

Romantic Healers in Old and in New Worlds

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Abstract: The revision of Romanticism in the last two or three decades went deeper than any other revolution in the canonization of western literature. Tom Wein (*British Identities, Heroic Nationalisms and the Gothic Novel.1764-1824*), Gary Kelly (*English Fiction of the Romantic Period*), Virgil Nemoianu (*Taming Romanticism*), or Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre (*Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*) demystified the uncritical association of this literary trend with the revolutionary political ethos in 1789 France, casting light on the conservative, past-oriented yearnings of the major representatives. Such considerations, however, do not apply to the American scene, where politics and poetics, unaffected, or at least not directly affected by the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic wars remained faithful to the ideas of the French Revolution. Whereas Europe turned conservative, with the Great Powers forming suprastatal networks of influence (The Holy Alliance at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 bonding the Kingdom of Prussia, the Austrian and Russian empires, joined a few years later by France and the United

Kingdom), America built a political system grounded in the rights of the individual and pursued "dreams" of personal and national assertiveness (the "city on the hill," "from rags to riches") in opposition to the European "concert of nations" model. Our paper is pointing to a necessary dissociation of meliorist plots and narratives of healing in the romantic canon on either part of the Atlantic instead of subsuming them under a common poetics/politics heading.

Keywords: *Romantic fantastic, utopia, anti-language, narratives of healing*

1. Preliminary Remarks

An excellent instrument for the analysis of the utopia corpus is the Kriterianmatrix (metrical display of criteria) proposed by Thomas Schölderle in his 2011 *Utopia and Utopie*, und adopted by Dr Simon Spiegel in *Bilder einer besseren Welt. Die Utopie im nichtfiktionalen Film* published this year. The discursive frame (political, philosophical, social-psychological narrative) is plotted with elements of narrative structure, typical tropes of stylistic parameters which are now cast in a sort of negative of the canonical generic form. Even the neighbouring literary kinds mentioned by Simon Spiegel, such as the *Robinsonade*, *Fürstenspiegel*, *Telemachie*, *Bildungsroman* (Crussoism, *Kyrupaedia* or *Mirror of*

Magistrates, Telemachia, novel of formation) undergo a similar process of disenchantment, although the agency responsible for decline changes as we cross over from the Old to the New World.

Whereas the high-minded healers or saviours in European romantic fantasy are of noble stock and restored by the social redress plot to their rights usurped by upstarts (See *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley, or, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg), in America, ancestry is associated with decay and sin (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Purloined Letter*, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, *Legends of the Province House*, *Wieland*), while those who remain loyal to the English king (*The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*, *Peter Rugg*, *the Missing Man*) are imagined to have gone adrift in a loop of time. Whereas the French sculptor Rude, who immortalized scenes of the Revolution on the Arc de Triomphe is almost forgotten, the Statue of Liberty has become the emblem of America. Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Monarch of Dreams*, lost in his dream chase of the Mount of Saint Michel Castle – a symbol of the Ancient Regime in its alliance of feudal and religious life and a western outpost at tide time separated by the ocean from the Continent – misses the train of young soldiers resembling Rude's *Le Départ des Volontaires* on the Arc in Paris.

Stranded among fanatical religious sectarians of early nineteenth-century America – pietists, shakers, transcendentalists – Charles Brockden Brown's *Carwin*, a character in his novel *Wieland*, is not a builder of civilization, but a destroyer. Christoph Martin Wieland's satirical onslaught on Fürsten, leaders of men, associated with the absolutist, irrational rule, had reduced their status to disciplined disciples of high-minded scholars (See *Wieland's Supplemente*, 1798). In the works of Poe, C.B. Brown, or Washington Irving, the king is a spectre in whom only deluded citizens continue to believe. Brown's protagonist of the same name, modelled on the historical *Wieland*, replaces the earthly king with "His Divine Majesty", a vengeful God driving him into unnatural crimes against his wife and children. The search for the Father commutes to hunt of the father and murder of the creator in *Frankenstein*, while an anti-Bildungroman takes enlightened characters such as *Wieland* or initially well-meaning ones, such as a *Carwin* (nourishing utopian plans of social reform in the New World) into a down-spiralling entropic plot which ends in madness, destruction and death.

