

Transitional Phenomena in the 18th Century English Literature

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Abstract: The present paper considers the general complexity of the 18th century English literature, but focuses on the transitional phenomena of that period, represented by the Pre-Romantic poetry and the Gothic fiction, which marked the evolutionary process from the Neoclassical literature to the later Romantic Movement.

Key-words: literary history, literary transition, Neoclassicism, Pre-Romanticism, Gothic, poetry, fiction, sentimentalism, sepulchral.

18. Yüzyıl İngiliz Literatüründeki Geçiş Fenomeni

Özet: Bu çalışmada 18. yüzyıl İngiliz Edebiyatının genel karışıklığı incelenmektedir. Neoklasik edebiyattan Romantik hareketlere uzanan evrimsel dönemi gösteren, ilk dönem Romantik şiirleri ve Gotik kurgu tarafından temsil edilen dönemin geçiş fenomeni üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Edebiyat Tarihi, Edebi geçiş, Neoklasizm, İlk dönem Romantizm, Gotik, Şiir, roman, duygusallık, mezara ait.

The social and cultural conditions in the 18th century marked new qualitative changes in men's attitudes towards themselves and towards the world around them, expressing a general growing self-consciousness of an age pleased with its achievements.

The 18th century begins with the reign of Queen Anne (1702 – 1714), which marked a glorious period of development and flourishing, followed by the reigns of George I and George II, which were marked by war, two Jakobite rebellions (1715 and 1745), as well as an increasing prosperity under Whig administration. In 1760 the long reign of George III began, during which the Industrial Revolution started, and the Tories were restored to power after half a century of Whig administration. England lost its American colonies, but became the world's first industrial country. James L. Clifford points to the complexity of contradictory manifestations which marked the social and cultural background of the period, among which '*... the wisdom of the past and the reckless innovators, ... the tradition of the nobility and that of a down-to-earth realism,*

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... *the aristocratic and the commercial, ... the land-conscious country folk and the new industrialists*' (***Eighteenth Century English Literature. Modern Essays in Criticism***, p. VIII), and the emergence of proletariat has also to be mentioned.

The 18th century was dominated by the culture of two propertied classes, the new industrialists and merchants of the cities and the landed aristocracy of the country, who sought to revive the refinement of the classical era of Caesar Augustus, and who developed standards of rationalism, analytical and critical approach, and imposition of norms throughout the period in all fields.

In general cultural terms, the beginning of the 18th century was marked by the principles of Neoclassicism, including the emphasis on reason, rules and ancient classical models; the periods of Queen Anne and of George I and George II were marked by a deeper search for rules because of the conviction that there must be some order in the universe; the latter part of the century proved to be of increasing subjectivism and individualism which marked the romantic beginnings. Mention also should be made of the development of printing, the preoccupations with improving the English language, the development of journalism etc.

In the field of ideas, the first half of the 18th century was dominated by the principles expressed by Alexander Pope (***Essay on Criticism*** and ***Essay on Man***); the second half of the century was governed by the personality of Dr. Samuel Johnson (***Lives of the Poets*** and ***Dictionary of the English Language***).

The 18th century was labeled 'Neoclassical Age', 'Reactionary Age', 'Augustan Age', 'Age of Enlightenment', 'Age of Reason', 'Age of Skepticism', 'Age of Novel', enumerated by James L. Clifford who also points to the idea that '*no modern century has ever achieved [such] unity of belief and expression*' (***Eighteenth Century English Literature. Modern Essays in Criticism***, p. VII), because the 18th century on the whole sought to emulate and revive the refinement and taste of the classical era of Caesar Augustus and as such it was pervaded by the Neoclassical spirit.

The 18th century expressed a feeling of cultural stability reached after the reaction against the late Renaissance Baroque. The optimistic thinking of that period was based on the confidence in the validity of the Ancient classical doctrine, the belief in the power of reason and experimental science, the emergence of deism that sought to solve the question of man's relationship to divinity, and the feeling of gratitude for what civilization had achieved.

The condition of English literature in the 18th century revealed three directions of literary evolution: (1) Neoclassicism, (2) Pre-Romanticism, and (3) the rise,

development and consolidation of the novel writing tradition. Each of these were of particular significance in the further development of English literature: Neoclassicism would influence the later literary productions of realistic, traditional and normative type; Pre-Romanticism marked the transition towards Romantic period; and the beginnings of novel were important for the development of an almost entirely new genre in English literature – imaginative prose – as well as for its later flourishing in Victorian period.

Besides fiction, the 18th century English literature manifested itself in poetry (Neoclassical and Pre-Romantic), whereas drama, following its Renaissance climax, came to a decline under the attacks of puritans, and even Restoration could not manage to bring it to a considerable revival. Moreover, drama, of dominating importance in Ancient period, could not be also revived by the Neoclassicism, which is in its essence based on Ancient classical values.

The transitional literary phenomena of that period are represented by the Pre-Romantic Poetry and the Gothic fiction, which marked the transitional process from the Neoclassical literature to the later Romantic Movement.

Pre-Romantic Poetry coexisted in the second half of the 18th century with the neoclassical poetry. The aspects of Neoclassicism came to be gradually challenged starting with the middle of the century, which marked a period of transition and experiment in poetic subjects and styles, and which anticipated the Romantic spirit in poetry – this period was called in the history of English literature Pre-Romanticism (T. S. Eliot called the poetic production of this period ‘*sentimental philosophizing*’ and ‘*early Romantic movement*’).

The main representatives of the Pre-Romantic trend in English literature were Thomas Parnell (1679 – 1718), Edward Young (1683 – 1765), James Thomson (1700 – 1748), Thomas Gray (1716 – 1771) – the representatives of the so-called ‘Graveyard School of Poetry’, who wrote a kind of descriptive and meditative poetry in which natural objects provide moral reflections on human condition, life and death – and James Macpherson (1736 – 1796), who brought the new interest in folk literature into the poetry of the period.

