

Romantic Suicide: The Chatterton Myth and its Sequels

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By the time Thomas Chatterton died tragically in 1770, the term "suicide" had been firmly established in England. Minois in his book *History of Suicide* (1999) states that it was Prévost who expanded the term during his English stay, and that it later passed into Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. As a neologism it was officially coined in France in the seventeenth century and helped to substitute all those words that had described voluntary death marking its blameworthy nature (such as the French "*se tuer soi-meme*" or the English "self murder"). Thus, Minois sees the eighteenth century as a crucial period not only because it witnessed the practical use of the term suicide, but also because a new conception of suicide developed, caused by the emergence of a rational critical spirit, that weakened progressively its spiritual prohibitions. Using Minois's words, there is a renovation of the concept towards the so-called "guilt-free suicide" (177).

Many factors made England in the eighteenth century a relevant place in terms of suicidal occurrences, especially as it developed linked to the so-called "English malady", a name that described a national condition attributed to English citizens. It encompassed a list of different physical and psychological states, that included hypochondria, hysteria, spleen, nerves, vapours, melancholy or madness. Among them, suicide was also considered an illness. The myth of the English malady then, made the term suicide popular. The physician George Cheyne in his book *The English Malady, or, A Treatise of Nervous Disease of all Kinds* (1733) registered (without verification) a burst of cases of suicide giving way to the idea through all Europe that England was the country where more people died of suicide. He argued in his book that the causes of suicide were mainly the progress of atheism, the English fondness for philosophical spirit, and climatic determinism, given the English bad weather. His pseudo-scientific reflections were complemented by discussions, debates and were covered by the press, which widely published about the different cases of suicide, including those that Minois lists during 1680 and 1720 as aristocratic suicides. The rise of capitalism, insecurity, instability and poverty were pointed out as the main causes for suicide and thus, it gradually became contemplated as a response to social or psychological circumstances, and not as a crime.

Within this atmosphere, Minois sees the peak of what he labels "philosophical suicide" in the eighteenth century, conceived as the

result of the debate of many centuries, which tried to balance the former religious, moral and intellectual thoughts about voluntary death. Debates, the praising of figures from Classical times, and treatises in favour and against suicide progressively discharged the religious guilt and created a tolerant way of approving it as a personal decision. For example, Hume's treatise "Of Suicide", established the basis of an indulgent and tolerant understanding. He conceived suicide as a rational action, but within a divinely ordered universe. In Timmons's words, Hume's concept was against the predominant notion that assumed that "self-murder was an usurpation of divine and state authority" (269). With this kind of intellectual support, suicide lost progressively the religious connotations it had before and it started being conceived as free choice of refusing life

However, this philosophical conception took another direction at the end of the century. In the preromantic years of the 1770s, the word *suicide* became tinged with Romantic enthusiasm, conforming to what Minois describes as "Romantic suicide", mainly around Chatterton's death in 1770 and Werther's fictional death in 1774.

The best figures of Romanticism felt compelled to write about Chatterton's suicide, making it part of their works and starting a tradition which lamented and glorified the dramatic death of this youngster. It led to reflections and thoughts about life, society and the injustice of unrewarded efforts. Thus, Chatterton's death gave way to the creation of a myth that not only reconsidered the quality of his poems, but also involved serious questioning on the role of the romantic poet. Chatterton's fondness for primitivism and medievalism -that had been so much criticised by Walpole and had reduced him to a forger of medieval poems-, was reconsidered. He became highly praised, to the extent that Barbara Gates analyzing the precursors of Victorian Suicides describes Chatterton as "a glorious martyrdom to Europe's artists" (23).

Indeed Chatterton's dramatic suicide extolled the image of the Romantic individual and reinforced the cliché of the Romantic social outcast. His suicide became a symbol of a fearless spirit that triumphed over death and was somehow conceived as a victory of the individual against adversity.

The myth was progressively constructed by Chatterton's followers. The earlier responses were done by key names in English Romantic literature, who portrayed Chatterton around a series of similar motifs which show the different conceptions of suicide that still converged in the century.

Those Romantic writers who had so often contemplated the boundary between Life and Death, valued Chatterton's decision of crossing it towards the unknown. References to death and life are continuous in their homage, where his youth and lack of experience

redeem the young poet. Another interesting feature in the construction of the myth is Chatterton's marginalized social and professional position that they outstand as one of his main causes for suicide. Society is ultimately seen as the cause of his voluntary death. That is why Goldberg in his study of Southey's reflection on literary professionalism, states that Chatterton became the emblem for the miseries of literature (1996). The myth, then, helps these poets to expose their own worries about their literary career. It gives them the opportunity to question the validity of critical responses and to evaluate the agonizing system of patronage.

