
Language and the Child in the Letters of the Romantics

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Abstract

Critiques on the subject of the child in the Romantic period continue to be guided by the notion of the idealized child of romanticism, and themes related to it, such as childhood as a privileged time of innocence and the child as a symbol of hope. The result is that discussions on childhood often remain circumscribed within the paradigms of romanticism; furthermore, they are largely based on poetry, a genre that affords primacy to the image, thereby reinforcing the Romantic aesthetic of the self-sufficient, innocent child. The letters of the Romantics are a rich source of material on the subject of children but have largely remained an unexplored territory. My aim in this paper is to question this unproblematic construction of the child in the Romantic period through a close reading of the letters and journals of the Romantics with an eye to how the narrator-parent constructs the child. A close reading of the letters of canonical and non-canonical Romantic writers reveals that the child in the letters of the Romantics, like any other character in a text, is a construction by the parent/narrator, and reflects to a large extent the parents' interests, attitudes and dilemmas. Furthermore, contrary to Wordsworth's reputation as the poet of childhood par excellence, it is Coleridge and not Wordsworth who emerges as the poet of childhood in our critical survey of the letters of Romantic authors.

Keywords: romanticism; letters of romantics; child; parent-child relationship, Dorothy Wordsworth.

Criticism on the subject of the child in the Romantic period continues to be guided by the notion of the idealized child of romanticism, and themes related to it, such as childhood as a privileged time of innocence and the child as a symbol of hope. The result is that discussions on childhood often remain circumscribed within the paradigms of romanticism. To be more precise, through the association of the child with traditional romantic themes, the child has become a vehicle for the perpetuation of these paradigms. An undue emphasis is placed on the figure or image of the child, with most of the such critiques being based on poetry. It is easy to see how the primacy of the image in poetry preserves the illusion of a self-created child in happy coexistence with the unfallen world of nature, and presents him as a self-sufficient subject in discourse. My aim in this paper is to question this unproblematic construction of the child in the Romantic period through a close reading of the letters of the Romantics with an eye to how the narrator or narrator-parent constructs the child.

Documentary texts such as letters and journals of the Romantics, which shall be the testing ground for our investigation, are a rich source of material on the subject of children but have largely remained an unexplored territory so far. Letters, in contrast to poetry and fiction that are imaginative recreations of experience, are more or less direct transcriptions of the writer's

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experience; as a result, they are likely to provide better access to the narrator's experience of the child. Letters also possess the merit of allowing the reader to situate the development of the child and the parent-child relationship within its natural context, that is, domestic home life.

All of the writers under consideration with the exception of Dorothy Wordsworth are parents, who have written on the subject of their own children, this being one of the criteria for my selection. Two non-canonical writers, Robert Southey and Dorothy Wordsworth, have been chosen in order to provide a counterpoint to the perspectives of the two major Romantic authors, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.

During the course of our discussion, we shall construct a narrative out of the parent's scattered observations on the infant, ranging from the moment of its birth to the age of, say, five, in an effort to trace the development of the infant and the ways in which it is recorded, if at all, by the parent. The means of recording this development or emergence of consciousness is, of course, language. My concern is to pay attention to the use of language, by the parent as well as by the child, both in the flow of narration regarding the child, as well as in the linguistic means used in its delineation, such as naming or nicknaming, and attempts at transcription of its speech. Through such a procedure I hope to show that the child exists, and exists only, within a discourse articulated by the parent, and reflects the parent-narrator's attitudes and interests.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first half deals with the child in its pre-verbal stage. This consists mainly in a discussion of names and nicknames relating to the question of identity. The second half deals with the child's entry into speech. A survey of the nature of language used by the parent to describe the child, as well as the extent to which the latter engages in the transcription of his child's speech, are treated as the guiding principles in determining the status of the Romantic child.

