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“Youth and Age” : Coleridge’s Later Poetic Achievement

Akiko Sonoda

Although Coleridge’s later poems have been almost neglected, they are not necessarily without deep poetic insight. In his later years, Coleridge composed fine pieces taking his theme mainly from his sense of loss and pain. In his last decade, though the number of poems he composed was not many; examining their quality we can say it was a quite fruitful period. He composed “Youth and Age,” “Work without Hope,” “The Two Founts,” “Constancy to an Ideal Object,” “The Pang More Sharp than All,” “Duty Surviving Self-Love,” “Alice Du Clos,” “The Garden of Boccaccio” being probably the best pieces Coleridge wrote after his *annus mirabilis*. In this essay I will discuss one of the best of Coleridge’s later poems, “Youth and Age,” and observe how Coleridge turns his sense of loss, a personal weakness into a strength through this poem.

“Youth and Age” has an interesting composition and publication history. The text of “Youth and Age” we usually deal with is a six-stanza version that was first published in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 1834.¹ In this text, the poet describes an old man, who at first loses himself in the memory of the past, and realizes an acceptance of his aging. The poet’s description of the process is exquisite but this was not achieved without effort. A poem entitled “Youth and Age” was first published in the *Literary Souvenir* in 1827. But the poem was not the same one as the accepted text and it was only a four-stanza, 38-line poem. The part which corresponds with the fifth and sixth stanza of the 1834 version was first published independently under the title “An Old Man’s

Sigh: A Sonnet” in the *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1832. In addition to the published texts, there are drafts of the poem in Coleridge’s notebooks. Though the first publication of “Youth and Age” was in 1827, the composition of the poem was assumed to have been begun in September 1823. We find the earliest draft of the poem in the notebook entry number 4994.² The entry number 4993 dated “10 Sept. 1823. Wednesday Morning 10 O’clock” is a quite precise explanation of the time which is supposed to indicate a moment of composition of the notebook entry number 4994. Ernest Hartley Coleridge includes the entry number 4994 together with the entry 4993 as “MS I” in the appendix of *CPW*.³ The entry 4994 consists of prose, a description of animate nature in the Quantocks hills, and the verse lines entitled as *Aria Spontanea*, which correspond to the third and fourth stanza of the accepted text. The notebook entry number 4996, which was also written in September 1823, is a more complete draft of the poem.⁴ Under the heading numbers of 1, 2 and 3, Coleridge composed each part of the poem, and as to the parts 1 and 2, we find plural versions in the entry. But the entry ends with the lines, which, with some variants, become the fifth stanza of the 1834 version. The notebook entry shows that from the early stage of composition, Coleridge intended the third part for the poem. However in the first published version of “Youth and Age” these lines were omitted.

The accepted text consists of three parts and each part consists of two stanzas: the prefatory five-line stanza and a longer stanza. The five-line stanzas, which appear alternately, set a pattern and create a sense of order in the poem. This poem opens with a reminiscence of youth:

Verse, a breeze mid blossoms straying,
 Where Hope clung feeding, like a bee——
 Both were mine! Life went a-maying
 With Nature, Hope, and Poesy,

When I was young! (lines 1-5)⁵

What impress us first are the musicality and clarity of the language of the stanza. Here "Verse" and "Hope" are expressed by the images of breeze and bee, which move around freely in nature, respectively. His youth is also represented by the three nouns: Nature, Hope and Poesy. In the third stanza, too, looking back over his past, he expresses his youth by these words "Love," "Friendship," "joys," and "Liberty." Some critics regard this kind of expression as evidence that Coleridge became unable to express or represent these concepts without depending on such abstract words. For example, referring to the lines "Flowers are lovely; Love is flower-like; / Friendship is a sheltering tree;" Patricia Adair argues, "The flat and definite equation of Love with flowers and Friendship with a tree surely shows that the images have become too fixed."⁶ However, we could say these words fit the song-like rhythm of these lines, and at the same time, aptly express the quality of an old man's reminiscence. In the poem, the speaker talks about the beautiful scenes evoked by his memory, but it is not the remembrance of a particular event at a particular moment. For example, "aery cliffs and glittering sands" over which the past speaker lightly roamed are not specified. Being idealized they are used as representative of natural sublimity and beauty.

The exclamatory line "When I was young!" consists of two spondaic feet and emphasizes the speaker's regret at the end of the first stanza. The exclamation, moreover, is repeated as an asking back at the beginning of the succeeding stanza:

When I was young?—Ah, woful When!

