

‘Looking backwards in order to be forward-looking’. Or just how *Modern* were the Romantics? (Panel ‘Augustan and Romantic Debates of the 21st Century’)

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In 2017 we celebrate several anniversaries, several literary landmarks which fell on the year of 1817: the 200 years of Jane Austen’s death (and the posthumous publication of her novels *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*), as well as Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy*, the poems *The Lament of Tasso* and *Manfred* by Byron, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* by P.B. Shelley, and also *Biographia Literaria* by S.T. Coleridge. But, as I was duly reminded, 1817 is also the year in which Madame Germaine de Staël (author of *De l’Allemagne*) died and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* was founded.

In fact, this whole decade of the 21st century will be one of continuous celebrations, as it represents the culmination of a particularly creative/productive spell in early nineteenth century Britain. We have only to think of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), which was completed in the Spring of 1817, as well as most of the poetic works of the poets of the second generation of Romantics: Byron, Shelley and Keats.

Therefore, two hundred years later (and in the midst of a generalised crisis of human values), we may indeed ask what these authors and respective works still have to say to us, and which particular legacy, if any, they have left us with. Living as we do in the age of virtual reality, digital humanities and the e-book format, we tend to consider ourselves as modern or, at least, as forward-looking – while we somewhat blindly plant our faith in the inexhaustible possibilities of science and technology.

One could argue, in fact, that the more forward-looking Romantics shared this (naïve?) faith with us and that, in T. H. Hulme’s words, “At the root of all romanticism is the belief that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities” (“Romanticism and Classicism”, 1912). This is very much present in a poet like P. B. Shelley who, in his lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* (of 1820), defines Man as

[...] a chain of linked thought,
Of love and might to be divided not [...]
Whose nature is its own divine control,
Where all things flow to [...]
(IV 394-402).

But if the intrinsic capacity for belief indeed defines them, this is also perhaps where we – as moderns – differ: “we [may] have seen too much in our lifetimes to feel much hope” (Wu, xxxvi).

The Romantics (of the enlightened sort) were not just optimists for human nature, they were activists, seeking to foment revolution where they could. In spite of the fact that they lived in a period of war and of great social and political upheaval both at home and abroad, they refused to succumb to despair, preferring to hope and, in some cases, to fight (Wu, xxxvii). They also believed that they could create, through their writing, a promised land in which people could live in harmony and equality; and for some, at some point, this was no futuristic or abstract idea – it was something attainable in the here and now (Wu, xxxvii). As such, they had no need of a redeemer or deity, or of a formal religion, as theirs was the faith in the redemptive potential of the mind – “the joy of elevated thoughts” of Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, or the “one plastic and vast intellectual breeze” of Coleridge, or still the power identified in Shelley’s *Intellectual Beauty*:

Ask why [...]
[...] man has such a scope
For love and hate, despondency and hope?
[...]

Thy light alone [...]
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

[...] with hope that thou wouldst free
This world from its dark slavery,
That thou – O awful LOVELINESS,
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.

[...]
Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind
To fear himself, and love all human kind.

(18-24, 32-36, 69-72, 81-84)

Although there may be little agreement on what exactly constitutes ‘Romanticism’, there is no denying that our contemporary discourse is still driven by many of those greater ‘questions’ first raised at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Besides, as Duncan Wu argues, “The Romantic period has an immediacy which earlier ones tend to lack. This is because so many of our values and preoccupations derive from it” (Wu, xxxi).

“Modern self-consciousness, perspectivism, scepticism, fragmentation and iconoclasm, as well as modern melancholy and modern political disillusionment made their first appearance in the Romantic period. The innovations of Wordsworth and Coleridge [in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798] managed to set our standards for what we now consider poetry: [in concepts such as ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’, in ‘a language really spoken by man’]. [The Romantics furthermore witnessed] the advent of the modern novel [and its different trends: not only Scott’s historical romances and Austen’s novels of manners, but also Mary Shelley’s dystopian Gothic fiction]” (Columbia University page)

Michael Page, in his *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H. G. Wells ...* (2016), writes that “The same impulses of fascination and fear of the future found in Erasmus Darwin’s poetry and Mary Shelley’s novels, respectively, continue to find voice in the contemporary speculative imagination” (p. 15). He refers, in particular, to the “emerging critical paradigm of the connections between Green Romanticism and science fiction criticism; [besides their proto-ecology] the Romantics embraced aspects of, and contributed to, the developing cultures of science” (p. 11). He adds that “it is generally agreed that science fiction has its origins in the Romantic era and that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is the foundational text”, because “at its core science fiction is a form of Romanticism [...] both are essentially literatures of change. [...] *Frankenstein* must stand as the core imaginative myth for the human encounter with technology” (p. 12).