I

In the letters and other documentary texts of Coleridge, Southey, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, we are introduced to the author as parent, in his various roles of nurse, playmate, teacher, and travelling companion. In Dorothy's case, it is the children of her brother, William Wordsworth, to whom she acts as a surrogate mother and nurse, much in the way that Southey in his *New Letters* functions as a surrogate father to the children of Coleridge at Greta Hall (Southey 1965, 2: 498, 518). The *Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth, apart from passing observations on the sons of Coleridge, Derwent and Hartley, are virtually absent in references to children. In *The Letters* of William and Dorothy Wordsworth,

however, Dorothy presides over as the recording angel of William's children, especially John and Dora, born in 1803 and 1804 respectively. Transcriptions of first attempts at speech by the children occur in Dorothy's letters to Lady Beaumont and Mrs. Thomas Clarkson, and samples of articulate speech as they grow older are recorded in her letters to Thomas Quincey.

William Wordsworth, the poet of childhood par excellence, apart from one-line remarks on health and appearance, is curiously silent on the subject of his own infants. Although we can attribute this apparent neglect, in part, to the paucity of correspondence by him, which, the editor of his letters reminds us, stems from his notorious disinclination towards letter-writing, Wordsworth's frugality regarding the descriptions of his children within the space of the individual letter, must be attributed to other causes. We note that the letters of Wordsworth contain more poems related to children rather than observations on the latter, his own and children in general. The child in Wordsworth's letters in fact, rarely appears outside the context of poetry. This leads us to believe that either his experience of children was essentially poetic, of the kind which is immediately transmuted into poetry rather than treasured as a fact, or that the real child, the flesh and blood child existing within a domestic context, failed to impinge upon his consciousness. In any case the reader is left guessing at the relation between the near absent child of his letters and those of his poems. Two of his major poems, "The Prelude, or The Growth of a Poet's Mind; an Autobiographical Poem" (1799-1805) and "Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1803-1806), are written during the early childhood years of John and Dora, say, the period from 1803 to 1807. The autobiographical nature of the poems seems to suggest that the experience of parenthood, in whatever manner it was lived, stimulated a return to his own childhood, which in turn became part of a vast poetic project of recollection, recovery, and glorification of childhood.

From the entire oeuvre of Wordsworth there are only two poems that are addressed to his infants, or rather infant, his daughter Dora. Both of them are composed in 1804, the year of her birth. "Address to my Infant daughter, Dora" celebrates the vulnerability and innocence of the infant state (Selincourt 1940-52, 2: 174). Deviating from the romantic tradition where the child is presented in harmony with nature, the poet lauds the occurrence of Dora's birth in the civilized part of the world where she will have better chances of survival. The other, "The Kitten and Falling Leaves", is perhaps his only light hearted poem relating to the child (Selincourt 1940-52, 2: 170-73). The poem employs a playful, exuberant tone in describing the frolicsome activity of "little Tabby," who darts after falling leaves as one would a prey and turns "blossoms inside out" on the apple tree. The kitten's antics are referred to as a "pretty baby-treat."

Markedly different from the philosophic or pathetic mode employed by Wordsworth's numerous poems on child orphans and peasants, Dorothy's poems such as "Address to a Child, during a Boisterous Winter Evening," and "The Cottager to her Infant" address the child in a simple language and joyous tone. "Address to a Child During a Boisterous Winter Evening" uses the rhetorical device of "What way does the Wind come? What way does he go?" and grants agency to the wind in a winter storm by describing it as a routing, growling intruder with claws. The wind attempts to break in through the doors and windows of a house where the speaker and a child, Edward, are seated by the fireside:

He may knock at the door, - we'll not let him in;
May drive at the windows, - we'll laugh at his din;
Let him seek his own home wherever it be;
Here's a cozie warm house for Edward and me.

(Selincourt 1940-52, 1: 230).

Dorothy's poems adapt themselves to the child's perspective in selecting the kind of imagery that would normally interest a child. "The Cottager to Her Infant" is a lullaby in which the mother weaves in the activities of the little creatures of her household:

The kitten sleeps upon the hearth,
The crickets long have ceased their mirth;
There's nothing stirring in the house
Save one wee, hungry, nibbling mouse....

