

English Romantic Poets: A Brief Characterization and the Problematic of Didactic Division of Generations

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Abstract: *This paper aims to portray in a didactic outlook on English Romantic Poets, as William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats and Percy Shelley, etc; and problematize the question of division between generations of Romantic poets - a question that has no agreement between critics and specialists. The paper shows the attempt of division performed by three important authors, Jorge De Sena, Anthony Burgess and Ruth Mary Weeks, to provide more information on the matter.*
Keywords: *Romanticism, Poetry, English Literature, English Poets.*

Introduction

In the eighteenth-century, England witnessed the brilliant work of essential poets to World Literature. The beginning of this new era of Literature - Romanticism - began in England with the publication of the first edition of the “Lyrical Ballads” (1798), the joint work of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

But it is important to have in mind that the Romantic movement, with its numerous poets, does not have a simple division of “generations”. Most critics do not agree or do not name each generation explicitly. This paper will deal with the work of the most important poets of the period, and also with the problematic of the “generations” and explain the various possibilities of arrangements provided by three important authors, such as Anthony Burgess, Jorge de Sena and Ruth Mary Weeks.

What is Romanticism?

Ruth Mary Weeks gives a syntactic definition of Romanticism in her book “English Literature”, that fits nicely for this essay:

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The impulse thus to abandon old ways of thinking and living, the insistence on individual freedom, and the glowing confidence with which the English poets of this period regarded the future make up an attitude of mind called romanticism. (p. 581).

Furthermore,

[...] the romanticist is [...] not dominated by common sense; he is willing to take a chance. He values emotion and enthusiasm more highly than cold logic. He strives not for social correctness but for individuality and independence [...] (p. 581).

These characteristics will show themselves in the lives and works of all Romantic poets exposed in this essay.

The Romantic Poets

Formally, the birth of English Romanticism, as already mentioned, was in 1798, in which the “Lyrical Ballads” was published. It contained individual poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge, after an unsuccessful attempt of creating poetry together. In its preface, Wordsworth establishes, in a text that could be called a “manifest” or even a “critical essay”, the principles of how the composition of poetry should be done: The language should be the one used by common people, “conserved stainless in the speaking of country people”¹; it should not be rationalized, should contain imagination, legend, human heart²; Jorge de Sena even mentions the poetical revolution that work intended to propose³. But both authors of such extraordinary work, Wordsworth and Coleridge, did not agree in its principles: many of them were criticized by Coleridge, more realist than his partner.

Wordsworth lived a long life, unlike other Romantic poets. He went to Cambridge and also to post-revolutionary France, in 1790, where he wrote: “*Bliss was*

¹ BURGESS, Anthony. “A Literatura Inglesa”. São Paulo: Editora Ática, p. 197.

² *Ibidem*, p. 197.

³ DE SENA, Jorge. “A Literatura Inglesa: Ensaio de Interpretação e História”. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1963, p. 237.

it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!"⁴. Wordsworth was credited as being very excited about the French Revolution and its consequences; but in 1793, the war between England and France started, and he was obligated to return to his homeland. His enthusiasm towards youth, democracy and revolution died, and Wordsworth became a very conservative poet, being even consecrated as poet Laureate when older.

He was one of the first poets that was able to survive on his poetry; in 1795, he received some money from a dead friend and met Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who became a great friend of his. Although they discovered not having much in common on their ideologies, they belonged to one of the most successful literary partnership.

Concerning Wordsworth's poetical abilities, he believed the poet was a prophet, not the transmitter of the other men's truth, but the founder of his own truth; he was a pantheist, in which Nature meant more to him than any other systems. Nature was the source of happiness to men; where men can meet God⁵. Burgess exemplifies this hegemony of Nature with the excerpt:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

(Tintern Abbey; lines 94-9)

Most importantly, Wordsworth considers people that live "among" nature are purer and wiser than those ones that live in the city, and even their language is less corrupt. His theory of poetic language comes from his deep philosophy of nature⁶.

Further more, Samuel Taylor Coleridge is another important poet that contributed to the Romantic movement. His themes concern the magical, the fabulous, the mysterious and the supernatural, pointed by Anthony Burgess as items that

⁴ WORDSWORTH, William. Trad.: John Milton. "O Olho Imóvel pela Força da Harmonia". São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2007, p. 12.

⁵ Idem item 1, p. 198.

⁶ Idem item 1, p. 199.

Wordsworth and Coleridge never agreed with⁷: the former fixed his poetry in the present and in everyday life, and the latter, in the past and in the wonderful.

Coleridge preferred the fantasy, the “suspension of disbelief”, the supernatural; addicted to opium (not illegal at the time), he created poems covered with colors, visions, mysterious happenings, exotic themes, etc. His three most famous poems are *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*. Unlike his longtime friend Wordsworth, Coleridge did not focus his poetry on only earthly themes, he used supernatural images and fabulous creatures, far from the quietness of nature and its tranquility. Coleridge finished his days - of a long life - dedicated to philosophy and critique; the greatest critic of English literature, according to De Sena (p. 243).