2. Romantic Utopian Projects

Despite historical changes undergone by all genres, utopia and its neighbours still belong to what Spiegel calls *totalitarismustheoretische und eine sozialpsychologische Forschungstradition* (tradition of theoretically totalitarian and social-psychological search), characterized by the universality of the utopian project. I quote: *Es geht nicht um Verbesserungen in einzelnen Bereichen, sondern um*

eine komplette Um- und Durchgestaltung der Gesellschaft (It does not concern improvement in individual cases but a complete reorganization of society) (Spiegel 2019: 24). Romantic utopian projects, even if improper or failed, are grounded within the romantic philosophy of history disseminated especially by Hegel, who saw a certain spirit of the age (shortly after, in 1840, William Whewell would call this “consilience of inductions”) feeding into all institutions and conferring on them a unitary character:

In virtue of the original identity of their essence, purport, and object, these various forms are inseparably united with the Spirit of the State. Only in connection with this particular religion, can this particular political constitution exist; just as in such or such a State, such or such a Philosophy or order of Art.” It is for America to abandon the ground on which hitherto the History of the World has developed itself. What has taken place in the New World up to the present time is only an echo of the Old World — the expression of a foreign Life; and as a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards History, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is. In regard to Philosophy, on the other hand, we have to do with that which (strictly speaking) is neither past nor future, but with that which is, which has an eternal existence — with Reason; and this is quite sufficient to occupy us. (Hegel 2001[1837] :104)

The same year (1837) Thomas Carlyle glossed on the French Revolution as an obscure phenomenon which had disappeared under interpretation (The French Revolution: A History). History, as in his essay “On History”, is seen now only as a manuscript open to interpretation, with missing letters and which cannot be fully deciphered by anybody. In Dickens’s fictional counterpart, Barnaby Rudge (1841), the narrator’s ravens in the met fictional plot, which are getting him news from the world as in the Odin myth, are just an empty figure mocking presumed omniscience. The plot shows the returning perpetrator of a crime eavesdropping astonished on one of the fabled versions of his past which does not as much as come close to what had actually happened. The literary utopia leaves the generic menu of the Victorians.

What utopian plots did romantic writers hatch?

A drifting world is in need of a healer. The Reign of Terror seemed to have gone too far for remedies. Utopia does not turn into dystopia – a bad world as the project of ill-meaning minds -, but it modulates into anti-utopia, somehow like the baroque anti-blazon in poetry or as any anti-language suggesting passage to a different society/ poetics but still within the same generic frame. The Healer is displaced by the Avenger in Byron’s Manfred, who is Nemesis herself. The ditty is not attending to victims or alleviating wounds, she has her hands full with the restoration of the ancient regime:

“I was detained repairing shattered thrones, /Marrying fools, restoring dynasties, /Avenging men upon their enemies” (Act II, Sc.3). Vengeance is needed for “mortals [who] dared to ponder for themselves,/ To weigh kings in the balance, and to speak/ Of freedom, the forbidden fruit.”

According to G. van der Leeuw (1963: 30), the mythic Saviour comes into the world through miraculous birth, epiphany, and resurrection, and commits acts of salvation. Byron's *Manfred* is made of such unworldly stuff:

First Destiny: [...] This man is of no common order, as his port And presence here denote. / His sufferings / Have been of immortal nature, like/ Our own [...] his aspirations / Have been beyond the dwellers of the earth. (Act II, Sc. 4).

He, however, does not save anybody, taking pride, instead, in being his own Destroyer. As well as Byron's other misanthropist, the Prisoner of Chillon, he chooses a world in which he reigns supreme over contact with humanity. That is, anti-Crusoism, anti-Robinsonade. The counter-culture functions in a way similar to the doping of metals with impurities that manage to change the properties of the host materials. The anti-language of utopia is, according to M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday 1976: 570), symptomatic of a counter-society set up within a host society as an alternative to it. The anti-language is generated by this emerging society, acting as its ally. The negative representation of royalty (anti-mirror of magistrates), of authority figures (anti-Telemachia), of the civilizing mission (anti-Robinsonade) is the correlative of the collapse of the Enlightenment utopian projects.