Between 1801 and 1804, in his Berlin lectures, the German Romantic A. W. Schlegel had posited the classic homogeneous spirit of the ancient world against the ‘romantic’, that he called ‘modern’ because of its intrinsic ‘dialectical characteristic or union of opposite or discordant qualities’ (as in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, not in a political or ideological but rather in an aesthetic sense). But this distinction had

originally been developed by Thomas Warton, only then passing over into Germany; as early as 1746, in his *Ode to Fancy*, he exalted the natural, the wild and spontaneous, associating ‘fancy’ with enthusiasm and the passions. In his own 1812-1813 lectures on literature, Coleridge made the distinction public, and so did Madame de Stäel at the same time in her book *De l’Allemagne*.

Indeed, the major changes from the previous neoclassical paradigm had been anticipated by the so-called ‘poets of sensibility’, among whom Thomas Gray, who in his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (of 1751) not only introduces the intrinsically humanist concept of the latent potential present in the most humble men,

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

(45-48)

But, also, the new image of the Poet as a young solitary brooder, marked out by melancholy, whose fate is an early death (deliberately embodied by Chatterton):

*Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.*

(117-120)

A concept and an image that, half a century later, would indeed be worked out and embodied by all the major Romantics.

Writing about “Innovation and Modernity” in the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Alfredo de Paz confirms that “The Romantic Age is marked by the idea that there is no one model of Beauty and that there exist relationships between literary works and the customs, institutions and genius of different peoples. This idea is found in various forms, in France, in the thought of Madame de Stäel and Chateaubriand [...] the unlimited progress of the human spirit and its creations [...] conceiving of literature as something dynamic, subject to the variations of the habits and politics” (p. 32, Vol. 5).

Some Romantics had themselves the stature of heroes or of media(tic) figures, and that ‘larger-than-life’ profile was further enhanced through the development of the

press. In this same year, William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* arguably launched 19th-century character criticism. The cult of celebrity in particular, so much a part of our post-modern world, had its first and biggest beneficiary in Byron: day-to-day reports of his affairs and adventures filled the pages of gossip-columnists and, when he died during the fight for Greek independence, scenes of mass hysteria greeted his coffin in the road from London to Nottinghamshire (Wu, xxxv). Besides, Byron's cosmopolitan facet (his travels and interest in international affairs), which removed him from the British insularity of the first-generation poets, introduced the modern bourgeois concept of tourism – or of travel for pleasure – present mainly in the idea of the Grand Tour. This, in spite of the fact that the grand sceneries that could be glimpsed, in this particular instance of the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, were really darkly grim scenarios of great devastation.

A brief synopsis of the year of 1817 provides the adequate context for the discussion of these writers – some of whom had become reactionary in the process. In the aftermath of the French Wars, it became clear that England was suffering from great social, economic and political problems, leading to general distress and discontent, in a series of events between 1811 and 1819. One of these was the attack on the Prince Regent (mad George III's son), an unpopular, self-indulgent and dissipated monarch, on his way to Westminster to open the parliamentary session. This coincided with the meeting of the provincial radicals (amongst whom Bamford, Cobbett, Hunt and Burdett) in London, who were carrying a signed petition demanding universal suffrage. The parliament reacted quickly, by re-enacting repressive legislation, which became known as the Gag Acts: the suspension of *Habeas Corpus* (allowing imprisonment without charge), the Seditious Meetings Act (prohibiting unlawful combinations) and the seditious libel measures ordered by Sidmouth against radical writers and printers. These upheavals culminated with a hunger-march to London, organised by the spinners and weavers from Manchester.

Robert Southey, who had become extremely conservative after his appointment as Poet Laureate in 1813, had indeed contributed to the implementation of these repressive measures by publishing an article in the *Quarterly* (at the end of 1816), stating that radical journalists should be prevented from insulting the government and defying the laws of the country. It is in the midst of these controversies that his poem *Wat Tyler* is published through unauthorised piracy. Defending himself against the

accusation of inciting revolt, Southey attempted to deny and later argued that his dramatic poem about the historical medieval leader of a peasants' rebellion in 1381 was, for all intents and purposes, nothing more than a piece of juvenilia.