Coleridge's response to Chatterton's suicide took form in the verses entitled "Monody", in 1790. It is the longest and most emotive response of all Romantic authors. Coleridge praises at all times the youngster, mentioning "his noble rage" or "the genial current of his soul". He feels Chatterton's death so dramatically, that he even recreates the scene of the suicide. It is "the sad and gloomy hour", that provokes in him an outburst of rage. Echoing Warton's "Ode on Suicide" he attacks furiously the dull English society that impassively stares at this death:

When Want and cold Neglect has chill'd thy soul,
A thirst for Death I see thee drench the bowl!
Thy corpse of many a livid hue
On the bare ground I view,
Whilst various passions all my mind engage...
Now is my breast distended with a sigh,
And now a flash of Rage
Darts through the tear, that glistens in my eye.
Is this the land of liberal Hearts!
Is this the land, where Genius ne'er in vain
Pour'd forth his soul-enchancing strain?...
This ever can the generous Briton hear,
And starts not in his eye th' indignant Tear? (16)

Coleridge's personal involvement with Chatterton's death was twofolded. On the one hand, he had seen the death of his brother Luke in 1790, and his sister Ann had asked him to write a poem about him. That explains the emphatic feeling that leads Paul Magnuson to read the poem at a first level as "Coleridge's private melancholy" (3). Besides, the "Monody" was one of Coleridge's first poems, written in times of economic needs. It made him feel close to Chatterton, understand his vain struggle, and share his fear of failure. Coleridge's sympathy aligns Chatterton with other authors of tragic deaths such as Butler and Otway. He sees suicide as a result of Fate and instead of condemning Chatterton, imagines his destiny in Heaven and asks the poet to give him strength to overcome his potential own needs for suicide:

O Spirit blest!
 Whether th' eternal Throne around,
 Amids the blaze of Cherubim,

Thou pourest forth the grateful hymn,
 Or, soaring through the blest Domain,
 Enraptur' st Angels with thy strain, -
 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! (17)

Magnuson, however, points at a second level of reading the monody, describing it as a discursive utterance, and "a bitter denunciation of class, wealth, and ecclesiastical power" (2). Coleridge does not blame Chatterton, but the society that neglects him. In that sense, he understands Chatterton's decision to look for another life with the tools of death. In this sense, Coleridge's own epitaph of 1833 acknowledged a similar struggle that he called "death in life", aspiring to find "life in death".

The female replica to Coleridge's "Monody" is Mary Darby Robinson's own "Monody to the Memory of Chatterton" (1791), which surprisingly is not included in the canonical lists of literary sequels to Chatterton's death. As in Coleridge's poem, she recreates the scene of suicide ("this dark, mysterious scene of woe" (77) and with rebellious tone, she recalls dramatically the poet's "fruitless toil" from an early age, and the neglect and oblivion of society. Robinson's pity on Chatterton is exposed within a context in which suicide is still conceived as a sin that awaits for punishment. Thus, "the wrath of Heaven" is assumed and Chatterton's grave appears unblest. But the female poet begs the Muse to keep Chatterton's name alive, as she imagines his spirit wandering in search for mercy:

Methinks, I hear his wand'ring shade complain,
 While mournful echo lingers on the strain;
 Thro' the lone aisle his restless spirit calls,
 His phantom glides along the minster's walls;
 Where many an hour his devious footsteps trod,
 Ere Fate resign'd him to his pitying God.
 Yet, shall the MUSE to gentlest sorrow prone

Adopt his cause, and make his griefs her own;
 Ne'er shall her Chatterton's neglected name,
 Fade in inglorious dreams of doubtful fame;
 Shall he, whose pen immortal genius gave,
 Sleep unlamented in an unknown grave? (73)

Some years after these two tributes, William Wordsworth in his poem "Resolution and Independence" (1802) brings back again Chatterton's suicide. His description of Chatterton as "the marvellous boy" is the most quoted part of the poem, but Wordsworth's moral evaluation and reprobation of Chatterton's decision seems to have passed unnoticed. In the poem, as he travels in the moor, his happiness as a Child of earth turns to dark reflections of "solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty". The poet thinks of each one's effort to survive, and mentions Chatterton. In spite of his admiration towards him, Wordsworth sees in his tragic end the punishment of Chatterton's pride:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;...
By our own spirits are we deified:
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness. (284)