(Selincourt 1940-52, 2: 50).

In contrast to William Wordsworth's shadowy paternal presence in his letters during the early years of his children's growth, the letters of Southey and Coleridge bear witness to their overt enthusiasm as parents. There is no 'male reserve' regarding their experience of domesticity and child-upbringing. Besides functioning as playmate and tutor to their children, we also catch Southey and Coleridge playing (what have been traditionally regarded as) the maternal roles of nanny and cook. "A child makes a huge alteration in the family," writes Southey to Charles Biddlecombe in 1802, referring to his fourteen weeks old daughter, Edith (Southey 1965, 2: 298). "I talk nonsense very fluently to her," he goes on to add, "and am a better nurse than you would perhaps imagine." (Southey 1970: 30)

"Nonsense," to use Southey's description of the nature of his conversation with his children, is one of the striking features of his letters, as it is of much of his light verse. Southey seems to have carried his predilection for mythopoesis into his letters, or to be more precise,

mythopoesis seems to be a feature of Southey's language in general. This is illustrated in the rich profusion of nicknames for his children, pets, and acquaintances in his letters. In his light verse it is evidenced in the fantastic analogies used to describe the vegetable and animal world. In "The Pig, A Colloquial Poem", the poet turns to the pig's advantage his attributes of obstinacy, ugliness, and dirtiness, and ends up by calling him "a Philosopher" (Southey 1970: 30). In "Gooseberry-Pie" the gooseberry bush is likened to the "gold-fruit-bearing tree/ The glory of that old Hesperian grove...", but one that needs no dragon for guarding its fruits. (Southey 1970: 82-84). Being a "vegetable Porcupine", it is its own protector (Southey 1970: 82).

In his letters we see Southey's persistent and regular use of the coddling tone to address his children. At times, this attitude leads him to create a coded language that is not entirely intelligible to the reader. Coleridge's occasional prattle, such as, "Kiss my Hartley, & Bercoo Baby Brodder," is almost refined into an art form in the letters of Southey. (Griggs 1956: 418). I quote at length from a letter written to his wife on Christmas eve in 1823 in which he sends his greetings to his family. Besides offering us a glimpse into "all persons and all creatures belonging to...[Southey's] household", it is a delightful example of Southey's fondness for punning and nicknaming:

A merry Xmas and a happy new year to you all! To you first and foremost my true and lawful Governess and Lady Mare; next to the great Bertha whom I love not with a B alone, but thro the whole alphabet, stopping only at the letter X because it is not possible to love any thing that is cross. Next to the very grave and sober Kate, Countess Pussycat...then to my Isabel who live as long as she will is to be a Belle still: and...my love to Charles Cuthbert Southey, Archbishop in nubibus, Rural Dean by courtsey...and to Rumpelstilzchen, and Hurliburlibus [two of the cats at Greta Hall]....(Curry 1965, 2: 262).

Southey is aware of this name-and-epithet-and-line spinning faculty of his. In his poem "To a Spider", after likening the spider to an "old Free-Mason" and the "Weaver of Snares", Satan, he strikes an apt comparison between the spider and himself, "the Poet poor" based on the fact that they both must spin for a living (Southey 1970: 30). The difference between them, says the poet addressing the spider, is simply this: "Thy bowels thou dost spin,/ I spin my brains" (Curry 1965, 2: 262).

Almost all of the authors at one time or other address their newly born in the diminutive, by attaching the suffix "-ling", to either the name or a characteristic of the infant. Southey's daughter is called "Edithling" (as in duckling) to describe her as the young one of Edith, her mother (Curry 1965, 1: 359). Wordsworth, in the poem on his one-month-old daughter,

Dora, greets her as "Monthling" (Selincourt 1940-52, 1: 174). Coleridge refers to his infant son Hartley, as "Bratling" (Griggs 1956, 1: 296). In her letters to Mrs. Thomas Clarkson and Lady Beaumont, Dorothy often refers to Wordsworth's son, John, as "our Baby", making him into a sort of totemic child of the family of three, William, his wife Mary, and herself (Selincourt 1967: 460, 476).

