

The soundscapes of childhood in Coleridge's lyric poetry

In chapter XXII of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge famously ridicules Wordsworth for addressing 'a six years' Darling of a pigmy size' (a six-year-old child) as a philosopher in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1807). The passage in question is among the most widely quoted and quintessential examples of the Romantic idealisation of childhood;

Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage! Thou eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the Eternal Mind—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find!
Thou, over whom thy immortality
Broods like the day, a master o'er the slave.
A presence that is not to be put by!¹

Coleridge's objection here is not so much with the content of Wordsworth's hyperbole as it is with its presentation of 'thought and images too great for the subject.' Wordsworth is being too presumptuous about the nature of childhood. Since children 'at this age give us no information of themselves' and adults do not remember enough of their own childhoods to furnish the gap, Wordsworth's idea of the child philosopher seems to Coleridge to impose a

¹ Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', ll. 110-19 as quoted in Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Adam Roberts, The Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Major Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 317.

sense of premature rationality upon the child, effectively replacing the child's own self-experience with what an adult would imagine it to be. To call a child a 'seer', 'philosopher', or 'prophet' in this sense is to appropriate childhood through an adult lens:

In what sense does he *read* "the eternal deep?" In what sense is he declared to be "*for ever haunted by the Supreme Being*"? or so inspired as to deserve the splendid titles of a *mighty* prophet, a blessed seer? By reflection? by knowledge? by conscious intuition? or by *any* form or modification of consciousness?²

Although there is evidence supporting the existence of a 'science of childhood' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including very early studies of child-rearing practices, child development and education,³ it was not yet self-evident to what extent, if any, the definitively 'unspeaking' infant (Latin *infans*), taken here in Rousseau's terms as a child six years or younger,⁴ could be considered a fully conscious being and to what extent it was more self-aware than an animal.⁵ It was also unclear to what extent the nature of infancy is forgotten in the passage to adulthood, how much, as Coleridge puts it, seemingly 'absorbed [...] into some unknown abyss'.⁶ In light of this debate about the ontology of childhood, Coleridge's question, 'In what sense is a child of that age a Philosopher?' appears to gesture emphatically to the incommunicable qualia of infancy hidden behind Wordsworth's all-too-knowing glorification of it. Coleridge suggests that by forgetting the separate mentality of the

² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 317.

³ See Adriana S. Benzaquen, 'Childhood, Identity and Human Science in the Enlightenment' *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004) pp.35-57.

⁴ Rousseau, *Émile; or on Education*, trans. Foxley, (London & Toronto : J.M. Dent and Sons, 1921; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921) p. 38.

⁵ "Human Nature," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1, 160–233 p. 161.

⁶ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 317.

pre-linguistic perhaps even pre-subjective state of the infant, Wordsworth overreaches the domain of hyperbole and forgets the nature of the subject he considers.

Biographia Literaria's criticism of Wordsworth's *Ode* speaks to Thomas Nagel's famous 1974 question of what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Coleridge is asking what it is like for an infant to be an infant, or indeed, if being a baby bat is anything different to being an adult bat. To echo Coleridge's words: 'if these mysterious gifts, faculties, and operations, are not accompanied with consciousness; who else is conscious of them? or how can it be called the child, if it be no part of the child's conscious being?'⁷ Coleridge, like Rousseau, is identifying the need to stop 'looking for the man in the child' (or the philosopher in the six-year-old) and recognise childhood as an independent phenomenon with 'its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling'.⁸ This attention to the self-experience of children asks not only what it means to be a child in a child's own language but also how the experience of childhood could be rendered legible in ours. Coleridge's qualms with Wordsworth's methods of expounding on the 'godlike' nature of children also have to do with the nature of poetry itself. In what ways, if any, can the lyric speaker genuinely address or even apostrophise the ode's 'silent human auditor, present or absent',⁹ when that auditor is an infant, someone that operates outside the domain of spoken words let alone written ones?

This challenge of invoking the child as a child in poetry is, as far as I know, an understudied if not unstudied aspect of Coleridge's poetry. Coleridge's own poetic works feature 399 instances of the words 'child', 'infant', 'baby' and their cognates;¹⁰ however, unlike the Wordsworthian child, the Coleridgean child is always a largely invisible figure.

⁷ S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions* (London; New York: Everyman's Library, 1965) p. 260-1

⁸ Rousseau, p. 54.

⁹ From M. H. Abrams' 'paradigm' for the Romantic ode in "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric", in *Romanticism and Consciousness* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), pp. 201-29.

¹⁰ Figure taken by search of *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed. E.H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912) on Project Gutenberg.

We seem to gain a richer image of Hartley Coleridge from his portrayal as the lisping ‘dew-drop, which the morn brings forth’¹¹ in Wordsworth’s *To H. C. Coleridge Six Years Old* than we do from the indistinct ‘babe’ mentioned in *Frost at Midnight* (1798). The same could be said of the fleeting mention of ‘feeble infancy’ in Coleridge’s Sonnet ‘To a friend who asked, how I felt when the nurse first presented my infant to me’. The conspicuous liminality of children, both in poems directed to them, such as the question-less *Answer to a Child’s Question* (1802), and those in which they are bodily incorporated, like *The Nightingale* (1795), begs of Coleridge the same question the *Biographia Literaria* asked Wordsworth: ‘In what sense can the magnificent attributes, above quoted, be appropriated to a child, which would not make them equally suitable to a bee, or a dog, or a field of corn?’¹² In what ways is the infant made present?

