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Poetic Vocations and Professions in the Early Three Versions of "The Monody on the Death of Chatterton"

Akiko Sonoda

"The Monody on the Death of Chatterton" is a poetic utterance of Coleridge's own anxieties as a poet in the form of an expression of his regret over the death of a poetic prodigy who supposedly committed suicide due to the poverty and neglect of his contemporaries. This "Monody," like many of Coleridge's poetical pieces, underwent several revisions in the course of Coleridge's lifetime. The first version is in the *Liber Aureus* (1790), a book which records good poetical compositions by James Boyer's pupils at Christ's Hospital. This poem, with extensive revision, was first published as a prefatory piece to an edition of Chatterton's *The Rowley Poems* in 1794.[1] Later, it was printed as the opening piece of his first book of poetry *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796); and was included in all of succeeding editions of Coleridge's poetry (1797, 1803, 1828, 1829 and 1834) except for the *Sibylline Leaves* (1817). As generally agreed, "Monody" is not one of Coleridge's best poems, but it is a poem which did not fail to preoccupy Coleridge over a long period of time, from school days—before he took up a career as a professional man of letters—to the end of his life. This is probably because Chatterton was an emblematic figure connected with authorial anxieties and distresses that Coleridge was experiencing throughout his career. Both of them were literary men

who worked in a time when literary works were becoming commodities in the literary marketplace; they composed poems with vocational senses predestined to this task by the Muses, although they felt their vocational and professional senses were at odds. At the same time it is supposed that young Coleridge sensed artistic affinities with Chatterton who was known for his out spoken criticism of authorities and oppressions in such works of "Kew Gardens" and "Decimus" letters. I posit that in the early versions of this poem, 1790, 1794 and 1796, written and revised in the crucial period when Coleridge was firs embarking on a literary career, he reflects his developing views on nature, a poet's role and his relationship with his audience.

The poem inscribed in the *Liber Aureus* was an expression of sympathy for Chatterton, the prodigy, regret over his death, and a protest to a contemporary society unappreciative of the genius's creations. After the conventional invocation to the Muse, the poem describes Chatterton's corpse "of many a livid hue" and is "on the bare ground" (lines 7-8), whose miserable sight fills the speaker's heart with anger. Compared with later versions, this 1790 "Monody" has greater emphasis on the description of Chatterton's distress when he faced neglect and scorn from people, and the emotional conflicts that eventually drove him to suicide. In the following lines (40-79) the speaker imagines Chatterton's disappointment when he came to London, where there were greater chances for success, "[E]late of Heart and confident of Fame," and surmises his spiritual struggles over the thought of committing suicide. Though the thought of his birthplace, mother and sister might have flashed upon his mind and dissuaded him from committing suicide, "Despair" and "Indignation":

> Told the keen insult of th' unfeeling Heart,
> The dread dependence on the low-born mind,

Told every Woe, for which thy breast might smart,
Neglect and grinning scorn and Want combin'd—
(1790; 74-77)[2]

The "keen insult of th' unfeeling Heart" presumably implies the charge of forgery made against him, and the "dread dependence on the low-born mind" hints at the situation that he should write catering to the requirements of the marketplace which was supported by the public who did not appreciate his works as much as he thought they deserved. In the economy of the literary marketplace, generally speaking, the readers' response was closely related to the income a writer gained through the publication. Coleridge attributes the reason for Chatterton's suicide to "Want and cold Neglect" that "chill'd" his soul. He questions:

Is this the land of liberal Hearts?
Is this the land, where Genius ne'er in vain
Pour'd forth her soul-enchanting strain? (1790; 13-15)[3]

It might have been a general assumption that people in Britain are appreciative of poetry, however, given the examples of Chatterton, Butler, Spencer and Otway, the speaker of this poem could not help regarding the people in Britain to be "unfeeling Heart" and the "low-born mind," who did not or could not appreciate the works by poetic geniuses. Although it is not certain if Coleridge had already decided to take up a poetic career at that time, it is certain that poetry was one of the possible future careers Coleridge was contemplating, who had been enthusiastic about poetry.[4] This version of the "Monody"closes with the following invocation to Chatterton:

