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The Young Robert Southey: An Atlantic Poet

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I. Introduction

Robert Southey's imagination was fired by the ocean, in particular the Atlantic Ocean. According to Speck, the first time Southey saw the sea was in 1783,

the sight of which from the shore impressed him ever afterwards more than any other except that of the stars. 'If I could live over any hours of my boyhood again,' he confessed, 'it should be those which I then spent upon the beach at Weymouth' (2006 p. 11).

In 1793, he wrote a letter to Horace Walpole Bedford from Bristol on 'a wet cold evening [before] an excellent fire':

nineteen years have elapsed since I set sail upon the ocean of life – in an ill provided boat – the vessel weatherd many a storm & I took every distant cloud for land – still pushing forward for the Fortunate Islands till I discovered that they existed not for me & that like many others wiser – better than myself I must be content to wander about & never gain the port. nineteen years – certainly a fourth part of my life – perhaps how great a part! (1793 letter 66, p. 7-8).

And in a letter to his brother, Thomas, who was in the navy, the Atlantic figures prominently:

I have two reasons for preferring a residence near the sea. I love to pickle myself in that grand brine tub -- & I wish to catch its morning evening & mid day appearances for poetry, with the effect of every change of weather. . . . my last dip was in the Atlantic Ocean at the foot of the Arrabida Mountain – a glorious spot. I have no idea of sublimity exceeding it (1797 letter 213, p. 2).

Thus, if Bristol 'shaped his character and politics' (Bolton 2007, p. 16), the ocean captured his heart. Moreover, exposure to the realities

of the slave trade on Bristol's bustling streets as a boy, as well as to its 'inquiring minds and crusading spirits' (Bolton 2007, p. 19), drove him to write an anti-slavery poem, 'Zimri', at fourteen years of age. This was followed by additional abolitionist poems in the 1790s, when he and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were lecturing in Bristol (Southey 2004, p. 48-56), making an Atlantic lens best suited for considering his early works.

British people 'had turned decisively against' the slave trade by 1792, 'whatever its economic benefits' (Walvin 1999, p. 63); however, moving from a flourishing grassroots movement to appropriate action was another matter. For example, Southey encouraged abstention from sugar, but by 1797 was 'much disheartened' (Bolton 2007, p. 30) at the reaction of the populace paraphrased by Cowper, 'What, give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea!' (1788, p. 77). Enacting effective legislation would prove to be an even more daunting task:

... the Slave-trade may be considered, like the fabulous hydra, to have had a hundred heads, every one of which it was necessary to cut off before it could be subdued (Clarkson 2004, Chapter I).

Dr. Livingstone, faced with Ujijian slavery during his explorations in East Africa in the 19th century, recorded in his diary,

We must never lose sight of the fact that though the majority perhaps are on the side of freedom, large numbers of Englishmen are not slaveholders only because the law forbids the practice (2005, 19th May 1869, Chapter I).

From 1787, when Clarkson first rode in to Bristol and was filled 'with a melancholy for which [he] could not account' (Clarkson 2004, Chapter XIV), until the carrying of Wilberforce's motion in the House of Commons in 1807, there was a voluminous poetic and literary outpouring on this subject (Coleman 1999, p. 399). On that first visit to Bristol, Clarkson noticed that 'every body seemed to execrate

[slavery] though no one thought of its abolition' (2004, Chapter XIV). In the ensuing years, however, numerous anti-slavery pieces would be produced by Bristolians (Haywood 2006, p. 25), placing Yearsley, More, Southey and Coleridge at one of the epicenters of abolition's twenty-year debate in England. Southey's abolitionist poetry was 'commended by his contemporaries' (Bolton 2007, p. 31), and he was the 'most tenacious of the three [among himself, Wordsworth and Coleridge] in the anti-slavery cause' (Richardson 1999, p. 242), yet one recent study mentions Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Burns as anti-slavery poets (Carey 2005, p. 96), and Southey only as a publisher of Cowper's poems (Carey 2005, p. 102).