But one cannot underestimate the attraction of linking an existing and outspoken Poet Laureate with a text like *Wat Tyler*. Indeed, Hazlitt in *The Examiner* invites Southey, the *Quarterly* reviewer, to "enter an injunction against the latter [Southey the dramatic poet] as a bastard and impostor." The publication of *Wat Tyler* had undermined Southey's literary authority—so much so that the nature of this authority became itself a subject of debate. By suggesting that all poetical merit lay in a former, radical version of Southey that no longer existed, this controversy forced Romantic writers to look back on their former selves, while at the same time insisting that such former selves be held accountable for what they had chosen to become. (*Romantic Circles*, 2004)

In marked contrast, this period (between 1816 and 1818) was a very productive time for both Byron and P. B. Shelley. In 1816, the two controversial/scandalous poets had met in voluntary exile near Geneva, in Switzerland; and during that summer they saw a great deal of each other (they would sail across the lake and talk for hours) – undoubtedly, an important moment in literary history, comparable to that of the earlier meeting between Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Under this shelleyian or wordsworthian influence, Byron's poetry became more serious and committed. It was also during this period that Byron suggested the ghost-story competition that inspired the writing of Mary Godwin's magnum opus *Frankenstein*. Above all, in this year 'without a summer', he composed much of *Manfred*, *Prometheus*, *Darkness* and *Childe Harold* Canto III (in which he showed his admiration for Napoleon, an overreacher and a kindred spirit).

XLII (42)

But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,
And *there* hath been thy bane; there is a fire
And motion of the soul which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but aspire
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

Inspired partly by Matthew Lewis's readings to Byron of Goethe's *Faust*, the verse drama *Manfred* and hero embody "the poet's frustration at the human condition and contempt for institutionalized religion", present in the character's defiance of the spirits he invokes and his incestuous passion for his dead sister, Astarte (Wu, 843).

For his part, Shelley wrote two of his most important poems in this period, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Mont Blanc*. These works, in turn, show the influence of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, namely the older poet's "sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused" (96-7), 'a motion and spirit', whose pantheist power discarded any conventional notions of the deity. The Poet, Shelley suggests in *Mont Blanc*, is inspired by the same stupendous forces that produced the precipitous landscape before him, and they are not of a divine nature (Wu, 1046).

It is also in 1817 that Shelley meets John Keats at Leigh Hunt's studio, and immediately tries to patronise his talented rival, but without much success (Keats is too proud of his independence to allow interference, being also suspicious of Shelley's shrill godless oaths). Indeed, 2017 marks the bicentennial of the emergence of Keats as a poet in his own right. Preceded by the publication of four sonnets in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*, March saw the eagerly anticipated publication of Keats's first volume, titled simply *Poems*, but in effect a debut anthology of Keats's skills in a variety of poetic genres – not only sonnets, but also romance, excursion, verse epistle, light satire, and songs. Prefaced by a sonnet to Leigh Hunt himself, Keats also waved the flag of political affiliation – liberal, anti-Monarchic, and in the teeth of *Blackwood's* excoriation of Hunt as the master of a low-culture "Cockney School."

In October of that year, the conservative John Lockhart had published the first of the Cockney School attacks (to Leigh Hunt and his circle, including Shelley and Byron) in the Tory *Blackwood's*. At the end of that year, Keats also finishes his wordsworthian mythological romance *Endymion*, containing the famous first line 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever', and he finally meets Wordsworth, who drily comments that the poem's 'Hymn to Pan' is "a very pretty piece of Paganism". In December of that year, Benjamin Robert Haydon would hold the famous 'immortal dinner' at his lodgings and studio, in Paddington. His diary account of the evening is one of the most vivid portraits

we have of the Romantics (namely, Wordsworth and Keats). “It offers us the sense of an artistic fraternity that understood that as Romantics they were different from the generation that had preceded them” (Wu, 833). Haydon recalls “every man expressing his natural emotions without fear”, “hearing the voice of Wordsworth repeating Milton” and “Keats’ rich fancy of satyrs and fauns” (quoted in Wu, 836).

Thank you.