

The Lakers and Cockneys: A Critique of Romantic Ideologies



Literature

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Abstract

Generally, when an author produces a literary text, he must write, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the views of an ideology and counter-ideology, one that he proposes and another that he opposes. Similarly, the romantics, who were divided into sub-schools: the Lakers and Cockneys, suffered from identity-crisis. So the Lakers defined themselves in relation to a new liberal democratic ideology working against the philosophical background of Locke and Hume, and the perfection of neoclassical poetry while the Cockneys sought a more liberal ways of expression and defined themselves in the context of a critical reading of the Lakers themselves. The new English rebels were stirred and inspired to revolt against the tyranny of incompetent regimes and gain an absolute independence. They intensified the self-sufficient resources of both man and society to have a natural aptness to create. Their impact was tremendous on the consciousness of Europe, stimulating a revolutionary movement in literature not less than in politics. Unlike pre-romantics, like Burns and Blake, the Lakers and Cockneys were not half-educated poets who followed their intuition and individual talent in their reaction against the sovereignty of Alexander Pope and his followers. Rather they were highly educated poets and critics who were well-aware of what they were doing. They maintained definite programs and contradictory ideologies in their poetry.

Recently, it is quite legitimate to analyze romantic poetry and criticism according to the assumptions of post-romantic culture in order to understand the romantics in terms other than their own self-recognition. Approached from the views of contemporary theories and methods of criticism, the romantic works are restored and perceived in a new light. This study, which is deeply indebted to deconstructive readings of the internal logic of romantic texts as well as their post-Althusserian socio-political considerations, seeks to mediate the ideological discrepancy between the Lake school of poets (Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge) and their Cockney rivals (Hunt, Shelley, Byron, and Keats). The study does not claim that historicizing the romantics is something new or innovative, lots of studies have stressed the close relationship between poetry and politics in the romantic age. Nevertheless, it shows how the Lakers and the Cockneys reacted differently to the historical demands of their age. These contemporaneous poets adopted opposing ideologies concerning the personal / the political and the imaginative / the real. While the first group of poets adhered to the German ideology which "was synthetic, fideistic, speculative, and supportive of established power", the second tended to French ideology which "was critical, anti-religious, rational, and socially progressive", said Jerome J. McGann (1983, 8).

As the romantic poets are increasingly read in the light of New-Historicist methodology, the Victorian legend that their poetry is an escapist literary production seems slightly convincing these days. The romantic escape to the Self is only a compensatory ideology because, after the Industrial Revolution, people were "unable to produce actively for themselves in the objective world", so they "make their field of activity internal and subjective - in Nature, Humanity, and Art" (Easthope, 1993, 20). Nevertheless, one should not confuse New-Historicism with literary history. The ideological critic should not concentrate on concrete history only, but how concrete history is transformed into subjects endowed with "a quasi-real hallucinatory individuality". A historicist reading of the romantics instigates silent historical motives behind their writings. It is an enlightenment of the historical truth behind the romantic works. In this sense, 'history' becomes 'myth', "and 'poetic imagination'", said Matthew Scott (1996), "the presentation of a string of events, or 'commonplace book'". The ideological approach to romantic poetry demands a unity between subject and object, consciousness and unconsciousness. This unity is not contradicted with the individual identity of the poet who European culture, since the Renaissance, guaranteed him an enjoying inward potentiality (Easthope, 19). Thus, the privacy of the poet was developed in relation to objective reality, supplying a Marxist account of romantic ideology, which repudiated German idealism for limiting poetry into abstract conceptions.

The ideology of a certain society is what they want to be. It is motivated fundamentally by the need to alter the lived relation between man and the world around him. Ideology, in this sense, is related basically to a radical political agenda that the mass fight out to achieve in their life. It is an organized collection of ideas, abstract system of thoughts applied to public matters, or intellectual strategy for categorizing the world and dividing it into ideographs. The ideographs are clusters of words that constitute the political discourse which expresses the subjective choices of the ideological believers. Thus, ideological critics presume a specific epistemic recognition of certain society by studying its verbal or non-verbal types of ideographs. The ideographs depict people's predictable behavior because the linguistic utterances of every ideology must be logically coherent, their meanings must lead to persuasion, have power of cognition, provide guidance towards action, and be capable of guiding one's evaluation. It is a system of presentation that explicitly or implicitly claiming to absolute truth, and creating the collective unconscious of a certain society.