Therefore, although a new wave of Southey scholarship has begun, due in part to a 'handsome new five-volume edition' of Southey's poetry (Dean 2005, p. 1), and Part I of an online edition of his *Collected Letters*, 'Southey is not easily reclaimed' (Pratt 2006, p. xx). One reviewer wonders why his epics 'were ever admired. . . . They are completely mechanical and external productions, null and void' (Dean 2005, p. 2). This attitude was fostered during Southey's lifetime when there was a 'critical onslaught' of his Oriental epics (Leask 1998, p. 185), and it continues to haunt his poetic reputation, leaving him undervalued by many.

Pratt notes that Southey did not express 'his literary or political principles in a direct manner' (2006, p. xxi), a quality which may have worked to his advantage given the complexities he faced when dealing with abolition, or may indeed have been the result of it. This tendency, however, makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what he meant; therefore, one of Southey's poems, 'To the Genius of Africa', will be analyzed in terms of its poetic form, style, metaphor and meaning. In this way, it is hoped that Southey's poetics in general, and his contribution to the poetry of the abolitionist movement in particular,

will be better understood. Although primarily a poem of the desert, ‘To the Genius of Africa’ contains allusions to the Atlantic, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge deemed it ‘perfect, saving the last line’ (Bolton 2007, p. 265).

II. Southey’s Preface

Southey’s preface to his ‘Poems on the Slave Trade’, helps to set the tone:

When first the Abolition of the SLAVE-TRADE was agitated in England, the friends of humanity endeavoured by two means to accomplish it. – To destroy the trade immediately by the interference of Government; or by the disuse of West-Indian productions: a slow but certain method. For a while Government held the language of justice, and individuals with enthusiasm banished sugar from their tables. This enthusiasm soon cooled; . . . Thus ended one attempt; and the duplicity with which Mr. Wilberforce has been amused, and the Slave-Merchants satisfied, has now effectually destroyed the other.

There are yet two other methods remaining, by which this traffic will probably be abolished. By the introduction of East-Indian or Maple Sugar, or by the just and general rebellion of the Negroes: by the vindictive justice of the Africans, or by the civilized Christians finding it in their interests to be humane.

To these past and present prospects the following Poems occasionally allude: to the English custom of exciting wars upon the Slave Coast that they may purchase prisoners, and to the punishment sometimes inflicted upon a Negro for murder, of which Hector St. John was an eye-witness (2004, p. 49).

Southey refers somewhat derogatorily to William Wilberforce (though they would later become friends) (Speck 2006, p. 170), because a bill of 1792 regarding gradual abolition was ‘diverted by the House of Lords into the quicksands’ (Pollock 1977, p. 115). Wilberforce remained resolute, determined to move forward ‘by constant and regular exertions rather than by sudden and violent

ones' (Pollock 1977, p. 116); nevertheless, activists felt betrayed, as can be seen in Barbauld's poem of 1791, 'Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq.', written in response to a previous legislative setback (Richardson 1999, p. 161-169).

In addition, the line, 'civilized Christians finding it in their interests to be humane', delivers brilliant understated irony. First of all, in Southey's mind, Christians would have been inherently civilized, and thus the adjective is unnecessary, making the comment tongue-in-cheek. Secondly, civilized beings do not need prodding to act in a humane fashion, reinforcing the satire; and finally, with a particularly deft touch, Southey uses the language of commerce, 'find it in their interests', for the benefit of the Bristol traders. For Southey, this was indeed a business transaction though of a different sort, as it provides evidence of his belief in a cosmic accounting at the end of the day. This is reinforced in two of his anti-slavery sonnets, one of which comments on those who 'sip the blood-sweeten'd beverage' without a guilty conscience (2004, p. 51), and another which calls to mind the lines of Macbeth by reminding readers that there is an afterlife, and that 'there the Slave / Before the Eternal 'thunder-tongued shall plead / Against the deep damnation of your deed' (2004, p. 54).

