

Where was British Romanticism?

Joep Leerssen

Universiteit van Amsterdam

A Review of

Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2008), ISBN978-0-19-923279-6, 292 pp.

Ever since Byron's maliciously-titled 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', the idea of English Romanticism has implied and occulted the informing presence of Britain's non-English parts. Written in the English language, but inspired by the craggy landscapes of the Celtic fringe and the bardic liminality of Ossian, Romanticism in Britain is, and is most definitely not, English. The usual roll-call of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats seems already to point towards the later filiations of Tennyson, Browning and Rossetti – which leads us firmly into the anglocentric 'Great Tradition' of Leavisite vintage, endorsed from Oxbridge to Harmondsworth. Byron figures in this roll-call as something between Rod Stewart and Tony Blair, whose Scottishness features only marginally in his flashy career (which in any case took him out of the country at an early stage); and in this Sellar and Yeatman view of 'Lyrical Ballads and all that' Walter Scott tends to be added on as an outsider, a man of letters *sui generis*, minding his own business at Abbotsford.

Murray Pittock's book gathers into ten chapters a number of essays written against this anglocentric foreshortening of the literary-historical record. He concentrates on the way in which Scotland and Ireland participated in European Romanticism, not just as provincial backwaters to an English mainstream, but as autonomous literary agents. Readers will be familiar with the aligning of the Gothic with Celtic Britain (Hogg and Maturin being here chosen as exemplars). Another chapter deals with Walter Scott, who is presented here, not so much as the embodiment of medievalist escapism (which would have been the obvious path to take), but as an author whose historicism was an inspiration to all vernacular cultures claiming their own place in history and, by implication, on the cultural map of Europe. (Pittock makes grateful use here of his experience as editor of the volume on Scott in the 'Reception of British Authors in Europe' series.) Separate chapters showcase Robert Burns and Maria Edgeworth as Romantics, and others highlight the formative influence of Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and James Macpherson. The final chapter returns to the idea that Scotland and Ireland took an active part in the great Romantic movement of the awakening of sub-imperial nationalities.

The book, as such, manages to bring off a number of interesting and even impressive feats. To begin with, it aligns certain key aspects of European Romanticism with a specifically Scottish or Irish input: the mantic nature of Romantic inspiration is rightly traced back to its Ossianic roots; similar

connections are made regarding Romantic features such as the taste for sublime landscapes, closeness to nature, egalitarian radicalism, the rediscovery of vernacular nationality and archaizing historicism. In the process, it offers enriching comments on Scottish and Irish authors by disentangling them from the political context of the 'Four Nations', and instead seeing them in the light of the poetical agenda and *mentalité* of European Romanticism. Finally, the authors in this generation are rightly traced back to a great variety of source traditions, from sentimental comedies and Enlightenment Patriotism to old-school antiquarianism.

Pittock succeeds with verve, deftness and acumen in his chosen agenda. There are some flaws; but they are few, and I list them merely for the sake of completeness. Occasionally the argument proceeds by way of apodictic (and overly generalised) assertion rather than demonstration ('the world of Wild Goose, Jacobite Ireland was not at all detached, though very different, from the more Toneite revolutionaries of 1798', 167). At other points the language falls into the fogbound doldrums of LitCrit Fustian ('The European nationalities question is ultimately the question which divided the paradox of Scott's hybridized historical romance from the possibility of the closure his dialogue of these forms had envisaged', 210); and occasionally the relationship between the multi-title footnote references and the text is a little unclear. By now it is notorious that even the most prestigious academic publishers are cutting corners on their copy-editing, which for a book priced at £50.00, is reprehensible, though not the author's fault. There are also a few solecisms in the spelling of Irish names (a Gaelic-English hybridisation of the form 'Ó Carolan'; Sir Richard Musgrave is misnamed Michael); and it is not for nothing that the book's title un-alphabetically mentions 'Scottish' first and 'Irish' second. The reader really interested in the nuts and bolts of Irish Romanticism must continue to draw on Claire Connolly's excellent chapter in the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* of 2006 (to which Pittock does not refer).

More interestingly, Pittock's book will exercise as much influence by provoking counter-arguments as by merely satisfying its readers; for in the process of opening up the centrifugal, anti-anglocentric field of British Romanticism it raises as many questions as it settles. Although Pittock bravely and squarely grasps the nettle of definitions in his introduction ('what is Romanticism?' and 'what is national literature?'), and develops cogent arguments in addressing these issues, he does not lay them to rest. For one thing, one must invariably be selective in literary history, and much more problematic than the question what or whom to include is what or whom to leave out. Byron only figures briefly as a champion of oppressed nationalities, and is barely mentioned in other respects; Tom Moore, Lady Morgan and even Edmund Burke are only mentioned in the penumbra of other arguments; and on the whole the aspects highlighted here are about the radical, innovative side of romanticism rather than

about its nostalgia and a-political escapism. This may be in part informed by the great unmentioned hole in the doughnut, 'English' Romanticism in the narrow sense. Are we to believe that Shelley and Mrs Hemans are nothing but daffodils, and Scotland all thistle? That Manzoni and Mickiewicz are more relevant points of reference than Southey? Also, at times Pittock seems to apply a rather, dare I say, Anglo idea of what Romanticism was about. Scottish and Irish trends stand out against this Wellek-Lovejoy-Abrams model, but effortlessly fit the sort of literary history nowadays conducted on the European continent. Surely Pittock's argument would have had the wind put in its sails by the notion, recently explored by Rüdiger Saffranski and others in the wake of Reinhard Koselleck, that Romanticism was in its very fibre and definition a deeply political shift in mentalities and paradigms, everywhere in Europe; that it heralded the conjoint rise of historicism and national organicism (both in an anti-feudal and in an ethnic-essentialist sense) both in political and in literary thought – the shockwaves of that shift spreading out both to the Right and to the Left, triggering both radical/subversive and reactionary/nostalgic expressions. And I for one sorely missed the influence of Herder in Pittock's scope and analysis.

That still leaves the question of the national literatures. What will have to be faced, following Pittock's opening up of the field, is a properly comparative analysis. Issues of distribution and dissemination (as pursued with exemplary clarity and depth by William St Clair in his *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004, not referred to by Pittock) gain urgency in the light of Pittock's argument. To which extent are the features shared by Irish and Scottish Romanticism absent from narrow-English Romanticism proper? Were Scottish and Irish authors read by fellow-Scots and fellow-Irish readers but neglected, or read differently, by English readers? In what distribution patterns did publishers and reviews disseminate these Scottish and Irish attitudes across the British Isles? And (most importantly to Pittock's working presuppositions) to which extent were Scottish and Irish authors in touch, and communicating a shared awareness of similar predicaments? Pittock on the whole proceeds by typological parallelism rather than by the exploration of actual exchanges and transfers. They existed, but their relative importance is as yet unclear; and in some cases, such comparative aspects may point into unexpected directions.

Finally, future research may take Pittock's work into the direction of historical impact and continuity. We see authors and names here retrieved by a latter-day academic researcher; but what was their stature and their ongoing reputation for their contemporaries and their immediate successors? How were they read and received, and what influence did they and their attitudes exert on subsequent generations? To give two examples from the mid-century: Samuel Ferguson formulated, as the Unionist ideal for Ireland, a Walter-Scott-style arrangement where the

loyal élite in the subsidiary capital (be in Dublin or Edinburgh) could draw on the local colour of the Celtic back country (the Highlands in the case of Scotland; Connacht and West Munster in the case of Ireland). And Thomas Carlyle was, despite his Celtophobic intolerant Teutomania, the idol of the Young Irishmen.