Conclusion

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Abstract and Keywords

For exiled readers the voices of authors offer a constant form of companionship, and a link with the homeland left behind. In some cases literary creations take the place of friends or families left behind or estranged. Like so many 19th-century readers, we still search works of literature for patterns that will help give meaning to our existence, and our changing preoccupations cause us to fall in and out of sympathy with particular parts of poems and novels at different points in our lives. The interweaving of literature with life is a central concern of the Conclusion, and I suggest that the exiled writing of the Romantic and Victorian generations tracked in this book meets the call of contemporary theorists for a layered cosmopolitanism. More than that, the literature that came out of Italy in the 19th-century helps us all to come to terms with exile in all its forms.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Julian Barnes, cosmopolitan, deracinated readers, Venice
'Romantic quests for “home” are endless’, Michael O’Neill astutely remarks, ‘and often involve the epiphanic or even eerie awareness that the imagination’s true dwelling place is homelessness.’¹ We are so used to the notes of exile in Romantic writing that we sometimes forget how much of it was written by literal, rather than metaphorical, outcasts. The history of English poetry also tends to overlook the way in which the Romantic generation of outcasts is entwined with the Victorians who came to Italy a few years later, consciously in the footsteps of the Pisan circle, but usually placed in a separate category altogether. If we align the novelistic, conversational, allusively layered textures of the epic poems Don Juan and Aurora Leigh, we can begin to recognize the significance of the loss of home and literal exile to the development of literary genre in the 19th century.

My exploration of the interplay between the material and metaphorical artistry of exile is one amongst many recent genre and gender-oriented attempts to enlarge the narrow view of Romanticism as lyrical poetry written by a handful of men about exclusively imaginary, volitional loneliness. Despite three solid decades of revisionary anthologies and guides, the teaching and anthologizing of Romanticism still tends to be dominated by mythic, sublime, obscure homelessness, rather than the historically grounded, geo-politically specific deracinations of war-torn Europe and America. As depicted in the illustrations to this book, the myth of the solitary genius on an eminence still overshadows the image of the Romantics as a group, writing collaboratively and experimentally and managing to be simultaneously in a paradise of exiles and in the thick of it.

It is clearly not a coincidence that some of the best satire of the 19th century is written from outside England, and that its publication in England was vexed, but this book has also examined the distinctive Italian exilic turn to narrative and conversational modes, as well as to dramatic and historical forms. However legendary the musicality of the Italian language, lyric is perhaps a more challenging form for poets in exile because the immediate environment, the locale that would receive or overhear lyric overflow, is acoustically other. Exiled involvement with another culture at the beginning of the 19th century sharpens awareness of the poet’s differences from his or her native society.
The exiles we have been reading all develop a much more edgy relationship with their readers precisely because those readers are distant, presumed to be largely hostile, and only perilously part of a common culture. Exilic artistry, therefore, disaggregates the components of national culture, and reopens the English poetic tradition to other voices. Being part of a multi-vocal textual tradition, rather than a singular patriotic one, exiled writing offers a new, fluid identity to its readers. The rebarbative criticism that 19th-century reviewers dished out to English poets in Italy is a home-guard response to its porousness, and to a mixture that appeared to undermine the national ideal of ‘splendid isolation’.

