

NATIONALISM AND/V.S. TRANSCULTURALISM WITHIN ENGLISH ROMANTIC POETRY

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Abstract: One of the paradoxes of English Romanticism is that, within the same literary context of the movement, two apparently contradictory approaches were simultaneously manifested in poetry. All the major Romantic poets exhibited a genuine attempt to capture and come to an adequate understanding of other cultures and, at the same time, to fully commit to their own national identity and plea for the return to English history and tradition of folk literature. The present article aims to demonstrate that, in the case of English Romantic poetry, transculturalism coexists in a symbiotic relationship with a newly rediscovered feeling of national self-awareness and self-consciousness. Due to their transnational experiences and increased interest to promote, through their poetry, a large diversity of transcultural sensitivity, the Romantic poets can be easily coined as pioneers of a new cross cultural modern trend, but also as preservers of the English past and national heritage.

Keywords: Romanticism, English poetry, trends, transculturalism, nationalism.

In his attempt to come up with a recipe to building a transcultural, cosmopolitan citizenship, Donald Cuccioletta considers that the solution lies in embracing some of the cultural specificities of different ethnicities by fostering the Other and “recognizing oneself in the *Other*”¹². Cuccioletta’s plea is for a transcultural approach understood as a solution for a harmonious cultural dialogue. In the same register, Roy L. Brooks describes transculturalism as a “converge” of cultures, in which each social group contributes “something of value to a new, blended mainstream culture”³

Although such issues as multi- or trans-culturalism (cosmopolitanism) are generally considered to be new, postmodern trends and preoccupations, the challenge of understanding, assimilating and being in contact with other cultures is not new. From a cultural perspective, the Romantic movement acted exactly in this direction. One of the greatest achievements of Romanticism was that it managed to foster different cultural identities within the same artistic borders.

The Romantic Revival was, in the main, a literary movement, although it extended in its later developments to music and the plastic arts, and became, indeed, a view of life. Transculturalism became a distinct feature of Romanticism because the current promoted an attitude of openness towards the arts, particularly towards the literature of different national cultures. All the philosophies and poetic theories, all the translations, essays, articles and studies on the nature of poetry elaborated during Romanticism contributed to creating and disseminating a general sense of openness towards otherness.

Simultaneously, another powerful ideology promoted by the Romantics was manifested during that age: nationalism. If the transcultural approach of the Romantics had to do with a shared tendency of openness towards other cultures, nationalism arose out of an awareness

¹ Cuccioletta, D., “Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship”, in *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, London, 2002, p.9.

³ Brooks, R. L., “Cultural Diversity: It’s All About the Mainstream”, in *Monist*, 2012, p.24-25.

of being part of a community that has common institutions, language, customs and, even more important, a common past and traditions.

Romantic literature manifested a genuine attempt to build a transcultural discourse and promote pluralism, but also advocated the assertion of one's own individuality by awakening a forgotten sense of self consciousness and national identity.

Rene Wellek considered that one should “go on speaking about Romanticism as one European movement.”⁴ Romanticism was indeed a literary movement that gradually, but surely, got an European dimension, but not only. Let's take a few examples. The origins of French Romanticism, are deeply rooted in a new manner of thought, which was largely the achievement of the influence of the eighteenth century philosophers, such as Montesquieu and Rousseau. Still, the main reference remains the French Revolution and the new revolutionary spirit and ideal, summed up in the well known slogan: *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*. The ideological and spiritual essence of all French Romanticism must be sought and viewed in the light of the Revolution and its consequences. Indeed, all “the political, social and cultural upheaval is constructed as the point of origin, the birth certificate of the French Version of Romanticism...”⁵ All French Romantic literary heritage is characterized by recurrent obsessions of an idealistic dream of unity and harmony. Rousseau's new approach to man and nature greatly influenced the young German writers of the *Sturm und Drang* who gradually formed a Germanophone group, a new generation of Romantic artists who emphasized imagination, vigor, uniqueness, freedom and creativity of the individual. The Russian Romantic Movement, on the other hand, set its bases on imitating western literary works, mainly those belonging to the eighteenth century. The unique geopolitical situation of Russia also made its Romanticism very specific even at its imitative stage. Most Russian Romanticism grew out of French and English poetry.

