

Offensive Disclosures

Following Coleridge's death, most of the leading periodicals of the day had chosen to supplement their reviews of STC's three-volume *Poetical Works*, issued shortly prior to his death, with details of his life, as a form of obituary. Through mere chance Henry Nelson Coleridge spoke first, reverently, in the *Quarterly Review*. It was confidently expected by the family that this tone of reverence would be maintained by all who wrote of the 'deeply beloved' departed. Alas, not so. Over the course of his lifetime STC had made many enemies; a harsh truth of which his wife and offspring, and even Henry, seemed to be touchingly unaware. A host of resentful and angry detractors now fell upon him, before the breath was barely out of his body, and to the horror of his shocked family began tearing his name and reputation to shreds.

The attack was launched by STC's former friend and admirer, Thomas De Quincey, in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* for September, 1834; this opening piece being the introduction to a sensational four-part series in which De Quincey damningly alleged that STC had been a blatant plagiarist, exposed his opium addiction to full view and, not content with this, drew a vividly harsh portrait of the Coleridge marriage, not sparing poor Mrs Coleridge in the process. Distressed as Sara and her mother were by De Quincey's allegations and 'offensive disclosures' they felt that their most judicious course would be to adopt a dignified silence, choosing to believe that his articles, ephemeral journalism, would be forgotten in the course of time. Mrs STC, all her life, had practised discretion; highly necessary for anyone domiciled with STC. De Quincey had announced in his first article that his information about the Coleridge marital troubles had been given him by Coleridge himself 'in confidence'; Mrs STC did not doubt De Quincey's claim as she knew only too well her husband's habit, in certain moods, of pouring out his private woes, real and imaginary, to anybody who would listen.

Sara, though greatly shaken by what she saw as De Quincey's betrayal of her father and indignant as she was on her mother's behalf, opined adamantly that, 'I would not have one whom I believe to have been so good a Christian as my Father defended by so unchristian a weapon as retaliation, nor would I have anyone connected with me engage in a warfare of personalities which I condemn so much when carried on by others.'¹

Hartley, in Grasmere, joined with the Wordsworths (about whom De Quincey had also been objectionably rude) in fulminating against ‘the little Monster’ (De Quincey, though a giant with his pen, was tiny in person). ‘Hartley says he will “‘give it to him”, & I hope he will,’² wrote Wordsworth’s daughter Dora, with zest.

But furiously as Hartley raged against the ‘pack of resurrection rascals . . . hovering around [STC’s] deathbed’³ it was pointless to look to him to vindicate his sire: Hartley could be relied upon for nothing but procrastination. Henry Coleridge therefore stepped forward to mount a defence. A rising young barrister of brilliance, he went about this, as might be expected, in a thoroughly professional manner. After much discussion between themselves, he and Sara decided that STC should be resurrected for the reading world at large in the guise of ‘saint and sage’ by means of carefully introduced and edited reissues of his major works. These would be ‘widely influential for good purposes’, containing ‘Sublime truths, and the maxims of a pure morality’ to be ‘diffused among persons of various age, station, and capacity, so that they become the hereditary property of poverty and childhood, of the workshop and the hovel,’ as Sara aspiringly put it. In short, Samuel Taylor Coleridge simultaneously popularised and sanctified.

Attacks upon Coleridge made much of his having been a hypocrite, a humbug who said one thing and wrote another, did a thing and then denied ever having done it (particularly within the context of his jacobinical activities as a young man, for which he had been famous at the time but had subsequently most strenuously disclaimed, thereby unleashing a storm of furious and scornful protest from those who had known him as a ‘fiery jacobin’). Even more damaging was De Quincey’s uninhibited presentation of Coleridge as a plagiarist. Muted allegations of plagiarism had dogged STC’s literary footsteps for decades, but until De Quincey’s 1834 onslaught had not been brought to the forefront of public notice. These accusations of plagiarism (chiefly levelled at the philosophical chapters in the *Biographia Literaria*, though plenty of other instances were cited) would be, Henry Coleridge realised, particularly difficult to deal with, requiring an extensive knowledge of German transcendental philosophy and a grasp and understanding of Coleridge’s mind and methods of working which Henry, despite his claims of intimate acquaintance with his uncle, found understandably intimidating. Therefore he decided to concentrate upon his uncle’s image as sage, polymath, poet-philosopher and unimpeachable character from a general point of view. With this decision Sara concurred.

