

THE FEELING OF NATIONAL BRITISH IDENTITY

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate the way feelings of National British identity appear in British Romantic poetry. The focus will be on the poetry of Byron and Shelley, the Radical Romantics. For the Romantics, poetry was a means to achieve “the well-being of the nation” (Stafford 2012: 22). At a political level, England, Scotland and Wales seek unification. The source of the common, collective good and unity promoted by the Romantics comes from here: “The poems of the British Romantics frequently reflect British nationalistic tendencies. Some illuminate the essence of a unification between England, Scotland and Wales. Others emphasize the uniqueness of their own countries heritage.” (Hutchinson 2017: 1) The Romantics believed in the rights and the importance of the individual, yet they also stressed the cause of the collective good. Poetry was a means of convincing people to fight together for a common cause, a way of motivating them to keep together: “Poetry, by opening the eyes of readers to the feelings of their fellow men and to their own complicated psychological experience, had its special contribution to make to the well-being of the nation.” (Stafford 2012: 22) Poetry thus served as a tie among members of the British nation. Poetry had become understood by and accessible to everyone, in a similar way in which poets place the sign of equality between them and the masses.

Keywords: liberalism, nationalism, Shelley, Byron, poetry.

For the Romantics, poetry was a means to achieve “the well-being of the nation” (Stafford 2012: 22). Where do the nationalistic aspect in Romantic poetry in Britain? This aspect has its origins in what was happening at a political level, as England, Scotland and Wales seeks unification. The source of the common, collective good and unity promoted by the Romantics comes from here: “The poems of the British Romantics frequently reflect British nationalistic tendencies. Some illuminate the essence of a unification between England, Scotland and Wales. Others emphasize the uniqueness of their own countries heritage.” (Hutchinson 2017: 1) The Romantics believed in the rights and the importance of the individual, yet they also stressed the cause of the collective good. Poetry was a means of convincing people to fight together for a common cause, a way of motivating them to keep together: “Poetry, by opening the eyes of readers to the feelings of their fellow men and to their own complicated psychological experience, had its special contribution to make to the well-being of the nation.” (Stafford 2012: 22) Poetry thus served as a tie among members of the British nation.

The engagement sustained by British Romantics meant “commitment to society” (Stafford 2012: 22):

For modern readers to make sense of Romantic poetry, it is therefore helpful to understand something of the convictions held by its creators, which are often set out quite clearly in their various prefaces, essays and letters. All the poets whose work is discussed in the chapters that follow were very able men and women, many of whom were driven by a strong sense of commitment to society. That they chose to write poetry was rarely a sign of a leisurely life-style: for many, publishing poems was

Section: LITERATURE

essential to their livelihood, while for those in more privileged circumstances, writing poetry was often part of a general desire to improve the world in which they lived. (Stafford 2012: 22)

Poetry was not a simple descriptive tool of the beauty of the surrounding world. Instead, it tried to make the world we lived in better. Poetry, in this respect, had a role similar to what is expected of the domain of politics.

Poetry had an ethical dimension. It referred to the common good, to a common cause, uniting the British people:

Shelley [...] was unequivocal about the ethical dimension of his art, arguing eloquently that:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own. A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination – and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. (*A Defence of Poetry*, Wu, 1190) (Stafford 2012: 23)

The famous Romantic imagination could play a significant role in the way society could progress. It could help envision a better future for the whole British society and for the whole nation:

Since imaginative literature had a unique capacity to affect the emotions and extend the range of its readers' understanding beyond their own personal experience, Shelley believed that it had a vital role to play in the progress of society. Unlike systems of moral philosophy, however, Shelley argued that poetry 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself', so that a great poem, such as *Paradise Lost*, worked not through any overt didactic message, but by exciting 'the sympathy of succeeding generations of mankind' (*A Defence of Poetry*, Wu, 1190, 1192). As one of the chief means through which the sympathetic imagination could be developed, poetry was crucial to the nation - not only at the moment of publication, but for centuries to come. (Stafford 2012: 24)

The way the individual, which could be the poet in his role as leader, similar to a politician, relates to society is one of the concerns of British Romanticism. The hero is not solitary in the sense that he cannot relate to society: he simply stands out as a leader. Thus, "*Don Juan* may adopt a largely comic tone, but this does not mean it is less concerned about the role of poetry in society than the eloquent manifestos of other Romantic poets. The relationship between individual and collective experience was a major preoccupation of the period." (Stafford 2012: 27)

Poetry had become understood by and accessible to everyone, in a similar way in which poets place the sign of equality between them and the masses. They have common interests and they form a collectivity. There is no division among them: "Poetry was no longer exclusively the pursuit of those with private incomes or classical educations, and with

the expansion of cheaper, provincial publishing, more and more people were able to see their work in print.” (Stafford 2012: 30) The poet identifies with the cause of the people.