During this period, the ideas behind the revolutions in America and France occupied the thoughts of Englishmen, too. The romantic poetic spirit was capable of multiple incarnations in different individuals and nations at different historical times. People were looking at the world in new and striking ways and literature reflected their revolt. All over the world, the Romantic Movement was closely connected to the idea of personal, individual liberty. Nationalism and liberalism went hand in hand and became inseparable allies. Liberals believed that an authentic freedom could be achieved only by people who rule themselves. It was the same idea that created enthusiasm and made the revolution practically a new religion:

People of all classes, people who stood loose by it, were in a positive ferment about the idea of liberty. There must have been some idea which enabled them to think that something positive could come out of so essentially so negative a thing... They had been taught by Rousseau that man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all this and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance. This is what made them think that something positive could come out of disorder, this is what created the religious enthusiasm. Here is the root of all romanticism: the man, the individual is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if

⁴ Rene Wellek, “The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History”, *Comparative Literature I*, repr. *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, London, 1963, 197.

⁵ Gerard Genette, “Introduction to French Romanticism”, *European Romanticism: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Prickett, London and New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010, p.33.

you can rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get progress.⁶

All the Romantic poets were animated by the French revolutionary spirit and became conceived, passionate supporters of it. This revolutionary spirit would stir their creative powers and would create the ideological basis for their radical poetry. Their desires to break with the traditional artificialities of the classics, to voice the poor and the oppressed, to reject sophistication of any kind and plead for *common*, sensibility, and more enthusiasm, all have their roots in the revolutionary ideals they embraced. The neoclassical ideology and the revolutionary spirit at turn of the century, recycled and reinterpreted in the light of a new manner of thought, constituted a complex background for the emerge of Romanticism.

A gradually but profound and irreversible transformation in artistic styles, cultural attitudes and relations between the artist and the society is notoriously evident during this period. Romanticism in general, and English Romanticism in particular, embraced this new notion of internationalism, one manifested in the creation and proliferation of a new cultural discourse that was both international and transcultural in nature. Gradually Romanticism got a cosmopolitan dimension due to the fact that it broke down cultural boundaries and managed to interweave apparently opposed cultural identities. This very spirit manifests itself in the works of every writer of this period. Each one is a law unto himself but no matter how much these writers may differ, due to their own, unique temperaments, they are still dominated by a tendency to promote a large diversity of transcultural sensitivity.

During Romanticism, poetry ranked above all other literary forms. For Romantics, poetry was the hope of the world. Shelly wrote that poets are the prophets of the future; they were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. In English literary history, Romanticism found its greatest expression in the poetry of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. These poets were highly individual and never considered themselves as part of a movement. Still, their work had a common quality and shared characteristics which were later defined as *Romantic*.

One of the poets' dominant and shared preoccupations lies in their interest for cultural diversity and otherness. This concern was nurtured and facilitated by the cultural interactions made available to them by the empire and by the rich flow of information and literary diversity coming not only from other European countries but also from the East. All the translations from Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit, all the new forms of drama and poetry, represented fresh and unexploited domains for literary inspiration and produced a flood of innovations for the English literates, in general, and the poets in particular.

Saree Makdisi, in his study *Romanticism and Empire* discusses the obsession of imperialism during the Romantic period. "With the notable exception of William Blake, every single major writer in the period (and most of the minor ones as well) had at least a passing flirtation with imperialism or its major cultural manifestation, Orientalism."⁷ The critic observes that many English Romantic poets, such as Lord Byron, Robert Southey, Percy

⁶ T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism", *Romanticism: points of view*, Robert F. Glekner ed., Wane State University Press, Detroit, 1974, 57.

⁷Jon Klancher ed., *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age*, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p.37.

Shelly, had significant imperialist or Orientalist works, if not long-standing, career long engagements with the East. He makes reference to a so called Romantic imperialism that is quite distinct from what came before and what would follow afterwards, a distinctiveness that had to do with the transitional nature of the period and with its location at the cusp of very different attitudes towards progress and modernity. According to Makdisi, the Romantic poets' interest in the forms of otherness, of the archaic, the residual, the remainders of a mythic past was generated by the empire and by the concomitant tendency towards the standardization and ultimately the homogenization of everyday life in Britain itself, which was the other by-product of increasing modernization.⁸

Indeed, transculturalism represents the foundation on which the entire Romantic movement was built, while nationalism and the traditional, historic heritage represent its construction. Openness towards otherness and the affirmation of one's identity went hand in hand.

Another thing that allied most of the Romantic poets was precisely their strong, mutual conviction that they were reviving the true English tradition of poetry. Their works marked the beginning of a poetic revolution and their fight was mainly for the liberation of poetry. As previously mentioned, the whole Romantic age can also be associated with the rise of nationalism. For the Romantic poets, the return to the past was a way of rediscovering an authentic sense of a true identity of their nation, one uncorrupted by the ugliness and misery of the present days. English Romantics tried to relocate national identity within the traditions of the folk as reflected by Wordsworth and Coleridge (e.g. *Lyrical Ballads*). They looked beyond the stylish life of educated men to a wilder and cruder ways of living. In the long *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, considered to be a sort of manifesto for the Romantic Movement, Wordsworth presents his view on the nature of the poetic process, the origin and purpose of poetry, and the language most suited for it:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men...Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature..⁹

The first generation of Romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, wrote poems about nature, about common folk or about simple country living. Wordsworth felt that men were at their best when living a simple life in a wild, natural environment. He reflected the growing belief in democracy, a faith in the common man who plows the fields, who watches the changing seasons, who may be buried obscurely in a country churchyard. A flower, a little child, an old

⁸ idem.ibidem,p.38.