Grant me, like thee, the lyre to sound,
Like thee, with fire divine to glow—
But ah! when rage the Waves of Woe,
Grant me with firmer breast t'oppose their hate,
And soar beyond the storms with upright eye elate!
(1790; 86-90)[5]

Here, the speaker is wishing for two powers—one is the creative power as a poet foreordained by God, and another the fortitude with which to fight the disdain of the public and ascend to a point beyond the reach of the malignancy of a contentious people. It seems that Coleridge judges that the latter power was lacking for Chatterton. As a young boy who has the same ambition of becoming a poet, Coleridge hopes for a fortitude which would lead him to a triumph over the people who defeated Chatterton. This 1790 version is an expression of deep sympathy to the young poet who was impelled to the suicide, however, it does not come to the point where Coleridge identifies himself with the poet. This is probably because Coleridge himself had not experienced the hate and neglect by the public as a poet and Coleridge closes the poem with an optimistic wish that he would not be defeated by the unfavourable reception of the public.

The crucial difference between the 1790 version and the 1794 version is in the mode of representation of Chatterton. In the 1790 version, the main focus was placed on Chatterton's spiritual conflicts and the speaker's sympathy for him. Although there is no fundamental change in this sympathetic attitude and expressions of grief over Chatterton's suffering and death, the Chatterton figure is somewhat mystified in the 1794 text. Coleridge is doing this by implying a strong bond between the poet and nature, as a manifestation of God, as a place where a poet is most welcomed and

nurtured as an essential part, and, as a source of inspiration. This may be because of the Pantisocratic scheme which came up in the early summer of 1794 and made Coleridge aware of the importance of nature to both the physical and spiritual well-beings of the human beings. In the scheme, Coleridge, with his friends including Robert Southey, intended to build a communal society in the uncorrupted natural beauty of America, where they would be able to fully receive divine influence of God. David Fairer has argued that the poem written in 1790 expresses a figure "specific, embodied, engaged, communicative, manly," and portrays Chatterton as a radical figure. He considers the later version of 1794 as "a more generalized and less focused text than it predecessor."[6] His observation is right, because, in the 1794 version, greater emphasis on Coleridge's own idea concerning what a poet should be rather than the mere Monody on Thomas Chatterton. In the 1794 text, Chatterton's image as a poetic genius possessed of an extraordinary creativity, is more effectively expressed by the reference to his close connection with nature. Whilst there are no references to nature and natural scenes in the 1790 text, in the later versions the poet's relationship to nature is emphasized passim. Firstly, in lines 15 and 16 of the 1794 text, when the speaker grieves that "heaven-born Genius so should fall," he claims that his deep grief is the same as Nature's, by adding parenthetically that "'tis Nature's bosom-startling call." Chatterton's distress and suicide were described as grievous to nature as well. Secondly, in the opening of the 1794 text, Chatterton, "poor Misfortune's child" is imagined to be wandering in the Sorrow's desert, whilst at the opening of the 1790 text, he is just imagined to be dead and lying on the "bare ground." Further, in the concluding part of the 1794 text, the poem returns to the same scene as its opening:

Here, far from Men, amid this pathless grove,
In solemn thought the Minstrel wont to rove,
Like Star-beam on the rude sequester'd tide
Long-glittering, thro' the Forest's murksome pride.

