From *Wat Tyler* to *A Vision of Judgement*
The 'sincerity' of Southey's liberal sensibility from the 1790s to the 1820s

Chine Sonoi

(i)

IN *WAT TYLER* (WRITTEN IN 1794 AND PUBLISHED IN 1817), the young Robert Southey undoubtedly emerges as a poet full of enthusiasm for protest, embracing, along with Coleridge at that time, a vision of an ideal egalitarian society in a brave new world. By contrast, in *A Vision of Judgement* (writ. 1820–21, pub. 1821), we see an older poet of discreet and subdued manner, by now willing to write an encomium not only to the king but also to established English society. Does the lapse of 26 years between the dates of composition of the two works thus show a clear or perhaps hazy transformation of the poet's political and moral stance towards the ideas of freedom and idealism? Whether the process was clear or hazy, it can be demonstrated that Southey did not change his views substantially during this period, but he certainly grew deeper in the pursuit of his aesthetic goals.

Wat Tyler, an Essex smith who came to prominence in the late fourteenth century, openly proclaimed the importance of human liberty. He led peasants from Essex and Kent to protest to the young king (Richard II) about their dire conditions and to demand the abolition of serfdom, unfair taxation, and other unjust burdens, only to be killed the very day after his seemingly successful negotiation with the king. Apparently, what Southey admired in Tyler was the strength of his belief in the idea of human liberty and equality, since this idea was by no means a self-evident characteristic of human society: both he and Coleridge fully understood the difficulty of putting such an idea into practice, as a result of their experiment with so-called Pantisocracy.

In Southey's oeuvre, Wat Tyler's vision is followed by that of Madoc, a Welsh hero who tries to establish a nation of his own in America. The work *Madoc* (1805), however, reveals, in its totality, the complex philosophy that Southey had elaborated, mixed with essential empathy for reformist ideology, as well as a discordant colonialist stance. This ambivalence seems less adroitly balanced in the figure of Madoc himself, a pantisocratic champion of social reformation imbued with a sense of patriotism. Madoc's insistence on building an egalitarian society, with equal ownership of property and the emancipation of slaves, is completely just: indeed, his is the voice of justice in an undeveloped land. On the other hand, for instance, the relationship between the Hoamen, the enslaved people, and Madoc, their prince, corresponds intrinsically to that between a slave and his master. His "heroic" career, however, sees its culmination in the religious context. He was successful in the conversion of these people to Christianity. Releasing the Hoamen from their slavery, Madoc, playing the role of their saviour, leads them to partake of Welsh civilisation and thereby enjoy, for the elevation of their souls, the blessings available within the institution of Christianity:

> For higher powers, and more exalted bliss.
> Share then our law, and be with us . . . .[1]

The Hoamen accept the leadership of Madoc as they recognise his competence, amply demonstrated by his having conquered the Aztecs who enslaved the Hoamen. Southey seems not to have been sensibly conscious of the flawed morality of this social structure, which apparently replicates one of the Christian missionary premises of his time. Belief in the virtue of Christianity and the value of British culture, and faith in their invariable soundness, are constants in Southey's, and thus also his hero's, world view.

At the surface level, *A Vision of Judgement*, written in elaborate hexameters, is, stylistically, a laureate poem, that is, an elegiac eulogy written upon the death of the king. In actual fact, however, it encompasses multiple strata of the poet's philosophy: on the one hand, belief in the freedom of human beings, as in *Wat Tyler*, and in emancipation presented in terms of Christian colonialism, as in *Madoc,* with its emotional swing towards compassionate British culture; on the other hand, the final, aesthetic recognition of the power of infinite nature, as in *A Vision*, which enables repressed human minds to free themselves from their enclosed situation and achieve the ultimate realisation of freedom.

In the context of *A Vision,* the poet regards the king's death as an attainment of freedom, which has been made possible only by death, bringing release from countless bondages and troubles: from the "thraldom" of ruling the country, from ceaseless wars, from the loss of the American colonies, and, above all, from his own "mental and visual" darkness as well as from the ever-tormenting recognition of the deterioration of his own mind. This slave-like condition binding the king was not, for the poet, essentially different from the enslaved condition of the suffering people throughout the history of English society. The bell which tolls through the silence of evening at the king's death is a "warning"[2] voice that not only informs people that even a king must die, but also surely conveys positive overtones of relief through spiritual freedom after a life full of cares and conflicts:

> 'Tis a deep dull sound that is heavy, and mournful at all times,
> For it tells of mortality always. . . .
> Thou art released! I cried: thy soul is deliver'd from bondage!
> Thou who hast lain so long in mental and visual darkness . . .[3]

The whole context of this work is comprised not only of the elegy dedicated to the king, but also of reprises and revisions of the poet's lifelong aesthetic enquiries into the nature, reasons, and political justifications of the human

---

[1] Robert Southey, *Madoc*, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, gen. ed. Lynda Pratt, 5 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), II, ed. Lynda Pratt, Part 2, Book VIII, ll. 97-98, p. 162.