Moreover, Southey is parodying the language of the pro-slavery movement which asserted that the African kings were barbarians who treated their subjects cruelly, making slavery in the hands of Christians a more civilized option: 'Hence it is evident, that it is better to be the Slaves of Christians, than the Victims of Heathen Ferocity' (A Planter 1789, p. 13). And finally, Southey hints at his awareness of Welsh poet John Dyer's epic in four books, 'The Fleece', in which Dyer 'expresses his sorrow on account of this barbarous trade, and looks forward to a day of retributive justice' (Clarkson 2004, Chapter III). For Southey,

the ‘just and general rebellion of the Negroes’ is synonymous with ‘vindictive justice’ (2004, p. 49), as he expresses in another sonnet:

Did then the bold Slave rear at last the Sword
Of Vengeance? drench’d he deep its thirsty blade
In the cold bosom of his tyrant lord?
Oh! who shall blame him? (2004, p. 53)

III. Stanzaic Analysis

A. The Invocation

In the opening lines of ‘To the Genius of Africa’ (1795),
O thou who from the mountain’s height
Roll’st down thy clouds with all their weight
Of waters to old Nile’s majestic tide; (2004, p. 54)

Southey evokes a supreme being that is both in tune with nature and in charge of it. These lines capture the sacred role which water played in ancient Egyptian civilization, especially the flooding of the Nile (Shaw & Nicholson, 2008, p. 225-226, 237-239, 344). The epitheton ‘majestic’, used to describe the Nile’s fertile, life-giving waters, indicates both the greatness and glory of this power, as well as conferring a sense of royalty and sublimity upon it. In Egyptian mythology, Osiris (see Figure 1), one of the oldest gods, was associated with the Nile River and with death, resurrection and fertility, while his grandson, Hapy, personified the Nile inundation (Shaw & Nicholson, 2008, p. 134-5, 310). Thus, Southey establishes poetic authority by invoking the muse of Africa rather than by turning to classical sources or to other British poets, such as Shakespeare or Milton. This is in complete contrast to Dyer, who opens his poem with a Latin inscription from Columella followed by an invocation modeled on ‘Paradise Lost’ (Goodridge 1995, p. 96). Dyer later supplies the lines, ‘Alike they shun / Libya's hot plains. What taste have they for groves / Of palm, or yellow dust of gold ?’ (1903, Book I, p. 51, 135-7).

Moreover, Southey opens a dialogue with Cowper's voice in the poem, 'The Negro's Complaint', by acknowledging the questions posed in terms of a point/counterpoint:

Is there, as ye sometimes tell us
 Is there One who reigns on high?
 Has He bid you buy and sell us,
 Speaking from his throne, the sky?
 (Cowper 1788, p. 76).

Southey's majestic 'One' lives high up in the mountains, and 'speaks' through the water of the Nile River on behalf of those being bought and sold.

He then moves to the Middle East with the lines, 'Or o'er the dark sepulchral plain / Recallest thy Palmyra's ancient pride' (2004, p. 54). These are beautiful lines referring to a location in Syria, called *Tadmor* in Hebrew, which is northeast of Damascus and southwest of the Euphrates River. The Euphrates was the last of the four rivers to have flowed out of the Garden of Eden, and as 'the Nile represented in prophecy the power of Egypt, so the Euphrates represented the Assyrian power' (euphrates 1897), creating a parallelism between Egypt and Palmyra. Palmyra was an elegant city, 'strategically located on two of the most important trade routes in the ancient world' (Palmyra 2000), which Dyer also mentions, 'To Tadmor, beauty of the wilderness, / Who down along Euphrates sent her sails' (1903, Book IV, p. 110, 156-7).

Carthage, a North African city founded by the Phoenicians and renowned for its navy and merchant fleet (Carthage 2000), was substituted for Palmyra in revised versions of the poem (Southey 2004, p. 54). Therefore, in the opening five lines of his poem, Southey has evoked ancient Egypt, Palmyra and Carthage, which not only represent the glory of the past, but each of which also possesses its own cultural monuments to the dead: Egypt has pyramids, Palmyra a large necropolis

called the Valley of the Tombs (Gravestone 2000), and Carthage also had a large necropolis. However, the greater significance of Carthage lies in the fact that it was razed by Rome during the Third Punic war, with 450,000 of its citizens killed and the remaining 50,000 sold into slavery (Ancient History 2000). Moreover, Southey describes the region around Palmyra as ‘sepulchral’, confirming his association of slavery with death.