Contrariwise, healing in American narratives comes from anonymous communities of the kind really existing in great numbers in nineteenth-century America. Continental met narratives may provide the framework for their own, but only to be rejected. Failure for having listened to the enticing siren songs of Old Europe had been a theme in American fiction long before Henry James's encounters between naive Americans falling victims to shrewd Europeans (*The Europeans*, *The Ambassadors*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Jolly Corner*, *Princess Cassamassima* ...).

The failure of utopian projects in the Old World is blamed on ideas, the crisis-healing plot being often a matter of a "battle of books". In James Hogg's *Private Memoirs of a Justified Sinner*, the interface of text and reality is repeatedly asserted. The author enters the fictional universe as a character whose occupation is indeed his in real life (a journalist, a reporter). Not only the author but even the typically Jacobin I narrator is dispossessed of his narrative which becomes the personalized textual body of the protagonists. Reality vanishes between their conflicting versions. Robert Wringhim's body is miraculously preserved in the grave in symbolic identification with his manuscript, a text being a hybrid form of existence: Life-in-Death, that fabulous character who wins Coleridge's *Mariner* playing dice. The *Mariner* becomes a text errant in the world of the living, imparting on them Pantisocracy's Bible of universal love.

The main conflict in *Frankenstein* is that between two reforming projects of the eighteenth century. In his 1754 *Sympathies*, Wieland distinguishes between the enlightened scholars' communication with their readership (who are physically absent, *die Abwesenden* – Wieland 1798: 154) and secret societies. Those who “redeem the ignorance of the world” through readings from Homer, Plato, Lucian, a.o., shared among enlightened lovers of truth, who admire Shaftesbury's moral world, who engage in the exercises in devotion practiced by the Rosicrucians (Rosenkranz: “wreath of roses”) are set over and against the mean character of members of secret societies such as Scottish Ramsay, who are said to darken the light of truth trying to pass as benefactors (Wieland 1798: 205):

“Cosmopolitans give the name of a citizen of the world the purest and highest significance. For they regard all the peoples of the earth as members of a single-family, and the universe as a state, in which they are citizens along with innumerable other rational beings, in order to promote the perfection of the whole under general laws of nature, each in his own special way minding his own prosperity”. (C.M. Wieland, *The Secret of the Cosmopolitan Order*, 1788).

The idea was shared by F.G. Herder, who, in “*Über eine unsichtbare Gesellschaft*” (On an Invisible Society) included in *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (Letters on the Improvement of Humanity) proposes a “long-distance” association of all thinking men in the world, an ideal society of *Buchdruckerei* (consumers of the print industry). It was through print that he felt united with *alle edlen Geisten der Wel* (all the noble spirits of the world) since ancient times to the present. Here was there no secrecy but only *helle, offenbare Wahrheit* – that luminous, open truth, or, what Carlyle associates with Goethe and the other men of letters: the open secret (“On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history).

Brown's novel *Wieland* combines two generic forms which were popular at the time: the epistolary novel which served the Jacobins' purpose of seducing the readership into accepting their political agenda and the novel about secret societies (*Geheimnisbundroman*).

It might have been Wieland and Herder who had awakened Europeans to a realization of the spectral dimension acquired by reality for people living in the age of print. Texts and bodies seemed now to share a common genesis. The De Laceys in *Frankenstein* admission the monster to the library of luminaries and opponents to absolutism out of which the revolution had been born: Milton's arch-rebel, Goethe's man of feeling (*Werther*), Count Volney's critique of empires, of corrupt and oppressive institutions. On the other hand, Victor Frankenstein studies at Ingolstadt University falling under the influence of the Illuminati lost among relics of a past esoteric culture and codes. Born of the dead past,

the creature's patched up body fills his own creator with disgust. The failure of the French Revolution was at the time blamed upon the Illuminati's dissatisfaction with the Girondins' (standing for the luminaries) achievements. The offspring of this political allegory turned benevolent by DeLacey culture and education finds himself in search of a father who wants to break free from his own creation and destroy it.