⁹ R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, *Lyrical Ballads: William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2005, 235-236.

shepherded could give Wordsworth thoughts *too deep for tears*.¹⁰ Coleridge, looking back many years later on the *Lyrical Ballads*, explained that his own endeavor had been:

...directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

(*Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*)

The first generation of Romantics –such men as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey tried to find a substitute for the ugly industrial life. Old literary forms such as ballads, with their magical atmosphere and haunting settings, became increasingly popular. Old ballads and folk poetry were considered as representing something more genuinely poetic than any other fashionable form of literature. Their poetry was an escape from the sordid realities of contemporary life to the magic and mystery of a different age or a different sky, a form of revolt against institutions and against all forms of authority but also an attempt to regain their national identity and to rediscover their cultural legacy. Fleeing from the hypocrisies and spiritual emptiness of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantics took refuge in what they considered to be superior nobility of the past, for example, primitive man (the Noble Savage), Ancient Greece, the early Christian era, the age of chivalry. The Middle Ages, with its stories of knights and damsels in distress, had a special appeal.

Through their poetical output they all tried to mark a return to the spirit and manner somewhat loosely associated with medieval romance. They were all revolutionists in their desire for liberty for the individual.

In spite of an European outlook on other cultures, English Romantic poets also manifested a great interest for a more removed, exotic cultures. The idea of escaping the ugliness of the industrial world was one of the feelings that greatly animated the English Romantic revival. They sought a sort of spiritual refuge into distant places, such as the islands of the Mediterranean, the wilds of America, the South seas; or into the future, into political Utopias, or religious afterlife. They manifested a deep sympathy with obscure, humble, underprivileged people, for example, the laborer, the Negro, even the criminal and the prostitute, but also sympathies with oppressed nations: the Greeks, the Italians, the Spanish-American countries.

All English Romantic poets showed a strong will to assimilate the cultural heterogeneity of other countries they had visited. Two kinds of hope were felt by the Romantics: they wished to improve the life in the present, but they also sought an ideal life apart from *here and now*. Each of the Romantics tried in his own way to find an ideal country. Many of the Romantics found stimulation in actual travel.

Wordsworth went on a three-month walking tour of France, the Swiss Alps and Italy together with his fellow student, Robert Jones. Greatly touched by the beauty of the landscape, Wordsworth wrote a poetical record of the tour, *Descriptive Sketches*, published in 1793. After leaving Cambridge, Wordsworth returned to France for a year, long enough to

¹⁰ Rewey Belle Inglis, Josephine Spear, *Adventures in English Literature*, Brace & World, Harcourt, 1985, 350.

come into contact with the French Revolution and to become a conceived, passionate supporter of it.

Byron too was an authentic “citizen of the world”. In his youth he visited on his *Grand Tour*, the customary trip aboard that affluent educated young men went on, all the Mediterranean countries and started working on his poetical account of his trip, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. This poem in particular is highly illustrative for Byron’s transcultural approach and his attempts to capture and come to an adequate understanding of other cultures. In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is depicted the tragic situation of the western Mediterranean scarred by war and that of Greece subdued by the Ottoman misrule. Freedom is therefore understood as a fundamental right of all human beings and the lack or denial of it as one of mankind’s greatest failings. The title of this narrative poem is inspired by the medieval word *childe*, term used to denote the title given to a young man who was to become a candidate for knighthood. The word *pilgrimage* strengthens the idea of the necessity of experience and hardships in one’s life, life understood, in this register of interpretation, as an initiatic journey. The hero’s travels open the eyes of his mind and allow for a better perception and understanding of the world around him. In Canto II, Byron reflects on the state of Athens, Albania and Greece’s glorious past and degenerated present. The last two cantos, Canto III, describing Belgium and the trip up to Rhine to Switzerland and Mt. Blanc, and Canto IV, laid in Italy, show, in comparison with the first two, not only a far richer intensity of feelings but also a higher quality of the poetical expression. As the poem advances, the wild, immoral, superficial Harold from the first Canto gradually develops, during his journey, into a deeply reflective, introspective and meditative man. His cynicism begins to soften and the intensity of his feelings to grow. His mere observations and descriptions of the nature and places he visited turn into elevated contemplations interspersed with deep reflections on history, on political and individual freedom or slavery, on man’s sufferance, humility and dignity, on sorrows, pains and transience of love.

