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Romantic Childhood, Romantic Heirs: Reproduction and Retrospection, 1820–1850

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by Beatrice Turner

BEATRICE TURNER'S EXPANSIVE STUDY OF FOUR CHILDREN of two famous Romantic writers also covers the occluded aftermath of a "monumental age" (3). Hartley and Sara Coleridge, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and William Godwin, Jr. were not just biological but (with the exception of Sara) literary "reproductions" of their parents. As adults, they struggled under suffocating physical and textual existences, the latter framed by Romantic constructions of childhood. In turn, they used their own various literary projects to "write back" to their parental authors even as they assumed the filial duty of memorializing them.

Turner borrows the concept of "writing back" from Salman Rushdie, who has used the phrase to describe the seizure of colonial language by the decolonized to renegotiate their own legacies. It is, she argues, a more appropriate model than Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, for as she emphasizes, *Romantic Childhood* does not concern the contests of an equally matched father and child but the "irrefutable" fact of formidable parents shadowing the lives of their children (6). Most accepted the literary inferiority of their work to that of their parents; a "language of infertility and deformity" marks their descriptions of themselves and of children in poetry and prose (7). As the book progresses, Turner's idea of writing back becomes a paralyzing Oedipal struggle, and the book's argument finally owes less to Rushdie than to Sigmund Freud.

So many unfinished projects treated in this book, especially ones undertaken to carry on a father's literary legacy; these are almost always symptomatic of a child's ambivalence toward a parent. *Romantic Childhood* covers an impressive array of texts, some of them in considerable detail, and includes poems, short fiction, novels, introductions, letters, and treatises. Many are unpublished and relatively obscure. As Turner shifts, sometimes quickly, from one text to another, she moves from discussions of the purposes of biography, children, and childhood, to sections on historical understandings of the family and early theories of genetic inheritance. The effect can be vertiginous, but an order of procedure helps anchor the narrative. Chapters all have three parts (except for chapter five, which has six): the first characterizes the child's place in the parent's work; the second explores the ways in which the child memorializes the father (or, in the case of William Godwin, the way

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the parent remembers the now-dead child); the third examines the ways in which the child renegotiates the cultural constructions of childhood.

The ambitious vision for this book is apparent in chapter two, which surveys generational differences in the function of biography, along with the discourses of childhood and the family prevalent during the lifespans of the Romantics. Under the influence of John Locke, Godwin thought of parenthood and family through the metaphor of the mechanized clock that requires maintenance. Even Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for all his vaunted attention to nature, believed that family members had to be trained to behave naturally. One can see this tension in Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1778–79), to which Turner devotes considerable attention in order to show how "rational pedagogical tradition conceals an appeal to nature and blood" (20). For her conception of the Romantic child, Turner plods through the ideas of Judith Plotz, Alan Richardson, and Mitzi Myers (among many others)—along with poems by STC, Charles Lamb, and William Wordsworth—to arrive at a familiar picture of the child of nature, an adult fabrication that either ventriloquizes his thoughts or remains presocial and prelinguistic. The generational views of biography that Turner surveys in the same chapter may be less familiar to readers: she combs many works, including STC's "Sketches and Fragment of the Life and Character of the Late Admiral Sir Alexander Ball" and "Prefatory Observation on Modern Biography" (1810), for theories of what a biography should do. Whereas STC and Godwin saw the genre as a monument to authorship or the presentation of an "instructive life," their children handled it as an instrument of interrogation, which they sometimes embedded in dutifully attempted memorials (40). "It is easy to imagine, reading the preface to the *Life of Chaucer*, or the 'Observations on Biography' [sic], the sort of memoirs Godwin and STC might have wanted or expected. They didn't get them, of course" (44).

The kind of memorials they did get is the subject of chapters three and four, which examine the writings of Hartley and Sara Coleridge, respectively. (Excluding their brother Derwent from her study indicates that Turner views his relationship with his father as unproblematic, although she does not explicitly say so.) The works of Hartley are a "willed rejection" of the kind of biographical encomium expected by the previous generation (56). His "Dedicatory Sonnet to S. T. Coleridge" (1833), written in response to "Frost at Midnight," his unpublished verse fragment entitled "A Dramatic Scene" (which Turner suggests was started immediately after STC's death), and a letter to Derwent present a relationship in isolation from the larger family, one that was pervaded by guilt on both sides. This relationship no doubt affected Hartley's efforts to supply an introduction to the new edition of the *Biographia Literaria* that the family planned, largely to recover the reputation of STC from recent attacks by Thomas De Quincy, whose four essays in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* characterized him as a Tory drug addict, hair-splitter, and plagiarist.