The common interest, or the common experience, is the focus of the Romantics:

The later eighteenth century is often seen as the birth time of democracy and it was certainly the moment when British literature began to open doors to anyone with the ability to write poetry. The importance of poetry to those who were to become the leading Romantic writers is abundantly evident in their own verse, essays and letters, but the extent to which poetry transformed the lives of other people is often less well known. During the years between 1780 and 1825, however, people across England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland were not only reading poetry, but writing, too, and their collective achievement was remarkable. When Byron described poetry as lava, whose ‘eruption prevented an earthquake’, he may have been thinking of his own inner torment, but his comment also applied to the experience of hundreds of contemporary writers, for whom poetry was an outlet for intense social frustration, for political comment and for personal expression. While this might mean that Romantic poetry is seen as a largely conservative force, diffusing the need for political change by alleviating anger over contemporary injustices, it can also be viewed as its leading proponents hoped it would be, as a vital contribution to the gradual improvement of society. For the great reforms of the nineteenth century, which extended the franchise, improved working conditions and prevented child labor may have had something to do with the gradual awakening of sympathy and renewed understanding of the common experience of all humanity that poets in the Romantic period were so keen to promote. (Stafford 2012: 30-31)

There is no longer a division in the interests of leaders and people. They form a unity. They understand each other very well and support each other. The poets sympathize with the masses and they can express their concerns with no efforts.

The focus on the specificity of the British culture is emphasized in the literary domain: “By transporting Juan across different countries and cultures, Byron was able to show that many ‘truths’ were culturally specific and that what might be greeted by British readers as a great victory could be viewed very differently by other nations.” (Stafford 2012: 78) The British try to find their own specific features as a nation.

The ideology of nationalism for British Romantics becomes unseparable from liberalism, in contrast to the way the two ideologies are defined in today’s world. In the contemporary world, the two ideologies are opposed. For the Romantics, nationalism has features of totalitarianism and of dictatorship. Liberalism is synonymous with freedom, and with our current understanding of democracy:

Nationalism and liberalism are two predominant ideologies in modern politics that have had great significance since their embryonic stage during the Romantic era in the latter half of the 18th century. Nowadays, the majority would perceive nationalism and liberalism as two opposing ideologies that have very little in common. For citizens of the west after the second world war, nationalism would have connotations of totalitarianism and dictatorship whereas liberalism would be related to democracy and freedom. For the Romantics, the distinction between these two ideologies was not as clear. (Hutchinson 2017: 2)

This understanding of nationalism should be considered in line with the distrust in the role of the government in the Romantic age. People wished to break free from the authority of the government. They needed leaders who could relate to their cause. Indeed, “Due to the political situation in Europe at the time, Britain associated their national pride with being a nation which venerates liberty and freedom.” (Hutchinson 2017: 2). The people, the collectivity, become the basis of the way society is organized during this age. The British Romantics took after the model of society proposed by the French Revolution – and which promised a world where we could witness the liberation of the human spirit. The Romantics valued the individual as well as democracy. Thus, nationalism and liberalism would refer to the way the British society could renew itself, in a way that would mean rebellion and a complete breakup with the past, with the way society was organized until then. Hutchinson (2017: 1-2) explains the particular situation of the British:

With the rise of the middle class, a relatively democratic system developed compared to the autocracies in Europe. England, Scotland and Wales had perfect circumstances for liberal and nationalistic values to blossom. Britain’s wars that were fought overseas gave rise to a patriotic pride in combat that lacked the negative concomitants that came with war in the motherland. With this out-of-mind, out-of-sight mentality, the French and Catholicism became the common enemy for the Britons, mainly due to the various wars that were fought against France. The fact that the wars were fought on foreign ground provided a higher living standard for the majority in Britain, which in turn created a love of the nation.

The British had formed a feeling of unity over historical circumstances, and the feeling of a nation went hand in hand with it. The feeling of unity comes from the feeling of a common purpose, of a better life, a promise coming with better standards of living. Everything became more relaxed with the loss of autocracy. The people felt free from the rules imposed by autocracy – which was reflected in the literature of the time. They also needed a sense of togetherness in order to make the best political decisions. Everything was up to them, as they were no longer ruled by other classes’ interests. Literature could only be a reflection of the new social order when it comes to the feeling of nationalism. It marked the shift from cosmopolitanism which was promoted by the Enlightenment to local aspects and patriotic feeling, which were promoted by Romanticism: “Literature and nationalism were inextricably intertwined during the 18th century in Britain. There was the shift from Enlightenment cosmopolitanism to “the Romantic preoccupation with localism and patriotism” (Simpson 42) which marks the beginning of nationalism in literature.” (Hutchinson 2017: 5) The bourgeoisie had become an active class as it was literate, and they managed to spread literacy towards the people: “The growth of nationalism in literature was mostly due to the rise of a literate population, the bourgeoisie, which paved the way for a rise in demand for vernacular language usage and vernacular cultural texts.” (Hutchinson 2017: 5) With the rise of the bourgeoisie, there was also a change within the literary canon: “The transition from the Latin or European literary canon to an English vernacular canon reflects middle-class Britons distancing themselves from the aristocratic customs of internationalism and the usage of Latin.” (Hutchinson 2017: 5) The aristocracy also lost power in the domain of literature, with the focus on a vernacular canon, instead of an aristocratic, Latin, European literary canon.

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