Ah! for the change 'twixt Now and Then! (6-7)

In the reminiscence of youth described in the preceding stanza there is

nothing woeful, and the readers are surprised a little at the phrase “Ah woeful When!” But in the next line the speaker explains his reasoning: the days of his youth cause him pain because they make him realize that he is no longer young in the contrast between now and then. In the second stanza, he remembers how he could easily roam around in the natural world:

This body that does me grievous wrong,
O'er aery cliffs and glittering sands,
How lightly then it flashed along: ——
Like those trim skiffs, unknown of yore,
On winding lakes and rivers wide,
That ask no aid of sail or oar,
That fear no spite of wind or tide!
Nought cared this body for wind or weather
When Youth and I lived in't together. (9-17)

His body is compared here to a “trim skiff,” a boat sailing audaciously on “winding lakes and river wide.” At first sight, it seems that he refers only to bodily vigour, but he uses the words “fear” and “cared” and also successfully describes his mental state. We can understand that the “winding lakes” and wide river represent both nature and the uneven but hopeful path of his life. In this stanza, emphasis is placed on a description of bodily vigour, but through this description of physical vitality, mental state, high-spiritedness and being carefree in youth are presented. In the concluding line of the stanza, the speaker personifies youth, and defines his youth as a time when “Youth” and he lived in his body together. The fourth stanza is written taking its starting point to this conclusion. The speaker exquisitely expresses his mental state wavering between the rejection and acceptance of his aging via his monologue to the personified

"Youth" within himself:

O Youth! for years so many and sweet,
'Tis known, that Thou and I were one,
I'll think it but a fond conceit—
It cannot be that Thou art gone!
Thy vesper-bell hath not yet toll'd : — (25-29)

In line 27, the speaker shows a sign of resignation saying "I'll think it but a fond conceit," but in the next line he suddenly rejects it. He begins to persuade "Youth" to put off the false disguise of age. As is observed in the following lines, while admitting that "Youth" becomes old, he recognizes the trace of youthfulness and insists that he is still youthful at heart:

I see these locks in silvery slips,
This drooping gait, this altered size:
But Spring-tide blossoms on thy lips,
And tears take sunshine from thine eyes! (33-36)

As I have mentioned, in the second stanza the speaker admits aging only on the physical level, and what makes him grievous is expressed as bodily change. We should note that also in this fourth stanza, which describes the conflict within the speaker, the change caused by aging is described by the change in the appearance of the personified "Youth." But "Sunshine" in the eyes is understood as reflecting the vigour and activeness of one's mind and here the poet emphasizes the youthfulness of the speaker's mind. By looking at the following draft in the notebook entry 4996, we can see the process by which the poet achieved this expression:

~~I hear the Breath~~ mark the change in gait, and Size,
Those gristled Looks I well behold.
But still thy Heart is in ~~thy~~ine eyes

.
I see theese Locks in silvery Slips,
This dragging gate, this alter'd Size;
But Spring-tide blossoms on thy Lips,
~~And the young Heart is in~~
~~The~~ And Tears take sunshine from thy eyes.⁷

As is observed in the quotation he rejected “But still thy Heart is in thine eyes” and “And the young Heart is in” and chose the line “And Tears take sunshine from thy eyes.” I would also like to point out that in the line, which is achieved after improvement, the sadness which tears indicate and hope which sunshine expresses, are finely combined. In the succeeding last two lines of the stanza he resolves to reject aging in his mind:

Life is but thought: so think I will
That Youth and I are house-mates still. (37-38)

These were the concluding lines of the four-stanza version of “Youth and Age.” As I have pointed out, in the poem, while admitting the physical changes caused by aging, up to the fourth stanza, the speaker avoids referring to the mental change which has occurred in him.

As to the addition of the fifth and sixth stanza to the four-stanza “Youth and Age,” there are opposing views. Morton D. Paley considers the added last part as anticlimactic, asserting “the persona that we encounter in ‘An Old Man’s Sigh’ is not the one that Coleridge presents to his readers in ‘Youth and Age’” and insists on the completeness of the four-stanza version.⁸ On the other hand, Max F. Schulz claims the superiority

of the final version. He considers that this poem "systematically contrasts the present with the past in three strophes which progress dialectically from thesis and antithesis to synthesis," and the "superb blend of themes" was achieved after efforts to combine the four-stanza "Youth and Age" and "An Old Man's Sigh: A Sonnet."⁹

Though the third part did not appear in the first published text of "Youth and Age," Coleridge had been seeking the use of the fine lines which he had already composed in notebook entry number 4996 and had intended them as a concluding part of "Youth and Age." In a notebook, which Warren E. Gribbs introduced in *The Modern Language Review* 1933, Coleridge drafted a version of the third part of the poem and added the following note to it:

But the poem formed a whole without it: and I must have either made a cheerless conclusion, or a religious one too elevated for the character of the Ode. But there is for *my* ear a sweetness in the movement of the first four lines that makes them worth writing down.¹⁰

Here Coleridge describes the final line as a "cheerless conclusion," and considers that the poem forms a whole without this part. That is supposed to be the reason he first published "Youth and Age" in the form of a four-stanza poem.