The poem continues, ‘Amid whose desolated domes / Secure the savage chacal roams’ (2004, p. 54). *Chacal* is the French spelling of ‘jackal’, offering another connection to ancient Egypt via Anubis, the canine god of the dead (see Figure 2). Anubis is associated with the jackal and is closely connected to Osiris, for it was Anubis who wrapped Osiris’s body for mummification (Shaw & Nicholson 2008, p. 36). In addition,

Anubis’ role as the guardian of the necropolis is reflected in two of his most common epithets: *neb-ta-djeser* (‘lord of the sacred land’) and *khenty-seh-netjer* (‘foremost of the divine booth’), the former showing his control over the cemetery itself and the latter indicating his association with the embalming tent or the burial chamber (Shaw & Nicholson 2008, p. 36-7).

Southey, referring both to Anubis’s sacred role and to the *chacal* roaming freely while stalking prey amongst the ruined necropolis, creates a haunting allegoric tableau. In the final line of the first stanza, he refers to the Arab slave trade, and in so doing broadens the scope of his poem to condemn all slavery, not just that which Britain was involved with.

The second stanza finds Southey urging the power he has invoked, now called ‘the Genius of Africa’ to hear the cries of the children and to come to their rescue. Identifying human beings as children in relation to a divine authority is a well-established precept across the spectrum of world religions; however, in this context it also

provides a satirical play on pro-slavery vocabulary which can be seen in statements such as ‘the Error in urging the Emancipation of the Children of Bondage’ and in describing slave owners as an ‘indulgent Parent’ (A Planter 1789, p. 6, 11).

In lines 2-4, Southey returns to Africa,
 Not always should'st thou love to brood
 Stern o'er the desert solitude
 Where seas of sand toss their hot surges high; (2004, p. 54).

The assonance, consonance, and alliterative meter of these lines capture the loneliness and sublimity of the desert. ‘Seas of sand’ tossing their ‘hot surges high’ simulate the ocean voyage of the transatlantic slave trade, while making another inference to the Arab slave trade which passed through the Sahara for centuries (Mwachiro 2007). Southey then moves to the ‘midnight song’ of the plains near the Gambia River, his first reference to Western Africa:

Nor Genius should the midnight song
 Detain thee in some milder mood
 The palmy plains among
 Where Gambia to the torches light
 Flows radiant thro' the awaken'd night. (2004, p. 54-55)

These melodious and peaceful lines recall

an idyllic scene of communal existence in the remote parts of Africa [from Coleridge's] *Lecture on the Slave Trade*, delivered in Bristol on 16 June 1795 (McKusick 1998, p. 127).

‘To the Genius of Africa’ was dated ‘*Bristol, 1795*’ (Southey 2004, p. 54) and evidence suggests a connection with this lecture:

The lost original MS of the lecture was identified by E. H. Coleridge as being ‘partly in the handwriting of S. T. C. & partly in that of R. S.’ (Southey 2004, p. 54).

Bolton confirms that ‘this section of the lecture is in [Southey's] hand’ (2007, p. 26), illustrating the uninterrupted exchange of ideas between

the two, prompting Southey to remark, 'Coleridge is writing at the same table; our names are written in the book of destiny, on the same page' (Bolton 2007, p. 22).

B. The Plea

The stage has now been set, and Southey is ready to exhort the Genius to action. The assonance and consonance of the second stanza are replaced by ecphonestic, with Southey following Demetrius's commentary elucidated in *On Style*, using harsh words to express grandeur, and placing that which is more vivid at the end of the line or stanza, thereby heightening the effect (1995, p. 381). In this third stanza, Southey employs seven exclamation points along with hyperbolic language to communicate the urgency and gravity of the situation, providing a complete break from the first two stanzas.