European plots and themes, European reference background, whether historical or cultural, from the ancient Greeks to French royalty or French theatrical representations may be there, in Brown, Poe, Hawthorne or Irving, but distanced through various narrative devices, such as titles: Hawthorne's *An Old Woman's Tale*, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, with its medieval ring which had never been heard in the New World. Brown's *Wieland* is an upper-class European whose troubled mind is inherited by his son, while *Carwin* is an American commoner who returns from Europe as a bonded man, his ventriloquism suggesting his split personality (fine words and despicable acts), which was the effect of his initiation into the cabal of an Irish *Homo Secreto*. In *The Man at Home*, the narrator alludes to the Jacobins' blacklists and night terroristic marches on political enemies, to supposed secretive dealings of the late French queen, suggesting also that the "open secret" of the literati was not so open after all, because to understand Spanish, for instance, did not imply the understanding of Calderon

The most effective distancing device is parallelism. Europe carries connotations of idle mythological representations of people stuck in a remote past. In William Austin's *Peter Rugg*, the Missing Man, a citizen of Boston gets lost in a storm, being carried away by his horse together with his daughter. As well as Walter Map's *King Herla*, borrowed from Irish mythology, Rugg is driving in his open chaise outside time haunting the American federation. He keeps passing his own house, unable to stop and re-enter real-time. He possesses old and expired currency – a coin dating back to King Charles Stuart's execution (1649) -, he imagines himself driving on the king's highway in the American commonwealth, he is said to be "the king's admiration". He belongs to a time which had been severed from the present and to an extinct species: he has his daughter with him, his wife had died uncomforted, their house is burned down and the land put up at auction. The village of Menotomy is revered as the landmark of the War of Independence (the beginning of America's severance- Gr. Tomia- from the British metropole), the site of its first bloody encounter of local patriots with the king's troops. Finally, stopping before what had been his gate, Rugg looks in dismay at the familiar faces of his neighbours who actually are their descendants. Those who had understood the way the wind of history was blowing, moving along with the time enjoyed continuity and a share in the nation's common heritage. Rugg's property was being swallowed by the new buildings of a flourishing

civilization. Rugg and his daughters are missing rings, he had missed the battle, had failed to do his duty. In the auctioneer's address to potential buyers, the language of scholarly and conservative Europe conflicts with the language of revolutionary action, and the latter with the bid to pragmatic "men of speculation [...] who are deaf to everything except the sound of money" to invest for profit. America is open to all possibilities: revival of the ancient civilizations, a celebration of America's heroic birth, a cradle of prosperity. Symbol of universal fraternity, Gentile of Jew, the Temple of Solomon becomes the attractor of Europe's mythical imaginary knocking at the door of the New World:

[...] an architect cannot contemplate this lot of land without rapture, for here is room enough for his genius to shame the temple of Solomon. Then the prospect — how commanding! To the east, so near to the Atlantic that Neptune, freighted with the select treasures of the whole earth, can knock at your door with his trident. From the west, the produce of the river of Paradise — the Connecticut — will soon, by the blessings of steam, railways, and canals, pass under your windows; and thus, on this spot, Neptune shall marry Ceres, and Pomona from Roxbury, and Flora from Cambridge, shall dance at the wedding.

By contrast, an American mythology, with an emerging "city on the hill" trope, is spreading over the land which passes from physical space into cultural order, redressing what Robert Frost would later see as their original inadequacy: "The land was ours before we were the land's" They are beginning to "story" it, to wrap it up in an ethos of heroic cult of freedom:

"Men of the North End! Need I appeal to your patriotism, in order to enhance the value of this lot? The earth affords no such scenery as this; there, around that corner, lived James Otis; here, Samuel Adams; there, Joseph Warren; and around that other corner, Josiah Quincy. Here was the birthplace of Freedom; here Liberty was born, and nursed, and grew to manhood. Here man was newly created. Here is the nursery of American Independence— I am too modest — here began the emancipation of the world; a thousand generations hence, millions of men will cross the Atlantic just to look at the North End of Boston."