But because Hartley recoiled from memorializing his father in the style of the biographies of a previous generation, he never finished the project. Sara was more productive—or at least more dutiful: she ghost edited many of her father's publications for almost 20 years after his death. In this capacity, her task was to erect a monument to her father that could withstand the unflattering profiles of him that were posthumously emerging. She did this by showing his writing as consistent and his life as restrained and upright. Yet elsewhere, she undermined the very myth she was erecting, for in her poem, "'To my father, on his lines called 'Work without Hope,'" probably written in 1845 (but not published until well into the twentieth century) the portrait of STC as a family man usurps the figure of STC as a poet and thinker. Thus, both children effectively confirmed De Quincy's belief that the legacy of the Lake poets "should be evaluated against the amount of human joy and suffering they caused in their lifetimes" (48).

Turner explains Hartley's failure and Sara's ambivalence as reactions not just to STC's conduct as a parent, but to the ways in which they had been represented—or underrepresented—in their parent's writing. Thanks to the famous early poems in which he appears as an infant, Hartley became the "inaugural Romantic child" (56). The poet's tender view of him in "Frost at Midnight" depends on a being who cannot speak, read, or write. Although he is, in other poems, a skilled interpreter of the natural scene, he possesses the kind of frozen perfection typical of the Romantic child. But for the parent obsessed with the fitful nature of his own creative gifts, the profile of the son—as static and prelinguistic—served less to mythologize the child than to quell his threatening presence. Looking at a trio of sonnets written by STC at Hartley's birth, and reading the young Coleridge into STC's "The Foster-Mother's Tale, A Dramatic Fragment" (1797), Turner depicts an Oedipal drama in which the father flattens his child into text in order to stifle his creative potential. By "Christabel" (1816), a poem that, Turner argues, STC wrote Hartley back into, the child has come into language and, therefore, portends the father's eventual death.

Hartley largely accepted the role of Romantic child; his writing was committed to an "endless rehearsal of that trope," and his literary corpus—sonnets, essays, occasional poems, and a biographical fragment—all respond to this characterization of himself in his father's work (57). In a sonnet that remained unpublished at his death, Hartley remarked that he would always be seen as "a living spectre of my father dead," and the stillborn figure of his father's legacy (78). While portraying himself as infertile and feckless, he managed to convey STC's own dismal performance as a father, however, and to criticize the Romantic legacy that had crippled him. In an essay "A Nursery Lecture Delivered by an Old Bachelor" (1851), he invented a narrator modelled on Lamb's Elia to highlight the distant and general depictions of children that had contributed to the previous generation's "investment in an

eternal, and endlessly replicable model of childhood" (81). Likewise, some of the poems for and about children from his collected edition of 1851—"To a Deaf and Dumb Little Girl," for example—appear to represent the Romantic child as cipher but actually expose the paternal death wish behind the creation of this figure. "In the Manner of a Child of Seven Years Old" explores the psychological, literary, and cultural ramifications of creating a figure that can create nothing. This poem, which receives extended and illuminating treatment in the book, reveals Hartley's own murderous intent in retaliation: indebted to Wordsworth's Lucy poems, it attempts to supplant STC with a different literary father.