In addition, Southey uses the phrase, 'the Daemon COMMERCE' (2004, p. 55), with the word 'commerce' completely capitalized, the only word in the poem to appear that way. 'Daemon' (dai/mwn) is the Attic Greek spelling for a word meaning 'god, divinity; one's destiny, lot', and is the source for the English word, 'demon' (Mastrorarde 1993, p. 110). Southey's choice of spelling evokes nuances associated with the word in Attic Greek which involve both good and evil spirits (Liddell & Scott 1940, p. 365-6). Therefore, although the first image which comes to mind is that of 'the demon commerce', one could also see it as 'the god commerce', executing a very clever pun. This again builds upon Dyer, 'As greedy mariners, whose desp'rate sails / Skim o'er the billows of the foamy flood' (1903, Book I, p. 65, 621-2), and highlights Cowper's stunning oxymoron, 'Men from England bought and sold me, / Paid my price in paltry gold' (1788, p. 75).

The next four lines of stanza three describe the circumstances in Africa with increasing intensity:

Pours all the horrors of his train,
 And hark! where from the field of gore
 Howls the hyena o'er the slain!
 Lo! where the flaming village fires the skies! (2004, p. 55).

The horrors of commerce's train are 'poured' onto the shore, an image which involves water, flow, and a spreading through the land, providing a complete inversion of the inundation of the Nile referred to earlier, which brings life. The reference is to death and to wars incurred to support the slave trade, as Cowper's ballad laments, 'By our blood in Afric wasted, / Ere our necks received the chain;' (1788, p. 76). The final line of the stanza introduces the refrain, 'Avenging Power awake – arise!' (2004, p. 55).

Stanza four continues the *deesis* or entreaty to the Genius, opening with anadiplosis, repetition of the word 'arise', to begin to create a climax. To do so, however, Southey moves away from the violent rhetoric of war and presents the universal image of a mother nursing her sick infant. He supports this change in tone with his diction, using words that begin with 'w' to create a softer effect than that of stanza three. It is similar to an *adagio*, creating a bridge between stanzas which will later build up to a *crescendo*. The air is 'hot' and 'infectious', alluding to disease or the plague, rather than war. Yet there is violence in the stanza, which comes when 'Christians tear / The drooping infant from her breast!' (2004, p. 55), a direct and 'fiery' statement (Richardson 1999, p. 242).

In addition to its musicality, stanza four is rich with visual imagery: the mother represents the continent of Africa (a beautiful reference to the land as sacred female), the hot infectious air symbolizes the plague of slavery, and 'her sick babe' personifies the people of

Africa oppressed and burdened by slavery. These lines recall Josiah Wedgwood's powerful antislavery medallions (MacLeod 1999, p.751-752), and William Blake's anti-slavery engravings, including 'Europe supported by Africa & America' (1796, p. 1). It offers a reference to the maternal goddess, Isis (see Figure 3), widely worshipped in Egypt and Syria-Palestine, who 'could be called upon to protect the young, and would be invoked at times of injury' (Shaw & Nicholson 2008, p. 160), and is reminiscent of the Christian nativity, with the mother 'bowing' over her child. Finally, to be 'whelmed' is to be submerged or immersed in water, providing a metaphor for all of those who died at sea during the voyage under horrific circumstances. This also alludes to the Christian rite of baptism while at the same time referring back to Osiris and his drowning in the Nile, a symbol of resurrection.

Stanza five builds to a crescendo by describing the factories or forts which contained the slaves prior to shipment. It is the longest stanza of the poem, containing 13 lines, and changes from iambic pentameter to iambic tetrameter, upping the tempo by making it sharp and rhythmical, almost militaristic. In addition, many of the lines begin with the word 'By', and the repetition, or anaphora, unrelentingly reinforces the nature of the tragedy, reflecting Cowper's sixth stanza (1788, p. 76). The 'infected' air is 'rank', increasing the revulsion, and Southey maintains the Christian imagery, for the slaves are scourged, as was Christ, and 'every drop of blood bespilt' (2004, p. 55) is being counted. This echoes Cowper:

Ask Him, if your knotted scourges,
Matches, blood-extorting screws,
Are the means that duty urges
Agents of his will to use? (1788, p. 76)

Moreover, Southey touches upon the anguish of the human heart in lines 7-8, 'By every groan of deep distress / By every curse of

wretchedness' (Southey 2004, p. 55), as does Cowper, 'Only by a broken heart!' (1788, p. 76, Carey 2005, p. 74). Dr. Livingstone sought to 'heal the enormous open sore of the world' (2005, 12 July 1872, Chapter VIII) caused by slavery, and became frustrated with those who offered excuses. As he wrote in his diary,

the only answer I care to give is the remark of an English sailor, who, on seeing slave-traders actually at their occupation, said to his companion, "Shiver my timbers, mate, if the devil don't catch these fellows, we might as well have no devil at all" (2005, 12 July 1872, Chapter VIII).