The ideographs supply intellectual strategy for categorizing the world or subjective choices the ideologues consider sacramental in politics, religion, society and elsewhere. When a group of ideologues think alike about certain matters, they express their thoughts linguistically by conceptual metaphors or functional signs in which this thinking alike is communicated. So that ideas are no more than material things and abstract thoughts are mere actions expressed in words. Thus, the romantic texts are encoded, and should be decoded, in terms of their wider socio-political pre-requisites. The *Lakers* and *Cockneys* depict in their discourse paradigms or mindsets for people to follow and even if this discourse has a covert subjectivity, it carries the essential doctrines, myths, or symbols of the real world.

Ideological criticism does not mean that poetry is a mere fictive image of the real world, rather it is the production of certain social effect (Balibar and Macherey(1978, 84). It cannot be reduced to mere mirroring reality, poetry should be interpreted on the bases of reality-effect and fiction-effect together. Reality and fiction are notions produced by the text to have both literary and non-literary presuppositions built on subjective views of the world outside the text. In the discourse life, the readers take up attitudes towards imaginary struggles as they would towards real ones so that the authors' duty is to compose discourses about the dominant ideologies in order to provoke aesthetic, moral, political, religious and social prejudices on the part of the readers who would be true-bearers of self-adopted ideologies.

Ideological criticism creates 'historical situatedness' or 'politics of the literary text', which means that the literary text is the production of the historical period in which it is written. The socio-economic and political changes of any age are accompanied with a prevailing change in the literature produced within the same period. Following this schema, the ideological account of the romantic age refers to the wider non-literary aspects of romanticism for it "was a political, religious, and philosophic phenomenon", as Stephen Prickett said (1981, 5). The politics of a literary text is locating the affectivity of a text within the totality of the system it manifests. It analyzes the constitutional entities of this system working within well-determined historical sense of being. It is a critical assumption which investigates the hidden meanings, implicit significations, and silent intentions of the literary texts and complemented by a close observation of the historical, cultural, economic, and political conditions in the time of literary production. Thus, it finds out the exteriority-interiority relations as components of the text formulation, explicating the 'inside' and 'outside' of discourse. In this sense, the ideological account of romanticism should address itself directly to the question of its historical framework as well as the constitution of its internal aesthetic aspects. "The prophetic or imaginative mind", said J.R. Watson (1985, 20), "transforms the sense-data into something new and individual through the power of its speech at this point the internal and external become mutually interactive, as the spirit of the living creature".

The romantic age was by all means the age of the middle class and the bourgeois ideology was a set of ideas proposed by the dominant middle class to all members of society. According to Prickett, this class brought salvation to Englishmen. So the romantic poem was used as an "operator in the concrete relations between the individual and ideology in bourgeois society and ensures its reproduction" (Balibar and Macherey, 87). This was not a mechanical imposition forced like religious dogma on individuals, rather it is proposed like a free choice for the subjective use of the democratic reader (Ibid.). Romantic poetry, due to the socio-political conflict with the older ideologies, focused

new pictures of man in which there is no question of social order. The heroes are no longer kings or queens, princes or princesses, the typical main characters in classical literature. Poverty, mental destruction, plain beauty, and common family roots did not hinder the romantic figures from being outstanding heroes because a new theory of romantic characterization emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, the new romantic heroes who lack cultivation and elegance came to poetry through politics.

The early romantics: Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey focused in their poetry on common country folks. In his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth said that he rejected totally "the personification of abstract ideas", and preferred instead to keep the reader in the company of more realistic human beings whose significance can be developed "from contemplation of an individual life to a more general consideration of man's condition". He evaluated the qualities of the rural poor who were excluded or marginalized. He did not sentimentalize the agricultural laborer as the classical stereotypes of the 'happy peasant', he expected more from him as a man. The innate nobility and endurance of characters like Michael, Matthew, the Solitary Reaper, Poor Sussan, Lucy, Lucy Gray and others make the reader identify himself with these 'noble savages' and develop negative attitudes against their social marginalization and dehumanization. His interest and experimentation with subjects from lower social order results from a socio-political change. In his "Preface", he admitted that he is concerned with "revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself". He examined the "state of public taste ..., and how far this taste is healthy or deprived". He admitted also that there was a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, that forced his reaction against the old systems of literary expression. He championed the new vistas of justice, human rights, democracy and equality which made the romantic age an intensely political age. "The revolution of 1789", said Emile Legouis (1978, 275), "had in its beginning violently shaken English thought and won the approval and even roused the enthusiasm" of the romantic generation that was born about 1770, and were in the full flower of youth in 1789. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey trembled with joy at the fall of the Bastille, but gradually they became more conservative towards republican France and more disgusting towards Napoleonic France. Their early exultation turned into apostasy making Southey more pitiful, Coleridge more obscure, Wordsworth more agonizing and self-questioning. Consequently, the Lakers, carrying unconsciously Burke's terror from the mob violence and savagery, advocated reform more than revolution. Nevertheless, the approval of the French revolution continued in the following generation of the great romantics: Shelley, Hunt, Byron, and Keats who came to manhood about 1815. A wonderful humanitarian enthusiasm and gorgeous dreams of progress and perfection were ready to catch the fire by contact with the passions which the French cause aroused. This revolution still represented "a trumpet of prophecy" for Shelley who saw "in sleep old palaces and towers / Quivering within the waves intenser day". Likewise Byron took the political initiative forward in his poetry, supporting the pursuit of freedom by translating it out of abstractions into living facts.