Wordsworth not only reactivates the myth with moral connotations, but adds notes of madness to the concept of suicide. A later and very different comment on Chatterton's suicide is Keats's dedication in "Endymion: A Poetic Romance" (1817). The poem was a trial for Keats. In Perkins's words, it was a "Trial of invention" (1136). Keats wrote it being insecure, aware that the reader would perceive his inexperience and immaturity, and his reflections in the Preface turn to Chatterton, making a serious statement on poetry and the failure of the poet: "It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit live".(1137). The motif of death and the hope to outlive through verses are linked. Keats takes suicide as a motif to keep his own hopes for success. In his homage to the dead poet, he acknowledges the disapproval of society on suicide, but justifies it mentioning the poet's fear to fail in his task: "there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object".

Keats's homage is then a rebuke towards those critics that do not appreciate the potential greatness of young poets. That is why he ends the preface with a reflection justifying the fresh attempts of the poet who starts, and somehow justifying Chatterton's deed:

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted...(Perkins 1137).

Ultimately, Keats is apologising for his own youth and inexperience in these verses, but it helps us to see his awareness of suicide as an

act that at the time received general disapprobation. The first lines of the poem could be read as his homage to Chatterton, and his desire to keep the poet's name alive:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing. (1137)

Finally, Shelley also has Chatterton in mind in his elegy to Keats, entitled "Adonais. An Elegy on the Death of John Keats". This poem was written in June 1821, four months after the death of Keats. According to Perkins, Shelley admired Keats greatly and he attributed incorrectly his death to the shock of savage reviews (1046). Shelley's praise on Keats makes him include the poet among those "whose names on Earth are dark", listing the tragic deaths of young poets, among whom Chatterton is the youngest:

The inheritors of unfulfilled renown
Rose from their thrones, built beyond mortal thought.
Far in the Unapparent, Chatterton
Rose, pale, - his solemn agony had not
Yet faded from him; Sidney, as he fought
And as he fell and as he lived and loved
Sublimely mild, a Spirit without spot,
Arose; and Lucan, by his death approved;
Oblivion as they rose shrank like a thing reproved.

As the other poets, Shelley wants to keep the memory of Chatterton alive in spite of society's oblivion and keeps the image of the poet's suffering permanent rejection.

Critics list other literary tributes to Chatterton by Crabbe, Byron, Scott or Rosetti. In France, the romantics enriched the construction of the myth, especially with de Vigny's play *Chatterton* in 1835, which later was adapted into an opera by Ruggiero Leoncavallo. Gates states that Vigny's play *Chatterton* (1835) made suicide fashionable in France. Using Steegmuller as source she records: "One young man committed suicide while watching Vigny's play; another killed himself with his hand resting on the last page of *Chatterton*" (23). Artistically, painters found in Chatterton's suicide a morbid motif that encompassed the sad, tragic and fearful idea of a young man killing himself, as prove Floaxman and Wallis's paintings¹. It is precisely Wallis's portrait the one that Peter Ackroyd selected as the paratextual announcement of his novel, *Chatterton* (1987). His intertextual contribution brings Chatterton's myth to our times,

where the motif of the poet's suicide hangs over the plot, as much as the spirit of Chatterton, still a ghost who has not found peace or social blessing. The witty reading by Ackroyd shows the author's great knowledge on Chatterton's life and searches for his replica in twentieth century London, in a clever portrait of a Romantic poet who suspects that Chatterton did not commit suicide, being the portrait of his death a fraud, as all Chatterton's poems. The elements used by the Romantic authors in the construction of the myth, are retaken in this contemporary novel. Reflections upon death, the economic desperation of the poet, the analysis of the boundaries between death and life and the need to make Chatterton immortal are maintained. Ackroyd's wink to the reader makes suicide a fraud planned by Chatterton, and can be read as the author's revenge towards all these centuries of rejection. Thus, Chatterton's dramatic choice to voluntarily leave this world towards the unknown proves to be a literary topic that with the help of authors of all ages still constructs the myth that still keeps Romantic suicide alive.

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1 Other paintings of Chatterton are listed and analysed in Richard Holmes "Forging the Poet: Some Early Pictures of Thomas Chatterton", where he also notes "Portraits of Chatterton continue to surface, the most recent being sold at Sotheby's in July 1990...None has been authenticated, but the tradition of his 'likeness' continues to haunt the literary world" (Groom 258)

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