Burgess quoted that if John Keats, who lived a short life, had lived beyond his 26 years, he would have become one of the greatest poets of all times⁸. His poetry is very sophisticated, lyrical and musical, it shows the sensuality of the Romantic movement⁹; his themes are simple, such as the beauty in art and nature; the wish for death; happy and unhappy love affairs; the enchant of classical past¹⁰; many times, he shows the pleasure of the senses - “wine, love and sounds of nature”¹¹; the suffering; but most frequent themes are beauty and sensuality themselves.

Keats did not want to be a public figure as Byron and Shelley; he was aware of his complex personality, and against all kinds of “selfmystification”. For him, poetry was, beyond all things, a piece of art. Jorge De Sena affirms that [...] foi a publicação das cartas [...] o que revelou tanta experiência anterior, quanta densidade de pensamento, quanta paixão amadurecida, quanta reflexão sobre a natureza, da poesia iam naquela sensualidade vibrantemente contida, cujas ressonâncias discretamente apelavam, afinal mais que os entusiasmos de Byron e de Shelley, para a consciência profunda. (p. 265)

Being a polemic man, Percy Bysshe Shelley honored his fame. He came from an aristocratic family and had financial independence, but he was not very good in following the rules: Shelley went to Oxford in 1810 and declared himself atheist, vegetarian, opposite to marriage, an “universal love lawyer” (in the words of Anthony

⁷ Idem item 1, p. 200.

⁸ Idem item 1, p. 204.

⁹ Idem item 8.

¹⁰ Idem item 8.

¹¹ Idem item 1, p. 205.

Burgess), ensuring his expulsion from the university; he even lived in a *ménage à trois* with two women. Shelley is the most political of all Romantic poets.¹² All his longer poems talk about rebellion, revolts, the chained suffering humanity.¹³ Ruth M. Weeks calls him “a master of rhythm” (p. 647). De Sena makes an essential assertion about Shelley:

Na larga produção que foi a sua [...] a poesia atinge uma abstração visionária, em que o libertarismo anárquico, uma concepção livre do erotismo, uma sensualidade intelectualizada, o ateísmo espiritualista [...] se conjugam para uma afirmação esplêndida de lirismo, que não é meditação ensimesmada ante a Natureza, como em Wordsworth, nem frustrada e dolorosa angústia da imaginação impotente, como em Coleridge, nem personalismo sarcástico, como em Byron, nem sensual vivência das coisas e dos seres, como em Keats, mas expressão de um espírito que tudo transfigura - inquietações, angústias, sonhos e paixões - naquela beleza intelectual que cantou num hino extraordinário. (p.263)

He is known for his poems that talk about nature, but recently his work is being reinterpreted through readings of a “Red Shelley”: a social, socialist and revolutionary Shelley. As an example, one of his most famous poems, “Ode to the West Wind”, can be read as renewals in terms of spring and times, and also as social happenings; it is his saying that “change is coming everywhere”.

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes; O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until

¹² SHELLEY, Percy Bysshe. “Sementes Aladas”. São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2010, p. 12.

¹³ Idem item 1, p. 203.

Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
(Ode to the West Wind, lines 1-9)

The fifth great English Romantic poet is also a very polemic man, like his acquaintance and friend, Shelley: George Gordon, or most known as Lord Byron, was the personification of the heroes of his poems; an impetuous, proud, athletic and charming man whose life no one could rule but himself. He had no interest for life itself, and lived a life of orgies, smoking and drinking; Byron lived in conflict with society and its values at the time, as he felt misunderstood; he was deported from England because of the life he had back then. Anthony Burgess calls him a “pleasant cynical”¹⁴; Ruth M. Weeks affirmed that:

One powerful conviction dominated all Byron’s work: the hatred of oppression and the love of freedom. For this cause, he wrote his greatest poem; and for this cause he lost his life in the Greek Revolution. In the generous sincerity of these convictions and in the grandeur of his verse, we forget the poseur who dragged across Europe ‘the pageant of his bleeding heart’, and remember only his ‘clairless mind’¹⁵.

Byron fought against tyranny for the Greek Independence, and died young, at battle. His most famous work, the long poem “*Don Juan*”, shows a man that seduces every woman that crosses his path without any commitment with feelings; the poem is full of irony, satire, sensuality, images of the exotic (Spain); it has fluid language, and a strong social critique.

Curiously, William Blake is associated with the Romantic movement, but chronologically does not belong to it. His first publication, “*Poetical Sketches*”, is from 1783, and contained many of his most beautiful short poems;¹⁶ that is why Jorge de Sena includes him in the “category” (if it can be named so) “Pre-Romantic Poets”.