[2] Southey, "A Vision of Judgement", *Robert Southey: Later Poetical Works, 1811-1838,* gen. eds. Tim Fulford and Lynda Pratt, 4 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), III, eds. Lynda Pratt, Daniel E. White, Ian Packer, Tim Fulford and Carol Bolton, l. 22, p. 562, Henceforth cited in the text as SLPW.

[3] Southey, "A Vision of Judgement", SLPW, III, ll. 24-30, pp. 562-63.

predicament, the difficulty of achieving spiritual freedom, and the ultimate meanings of Nature itself.

(ii)

It seems Southey's speculations on human happiness became deeper, or, more precisely, lost their former single-mindedness, during the period of drastic changes in society and in people's minds after the political commotions in France and in his own country. Naturally, such upheavals as the Reign of Terror in France (1792-1794), William Pitt's two Gagging Acts (1795), and the two wars against France (1793-1802, 1803-1815), taught Southey lessons distinct from those of ideology and theory. His concept concerning the freedom of human beings, however, seemed hardly to have changed from the view he held in the 1790s, though on the other hand he clearly did recognise the potential perils of liberalism when carried to extremes. In a letter of his to Mary Barker in 1801, denouncing France, he vented his anger: "France has played the traitor with Liberty. . . . England has mended—is mending—will mend. I have still faith enough in God, and hope enough of man. but not of France! Freedom cannot grow up in that hot bed of immorality."[4]

In *A Vision,* the idea of liberalism – in other words, the idea of freedom as a means of bringing about the happiness of human beings – is an essential subject of the poem. *A Vision* argues that the belief in the strength of this principle can be compatible even with the disorderly debates and demonstrations of social reformers:

> . . . in the hubbub of senseless sounds the watchwords of faction,
> Freedom, Invaded Rights, Corruption, and War, and Oppression,
> Loudly enounced were heard.[5]

The watchwords of the reformers were heard by the king (when he was alive) but he was not their target. The king was neither the oppressor of freedom nor the attacker of human rights. The target that the reformers attacked was not the king but the social system. Taking these lines as contradicting the poet's own stance of positive support for human liberty and equality, as Hazlitt did, is not to the point.

In *Wat Tyler* one finds, among other similar watchwords, John Ball's candid and zealous appeal to the people in justification of the immutability of human rights and freedom:

> Boldly demand your long-forgotten rights,
> Your sacred, your inalienable freedom —
> Be bold – be resolute – be merciful![6]

---

[4] Southey, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, gen. eds. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer, Part Two, eds. Ian Packer and Lynda Pratt, Letter 626, Southey to Mary Barker, mid-late November, 1801, Online at Romantic Circles. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Two/HTML/letterEEd.26.626.html>

[5] Southey, "A Vision of Judgement", SLPW, III, ll. 18-20, p. 577.

John Ball's demand, instigating people to claim their sacred right of human liberty, appears to be unchanged from the reformers' catchphrases, which later re-emerge in the same protest in *A Vision*. Hazlitt and other critics of the time argue that the differences in Southey's views – represented, for instance, in the above quotations – are obvious, and that they are as far apart from each other as alpha is from omega.[7] The criticism which maintained Southey's "total change"[8] in political attitude towards social reforms is responding to Southey's article in the *Quarterly Review* published in 1816 which analysed the "incendiary" nature of social reformers and journalists who were permitted "to sow the seeds of rebellion, insulting the government, and defying the laws of the country."[9] Southey's "ultra-royalist"[10] opinion does, in Hazlitt terms, clash with his advocacy for the revolutionary hero, Wat Tyler.

My view, however, is that Southey's thoughts on human liberty had not in fact changed, essentially, during those years, and that to portray the difference between the two works as indicating the poet's political apostasy is to oversimplify this dispute quite unduly.