Especially influential were Byron’s trips to Greece and Turkey. He devoted himself to the cause of national independence of Greece in its war against Turkey (1821-28), and as a martyr to this cause transformed the meaning and role of the modern poet in the age of nationalism, opposed tyranny in his poetry and in his life.

Other Romantics discovered that travel in one’s imagination to far centuries and far places can make life interesting, valuable and worth living. In Coleridge’s case, the transcultural process was triggered by moving imaginatively outside his homeland borders. Coleridge planned an egalitarian, utopian community, named Pantisocracy, in the wilderness of Pennsylvania, made up of free men of good will, gladly sharing their property.

Shelley, on the other hand, spent some time in Ireland where he got involved in promoting political rights for Catholics. After his return to Wales, where he tried to set up a commune of “like spirits,” he wrote his most famous pamphlet *Address to Irish People*, in which he urged the Irish, who were living in appalling conditions, to be virtuous by practicing sobriety, moderation and wisdom. His first major poem was *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem*, a Utopian allegory which celebrates the merits of republicanism, vegetarianism, atheism and free love. During his travels around Europe, after he settled in Geneva, Shelley

composed “his first authentic and unmistakable poem.”¹¹ *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*. The twelve cantos poem *Laon and Cynthia*, later renamed *The Revolt of Islam*, is an allegory which transposes a highly personalized version of the French Revolution into an Oriental setting. Shelley manifested interest not only for the remote cultures and places but also for the remote past of foreign cultures. In the four-act lyrical play *Prometheus Unbound*, a work that is partly a mythical drama and partly a political allegory, he based his subject on the Greek Prometheus myth. Shelley’s expressed purpose in writing this play was to present his sense of the evil conditions of the universe, to represent a sudden miraculous change in that condition, and finally, to sing the glory of the universe thus transformed, a renewed world in which man knows how to admire, hope, trust and endure, all in the name of a universal love.

A Defence of Poetry, written in 1821 and first published posthumously in 1840 in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* (1840), is an essay in which Shelley argues that poetry has a moral function due to its the power to reveal the order and beauty of the universe and to reform the world. Shelley claims that the poets are missionaries, unacknowledged legislators of the world, “creators and protectors of moral and civil laws”¹², prophets and leaders who, through their quest for the eternal truths of beauty, can show the way to a better society. His essay was considered “one of the most penetrating general discussions on poetry that we have”.¹³

Like Shelly, Keats not only created imagined landscapes, but also traveled to Italy. Both poets adapted the classical form of the *ode* and used elements of the Greek mythology in their works. Keats, a Romantic par excellence, also manifested predilection for the remote past, especially for the Middle Ages. As all the other Romantic poets, Keats was not at home with epic constraints and narrative rules. He nourished a certain freedom of treatment and, in the Romantic spirit, he attempted to reinterpret the myths and their heroes and create his own mythologies. *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, Keats’ first major poem, stands as a perfect example of the kind. This poem too is based upon a Greek mythological theme. Keat’s volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and other Poems* includes, apart from the three narrative poems named in the title, the fragmentary *Hyperion* and five odes *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode on Melancholy*, and *Ode on Indolence*. *The Eve of St. Agnes* is considered one of Keats’ finest poems if not the greatest. Is a romantic love story which blends elements of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Chaucer and Boccaccio. The setting of the poem is an old Medieval castle where the maiden Madeline, daughter of a medieval baron, is eager to perform the required rites in order to have a magical vision of her beloved Porphyro in the eve of St. Agnes.

As shown in the examples mentioned above, all English poets gave birth to a new generation of transcultural mobile writers, who, by choice or by life circumstances exposed themselves to cultural plurality and diversity. Their transnational and transcultural experiences were all mirrored in their poetry. Through their poetry, they managed to

¹¹ George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1972, 525.

¹² Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, eds. *Gateway to the Great Books*, Volume 5, Critical Essays, Encyclopædia Britannica, Toronto, 1963, p.214.

¹³ Perkins, David, ed. *English Romantic Writers*, 2nd Edition, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, Toronto, 1995, p.1131.

transcend the borders of a single culture and to promote a global cultural perspective. Simultaneously, they also pleaded for a return to English historical past and its tradition of folk literature. Therefore, in the case of English Romantic poetry, transculturalism coexists in a symbiotic relationship with a newly rediscovered feeling of national self-awareness and self-consciousness, while the Romantic poets can be easily coined as pioneers of a new cross cultural modern trend, but also as preservers of the English past and national heritage.

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