Southey more than the others adopted conservative political ideology in which he argued against parliamentary reform, opposed Catholic emancipation, and he even ridiculed feminism. For him, the victory of women cannot be achieved by their feminist struggle but by their feminine charms. He addressed Mary Wollstonecraft, saying: "The lily cheek, the 'purple light of love', / The liquid luster of the melting eye,- / Mary! Of these the poet sung, for these / Did woman triumph" (1-4). Two different Marys come to the reader's mind, one is the Biblical mother of Christ, the other is mother of Feminism. The puzzlement intends to remind women of their femininity to befit, according to the poet, a universal human order built on patriarchy more than imitating masculine roles. However, Southey is not a convert from feminism, his early Pantisocratic views saw woman in the light of Rousseau's writings in which the philosopher of the French revolution relegated the role of woman into a mere supporter of man. Every man, said the manifesto of 'Pantisocrscy', should take a mild and lovely spouse whose task is to prepare his innocent food and tend his beautiful race.

To the Pantesocratic years belonged Coleridge's happiest and most optimistic 'Conversation Poem', "The Eolian Harp" in which the provocative wind "is not only a property of the landscape, but also a vehicle for radical changes in the poet's mind", said M.H. Abrams (1957, 37). The playing of the wind on the harp is very suggestive of music evoked by the outside world on the mind and soul of the romantic poet. The harp becomes itself the poet under

the tremendous impact of exteriority which motivates his interior imagination. "The wind harp", Abrams continued, "has become a persistent Romantic analogue of the poet's mind, the figurative mediator between the outer motion and inner emotion". The wind's workings on the strings of the harp creates a sense of harmony that makes "The Eolian Harp" a great cosmic love poem. According to Abrams, "the love between the poet and his bride becomes the exponent of a universal relationship - the union of the individual with the 'Universe' which, Coleridge said, occurs through love". Early in 1795-6, Coleridge was still a necessitarian under Locke and Hartley, so the 'eolian harp' was considered as a conventional image of the human mind as a passive receptive instrument stirred only by external forces (like the wind). It is the same wind, or external forces that could not activate Coleridge's mind in "Dejection: An Ode". After 1800, Coleridge adopted a more dynamic ideology in which the 'eolian harp' sign became inadequate and was rejected totally by the poet. His imagination was no longer motivated by external forces, rather it is a living power which is able not only to perceive the world, but in part to recreate it. In this sense, "imagination in Romantic discourse", said Forest Pyle (1995, 2), "is ideological". "One cannot", he continued, "hope to understand ideology without something called imagination". There are socio-political as well as literary roles given to imagination in romantic poetry. Ideologically significant, imagination has a "healing power", it is "an agent of meaning and redemption" (Ibid., iii). Thus, only when the Ancient Mariner "watched the water snakes", "a spring of love gushed" from his heart, and he "blessed them unaware". In the same moment, the Albatross fell off from his neck and he was saved. This simple seaman returned home with a moral he preaches to the Wedding-Guest that a crime against nature is a crime against humanity and God. Thus, poetics and politics are inseparable in Coleridge.