Southey's compendium of nicknames for his children is impressive. His baby son Cuthbert is called "Og" and "Cuddy" on account of his chubbiness and large size (Curry 1965: 2: 212, 218). The first seems to be an onomatopoeic approximation of his roundness and oversized body, the second appears to be a distortion of 'cuddly', a quality one usually associates with fatness, especially in a child. Some of the names used to describe the children are borrowed from characters in stories and myths. In a delightful confounding of "The Story of Three Bears" (authored by Southey) with the Bruins, Southey transforms the three children of his uncle Herbert Hill from Edward, Herbert, and Errol, into "Duke Bruin", "Marquis Bruin", and "Earl Bruin" (Curry 1965, 2: 72). His baby girl Bertha is subsequently incorporated into this mythical framework through his act of naming her "Bruinella" (Curry 1965, 2: 79). Southey's tireless mythicizing of the domestic space is not only a sign of his creative use of language; it is also a mark of his special involvement in the imaginative life of children.

The preceding discussion looked at a number of ways in which the parent-narrator through the act of naming and nicknaming constructs the identity of the child, and in the process articulates his own. In the case of Southey, we observe the role name giving, as well as the creative use of language in general, plays in the creation and mythicizing of domestic space. Coleridge's choice of the naturalistic name, Derwent, for his son, was considered as a case of romantic name giving. It will be noted that these are examples of the child in its pre-verbal stage. The parent's naming, although takes into consideration the individual traits of the child, is nevertheless, something which the parent bestows on its voiceless child. Language, in this phase, is a faculty belonging only to the parent, and hence, is a function of the parent's identity. The true emergence of the child as a distinct subject, then, can be said to begin with its entry into speech. In the pre-verbal stage, the parent is the sole narrator. But with the child's first articulate sounds, the child becomes his own narrator, with the parent taking on the role of transcriber.

II

Whereas "Og" and "Bercoo" are the parent's nicknames for the infant before it can talk, Coleridge's record of his son Hartley's childish pronunciation of William Godwin, "Gobwin" (Wardle 1979: 293), is a case of an onomatopoeic rendering of the child's speech by the

parent. The one is the parent's name for the child, the other is, or comes to be, the child's name for an adult. The beginning of the parent's transcription of the child's attempt at pronunciation, later speech, constitutes the incorporation of the child into adult discourse. The child is no longer an object of observation, but the subject of a potential dialogue between the parent and himself. It is only in the letters of Dorothy and Coleridge, as well as the notebooks of the latter, that we come across transcriptions of the speech of children in a true sense, that is, as a sub-text set off from the narrational body of the parent text.

It comes as a surprise to the reader that although the letters of Southey contain abundant material on children, there is no attempt on his part to record a child's speech in its own voice, whether its first inarticulate attempts, or the later more developed jargon of childhood. The speech habits, observations, and emotional responses of his children are rendered in the passive voice, which is embedded in the parent's narration. The reason for this seems to lie in the fact that Southey, in talking to his infant, uses a childish vocabulary and tone himself, one that is partly borrowed from the child itself, and partly self-synthesized, as we have seen in the previous section. To put it bluntly, there is no attempt on Southey's part to address the child as an adult; in talking to his infant, Southey himself regresses to the level of the infant. Strictly speaking, what we observe in the letters of Southey is not the child as a distinct subject, but the child frozen at the pre-verbal phase, or the infantile child. A comparison of Southey's observation on his one-year old son, Herbert, with Dorothy's on one-year old Dora, will help make the point:

Herbert is in Betty's phrase "a grand talker grown." He tries to say everything, and seldom fails to make himself understood. (Curry 1965, 1: 480)

(Southey to his brother Thomas Southey)

She aims at all words, but does not articulate any very distinctly except "Ta-Ta" (and that is no word) and "Aty" ~ for she calls me Aty, though she hears nothing but Anny. (Selincourt 1969, 1:660)

(Dorothy to Mrs. Thomas Clarkson)