I argue that the absent-presence of the Coleridgean infant retains the integrity of its pre-linguistic state by asserting itself through the suggestion of sound. As opposed to being presented by way of semantic, word-based communication, as in the case of Wordsworth’s ill-thought ‘Thou best philosopher’, the invisible child-figure is made known by its perceived effects upon the prosody, alliteration, and rhyme that form the musical dimension of the lyric. As an entity that knows no grammar, the Coleridgean infant embodies the lingo-social gap between infancy and adulthood. In this sense, it can be said to exist poetically in what George T. Wright and Jonathan Culler have characterised as the lyric present. The lyric present refers to the usage of simple present tense verbs in lyric like ‘I walk’, ‘I wander’, and ‘I fall’. The avoidance of complex modifiers normally used in speech means that the ‘actions described [in the lyric present] seem suspended, removed from the successiveness of our ordinary time levels, neither past, present, nor future, neither single nor repeated, but of a different

¹¹ Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, 6 vols (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street) p.199, line 27.

¹² *Biographia Literaria* p. 261-2.

dimension entirely'.¹³ Normally only mental or figurative events are described in this simple present tense so it is an ideal form for fitting in the child without misrepresenting the mystical nature of childhood. I argue that Coleridge uses the unique qualities of the lyric to allow the infant to be heard in tandem with the speaker's words. We can perceive the infant's timeless language of tears, gurgles, and whimpers in the speaker's reactions to and inadvertent mirroring of the child's moods. This mirroring takes shape in the form of alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme and other acoustic patterns. It is also expressed in unexpected moments of quiet and mid-poem changes of volume. Instead of figures of speech, the Coleridgean infant is thus sometimes also felt through figures of speechlessness.

We can see the aural dynamics of this infant language at play in *To an Infant*. On first reading *To an Infant* may appear a univocal poem. It confesses itself to be engaged in only the one-way address self-explanatory in its title. However, we find in the poem's vocal patterns a split agency. Coleridge reflects the lulls and flails of the infant addressee in the intonations of the parent-speaker's voice. This internalization of the infant's sounds in the texture of the lyric's poetics begins with the first line of the poem: 'Ah cease thy Tears and Sobs, my little Life!'¹⁴ Whilst 'Ah' signifies an onomatopoeic exclamation or realization in semantic terms, its liminal status as both cry and word, expression and aural melisma also illustrates its more primitive status as a fragment of sound, or a phoneme that the parent has caught onto to coax their baby into speaking. The adult's mimicry of the half-formed vowels and cries sounded by the child are both automatic, a function of the natural impulse to feedback the sounds and volume we hear from a conversation partner, and deliberate, a

¹³ George T. Wright, 'The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems', *PMLA*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May, 1974), pp. 563-579 p. 565. See also Jonathan Culler, 'Why Lyric?', *PMLA* 123.1 (2008), 201-6, and 'The Language of Lyric' *Thinking Verse* IV.i (2014), 160-176.

¹⁴ S.T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works* ed. J.C.C. Mays, 3 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) I, p. 196, line 1.

conscious effort to pull the half-formed words latent in the infant's cries into intelligible, fully-formed language. The speaker is not only speaking 'to' the child but also actively willing it to learn and respond. We are soon given a sense of a change in the baby's tone when the placating 'ea' vowel sounds are stifled into 'i' sounds after the child's attention is grabbed with 'Ah' ('Ah cease thy Tears and Sobs, my little Life!'). The clumping together of the alliteration of the 'l' breaks the line's initially monosyllabic progression with the suggestion of a hiccup, consuming sob or choked breath punctuating the child's tears. Through this means of echolocation the calls of the father manage to feedback those of the child, and so delineate the contours of the baby's presence and moods as a unique in-text listener and conductor. Even whilst striving to speak 'to', the parent voice cannot help but usurp itself by speaking both 'for' and 'towards' a closer relationship with their unspeaking child.

This form of infant-directed speech (IDS) or 'baby-talk' facilitated by the speaker-parent is part of a series of speech registers caregivers use to address their infants, soothe them, gain their attention, and aid the acquisition of speech.¹⁵ Taken in the context of the printed page the curious mixture of very soft, soothing sounds (the gentle lilt of the parent attempting to comfort and discipline), and aggressive exclamation marks (perhaps prompted by the infant's screams) in *To an Infant* raises an oratory challenge for readers. How long can we channel these mixed vocal cues into a single reading whilst remaining sufficiently emphatic? How can one both enunciate the mollifying sibilance and assonance whilst still injecting the vehemence demanded by the exclamation marks? The difficulty of reading *To an Infant* aloud lies in the fact that the disembodied domain of print can artificially homogenise this blend of loud and the soft, agitated and comforting, when the voice, or rather, a single voice cannot. The reader cannot negotiate the two beyond eliciting the disturbing