C. The Resolution

Stanza six affords another transition, this time to the deeds of the Genius. It is a difficult stanza to understand, in part because of the use of the pronoun 'their'. Earlier in the poem, Southey had referred to the lands of Africa and Syria as 'thine', but in this stanza, such locations are not the Genius's, but someone else's, 'theirs'. Who or what force is behind the pronoun 'their' is not specified, involving foreshadowing. In addition, Southey removes this stanza out of time, and creates his own reality. The Genius has heard, and takes revenge over 'their blood-fed plains' (2004, p. 56). Does this refer to the 'dark sepulchral plain' of Palmyra, the 'palmy plains' of the Gambia, or the plains (including plantations) of the nations where the slaves landed? Is it a Biblical reference to the plagues of Egypt, and thus a metaphor for divine retribution? Southey next moves to 'their proud navies' (2004, p. 56), a reference to the British naval fleet which reigned supreme at that time, as well as to the navies of other European powers. He describes both the plains of Africa and the navies of Europe as 'theirs', blurring the distinction between Africans and Europeans. In addition, he vaguely mentions 'their armies' (2004, p. 56). Is he referring to the armies of the African kings who warred and captured slaves to sell, or 'to the

English custom of exciting wars upon the Slave Coast' mentioned in the preface? Ambiguity and dissolution of boundaries are pervasive, presaging the 'abolition of subject/object distinctions' apparent in Southey's Oriental epics (Leask 1998, p. 186).

This is an apocalyptic stanza describing a holocaust, with avenging hurricanes on land, storms wreaking havoc on navies, and armies destroyed by the 'baneful breath' of the Genius culminating in 'gales of Death' (2004, p. 56). The destructive element in this stanza is air, perhaps due to the arid climate of Africa, and offers a fine example of Frye's maxim that air is 'likely to be associated with the theme of unpredictability and sudden crisis' (1957, p. 160). Even though proud navies are dashed, they are dashed 'upon the shore' by 'whirlwinds' (2004, p. 56). Southey's use of aeolian language mirrors the force of wind, and there are marked similarities to Cowper's fifth stanza throughout (1788, p. 76).

In stanza seven, the final stanza of the poem, Southey jolts us back into time with the opening line, 'So perish still the robbers of mankind!' (2004, p. 56). He provides an antecedent for the pronoun 'their' of stanza six, 'Inhuman Power'. Lady Justice is bound as are the slaves, and an 'Inhuman Power has snatch'd the sword' (2004, p. 56), a metaphor for the usurpation of Justice's honor and authority. This exchange demonstrates one of Southey's subtlest poetic references, with the 'Inhuman Power' harkening back to the 'humane' behavior mentioned in the preface. To be 'inhumane' is to be 'inhuman'. Thus, the 'Inhuman Power' is synonymous with the 'inhumanity' of those who do not act in a civilized fashion. This expands the scope of the 'Inhuman Power' to include every human being and his or her conscience, as well as institutions of government entrusted with enacting and enforcing civil law.

The final four lines of the poem move decisively toward the future. They contain no exclamation points, lending a calm sense of assurance to the impressive onomatopoeic language of this concluding quatrain.

Justice shall yet uncloset her eyes,
Terrific yet in wrath arise,
And trample on the tyrant's breast,
And make Oppression groan oppress (2004, p. 56).