It is quite clear that controversial political trends were expressed by the two generations of the romantic poets who declared "the Cockney / Laker school wars", said Greg Kucich (1999). These wars shaped the literary culture of the romantic age; thus, "recent critiques of the Romantic ideology of solitary genius", Kucich thought, "have provoked a keen critical interest in these communal modes of cultural fashioning, particularly as they assembled around oppositional representations of the Lake School and what we are beginning to identify as its Cockney Other". The Cockneys, who suffered from serious problems of publication and critical reception of their poetry, perceived themselves as a single school and expressed certain ideological trends working against the counter-ideology of the Lakers. They were dissatisfied with the Lakers' cause of liberty and called for a more dynamic socio-political role of poetry. Thus, when Southey denounced Byron, in his "Preface" to "A Vision of Judgment", as being the head of the "Satanic School" of poetry, Byron replied with another poem in the same title, one of the greatest satirical parodies, in which he eulogized Satan more than King George III to whom Southey's poem was dedicated. In the last testimony, Michael addressed Satan saying: "Our difference is political". The anecdotal Byronic vision represented himself and Southey, as Satan and Michael, leaders of "different parties" fighting each other. The younger generation of the romantics felt that the elders were weakening and not revolutionary enough, or they betrayed their cause of liberty. This reaction modified the present understanding of the formative factors of the Lakers' ideology and the Cockneys' counter-ideology.

Historicist criticism presents the Cockneys as a single community of poets assembled around the radical figure of Leigh Hunt to whom Keats dedicated his first volume *Poems* (1817), admitting the inspiring role of his friend. The social poetry which characterizes the epistles and sonnets of Keats' *Poems* was a confident, joyful and frequently an erotic affirmation of liberalism against the despondency of post-Napoleonic England. Keats presented fresh insights about the poetics and politics of the new romantic age. He dreamt of a Utopian society perfected by pleasure, "a society remade through sexual love not political violence", said Jeffrey N. Cox (1998). Reviewing Keats' *Poems*, Hunt said that his friend helped to "put a new spirit of youth into everything", and "an intense feeling of external beauty in its most natural and least expressible simplicity". He denied the common accusation of Keats' early poetry as being boyish and immature. In his *Keats' Boyish Imagination*, Richard Marggraf Turley (2004) hypothesized that the poet had a "deliberate use of immaturity", or "strategic enactment of immaturity". It scrutinized the political consciousness in Keats' poetry and his challenge to "the mature force of established power". This means that his adolescent politics and poetics were intertwined, providing a free space for the young poet who "depicts the world as one huge, transcendental signifier of nonsense", and he developed gradually a matured political and historical consciousness reflected in the later narratives of his dignified Odes.

In his "Endymion", Keats was still resisting mature narratives. He challenged the middle-class ideology and rigidity in gender roles. Thus, he reworked the social and political allegories in the unexpected end of his romance. After three books of a long and tiresome quest that proved at the end nothing but a waste of time, Endymion, the Latmian shepherd-prince decided, too late, "no more of dreaming". Although, as traditional romances, the poem ends with a wedding-scene, Keats' protagonist realized that he was entrapped by a supernatural power beyond his control. His tragic flaw is that he exceeded his mortal limits in a romantic quest to seek a goddess and break the cosmic order. He oscillates between two female figures: the Indian Maid who is more approachable, and Cynthia who represents supernatural detachment. These two figures represent Keats' double dictum of sensation and thought or 'truth' and 'beauty'. The Indian Maid, the manifestation of the ideal woman on earth, redeems Endymion from his past fantasies: "No, never more / Shall airy voices cheat me to the shore". After tasting the glamour of physical love with her, the hero promised his Indian Maid a simple and ideal shepherd life in an Arcadian garden. But, unaware that they are one, the Indian Maid is transformed in a miracle from an Eastern woman of dark hair and eyes into a typical Western woman, an unapproachable white and blond goddess. The shift of characters leaves the young hero pessimistic and dissatisfied especially in the last day of his life on earth which he contemplates with a sad valedictory tone. In the end of the poem, the only triumphant character is Cynthia herself. She victors over Endymion whose femininity is proved at the end of the poem. This trend is not unknown to Keats himself who believed that "his appearance was girlish" and his detractors endeavored to disregard his poetry by "questioning his manliness, and thus his right to be taken seriously". "I am a weaver boy to them", Keats complained. Thus, he used a feminine hero for self-representation. In the last scene of the poem, Endymion surrenders totally to the will of his Goddess, he "knelt down", and "they vanished far away". They transcend heavenward but there is no mystifying atmosphere, the wood around is gloomy and there is a sense of detachment. He goes to heaven against his will, rather it is Cynthia's divine will, "Heaven's will, on our sad fate". The unavoidable journey to heaven is a dissolution of the hero's self-control and the poet's 'I am'.

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