It is true that the subject of protest in *Wat Tyler* was denounced by William Smith, MP, as "seditious" in the parliamentary debate on the Seditious Assemblies Bill on 14 March 1817. The publication of *Wat Tyler* (the manuscript of which had been missing for twenty-three years) was all the more controversial due to its theme and the status of its author as Poet Laureate. In this difficult situation, Southey dared to declare that his view of human liberty expressed in *Wat Tyler* was true to his mind. Southey challenged his opponents by insisting that the theme of *Wat Tyler* had "no *wickedness*" in it and that he felt "no *shame* for it". Southey also admitted that the poem was written in the "sincerity" of his heart.[11] On the other hand, he accepted that the public display of liberal principles should be restricted to a certain extent at that time. He came to the conclusion that the complicated evaluation of *Wat Tyler* lay in "a mischievous publication"[12] that put pressure on the work, without any adjustment to contemporary circumstances.

Southey's principle of human liberty in *A Vision*, which accorded with the spirit of *Wat Tyler*, became well attuned to the philosophical climate of the time. Ideologically, Southey's vision of human liberty seems subdued, when he depicts it, for instance, in images of the nostalgic landscapes of his native Bristol. In these images, the tone of celebration of Bristol's long-enduring towers and rocks is mingled with recollection of the youthful fervour of his period of protest. Southey's admiration for Thomas Chatterton in this context

---

6 Southey, *Wat Tyler*, SLPW, III, ll. 123-25, p. 486.

7 Cf. William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1932), XI, p. 82.

8 *Examiner*, (9 March 1817), pp. 157-59, p.157.

9 *Quarterly Review,* XVI, No. 31 (1816), pp. 225-278, p. 275.

10 *Examiner*, (9 March 1817), pp. 157-59, p.157.

11 Southey, *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. John W. Warter, 4 vols. (London: Longman, 1856), III, p. 66, Southey to Charles W. Williams Wynn, 22 March 1817.

12 Southey, *A Letter to William Smith, Esq., M. P.* (published in April 1817) in *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey, 6 vols. (London, 1849-50), IV, p. 372.

is not a simple, passing comment but a more complex one:

> Marvellous boy, whose antique songs and unhappy story
> Shall, by gentle hearts, be in mournful memory cherish'd
> Long as thy ancient towers endure, and the rocks of St. Vincent….[13]

The tone of nostalgia is also gloomy, indicating to a greater or lesser extent Southey's belated discovery of an indirect way to express whatever he thinks about human liberty and freedom in his admiration for the young radical spirit as well as the city which once attracted liberal protestors.

(iii)

A Vision of Judgement opens with a natural landscape, under the symbolic title of "The Trance," suggesting a psychological moment of poetical meditation. The poet's stance at the opening is therefore moulded in the image of a solitary meditator in the midst of nature. The light, sounds and clear shapes of the landscape have all faded. If the poem had not taken the shape of a formal elegy for the deceased king, this opening could have been the concluding section. This opening canto does in fact employ a conclusive tone to convey the poem's final theme. The evening stillness of the mountain, lake and vale makes the pensive poet realise the potential of "Infinity" which nature possesses. The poet perceives that "Infinity" might be the artistic goal which he imagines he has achieved at this moment.

> 'TWAS at that sober hour when the light of day is receding . . .
> Fade, like the hopes of youth, till the beauty of earth is departed:
> Pensive, though not in thought, I stood at the window, beholding
> Mountain and lake and vale . . .
> Pensive I stood and alone, the hour and the scene had subdued me,
> And as I gazed in the west, where Infinity seem'd to be open,
> Yearn'd to be free from time, and felt that this life is a thraldom.[14]

The poet realises that the potential of infinity signifies the infinite acceptance by nature of human sufferings, human limitations, and the thraldom of human lives, even the king's. Southey claims that the influences of nature on human minds can also be called nature's "moral effect." Contemplating the scene before the lake in the dusk, he perceives the power of nature, which can heal human minds and release them from the bondages and severities of life.

The moral effect which nature exerts is the central image that Southey evaluates, and he insists that this is the positive result that poetry can finally expect to achieve. In the "Preface" to *A Vision of Judgement*, Southey refers to the "moral purity"[15] of English literature. This characteristic has been its "distinguished" trait for more than half a century, and has caused the

[13] Southey, "A Vison of Judgement", SLPW, III, ll. 54-56, p 602.
[14] Southey, "A Vision of Judgement", SLPW, III, ll. 1-21, pp. 561-62.
[15] Southey, "Preface" to "A Vision of Judgement", SLPW, III, p. 541.

improvement of English "national manners." [16] Nature, with its healing stillness, sublimity, immensity, stability and beauty, elevates people's spirit and the poet's mind. During those years in particular, he was keenly aware of the notion of his double duties as a poet: one stemming from the laureateship, the other from the moral power of poetry.