The opening line of defence took the form of Coleridge’s *Table Talk* published in the spring of 1835. Henry, in his preface to the *Table Talk*, drew a portrait of his uncle as inspired conversationalist and visionary: ‘I have seen him at times when you could not incarnate him, when

he . . . burst . . . through the obstacles of common conversation. Then, escaped from the flesh, he would soar upwards into an atmosphere almost too rare to breathe, but which seemed proper to him, and there he would float at ease.⁴

Henry also attempted to depict his uncle physically when in visionary mood, choosing as a particularly inspired moment the evening of Midsummer's Day, 1827:

The sun was setting behind Caen Wood, and the calm of the evening was so exceedingly deep that it arrested Mr Coleridge's attention. We were alone together in Mr Gillman's drawing-room, and Mr C. left off talking, and fell into an almost trance-like state for ten minutes while contemplating the beautiful prospect before us. His eyes swam in tears, his head inclined a little forward, and there was slight uplifting of the fingers, which seemed to tell me that he was in prayer. I was awe-stricken.

When the sage at length resumed his discourse it was in a vein so 'brilliant and enchanting' that Henry, when he left him that night, felt, he afterwards wrote, 'so thoroughly magnetized that I could not for two or three days reflect enough to put anything on paper.'⁵

Such episodes, Henry freely conceded, defeated his powers as a

mere reporter by memory . . . The great point with me was to condense what I could remember on each particular topic into intelligible *wholes* with as little injury to the living manner and diction as was possible . . . I must leave it to those who still have the tones of 'that old man eloquent' ringing in their ears, to say how far I have succeeded in this delicate enterprise of stamping his winged words with perpetuity.⁶

Hartley, when he read the *Table Talk*, had no hesitation in complaining to Derwent that it gave him no feeling of their father's manner; Derwent agreed. Even worse than the failure to capture STC's manner was (in Hartley's view) Henry's distortion of the content. STC was presented by his nephew as having discoursed in a distinctly starchy Tory strain. Hartley, raised in infancy in a fiercely republican household of which he retained vivid recollections, objected strenuously to the presentation of STC, by Henry, as virtually a solid Establishment figure. This was not 'dear Papa' as Hartley, himself a staunch Whig in maturity, had known and loved him.⁷

Accordingly Hartley wrote to his mother on the subject of *Table Talk*; well aware that it would be passed on to Henry. 'Permit me to say, that my Father's opinions on many points of public import were considerably different during the years wherein I . . . conversed with him from those which Henry has

recorded.⁸ Hartley followed this up by suggesting injudiciously in a letter to Sara that Henry had not only misrepresented but had suppressed STC's opinions; at all events, that was how Sara read it.⁹ Henry, not unnaturally, resented all this; Hartley had to back-pedal in order to avoid family conflict:

All I said was, that his was a many sided mind, that it had chanced I had seen it under aspects probably less frequently developed in later years. He was in his youth at the period to which my earliest recollections of him extend, a great deal more of a republican, and certainly, much more of a philanthropist and cosmopolite, than he appears to have been distinctly aware in his riper years. He was, in so far as his nature allowed him to hate anything, a king-hater, and a prelate-hater.¹⁰

In fairness to Henry it should be said that, whereas Hartley had not once seen or spoken to his father during his final twelve years of life, Henry had only known STC closely during that period of revered enshrinement in the Grove. Neither could Derwent nor Sara be of help on this issue; Hartley alone remembered that miraculous young man, 'Cloathed and mitred with Flame . . . a Volume of Gold leaf, rising & riding on every breath of Fancy'; 'An Imagination winged with fire inspiriting and rejoicing' to quote STC's famous self-description and Humphrey Davy's twin image of him.¹¹

It was not surprising that Hartley, with this image living for him in vivid glimpses of memory, should have been loath to envisage STC beyond a certain point in time; did not wish to know about the seamless Sage of Highgate who must be reverently preserved for posterity embalmed in an edifying after-glow of amber. Where was that Imagination winged with fire? That ardent spirit who had whirled away from the side of Hartley's cradle to proclaim liberty, equality and fraternity; to preach to mesmerised Unitarian congregations, '*That all might know the truth, and that the truth might set us free!*' Where was he? Not in the pages of Henry's *Table Talk*, that was certain. Perhaps STC in his final years had talked like that: Hartley had not known him in those final years. The father Hartley had known had disappeared long ago.

Henry wished posterity to benefit from STC's wisdom of accumulated years. Hartley's memories dwelt, almost exclusively, in the distant realm of infancy. Eternally loath to quit that shore upon which he had played in the magic past, Hartley resolutely dragged his feet along the corridor of time. 'To walk with reverted eyes, to live in the days that are gone, is commonly accounted the natural propensity of old age . . . For myself, I remember not a time when it was not so with me', he confided to his sister in 1834. And he intoned, as the most comforting maxim he could find in life, "'Not e'en the Gods" upon the past have power.'¹²