

Lars Eckstein and Christoph Reinfandt (Eds.)

Romanticism Today

Selected Papers from the Tübingen Conference
of the German Society for English Romanticism

Christoph Bode, Frank Erik Pointner, Christoph Reinfandt (Hg.)

STUDIEN ZUR ENGLISCHEN ROMANTIK

(Neue Folge)

Band 6

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

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of the German Society for English Romanticism /
Lars Eckstein and Christoph Reinfandt (Eds.).-
WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009
(Studien zur Englischen Romantik, 6)
ISBN 978-3-86821-147-4

Umschlagabbildung: William Bloke

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009
ISBN 978-3-86821-147-4

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
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Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>
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Lars Eckstein & Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen)

The Adventures of William Bloke, or: Romanticism Today and How It Got Here

After a five-year hiatus in which his son was born, the British singer/songwriter and political activist Billy Bragg returned to the music business in 1996 with an album entitled *William Bloke* (cf. Bragg 1996/2006).¹ Typically for Bragg, this punning reference to William Blake combines an acknowledgement of Blake's oppositional position in his own times with a broader political agenda, which appropriates Blake's singularity for the concerns of the common people at the end of the twentieth century. These two impulses are, however, not quite compatible: Is the appropriation of Blake as a bloke really only a slight modification in line with Blake's legacy or does this change of name indicate a change of identity? While Bragg's notion of 'William Bloke' insists on Romanticism's continuing relevance today, it also points to some unresolved tensions in Romanticism itself and to the fact that Romanticism today is frequently marked by simplification, sentimentality and the dangers of downright misunderstanding and falsification. The latter, however, does not necessarily mean that Romanticism has lost its grip on cultural practices, as a closer look at Bragg's record reveals.

Beyond its title, *William Bloke* is not very explicit about its Blakean pretexts. The most obvious reference comes in the verses of the second track, a rollicking, ska-inspired version of a song called 'Upfield,' propelled by an incessant horn arrangement.²

I dreamed I saw a tree full of angels, up on Primrose Hill
And I flew with them over the Great Wen till I had seen my fill
Of such poverty and misery sure to tear my soul apart
I've got a socialism of the heart, I've got a socialism of the heart

The angels asked me how I felt about all I'd seen and heard
That they spoke to me, a pagan, gave me cause to doubt their word
But they laughed and said: "It doesn't matter if you'll help us in our art
You've got a socialism of the heart, you've got a socialism of the heart"

Their faces shone and they were gone and I was left alone
I walked these ancient empire streets till I came tearful to my home
And when I woke next morning, I vowed to play my part
I've got a socialism of the heart, I've got a socialism of the heart

Besides its obvious Blakean references ("tree full of angels," "ancient empire streets"), the song combines a number of typically Romantic elements on a more general level:

¹ On the activism side Bragg has recently come forward with an elaborate reflection on English and British national identities after 9/11 and the London bombings on July 7, 2005 in a book entitled *The Progressive Patriot* (Bragg 2006).

² All lyrics are quoted from www.billybragg.co.uk (accessed 4 March 2009) with slight changes to accommodate the versions actually sung on the album.

a highly subjective speaker position (even to the point of complete idiosyncrasy or madness), a critical attitude to prominent features of the contemporary urban world ("poverty," "misery"), and a longing for redemption and/or transcendence evoked in a synthesis of political and personal terms ("socialism of the heart"), which ultimately culminates in a chorus full of religious imagery.³

I'm going upfield, way up on the hillside
 I'm going higher than I've ever been before
 That's where you'll find me, over the horizon
 Wading in the river, reaching for that other shore

And still, the singer seems to remain "a pagan" even after he "vowed to play [his] part" in the wake of his encounter with the angels, and in spite of the song's enthusiasm, 'upfield' seems to have strong connotations of 'uphill' within the confines of this world.⁴

This sceptical reading is strongly encouraged by the fact that "Upfield" is not the album's opening song but rather preceded by the much more muted "From Red to Blue," a kind of soliloquy of the singer carried by a sparse instrumentation of electric guitar and organ without any rhythm section. "From Red to Blue" clearly indicates a shift from politically committed Romanticism ('red') to a more personal, privatised variety ('blue'):

Another day dawns grey, it's enough to make me spit
 But we go on our way, just putting up with it
 And when I try to make my feelings known to you
 You sound like you have changed from red to blue

You're a father now, you see things in different ways
 For every parent will gain perspective on their wilder days
 But that alone does not explain the change I see in you
 The way you've drifted off from red to blue

Sometimes I think to myself
 Should I vote red for my class or green for our children?
 But whatever choice I make
 I will not forsake

So you bought it all, the best your money could buy
 And I watched you sell your soul for their bright shining lie

³ A demo of the song on the bonus CD of the 2006 edition emphasises this dimension more clearly in an arrangement featuring Cara Tivey on piano, and the Mint Juleps from the London East End as a gospel choir. In fact, the gospel touch of the lyrics is so strong that the 'socialism of the heart' came across as a 'soul sure reason of the heart' for the present writers until the lyrics on the website were consulted – a mishearing which would probably not have occurred to listeners more into Billy Bragg.

⁴ One could hear this aspect underlined in the incessantly repetitive arrangement of the horns in the officially published version of the song.