And here, in Inspirations's eager Hour,
When most the big soul feels the mad'ning Power,
  These wilds, these caverns roaming o'er,
  Round which the screaming Sea-gulls soar
With wild unequal steps he pass'd along,
Oft pouring on the winds a broken song:
Anon upon some rough Rock's fearful Brow,
Would pause abrupt—and gaze upon the waves below.
(1794; 96-107)[7]

Like sea gulls, the Minstrel, who wonders through the sublime scene of a deserted wild, is a part of nature and is under the influence of the "mad'ning power" of inspiration. This figure reminds readers of the old mariner in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* who wanders around condemned to repeat the tale of his experience when an inspiration visits him. This is probably the image of Chatterton's afterlife. He, who is predestined to be a poet, is still meditating songs even after his death. Thirdly, there are changes in the description of the exemplary poet figure who died in poverty and neglect. In the 1790 version, Butler and Otway were respectively expressed as "felt Want's poignant sting" and "[S]ank beneath a load of Woe." In the 1794 text, Spencer (not Butler) is "[B]eneath chill Disappointment's deadly shade / His weary Limbs in lonely Anguish lay'd!" and, of Otway Coleridge wrote "While 'mid the pelting of that pitiless storm, / Sunk to the cold Earth Otway's famish'd form."[8] The word "shade" may imply the shade of

tree, though it is a tree of "Disappointment," and Otway is returning to the earth, though it is the unwelcoming cold earth. In this version, it is implied that they died in nature. Fourthly, and most importantly, in the 1794 version of the poem, the glory of Chatterton's achievement is expressed in images of the natural world:

> Clad in Nature's rich array,
> And bright in all her tender hues,
> Sweet Tree of Hope! thou loveliest Child of Spring!
> How fair didst thou disclose thine early bloom,
> Loading the west-winds with its soft perfume! (1794; 49-53)[9]

This perhaps shows Coleridge's awareness of what a poet's relationship to the natural world should be. Chatterton is characterized as "Sweet Tree of Hope" and the "loveliest Child of Spring" embraced by rich nature. The image of Chatterton is de-realized and expressed like a seraph in the earthly paradise. His poetic genius is expressed as the blossom of a tree that sends its perfume on the west wind. Furthermore the change which he experienced is figuratively expressed through the change of weather:

> Ah! soon upon thy poor unshelter'd head
> Did Penury her sickly mildew shed:
> And soon the scathing Lightning bade thee stand,
> In frowning Horror o'er the blighted Land! (1794; 57-60)[10]

By emphasizing the bond between the poet and nature, the 1794 version of the "Monody" represents Chatterton as a somewhat unreal and transcendental figure, who lives in a different world from ordinary people. After his death, he, in solitude, drifts in a wilderness—outside

of the boundary of everyday life—still meditating songs and drawing inspirational power from nature.

As young men with literary ambition in the late eighteenth century, it was impossible for both of Chatterton and Coleridge to avoid working in and for the literary marketplace to some extent. Judging from the fact that the cause of Chatterton's suicide is conventionally attributed to "poverty" and "neglect," it is obvious that there was an assumption that a poet's efforts should be rewarded by pecuniary recognition as well as by the respect from the public. However, as the two exemplary names of Otway and Spencer, or Butler in 1790, show, this disappointing fate is expressed as not particular to Chatterton but rather as a common one for a man of genius. The development in periodical publication was a double-edged sword for writers. As a result of this development it had become easier to find a place of publication for their work, as well as a means of earning their livelihood. However, as a result of the sharp increase in the number of publications, the borderline between popular and serious or high-brow literature one had become ambiguous. In addition, there was a prejudice among people including authors themselves that the marketplace produces second-rate pieces which cater to popular taste, whilst works written without any financial need tended to be regarded as having genuine values. In this situation, poets who work with high ideals and were confident in their genius, felt a need to claim their legitimacy as poets by emphasizing their genius and special power of imagination, and their transcendence of practical matters such as income and literary business. I would suggest that the Romantic poets' claim concerning a poet's genius and transcendence of the trifles of everyday life, is partly from the necessity to secure their positions as poets producing work of genuine worth.