Though as Paley and, in the note quoted above, Coleridge himself observe, the four stanza poem can be considered complete in itself, the poem which concludes "Life is but thought: so think I will / That Youth and I are house-mates still" (37-38) seems to fail to convey to us the real problem of the speaker. The last stanza gives a sense of reality that is indispensable to the poem, and I consider Coleridge's completion of the six-stanza version is the right choice. The sense of loss and isolation,

which is described in the last stanza, is severer than the physical changes and can be the stronger motive for the composition of the poem. If the poet ends the poem with the optimistic, rather self-deceiving conclusion "Life is but thought," he fails to come to terms with the reality of the old man's point of view. At the same time, as Coleridge judges the first four lines of the fifth stanza are "worth writing down," the lines themselves leave a memorable impression, but these lines have first been fully brought to life placed in the context of the poem, which deals with the problem of hope in life. In the first and the third stanzas we only find the "sweet" memory of youth filled with hope, but in the fifth stanza, the speaker confesses his feeling of emptiness: "Where no hope is, life's a warning / That only serves to make us grieve" (41-42). These lines "Dew-drops are the gems of morning, / But the tears of mournful eve!" (39-40) compare the life of a man to a day, and impress on the reader the evanescence of youth. Further, here the brilliance and hope of one's youth are metaphorically expressed by the image of gems, and the sorrow in old age by tears.

On the one hand, the last part of the poem takes over the pattern which the preceding first and second parts have established; on the other, it breaks the pattern in some respects. By breaking the pattern the poet tragically emphasizes change. Firstly the length of the sixth stanza is only six lines and much shorter than the second and fourth stanzas, and gives a fragmentary impression. Secondly, in the fifth line of the first and the third stanzas he refers only to himself: "When *I* was young!" (5) and "Ere *I* was old!" (22), but in the fifth stanza, he extends the reference to the more general, saying "When *we* are old:" (43) (emphasis added).¹¹ The part of the notebook entry number 4996 quoted below indicates that he reflected on the choice of words "us" and "me":

Dew-drops are the Gems of Morning,

final version of “Youth and Age” in 1834, the very last years of Coleridge’s life. The final text of “Youth and Age” conveys the more complete problem and the mental state of the aged speaker: happiness in losing himself in memory, the sorrow caused by the contrast between the present and the past, the rejection of his aging, and resignation in an acceptance of aging. Coleridge captures an old man’s various states of mind and preserves them in the poem. As he did in his earlier life, even in his last years, Coleridge continued to capture his feeling and visions and composed this fine poem. In this poem, a sense of loss is both a starting point and a conclusion. Though the speaker cannot find a solution to extricate himself from the present situation, in the ending he gets to the heart of his problem. The strength of this poem lies in his sincerity to face up to his loss.

Notes

- 1 The text is in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1912) 439-41. Hereafter abbreviated as *CPW*.
- 2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, vol. 4, Text (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) no.4994. Hereafter abbreviated as *Notebooks*. Each volume of the *Notebooks* consists of two parts, Text and Notes.
- 3 *CPW*, vol. 2, 1084-85. As to the relationship between entry number 4993 and 4994, Kathleen Coburn explains as follows: “Yet the appearance of the hand in the MS casts some doubt on whether this and 4994 are one entry; they appear to have been written at different times and with different pens. It may be that printing them together presents correctly an intention by Coleridge to record the moment of composition of *Aria Spontanea* in 4994.” See, *Notebooks*, vol.4, Notes, no.4993.
- 4 *Notebooks*, vol. 4, Text, no. 4996.
- 5 Except where otherwise noted, all textual citations are from *CPW*. Hereafter all quotations from the text are indicated parenthetically after the cited passage.

- 6 Patricia Adair, *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967) 227.
- 7 *Notebooks*, vol.4, Text, no.4996
- 8 Morton D. Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1996) 71-72.
- 9 See Max F. Schulz, *The Poetic Voices of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Detroit : Wayne State UP, 1963) 141-44. He considers that the "antithesis" is referring to middle age. But "Ere I was old!" can indicate all the years before old age. Moreover, as we know from the title "Youth and Age," the poet considers youth and age antithetically, and refers only to past youth and present old age. It seems proper not to limit "Ere I was old!" to middle age.
- 10 Warren E. Gribbs, "S. T. Coleridge's 'The Knight's Tomb' and 'Youth and Age,'" *Modern Language Review* 28 (1933) 83-85.
- 11 There is another possibility that "we" indicates the personified "Youth" and I. But I consider here the poet refers to the aged in general.
- 12 *Notebooks*, vol.4, Text, no.4996.
- 13 *Notebooks*, vol. 4, Text, no. 4632.