In contrast, Sara is largely missing from her father's corpus. She redressed this exclusion by rewriting herself as the Romantic child: numinous, sickly, and studious—a death figure that replicated her brother's position and denied herself the "regenerative power" the child should embody (108). For Turner, the very transcendence of the Romantic child excluded both girls and creativity: just as Hartley could not produce text, Sara could not produce children. Turner's assumption that the figure was gendered masculine by default, which comes chiefly from Rousseau, controverts much of the material evidence—from clothing and visual images—that very young children were gendered feminine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also ignores Wordsworth's Lucy and other representatives of girlhood from "The Pet-Lamb" and "We are Seven," to name just two. Nonetheless, the discussion of the ways in which Sara, through her own writing and the correspondence of her neighbors, approximated a Romantic figure that may have debarred women, is the strongest part of the book. As rendered by Turner, Sara—like Hartley—understood the cultural construction that had forced her hand. She portrayed Romantic childhood as a subjectivity achieved through the maternal relationship, particularly through her relationship with her son Herbert, to whom she wrote many poems. Moreover, in her fairy tale, *Phantasmion* (1837), which remained largely unpublished in her lifetime, she represented writing as a cause of physical ailments to the maternal body, and she displaced this trauma onto the child. Her collection of children's poetry, *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children* (1834), displays a lifelong ambivalence toward childhood innocence. Rather than a state of being, it is a learned condition, one that must be monitored by the adult, specifically the mother, who suffers for her continuous attention. In short, in her poetry Sara embodied the timelessness of the Romantic child in images of physical suffering; and the same somatic infirmities inspired her to claim kinship with her father in her Introduction to the second edition of the *Biographia Literaria* (1847) and in her unfinished memoir (left to her daughter).

Shifting to the work of Godwin and his two children, Turner begins with an examination of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (1797), each of which applies a

different balance of principle and experience to methods of education. Then she considers Mary Shelley's two memoirs of her father, one in the 1831 reissue of *Caleb Williams* and the other unfinished, to confirm the uselessness of the paternal philosophy in the eyes of the daughter, largely on the grounds that it had proved so impracticable. The four works of fiction by Shelley that Turner then reads—the novella *Mathilda* (1819), the children's story *Maurice, or, the Fisher's Cot* (1820), and the novels *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837)—focus on the relationships between father-teachers and daughter-students. They simultaneously unearth transgressive feelings within the family, as well as urges to repeat "the traumatic family histories they cannot acknowledge" (158). For example, Mathilda is her father's sole pupil (much as Shelley was Godwin's); but in the convoluted plot of this family romance, she also reprises his own role as inexperienced lover. *The Fisher's Cot,* somewhat differently, questions the composition of the family itself and rehearses the perennial tension between natural, i.e., biological, and constructed (sympathetic) relations among members.

Turner's final discussion of Godwin, Jr. focuses on an overlooked figure in most reconstructions of second-generation Romantic circles. Like Hartley, Godwin, Jr. never really found a literary niche; after publishing some short stories—one of which, "The Executioner" (1832), receives sustained attention here—he finally made a living as a journalist. In Turner's reading, this story—along with his novel, *Transfusion; or, the Orphans of Uberwalden* (1835)—becomes a public airing of a barely concealed private desire for an alternate father. The ghoulish plot of *Transfusion,* published after his death at 29 with an appended memoir by his father, reflects in addition the era's incipient theories of inheritance and the function of blood. In it, Godwin, Jr. rejects the social bonds stressed by the previous century's rational educationalists and dramatizes the importance of adhering to genetic and, particularly, to gender boundaries in imagining the family. For his part, Godwin seems to have profited from reading his son's fiction. Although the memoir he wrote for *Transfusion* supplies details of his son's refractory conduct as a pupil, it also second-guesses his own educational theories.

The fictions discussed in these last two chapters are steamy and convoluted Freudian romances of the family, and Turner gives us long summaries and analyses of their sensational complications. Yet the conflicts between class and blood that preoccupy her at this point in the book, by introducing a new current of study with a separate and complex critical heritage, stray too far from her initial concerns. Furthermore, her careful use of previous criticism to frame her own contributions, exhausting plot summaries, and a diverting habit of introducing a text and then postponing discussion of it sometimes cause the reader to lose her bearings. Her arguments about retaliatory "writing back" can be perceptive and penetrating, but also strenuous and counterintuitive. Signs that the four heirs have separated themselves from the towering figures of their

Romantic fathers are often so subtle in their writings that Turner must work very hard to persuade us that these signs are there. On the whole, though, her energetic account of children grappling with the legacies of imposing fathers illuminates an entire "literary generation" that is "often passed over in a leap from the Romantic to the Victorian" (181).