Romantic poets, who were sympathetic to Chatterton, usually

regarded him as a naïve young boy with genius who did not have any practical knowledge of how to steer himself in the literary marketplace. Coleridge, referring to Chatterton, wrote to Southey in July 1797:

> A young man by strong feelings is impelled to write on a particular subject—and this is all, his feelings do for him. They set him upon the business and then they leave him.—He has such a high idea, of what poetry ought to be, that he cannot conceive that such things as his natural emotions may be allowed to find a place in it—[11]

However, as recent scholarship has shown, Thomas Chatterton, was actually a more sagacious professional writer than usually assumed. Chatterton started publishing his poems in Bristol when he was fifteen, and by the time he moved to London with an ambition to catch greater chances which would bring him more money and fame in the capital city, he had already published 31 pieces in seven different journals, five of which were London journals; had started correspondence with London publishers while he was in Bristol; met many people who would be helpful in his literary business including James Dodsley from whose Chatterton wished to publish the Rowley Poems, as soon as he arrived in London.[12] After his arrival in London, he published his writings as well as poetry to several London magazines, and was moderately successful, although, as Michael F. Suarez has pointed out, it was unlikely that he could achieve his most important objective in his London activity—to publish the Rowley poems with a prestigious London publisher.[13] The closing lines of the 1790 text might imply that Chatterton could not transcend all the trifles and could not rise to a point beyond the reach of the malignancy of his contemporary people, where a poet should be. However, in the 1794 text, Coleridge expressed Chatterton as an ideal poet figure, by emphasizing an aspect of a poet inspired by God, who lives in a different world or realm

from ordinary people.

In the 1796 text, published as the opening piece of the *Poems on Various Subjects*, I would suggest that Coleridge's anxiety about his future career as a professional man of letters is more specifically expressed. From around 1794, Coleridge started his career as a professional man of letters. With the prospect of raising money for the Pantisocracy, he and Southey wrote the play, *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794), gave public lectures on religion and political matters in Bristol (1795), and after Southey's abandonment of the Pantisocratic scheme in the summer of 1795, Coleridge planned his own journal *The Watchman* and put his energy into completing poems for his first book of poetry. All of these were done in order to fulfil a promise which had already been made in advance. Through these literary enterprises, Coleridge experienced himself the difficulties and dilemma of writing poetry and other literary works in order to fulfil the promised task. While preparing for public lectures in Bristol, Coleridge often complains how hard and time-consuming his present work is. On a practical level it was not an easy task to complete a work, with which he could truly be satisfied with, by a particular deadline; on a theoretical level, it caused a dilemma as to what a poetic creation should be, because to write to order, more or less, requires a poet to compose unnaturally without enough inspiration and preparation. He strongly felt a dichotomy between his actual situation with the ideal. In a letter to Joseph Cottle dated 22nd February 1796, Coleridge complained:

> It is my business and duty to thank God for all his dispensations, and to believe them the best possible—but indeed I think I should have been more thankful, if he had made me a journeyman Shoemaker, in stead of an 'Author by Trade'! I have left my friends, I have left plenty—I have left that ease which would have enabled me to secure a literary

> immortality at the price of pleasure, and to have given the public works conceived in moments of inspiration, and polished with leisurely solicitude[14]

He continues that "[T]he Future is cloud & thick darkness—Poverty perhaps, and the thin faces of them that want bread looking up to me! Nor is this all—my happiest moments for composition are broken in on by the reflection of—I *must* make haste—I am too late—I am already months behind! I have received my *pay* before hand!"