By making space for a more generous coverage of the mingled genres and voices of exile, including exiled re-readings of other works, we can see more clearly how canonical Romantic and Victorian poets epitomize the insights of Oscar Wilde and Thomas De Quincey that literature is essentially cosmopolitan. Literature of the early 19th century does not need to apologize for what ideologically led critics (in the role of lone critical genius, standing outside the tradition) label Romantic ideology. Romantic and Victorian literature needs only to point to its evident comprehension of the materiality, as well as the mythos, of exile to earn acknowledgement of its vital critique of today’s global causes of homelessness: despotism, rabid nationalism, religious intolerance, the extinction of the wilderness, and growing alienation (despite and possibly because of technology’s apparent shrinkage of geographical distance) between citizens.
Throughout its ‘patient and irreconcilable enmity with domestic and political tyranny’, the writing of the Pisan circle, the Brownings, and Walter Savage Landor in Italy goes a long way toward anticipating and meeting the call of contemporary political theorists for a form of ‘layered cosmopolitanism’. By virtue of its almost agonized thoughtfulness, this concept of different spheres of ethical reasoning linked to everyday interaction helpfully embraces what used to be called (sometimes less thoughtfully) (p.243) ‘universal values’. The cosmopolitan inventiveness of Byron, the Shelleys, the Brownings, Landor, and their intermediaries retains aesthetic, political, and ethical significance for us now, and for the future. By keeping hold of the past and mixing old associations with the religion, history, and culture of another region, they demonstrate the difficult, but rewarding, possibilities of belonging to more than one community; at the same time, they illuminate the way that political consciousness begins in affective transmission. The English experience of exile in Italy, in which we see our leading 19th-century poets as uprooted readers as well as writers, helps us to recognize and guard the value of past representation as a way of understanding present actuality.
Julian Barnes’s recent collection of essays celebrates the power of fiction to explain life: ‘how we live it, what it might be for, how we enjoy and value it, how it goes wrong, and how we lose it.’ One of his most striking comments describes the paradoxical situation of the reader: ‘Alone, and yet in company ... Alone in the company of a writer who speaks in the silence of your mind.’ To a Romanticist, this shadows so beautifully the cadence of ‘Forlorn yet pleasing’ that it is hard to remind oneself that Barnes is speaking of novels in general, rather than Romantic poetry in particular, especially as he comes to the same conclusion as Elizabeth Barrett, Byron, and Walter Savage Landor about the company of authors: ‘it makes no difference whether that writer is alive or dead. Fiction makes characters who have never existed as real as your friends.’ The only thing I think we might want to add to Barnes’s eloquent summary is that, once our reading becomes inextricably Burkean and associative (rather than the fresh start of Tom Paine), we are often not only in the company of the dead author, but with interlinked fellow readers, friends, and teachers. The experience of hearing their voices mingled with the words on the page often occasions, as Rousseau pointed out, ‘a bitter reflection at having lost them’. Reading is an endless renegotiation and consolidation of experience with all its gains and losses.

Recognition of the complex layers involved in the reception of literature entails a recognition of the kinship between the acts of reading and creative interpretation performed by artists and critics—a kinship discerned by Oscar Wilde who, rather unexpectedly, emerges as one of the critical sponsors of this book. Naturally, Wilde’s insights on the exiled nature of great art are delivered through an imaginary conversation: the critic’s individuality, he asserts, ‘becomes a vital part of the interpretation ... He will be always showing us the work of art in some new relation (p.244) to our age. He will always be reminding us that great works of art are living things.’ It sounds more than a bit like P. B. Shelley, and as a beautiful late 19th-century double of A Defence of Poetry, it constitutes a bold and exhilarating defence of criticism. We are all readers, and other books keep renovating the layers of interpretive possibility that every work of literature draws into its orbit, helping us to read in fresh ways, guiding us to fresh woods and pastures new.
Conclusion

The time that we spend in silent reading reminds us that life is a lonely occupation (even reading aloud to someone else reinforces this: it is quite possible to read a familiar story to a child, while thinking of something completely different). Reading sharpens our consciousness of isolated self-consciousness; being ‘alone in the silence of your mind’, as Barnes puts it, always brings us back to the brink of the metaphorical exile that most of us will experience at some point in our lives. ‘For Life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people’, Wilde observed, ‘[t]hings last either too long, or not long enough.’

When we find ourselves shut out of our previous existence by the shipwrecks that Boccaccio patiently catalogued, reading confirms our solitude at the same time that it keeps us company and, in a strange act of transference, the mythical and material aspects of exile cross over as we read.

In the long, hard look at exile that dominates Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto IV, the stanzas on Venice, city of exiles, are followed by Byron’s reflection on the life of poetry that makes its ‘firm abode/In bare and desolated bosoms’ (IV.21). All other abodes, we know after watching Venice rise above or sink into the sea, are transient, but the link between author and reader, that extraordinary affective connection that is always there as long as we keep our books, stays with us as a bridge thrown across the gulf of time, reassuring us—in all the unsettling ways created by art—that existence may be borne.

Notes:

(1) O’Neill, ‘Realms without a Name’, p. 77.

(2) Wilde argues: ‘It is Criticism that makes us cosmopolitan’. See Ellmann (ed.), The Artist as Critic, p. 404. De Quincey states: ‘literature, by its very grandeur, is degraded socially; for its relations are essentially cosmopolitan ... if it works by the highest forms of passion ... its natural effort ... is to address the race, and not any individual nation.’ See Barry Symonds et al. (eds), The Works of Thomas De Quincey, 21 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000–2003), XVI, 325.

Conclusion


(7) Ellmann (ed.), *The Artist as Critic*, p. 375.

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