Jorge de Sena affirms that Blake was an engraver, painter and poet who had visions of supernatural entities that followed him through his life, and believed that appearance and reality were only one and the same, as what he “saw” and what he

¹⁴ Idem item 1, p. 201.

¹⁵ WEEKS, Ruth Mary. “English Literature”. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, p. 622

¹⁶ Idem item 3, p. 225.

“understood”¹⁷. Blake was a mystic “who claimed to talk daily with spirits and angels. [...] a poet who lived in an inner world of emotion and vision.”¹⁸; he created his own mythology and used it in many of his poems, which he illustrated with his engravings. De Sena also affirms that almost all Romantic professionals were incapable of understanding this genius that lived among them, who was “o Romantismo em pessoa”¹⁹, above, out and against all schools.

Ruth Mary Weeks calls him “the first note of dissent”²⁰, as a reference to the Romantic movement and its radical changes against the rules of the period. Blake’s poetry is credited to be one of the most original of all times. Blake saw the rough realities of his time, but also had the sensibility to see the happy simplicity of a child. The most frequent themes of his work are his anti-Church religion; the suppression of natural desires; the body as an extension of the soul, etc.

The Discussion

One division of generations of English Romantic poets was performed by Ruth Mary Weeks in her book “English Literature”. She conceives three parts of a whole inside the movement, excluding William Blake (already explained as being a part of the pre-Romantic poets): The “Gospel of Nature”, the “Gospel of Freedom” and the “Gospel of Beauty”.

The “Gospel of Nature” separates William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge from the rest. This “gospel” is determined as a “remedy” against “the conservative ideals of the age in which they were born” (p. 581). She includes William Cowper along with Wordsworth as poets that exalted the beauty of nature as a pattern for society; “they thought man could learn the secret of happy existence untrammelled by cramping conventions” (p. 581). Coleridge was included in the “Gospel of Nature” because he also talked about nature, but the author states that “the poem [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner] has nature for its background, but it is the remote polar and tropic seas - not the familiar English countryside which Wordsworth celebrated.”

¹⁷ Idem item 16.

¹⁸ Idem item 15, p. 572.

¹⁹ Idem item 3, p. 226.

²⁰ Idem item 18.

Her second division, “the Gospel of Freedom”, includes Lord Byron and Percy Shelley; they are considered poets of evident political lives, engaged to talk about and act against tyranny. Lord Byron is celebrated for his travels in Spain, Greece and Turkey, specially for his heroic death against the Turkish domination, and Shelley, among many things, for his tragic figure and his “clashes with society”. (p. 642)

Finally, the third division talks about John Keats, “introducing to English readers a new test for human life and society - the extent to which its final product is beauty in things and experience.” (p. 657)

Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.
(Ode on a Grecian Urn - lines 49-50)

John Keats is the only representative of the “Gospel of Beauty”, classified by Ruth Weeks.

As already mentioned, Jorge de Sena, in his text “A Literatura Inglesa: Ensaio de Interpretação e História”, divides the English Romantic poets in two sections: Pre-Romantic and plus two generations of Romantic poets. For this essay’s concern, it must be said that William Blake is named a pre-Romantic poet, along with Alexander Pope and Thomas Gray. De Sena calls Wordsworth, Coleridge, Walter Scott, Southey, Landor, Campbell and Moore, the “vanguard of the Romantic movement”. (p. 246); so we can tell he considers them the first generation, in his text. Byron, Shelley and Keats are the poets of the “social pressure” that succeed the radicalism of the end of the eighteenth-century. He quotes:

O sarcasmo de Byron, as visões libertárias de Shelley e o contemplativismo estético de Keats são três faces dessa utópica reconquista que, fugaz e condenada à morte precoce que inexoravelmente os atraiu, pairou nas alturas da mais pura poesia. (p. 257).

He states that this purity is evident in Shelley and in Keats, and is not the least paradoxes of Lord Byron.

And the third author chosen for this essay, Anthony Burgess, in his book “A literatura inglesa”, makes no distinction between generations, or divisions, contributing to the discussion. The chapter Burgess dedicates to the Romantic poets is very didactic, with excerpts of poems and considerations about the literary qualities of each five great poets (and a final item about smaller poets).

Conclusion

What comes to the discussion about the divisions is not so easy to classify: as a common opinion, Romanticism, not only English, created a whole diversity of artists, with all sorts of characteristics and special abilities. Wordsworth and Coleridge, great friends, were not so similar; Byron and Shelley, even being engaged to social happenings, did not fight for the same, or did not express the same in their works; Keats was Shelley’s close friend, but they were very different, and so were their works; those are great reasons to understand why this didactic classification is so problematic and brings so many questions.

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