We notice that Southey's use of the phrase to describe Herbert is derived from adult discourse, in this case, Betty, a maid employed at Greta Hall. Herbert is called a grand talker, but there is no attempt on Southey's part to record his conversation in any of his letters; his other son Cuthbert, and his daughter, Edith, is likewise voiceless. Similarly, Wordsworth calls his little Dora a "delightful chatterer" (Selincourt 1967, 1:34), but makes no attempt to transcribe this chat. In the sample from Dorothy's letters, however, we notice that little Dora's childish

speech is clearly set off by quotes from the adult commentary. What we observe in the letters of Dorothy is the emergence of the child as a distinct subject, an individual with its own voice, a phenomenon that is carried further in the letters and notebooks of Coleridge.

Coleridge's observations on his sons Derwent and Hartley, especially the latter, which are found in his letters as well as notebooks, are by far the most interesting of the lot. Coleridge can be considered to be a special case, that of the 'philosophic parent', watching in fascination and painstakingly recording the first "half-smiles", tears, laughter, and the first attempts at speech of his children. His is a special case because his observations on his children form part of his philosophical quest for a criterion of linguistic naturalness which, McKusick points out, began quite early in his career (McKusick 1986: 432). I shall at this point enter into a brief digression in order to situate Coleridge within the main philosophical debate over the origin and nature of language in his day.

The controversy regarding the origin of language in the period can, generally speaking, be resolved into the debate between proponents of linguistic naturalness and those of linguistic arbitrariness. Theorists of linguistic naturalness, such as Thomas Reid and Monboddo, believe that there is a necessary relation between a word and its referent. The world of human language and the world of nature, according to this theory, are capable of reflecting one another. Hence words may express the inner nature of the things they designate and function as an expressive medium in human discourse. Philosophers in the English empiricist tradition, Locke, and his successors Berkeley and Hartley, are proponents of linguistic arbitrariness. They view language simply as a social convention, learnt by custom and habit, in which the relation of a word to the thing it denotes is purely arbitrary. Man is thus reduced to being an island, with no integral relation to another being and the world around him. Coleridge's exasperation with the deterministic nature of the latter theory is voiced in a passionately worded letter to William Godwin. Expressing his wish that Godwin should write a book about the relation between the power of words and human feelings where he might attempt to "solve the great Questions", Coleridge gets carried away and digresses:

...Is thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? & - how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of their Growth? - In something of this order I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of Words & Things, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too.... (Griggs 1956, 1: 625-26).

Coleridge's belief in the organic nature of language is clear from the above passage. It is rather amusing to observe that Coleridge seems to have destroyed "the old antithesis of Words and Things" in his observations on his son Hartley, or rather in his depiction of his son as a child of uncorrupted nature. At times, his son is perceived to be an emanation of nature itself. Hartley is "a spirit that dances on an aspin leaf," "the darling of the Sun," "a thing sui Generis"

(Griggs 1956, 1: 612, 625, 802). Coleridge's letters are interspersed with lyrical descriptions of Hartley's instinctive understanding and love of nature. The parent even manifests pride at the fact that he is a late talker and a slow learner of words, reading it as a sign of Hartley's profound sympathy with nature. In the excerpt given below we have six-year old Hartley's testimony in his own words. He is aged six at the time. To be more precise, Hartley first narrates it to his younger brother Derwent, who in turn narrates it to the parent, who in turn transcribes it in a letter to Sara Hutchinson:

...Derwent...comes to me and says - Tiss! - He is such an angel! - Sometime ago I watched Hartley under the Trees, down by the River - the Birds singing so sweetly above him / & he was evidently lost in thought. I went down, & asked him what his thoughts were - so he hugged me, & said after a while "I thought, how I love the sweet Birds, & the Flowers, & Derwent, and Thinking; & how I hate Reading, & being wise, & being Good'.... (Griggs 1956, 1: 804).