¹⁵ Bart de Boer, 'Infant-directed Speech and Language Evolution', in *The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution*, ed. Gibson and Tallerman (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

compromise of a stage whisper —precisely the mixture of exaggerated intonations and soothing low-volume tones characteristic of modern-day enumerations of IDS. Caught in between parent and child, the reader of Coleridge’s largely adult-directed *Poems* is unwittingly stimulated into adopting IDS. In fact, the duality of this parental echo as both a socially-primed response, and an intentional persuasive device, is further complicated by the recognition that the child’s cries are also involved in metaphorically strumming the vocal cords of the parent. The infant’s unheard cries, squeals, and gurgles modulate the parent-persona’s voice. Coleridge’s speaker, in turn, subconsciously raises and lowers his tone to mirror and control the volume, speed, and intensity of his infant’s cries. The frequency of exclamations mimes a struggle between parent and child. Under the pressure of the child’s unseen kinesic prompts, the adult’s voice inevitably rises even as his own agency tries to assume hushed sounds. The internal rhyme of ‘my’ and ‘thy’ expresses the persona’s dual role as working both with and as the infant to which it speaks. The child is both figuratively and literally the speaker’s ‘little life’, at once a cherished loved one, and a half-formed being with a half-formed language. Indeed this struggle for dominance between speaker and child escalates to the point where the baby’s agency seems to break through the parental front, finally goading a sigh out of Coleridge as well:

Man's breathing miniature! thou mak'st me sigh—
A Babe art thou — and such a Thing am I!¹⁶

While the parent tries to teach the child to speak with words, the baby tries to move the parent to enter into their own linguistic terrain and speak without diction – to let the ‘Ah’ dissipate into a sigh and recognise that sigh in the very utterance of ‘I’. The interjecting sigh thus becomes the baby’s sign of subjectivity, its own cognate to Coleridge’s ‘I’. The agency required to ‘make’ the persona sigh cannot be dismissed. Even if we cannot know in what

¹⁶ *Poetical Works*, I, p.196, line 13.

‘sense’ a child can ‘read’ (to return to the offending passage from Wordsworth) Coleridge insists that the child can (indirectly) speak through their carer and so be written. In this way the poetic voice itself becomes a babe-like thing; it plays with pure vocality and semantic potentia, yet is unable to convey a continuous consciousness beyond these movements of voice.

The recognition ‘A babe art thou’ is crucial because it indicates that while *To an Infant* presents a titular address directed to an infant, it does so partially to ‘desynonymize’ it from ‘babe’. Crucially, the words ‘infant’ and ‘babe’ define a child against two different modes of communication. An infant is etymologically ‘unspeaking’ and therefore defined against conventions of speech, and diction. A ‘babe’, on the other hand, has its linguistic roots in an onomatopoeic imitation of baby-talk and so is defined against a spectrum of pure animalistic auralty. Like the infant, the babe is ‘unspeaking’ in the sense it cannot formulate semantically intelligible speech. Yet because it does not orient itself around a frame of sense and semantics, the ‘babe’ can talk back through the sound and poetics of Coleridge’s verse where the infant cannot. Instead of a singular voice we find an overlay of voices: the one set speaks to the infant, the other to the babe; the one orients itself around the absence of speech the other to the existence of sound.

The linguistic priming at play in these father-son interactions ultimately makes the feelings and reactions of the unspeaking infant textually visible through sound. In doing this, Coleridge renders his lyrical child a function of pure poetic *melos*, the melodic element of his lyrical form, to the paternal speaker’s *opsis*, the image-making worded aspect of the lyric. To use Northrop Frye’s terms, Coleridge makes the baby the babble to the speaker’s doodle.¹⁷ As in *To an Infant* this indication of the baby’s presence does not constitute an imitation or

¹⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 275.

ventriloquism of the baby's voice. Coleridge enables us to echolocate the ebb and flow of the baby's circadian rhythms precisely through the vibrations of the parent's voice rather than that of the baby itself; this vocal space opens up in the silence of the night, waiting to be filled in by the baby once he biologically advances from infant to a speaking voice, the 'stranger' prophesized by *Frost at Midnight*.

To conclude, Coleridge manages to transcend the limitations of apostrophe he detailed in his critique of Wordsworth by allowing his speakers to share his poems with a different though no less familiar medium: the babble of the baby. This system of acoustic signage charges non-verbal or proto-verbal poetic gestures as indications of the rich mental life unspoken by the infant in their 'godlike' state. The Coleridgean Child's language of pure poetic sound is also conversing 'to' a baby that exists outside the apostrophe to its infancy. The child has the potential to grow out of its childhood, learn, mouth, and, most importantly, be heard. At the same time the speaker has the chance to enter into the language of the child and be humbled by its mystery. By including the presence of the infant in these auditory hints, Coleridge not only writes down a child and his/her presence in the poetry but also engages in the act of *poesis*. He creates a parallel between parenthood and poet-hood that not only writes down the child but also raises it up.

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