Southey uses the verb 'uncloset' rather than 'open' for a wonderful effect. This is a form of understatement called litotes, and is particularly refreshing after the use of hyperbole earlier in the poem. These lines clarify the confusing usage of 'their' in stanza six, with entities such as navies or plains being grouped together by their involvement with tyranny and oppression rather than by nationality or continent. Genius, who meted out divine retribution in stanza six, has been replaced by justice to be served in courts of law and through legislation, as Mungo pleads in the epilogue to 'The Padlock':

I speak to Britons.—Britons, then, behold
A man by Britons snar'd, and seiz'd, and sold!
And yet no British statute damns the deed,
Nor do the more than murd'rous villains bleed.

O sons of freedom! equalize your laws,
Be all consistent, plead the Negro's cause;
That all the nations in your code may see
The British Negro, like the Briton, free
(Clarkson 2004, Chapter III).

Finally, it is necessary to consider the title. 'Genius' represents a force or deity of Africa to whom the poem is addressed, yet it is unclear exactly what the word 'genius' refers to. One clue may lie outside of Africa, garnered from the French Revolution. Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, guillotined along with Maximilien

Robespierre on 10 Thermidor (28 July 1794) for his role in the Reign of Terror, felt that France could resist Europe with only one weapon, ‘the genius of freedom’ (Beraud 1928, p. 97).

IV. Conclusion

This complex poem, written when Southey was twenty-one and formulated in terms of a prayer or supplication, is rich, exotic, and filled with nuance. Southey demonstrates an awareness of Egyptian and African culture which he expresses with sensitivity and beauty, exhibiting mastery over a variety of literary techniques. The poem functions on several levels, combining a parody of the language of the pro-slavery debate with tongue-in-cheek barbs aimed at his wealthy audience, all the while appealing directly and unabashedly to them. Southey draws upon Dyer, and pays homage to Cowper by intertwining his thematic approach with Cowper’s in a contrapuntal arrangement.

One of the impressive aspects of the poem is the ease with which Southey blends imagery of the various religions, cultures and forces of nature to which he refers. By 1789, at fifteen years of age, Southey ‘had formed his project to write a long poem on the world’s major religions’ (Butler 1999, p. 336), and that interest manifests itself here. Furthermore, Southey breaks boundaries indicating that there are those who support freedom and those who support oppression on all sides. He articulates in the poem what Blake and Wedgwood express in their art, that Africa, Europe, and the Americas are intertwined, and that all human beings deserve dignity manifested by equality under the law. This mirrors Saint-Just, who stated,

If you want a republic, see that the people have the courage to be virtuous; there are no political virtues without pride; there is no pride when people are in distress. You are

asking for order in vain; you must secure order by producing it through good laws (Beraud 1928, p. 97).

The abolitionist themes of justice and humanity are not unique to Southey, having been articulated by others, including Currie (Carey 2005, p. 73-74), Cowper (1788, p. 74-77), and Dyer (1903, Book IV, p. 111, line 203). What is unusual is Southey's circumspect approach, the way he veils his allusions under hyperbole, creating never-ending links which are at once visible yet elusive, a mirage in his desertic setting. Ultimately, 'To the Genius of Africa' is an anguishing poem, resplendent with depth, subtlety, and conviction, which accepts and condones vindictive justice as a forerunner to Dyer's retributive justice:

But let the man whose rough tempestuous hours
 In this advent'rous traffic are involv'd,
 With just humanity of heart pursue
 The gainful commerce : wickedness is blind :
 Their sable chieftains may in future times

Burst their frail bonds, and vengeance execute
 On cruel unrelenting pride of heart
 And avarice. There are ills to come for crimes (1903, Book
 IV, p. 111-2, 201-8).

Figures

(All figures are Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)



Figure 1. Painted Wooden Figure of Osiris, from the tomb of the scribe Hunefer, Egypt, 19th Dynasty, about 1275 BC.



Figure 2. Faience pectoral, from Egypt in the New Kingdom, perhaps the reign of Ramesses II, about 1250 BC. This is an example of a pectoral necklace, laid on the chest of a mummy, containing two protective images, the *wedjat* eye (representing restoration to health and resurrection), and Anubis.



Figure 3. Bronze figure of Isis nursing her son, Horus, from North Saqqara, Egypt, the Late Period, after 600 BC.

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