We observe that Coleridge narrates the anecdote in the voice of his children, using the dashes for Derwent's speech and quotes for Hartley's. Hartley is viewed by Coleridge not only as a child of nature, but also as a true poet in his creative use of language. He observes at work in his son's fanciful thoughts the principle of analogy and metaphorical thinking. In a letter to Southey written in 1800 Coleridge gives an account of what he terms as Hartley's "theological-astronomical Hypothesis":

...Having so perpetually heard of good boys being put up into the Sky when they are dead, & being now beyond measure enamoured of the Lamps in the Streets, he said one night, coming thro' the Streets - 'Stars are dead Lamps - they be'n't naughty - they are put up in the Sky. - (Griggs 1956, 1: 563).

It is easy to see how Coleridge's construction of his son Hartley as a child, and poet of nature, constitutes part of his philosophical project to salvage language from the doctrine of linguistic arbitrariness.

In this section of the paper we have seen how the child exists essentially in a discourse created either through a dialogue of the child with an 'other', a peer or a parent, or a narration in its own voice. It is only in the case of Coleridge that we come across the child as a fully developed subject, as an individual in his own right. We observed that the conversation of Hartley in Coleridge's letters is transcribed or narrated in the voice of the child. This is also the case in the letters of Dorothy. Southey presents us with an instance of the passive or infantile child, or the child as object, and Wordsworth with an instance of the absent child.

Another kind of absence was made discernible in our survey. Comments on the female child are far lesser than in the case of her counterpart, and are mainly of an affective nature. Southey's infant girls, Edith and Bertha, who are repeatedly referred to as being of "kissable age" are not attributed any qualities of the mind as they mature, as are their brothers, Cuthbert

and Herbert (Curry 1965, 1: 498, 518). Similarly, there is very little attempt on the part of Dorothy Wordsworth to delineate the individual features of Wordsworth's Dora. From the time of her birth to the age of four, Coleridge refers to his infant daughter Sara simply as "meek little Sara", "mild as moonlight", and "a quiet Creature" within the lengthy descriptions on his sons Derwent and Hartley (Griggs 1956, 2: 1014, 1015, 1022). There is also no record of Sara's speech in Coleridge's letters. Like the older Sara, the "Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!" in Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp", little Sara largely remains a type rather than an individual (Coleridge 1912, 1: 102).

Does the absent child of Wordsworth's letters, when placed beside the numerous peasant and orphan children of his poems, encourage a revaluation of Wordsworth's status as a poet of childhood? Or does it merely point to the poet's preference of one genre over another as a medium of expression? We can arrive at suitable answers to these questions only after an in-depth comparison of poetry and letters of the authors in question, a project which this paper did not attempt to undertake, concentrating instead on the latter. It appears that whereas the child in Wordsworth is present entirely in his poetry, in Coleridge the child exists more fully and more poetically in his letters. If we were to go mainly on the evidence of the letters, it is Coleridge and not Wordsworth who emerges as the poet of childhood in our critical survey of the letters of Romantic writers. Another fact that stands out starkly is the rather deep involvement of the male writers with their children during the Romantic period, which would undergo a change in the Victorian era in which gender roles became more polarized, with women being expected to take on the primary role of care-givers for children.

The difference in the treatment of the child in our survey shows clearly that far from being the proverbial child of romanticism existing amidst uncorrupted nature, the child in the letters of the Romantics, like any other character in a text, is a construction by the parent/narrator, and reflects to a large extent the parents' interests, attitudes and dilemmas. Irrespective of whether the observations are of the child in its pre-verbal or talking phase, the parent cannot help viewing the child as an extension or reflection of self, and understandably so, being the child's fleshly progenitor and not just a textual one. In the preceding critique of letters of the Romantics, we saw how the child becomes a vehicle reflecting the parent-narrator's degree of involvement with their children, their differing attitudes towards girls and boys, and is co-opted into the prevailing philosophical debate over language. We have become accustomed to thinking of the self-other dialectic in terms of gender, class, race, and sexuality. In our study we see that the child-parent interaction is yet another significant but neglected facet of the dynamics of self and other in literary studies, one that merits further exploration.

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