Where are the principles of the friend I thought I knew
I guess you let them fade from red to blue

I hate the compromises that life forces us to make
We must all bend a little if we are not to break
But the ideals you've opted out of, I still hold them to be true
I guess they weren't so firmly held by you

While at first glance the song seems to suggest that the singer is actually addressing another person, the autobiographical reference to Billy Bragg's recent fatherhood associated with the 'you' in stanza two opens up the possibility of reading the song as an 'internal' negotiation between two sides of the singer's personality which come together in the 'we' of the first and last stanzas. As in this song, where the critical self ('I') has the upper hand both in the bridge ("Sometimes ...") and at the end, Bragg would certainly claim a dominance of the critical self for himself while being fully prepared to acknowledge his own 'you'-side of private bliss and consumerism. In fact, this split personality pervades the whole album and thus corroborates such a reading of the opening song. On the one hand there are songs reminiscent of the old activism, like the musically lush allegorical treatment of capitalism as "Sugardaddy" ("Sugardaddy comes with his pockets full of fun / Sugardaddy's blowing kisses from his gun / What will he do and where will he run / When the real world comes to town"), an aggressive incantation of Kipling's "A Pict Song" accompanied by electric guitar only ("For we are the little folk – we! / Too little to love or to hate / Leave us alone and you'll see / That we can bring down the state"), and a paean to a "Northern Industrial Town" set to a traditional folk tune. On the other hand, and these tracks certainly dominate *William Bloke*, there are songs which indicate a shift to the private, such as the Randy Newman-like sarcasms on a failing relationship in "Everybody Loves You Babe" or the intimate "Brickbat" which refutes its own title ("I used to want to plant bombs at the Last Night of the Proms / But now you'll find me with the baby, in the bathroom, / With that big shell, listening for the sound of the sea"), the personally introspective "The Space Race is Over" which deconstructs a traditional Romantic motif ("It's been and it's gone and I'll never get to the moon / [...] / And I can't help but feel we've all grown up too soon"), a pure love song ("The Fourteenth of February"), a religious meditation entitled "King James Version" with only slight political overtones at its end ("Looks like a drift to the Right / For the world we were born in / But the horizon is bright / Yonder comes the morning"), and a satirical take on a certain type of contemporary personality ("Goalhanger").

With this ambivalence, Billy Bragg's *William Bloke* captures the characteristic "Dilemma of the Romantics" that John Berger summed up neatly in a 1959 essay:

Romanticism was a revolutionary movement that rallied round a promise which was bound to be broken: the promise of the success of revolutions deriving their philosophy from the concept of natural man. Romanticism represented and acted out the full predicament of those who created the goddess of liberty, put a flag in her hands and followed her only to find that she led them into ambush: the ambush of reality. It is this predicament which explains the two faces of Romanticism: its exploratory adventurousness and

its morbid self-indulgence. For pure romantics the most unromantic things in the world were firstly to accept life as it was, and secondly to succeed in changing it. (Berger 58-59)

As many recent publications have tended to point out, it seems that, beyond or behind questions of actual politics, the persistence (Ward) and continuity (Reinfandt) of Romanticism well into postmodernism (cf. Garvin, Larissy) and what is sometimes called 'postmodernity' (cf. Livingston) can most profitably be read as a reaction to and against modernity itself. Even a hands-on guide to analysing Romantic poetry admonishes its readers at the beginning of the twenty-first century that

you need to think of Romantic literature not as escapist in the way the term 'Romantic' sometimes suggests, but as literature that tries passionately to come to terms with the modern world as it emerges through a series of wrenching changes [...] [W]hat we get in the literature of the period is a range of competing, arguing, contending voices rather than a series of common assumptions that all share and that can be neatly summarized. (O'Flinn 3)

With this common denominator in mind, even the time-honoured problem of the great variety of Romanticisms (cf. Lovejoy) can be addressed:

All this variety need not worry us, if we reconceptualise European Romanticism as a *set of responses*, highly differentiated and at times downright contradictory, to a historically specific *challenge*: the challenge of the ever-accelerating modernization of European society. (Bode, "Europe," 127, emphases in the original)

And one can extend this notion to include the Americas and even 'Western' culture at large with its globalising dynamics, which is, as it were, quite literally 'underwritten' by "that unique historical situation in which [...] nothing can be taken for granted any more and in which a reaching out for new (and old) securities is the order of the day." (*ibid.* 135) For this specifically modern state of affairs Romanticism marks the "juncture at which the individual becomes (falteringly or enthusiastically) aware of his or her own range of possibilities" against the "insight that the relationships between language and mind, between sign and meaning [...] are by no means secure and stable but rather precarious, dynamic and evolving" (*ibid.* 135).

Against this background, Romanticism can thus be read as a structural analogy to modernity at large, and, somewhat paradoxically, both modernity and Romanticism are marked by the foundational contingency of their observable features – which have been determined by evolution and are thus necessarily so, but could also have turned out differently. This contingency can either be acknowledged through increasing degrees of reflexivity in (post-)Romantic cultural practices in art and literature and beyond, or ideologically sublimated into seemingly stable securities. Here, the Romantic ambivalence outlined above returns on a more abstract level and can be used for addressing the question implied in the subtitle of this paper: How did Romanticism get from its original historical moment to its present incarnations?

Following Jerome McGann's influential inquiry into *The Romantic Ideology*, two dominant ideological macro-paradigms of modern culture can be identified: on the one hand, an 'analytic' programme of Enlightenment discourse "most notable for its methodological and procedural rigor" but, with regard to its awareness of historical con-