow: a truly pioneering and inspirational study.

¹⁵ Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, translated by Evan Cameron (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 574. For example, a reader for the publisher Fasquelle, to whom Proust had submitted the manuscript of *Du Côté De Chez Swann*, complained: ‘At the end of this [...] manuscript [...] one has no notion – none – of what it is about. What is it all for? What does it all mean? Where is it leading to? – It’s impossible to know! It’s impossible to say!’ Tadié, p. 575. Hartley’s work, likewise transcending the assumptions of his own period, has been received with similar irritable incomprehension. Hartman, for example, criticises Hartley’s ‘posthumous poems’ as limited to ‘purely local interest’, reflecting ‘myopia’, expressing merely ‘the sadness of dereliction’, and a ‘chronicle of wasted time’. Hartman, pp. 160-161. Griggs writes of Hartley’s prose: ‘Sometimes it is difficult to discover at what Hartley is aiming, and a serious conclusion may follow a pleasantly meandering fancy’. Griggs, p. 190.

¹⁶ Peter Swaab’s excellent edition of Hartley’s sister’s poems will provide an exemplary model in this respect. See *Sara Coleridge: Collected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Peter Swaab (Manchester: Fyfield Books, Carcanet, 2007).