At the end of the 1796 text, new lines which refer to the Pantisocratic scheme, were added. Poems included in the *Poems on Various Subjects*, which was published on 16 April 1796, had been sent to Cottle by the end of March. The date of composition of these lines is not certain. I. A. Gordon has suggested that they were composed in September and October 1794. His grounds for it are that this was a time when Coleridge, who was then back in Cambridge, was able to write enthusiastically about the Pantisocratic scheme; a sonnet whose octave was incorporated into the 1796 text was included in Coleridge's letter to Southey dated 18th September 1794;[15] and Coleridge dates the "Monody" October 1794 in the succeeding editions of his book of poetry. Though it is certain that the eight lines which were the octave of a sonnet included in a letter to Southey, were written in September, it is not certain if Coleridge had composed all of the lines which were added to the ending part of the 1796 text at that time; and it is not even clear if he had, then, intended these lines as a part of the "Monody." Actually, because of the lack of documentary evidence, it is difficult to specify the date of composition or revision of this poem. I would suggest there is a possibility the additional lines were composed later than Gordon concludes. Coleridge started sending his manuscripts to Cottle and his printer from the late spring or the summer of 1795, and he finished sending all the poems by the

end of March, 1976. Coleridge wrote in a letter to Poole dated 30th March 1796, "My poems are finished."[16] Judging from the letter to Cottle, which Earl Leslie Griggs surmises with certainty to be written on 30th March, 1796, Coleridge finished the preface after he completed all the poems for the volume.[17] Though the realization of the plan of Pantisocracy might have become more distant than before after the withdrawal of Robert Southey from the plan in the summer of 1795, Coleridge had not given up the scheme at all. He had been wishing to realize it in some form, and *The Watchman* was originally projected for the purpose of raising funds for it. If Coleridge had completely given up the Pantisocracy, it is more likely that he did not include these lines in the opening piece of his first book of poetry. Much less, he would not have referred to it in the prefatory essay to this volume as "an intended emigration to America."[18]

If we assume the later date of composition of the lines added, an interesting reading is possible. In the 1796 text, after the ending of the 1794 text, Coleridge continues:

> Poor CHATTERTON! Farewell! Of darkest hues
> This chaplet cast I on thy unshap'd tomb;
> But dare no longer on the sad theme muse,
> Lest kindred woes persuade a kindred doom:
> For oh! Big gall-drops, shook from FOLLY's wing,
> Have blacken'd the fair promise of my spring;
> And the stern FATE transpierc'd with viewless dart
> The last pale Hope, that shiver'd at my heart!
>
> (1796; 110-17)[19]

The last four lines might imply his difficult experience as a professional writer and furthermore his likely failure of *The Watchman*,

which was to be discontinued in the following months. In the lines in which he fears that "kindred woes", probably more than the unfavourable reception of his own and Chatterton's work, "persuade a kindred doom," Coleridge expresses an anxiety that he might follow the same fate as Chatterton because his experience as a professional writer might follow the same pattern as Chatterton.

Thus, being disappointed, the speaker turns his mind to the intended immigration to America. Forgetting about the past "shame and anguish of the evil day," he seeks "the cottag'd dell / where virtue calm with careless step may stray." There, the speaker imagines Chatterton, who if he had lived, would join his community as a fellow pursuer of freedom and liberty:

> O CHATTERTON! That thou wert yet alive!
> Sure thou would'st spread the canvass to the gale,
> And love, with us, the tinkling team to drive
> O'er peaceful Freedom's UNDIVIDED dale;
> And we, at sober eve, would round thee throng,
> Hanging, enraptur'd, on thy stately song!
> And great with smiles the young-eyed POESY
> All deftly mask'd, as hoar ANTIQUITY. (1796; 126-33)[20]

In their society, they would discuss their ideas concerning the realization of freedom, and would fully appreciate Chatterton's poetic achievement, which has been neglected or charged with forgery. However, it is undeniable that this is a society detached from the society which they should change, a kind of refuge for poets neglected in their contemporary society. The speaker refers to his vision as "vain Phantasies." It is useless to dream such a thing, because now Chatterton is dead, but it is also pointless in that it does not change

the situation that impelled Chatterton to suicide.