Peter, however, had not been a rock on which a church could be built but a "rug[g]", a floor covering which might have been an animal skin, a coverlet for travelling or a garment for his horse. His land lacks identity, and now it looks like a blank page on which any narrative of social action can be written. American typos was born, Austin's story looking ahead to Henry James's "The Jolly Corner", where an American returning from Europe as an aging man feels frustrated over not having achieved

what the builders of sky-scrappers pulling down his old-fashioned home had created over the same time span.

Paradoxically enough, the auction scene places America, a new nation, in post history: whereas Europeans try out utopian projects, exposed to success or failure, Americans serve themselves to a menu of alternative projects, with the prescience of their worth and satisfied to naturalize those of their election.

Irving's Rip van Winkle falls within the same allegorical pattern of return to a later reality after a long sleep. This time the hero's error is his political aloofness, his narrow sphere of concerns, the nation's liberty being limited in his case to freedom from ... matrimony.

By contrast, the protagonist of Thomas Wentworth's Higginson's *The Monarch of Dreams* is high-minded but making the wrong choice. His admiration of Mont Saint Michel whose picture he sees in a magazine and of everything it represents – a monastery in a feudal citadel on a piece of land which becomes an island during the tide, functioning as the emblems of the ancient regime – drives him into a mad scheme of controlling his dreams to the point where he manages to focus on the image of the castle even in sleep. Francis Ayrault has Huguenot and Quaker ancestry, he is a dreamer - the very opposite of an emerging type of the nation: the community-minded citizen. He fails in his duties as a brother, neighbour, member of the social body, local or nationwide. He neglects his sister, fails to act as peace-maker during a strike, fails to help a Canadian female runaway... His dreams reveal his unconscious desires of ruling over others, contrary to the American option for equality among all the people:

Sometimes the books were at his command, and he grappled with whole alcoves; sometimes he ruled a listening senate in the halls of legislation; but the peculiarity was, that there were always menials and subordinates about him, never an equal.

Finally, he realizes that all those figures in his dreams were actually copies of himself. Instead of building an outpost of civilization, Francis practices a version of blighted Crusism. The outbreak of the Civil War entices him to action, but he discovers that as well as in *Frankenstein*, what he had created is now in control of his life:

In the midst of this tumultuous dreaming, came confused sounds from without. There was the rolling of railway wheels, the scream of locomotive engines, the beating of drums, the cheers of men, the report and glare of fireworks. [...] Each image of himself, before diminutive, became

colossal: they blocked his path; he actually could not find himself, could not tell which was he that should arouse himself in their vast and endless self-multiplication. He became vaguely conscious, amidst the bewilderment, that the shouts in the village were subsiding, the illuminations growing dark, and the train with its young soldiers was again in motion, throbbing and resounding among the hills, and bearing the lost opportunity of his life away—away—away.

The numerous brotherhoods created in America in the late century provided the historical ground for the revival of the utopia, Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward 2000-1887*) and William Dean Howells (*A Traveler From Altruria, Romance*), elaborating on its classical form as mirror of reality, satire, and meliorist project neighbouring on the generic parameters of a scientific romance. Whereas the socialist or religious communities of the earlier half of the century had inspired apprehensions of innocuous secret dealings, those of the late centuries were seen as beneficial as they contributed to healing the wounds of a nation divided by the war.

3. Re-writing Romantic Utopias.

The simple life in the woods, but in company with other men and receiving guests, appealed to Henry David Thoreau. Readers of his *Walden* should not be mistaken by the author's repeated injunctions to self-discovery, though. Thoreau shared with Emerson a belief in the community of the entire humanity through the Over soul of Brahma revealed in each individual mind. American individualism never loses grip on the ONE with capital letters which is the nation. It was not cosmopolitan esoteric lore in the humanities that Emerson meant to lay down as epistemological ground of his philosophy of being but science. In his *Representative Men* (1850), Plato is said to have anticipated Laplace, according to whom, if the state of the universe at a certain moment were to be known, all futures would be predictable. As a future-oriented society, America is sensitive to such issues. By combining the holism of the Vedas and of contemporary physics, Emerson and Thoreau anticipated the quantum philosophy of science.