Southey's plea was to remind readers living in hard times of successive wars and intolerance, and of the goodness and stability which nature potentially bestows. These moral aspects of poetry were perhaps what Southey had become more alert to since receiving his laureateship. In particular, for instance, his admiration for the stability which nature generates might suggest his veering towards ideological "orthodoxy" [17], but, in fact, it reflects his reinforced confidence as a poet who has realised the profound value of nature, imbued with almost religious tinges reminiscent of Wordsworth's vision of nature. Be that as it may, the Wordsworthian images of the rural countryside in the introductory lines of *A Vision* certainly offer a message of calm and familiar relief to Southey's English audience.

The poet's artistic viewpoint reached a peak of intensity while writing *A Vision*. This enabled him to identify a significant relationship between human beings and nature that he believed would emancipate the emotionally oppressed from their troubles if only they could get closer to nature. From one point of view, Southey's presentation of his belief in the benefits of the English landscape, with its power to inspire and release the human spirit at this particular point in history, seems his goal as poet laureate, especially if we take into consideration the appearance of a series of strict censures against his poetical stance. However, if we try to imagine how the completion of *A Vision* was possible through the poet's imaginative and ideological contemplation and his resolution as a poet, we may acknowledge that Southey was successful in communicating the specific philosophical objectives of his poetry, including his lifelong themes of human liberty and the spirit of nature in which human beings can participate.

(iv)

Supplement-wise, let me review some facts concerning the works discussed here. *A Vision of Judgement*, with respect to its public nature and the fact that the king was to read it, had a decidedly conservative and anti-Jacobin tone. It was naturally praised by the king himself, and by the monarchical faction such as the writers of the *Anti-Jacobin Review.* On the other hand, Byron, Hazlitt, Francis Jeffrey and others fashioned acrimonious criticisms against Southey's apostasy from republican politics. The untimely publication of *Wat Tyler* in 1817 ironically helped to fuel this view.

With the appearance of tough commentaries on Southey's works, the unfavourable ambience became more intense, when in 1816 he published *The Lay of the Laureate*, which was dedicated to Princess Charlotte on the occasion

[16] Southey, "Preface" to "A Vision of Judgement", SLPW, III, p. 541.
[17] Introduction to "A Vision of Judgement", SLPW, III, p. 524..

of her marriage. The poem was not artistically successful, as it suffers from his ambivalence between the conflicting roles of liberal advocate and conservative laureate. The work was panned by Hazlitt as "beneath criticism"[18].

Such was the background to the writing of the Preface to *A Vision*. Clearly, the poet's intention of the Preface was his own defence and to persuade readers that the poem's artistic objectives and their intellectual structuring were the primary motivations of this work. The laureate framework of the poem, i.e. an encomium to the king, is not entirely incongruous with the poem's basic tone of the homage to the country. Elucidating the value of the picturesque scenes of the English nature and the emancipation of peoples' minds sounds certainly agreeable seen under the whole context of the poem. The still, healing and restoring strength which the English landscape holds is not only the bass note of the poem but it involves, in his artistic belief, a matching metaphor of the nature of human liberty.

Another piece of late 1820s with themes of nature and human liberty also exemplifies a significant relationship between them. In *Sir Thomas More, or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829-31), a scene appears in which Sir Thomas More (as a ghost) and Southey, in a figure of Montesinos, have a conversation on the social changes and its consequences in the country from the past to the present time. The Lake sceneries are the ambience of their walking: "The water, the rocky pavement, the craggy sides, and the ash tree, form the foreground and the frame of this singular picture. . . ."[19] Sir Thomas More, who unequivocally advocated freedom of activities of human minds during the religious convulsion in 1530s, experienced the course of events of his time in the same way as Southey did from 1790s to 1820s. Politically, the outcome of the social turmoil of Sir Thomas's time and of Southey's did work, eventually, to make society more advanced, and in a moral context, both persons acknowledged that the power of simplicity, unchanging condition, restoration, and pleasure which nature would offer always worked in their minds as giving positive principles of human minds. Particularly for Southey the pleasure which nature bestowed was also deep potentials which sustained his moral experiences throughout the period of 1820s and after:

> I scarcely know any place more delightful than this [in Keswick] was … for … the fine composition of the scene, its refreshing shade and sound, and the … sense of deep retirement …[20]

Nature for Southey in 1820s and after existed in the centre of his artistic recognition also as moral strength which we find as his unchanging quality since then.

---

[18] *Examiner*, 445 (7 July 1816), pp. 426-28, p. 427.

[19] Southey, *Sir Thomas More, or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (John Murray: London, 1829-31), 2 vols, I, p.122.

[20] Southey, *Sir Thomas More*, I, p. 120.