Significantly, the "Monody" was the opening piece for his first book of poetry. By printing it at the beginning of the book, Paul Magnuson has pointed out, Coleridge could "publicize his quest of income."[21] At the same time, by speaking of Chatterton's poetic genius and the public's failure in appreciating him, Coleridge could assert the point that he is in the same line of genius as Chatterton, whose work should not be neglected like Chatterton's. Thus he could claim his legitimacy as a poet and could warn readers not to repeat the same mistake with him as with Chatterton.

Like Chatterton, who came from Bristol to the capital city "Elate of heart" and "confident of fame," Coleridge commenced his literary career with high ideals and confidence in the value of his work. As we have seen, Coleridge believed that a poet's achievement should be rewarded by both public respect and financial recognition, however, through his own experience of writing to order and of unappreciative readers, he imagined that he felt the same disappointment and anxieties as Chatterton about his future as a poet. The three early texts of the "Monody," reflect Coleridge's awareness of the ideal strong bond between poets and nature as a manifestation of God, his compulsion to claim the legitimacy of poets' position, and his increasing anxieties concerning his career as a professional writer.

Notes

[1] Thomas Chatterton, *Poems, Supposed to Have been Written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley, and Others, in the Fifteenth Century,* ed. Lancelot Sharpe (Cambridge: B. Flower, 1794) xxv-xxviii. Facsimile edition of this volume is available as Thomas Chatterton, *The Rowley Poems* 1794, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1990).

[2] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, vol.1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1912) 128. Hereafter cited as *CP*.

[3] *CP*, vol.1, 13.

[4] Coleridge had been including poetical pieces in his letters to his brothers, especially to George when he was just fourteen. An earliest letter with a poetical piece is in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, vol.1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956) 1-5. Hereafter cited as *CL*.

[5] *CP*, vol.1,15.

[6] David Fairer, "Chatterton's Poetic Afterlife, 1770-1794: A Context for Coleridge's Monody," *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, ed. Nick Groom (London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1999) 248.

[7] *Rowley Poems*, xxviii.

[8] *Rowley Poems*, xxvi.

[9] *Rowley Poems*, xxvi-xxvii.

[10] *Rowley Poems*, xxvii.

[11] *CL*, vol.1, 333.

[12] Michael F. Suarez, SJ, "'This Necessary Knowledge': Thomas Chatterton and the Ways of the London Book Trade," *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture* 96. Also refer to a letter written shortly after his arrival in London. Reporting his "glorious prospect," he wrote to his mother: "The poverty of authors is a common observation, but not always a true one. No author can be poor who understands the arts of booksellers—Without this necessary knowledge, the greatest genius may starve; and, with it, the greatest dunce live in splendor. This knowledge I have pretty well dipped into." Thomas Chatterton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton: A Bicentenary Edition*, ed. Donald S. Taylor and Benjamin B. Hoover, vol.1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 561.

[13] Suarez, 111.

[14] *CL*, vol.1, 185.

[15] This sonnet was first published in the *Life and Correspondence of R. Southey* (1849), where this is attributed to Coleridge's friend S. Favell. However, as Sara Coleridge had argued, it is obvious that this sonnet was composed by Coleridge.

[16] *CL*, vol.1, 195.

[17] Coleridge wrote in the letter: "I will be at your Shop at half past six—if you will give me a dish of Tea—and between that time & eleven o'clock at night I will write out the whole of the notes &the preface." *CL*, vol.1, 193. As is in his letter of 22nd of February, 1796: "I have been composing in the fields this morning, and came home to write down the first rude Sheet of my Preface," it seems that he had started writing the preface in late February. *CL*, vol.1, 186.

[18] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subjects 1796*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1990) x.

[19] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. John Beer, Everyman's Library 27 (1963; London: David Campbell, 1999) 38.

[20] *Poems*, 38.

[21] Paul Magnuson, "Coleridge's Discursive 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton'," *Romanticism on the Net*, 17 (February 2000). http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scats0385/17monody.html