In 1948 Burrhus Frederic Skinner, Professor of psychology at Harvard published a book entitled *Walden Two* which has little in common with the transcendentalist precedent. There is no anxiety of influence in Skinner, no new text cannibalizing a previous one, no claustrophobic sense of being imprisoned inside another text or being haunted by it. Skinner answers the question inscribed in the genetic code of the genre: how can social management improve the life of man? By opting for small

economic units, the book is relevant to contemporary debates about the dehumanizing and oppressive presence of the globalized corporative networks of power. Concerns about health, education, and welfare to the detriment of economics and government are also symptomatic of a country that placed human rights above the majority rule of democracy. Skinner's statement in political philosophy is influenced by a fashionable discipline of the day – behaviourism – but the utopian cast of mind of the pilgrim-fathers is still there as are individualism and perfectionism:

The great men who are said to have made a difference inhuman affairs –Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, the scholars and scientists of the Revival of Learning, the leaders of the Enlightenment, Marx –were not political leaders. They did not change history by running for office. We need not aspire to their eminence in order to profit from their example. What is needed is not a new political leader or a new kind of government but further knowledge about human behavior and new ways of applying that knowledge to the design of cultural practices.

A different pattern faces us when we turn to Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, a novel refurbishing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published this year.

The main narrative device used by a writer who had previously proved her imaginative potential of mapping stories in light of quantum physics theories is that of repeated transgressions of boundaries between textual worlds and reality, with chimeric characters whose names conflate authorial and figural identity (Victor Stein in love with Mary Shelley but also with Ry – a transgender doctor in Brexit England).

The dramatization of Mary Shelley's Preface to *Frankenstein*, where she tells the story of the birth of the novel, is accompanied by another trans-genre experiment: the gloss on the novel, and a new love story of a transgender couple experimenting the generation of automata (sex dolls) or non-biological life forms. By stating that her story is an invention which sits in another invention, Winterson echoes Shelley only apparently, for whereas her predecessor had had in mind creation myths, including the *imitatio dei* of producing a unified fiction out of disconnected cultural parts, she takes a mortal leap from text inside reality itself - the reality of experiments in the survival of the race through storage of memory, or cryonics, meant to ensure the return to life of dead bodies, or of already existing posthuman bodies interacting with machines.

The two worlds we have compared so far from the point of view of their solutions to life-saving problems are brought together. Ry travels to Memphis, Tennessee, to visit the Tech-X-Po on Robotics and see how they affect the humans' mental and physical health. Memphis has been selected because

this American city and Mary Shelley's novel are both two hundred years old. Winterson is very subtle in her invention of correspondences. The conflicting esoteric/mystical Illuminati strain versus scientific experiments in galvanism finds a perfect counterpart in the overlay of the machinic exhibition script with precise roles- Exhibitor, Demonstrator, Purchaser, point of contact - and the local people's undaunted belief in Jesus and afterlife. The American way of life is based on a psychologically healthy division among three components: performative research, religious mental makeup and hedonist consumerism. For love of freedom Americans go to all extremes, doing away with all figures of authority, expelling even world-builders from their utopian constructs which are allowed to function through the collaboration of community members *inter pares* (*Walden Two*).

On the contrary, Europeans are schizophrenic, living simultaneously in several worlds. To them, reality is neither solid nor certain but "part of the ceaseless pull-it down-build it again patterns of history". As far as history is concerned, the narrator says, "We are the history we are making". The Europeans' pride in self-generation and self-determination is after all the hybris of the Old World; the repeated fall of Frankenstein into another fiction, in some other kind of madness, which their creatures inadvertently correct according to some hidden plan of justice in an ethical universe where, they say, what is good is also realized ...

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