Edward Young is considered the most representative poet of the Graveyard School of Poetry. His poem *Night Thoughts* (1742 – 1745) is a huge work in blank verse, comprising some 10 000 line, and containing nine books with such titles as ‘On Life, Death and Immortality’ or ‘On Time, Death and Friendship’. After describing the gloomy atmosphere of the night, the poet continues with meditation sprung from personal sorrow, which confers to the poem a highly personal tone.

James Thomson wrote four long poems on the seasons, *Winter*, *Summer*, *Spring*, and *Autumn*, which were collected in a single volume in 1730. This volume, *Seasons*, was extremely popular with simple and pious people of the time, despite its loose structure and the conglomerate of topics: scientific explanations of the weather, descriptions of nature, philosophical and political reflection, etc. Each of the four seasons describes seasonal effects on rural labor and narrates some human events. The poet intended to show how nature declares the glory of God, but was accused for confusing Nature with God in creating a kind of natural religion. Thomson, however, had in mind another project – to ‘sing the works of nature’, for as he confessed in the Preface to *Winter*, he knew ‘of no subject more elevating, more amusing, more ready to awake the political enthusiasm, the philosophical reflection, and the moral sentiment than the works of nature’.

Another leading figure among the 18th century poets of transition was Thomas Gray, who, in his most famous *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), moves from a contemplation of the landscape to a meditation on the ‘short and simple annals of the poor’ with strong moral considerations. There is a skillful alternation between generalized abstract ideas and individual examples; although towards the end the continuity is somehow broken by the unexpectedly personal turn that the poem takes. Gray was one of the most learned men in Europe in his day, his intellectual interests having shaped the fashion of poetic ideas in his time, and as a poet pleasing the audience with remarkably joined description, meditation and moralizing, but his literary production was relatively small: apart from his *Elegy*, he wrote a few odes (e. g. *Ode on the Spring* and *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*), and two poems – *The Bard* and *The Descent of Odin* – which expressed the contemporary to him new interest in so-called ‘primitive poetry’.

‘Primitive poetry’ included Celtic and Medieval poetry, ballads, legends and other folk literature, as well as biblical poetry. This kind of poetry represented a great literary fraud, the writers attributing to their texts false authorship. The Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736 – 1796) produced in 1760 *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*, a number of prose poems which Macpherson pretended to be translations of Ancient Gaelic poetry, and which he attributed to the Irish hero and bard Ossian, having lived in the 3rd century AD. Later the texts of these epics were translated into rhythmic English prose, and published in the collected edition, entitled *The Poems of Ossian*, in 1765. These texts were intended to confirm the view that a great primitive epic had existed, and although the ‘Ossianic Poems’ are known as a literary fraud, at that time they

took by storm not only England, but also all Europe, and made Macpherson influential among many contemporaries. The poems were far from anything found in old Gaelic literature, except some similarities with fragments of genuine Gaelic ballad poetry, but were rather derived partly from the Bible and partly from Milton, and also from the cadences of Highland preaching.

Thomas Chatterton (1752 – 1770) produced a volume of *Poems. Supposed to Have Been written at Bristol by Thomas Rowley and Others in the 15th Century*, claiming to have discovered genuine medieval poems, but the poems were written in a kind of no-language, as the poet had no knowledge of Middle English but devised a purely imaginative spelling for contemporary words. When his false was discovered, Chatterton, who had fell into poverty, killed himself. Important for being indicative of a new interest in English poetry, Chatterton became a sort of martyr for the coming Romantic generation of poets who turned him into a legend of the sensitive young poet in conflict with the entire world.

The 18th century Pre-Romanticism marked the process of transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism in two directions: (1) ‘mournfully reflective poetry’ and (2) ‘primitive poetry’.

In the case of the former, the focus shifted from the neoclassical didacticism and abstract philosophizing to the expression of the poet’s own states, from the imitation of the external world (once more a return to the ancient classical models) to the expression of the poet’s own emotions, thus the relationship of the poem to the poet acquiring more significance than its relationship to the audience. Also as a reaction against the Augustan principle of decorum and the rational approach to subjects, which did not favor anything melancholic and self-indulgently piteous, a number of poets started writing a type of sentimental, melancholic and personal (of which the best forms were elegy and ode) with emphasis on the brevity of life and the sepulchral, the idea of death and the transitory aspect of human life. The poets combined description (of natural objects) with meditation (containing moral considerations on human existence), as they attempted to correlate in the literary texts emotionalism with philosophy, a highly stylized, ornamented diction with a note of intense passion, and wrote texts expressing melancholy, sentimentalism and even individualism – texts that revealed aspects similar to those of the later Romanticism.

In the case of the latter, the focus shifted from the concern with Ancient classical values to a new taste in the autochthonous folk literary background, in particular the interest in Celtic poetry and in that of the Middle Ages, and such texts produced in Pre-Romanticism were in general sentimental in the pathetic sense

of regret for days gone by – these texts were important for the later Romantic Revival.

The writers of Pre-Romanticism were thus poets of transition, because they expressed in their poetry characteristics of both Neoclassicism (which was coming to its end) and Romanticism (which was coming to its beginnings).

The Gothic Novel emerged in the literary context of the 18th century by the middle years of this period, as a result of the revival of interest in the universe of the Romance, and lasted as a more or less unified genre until 1820s.

In the 12th century the word ‘Gothic’ was used to describe architecture and art in Europe; in the 18th century the word was used to describe novels dealing with macabre or mysterious events in a medieval setting. This type of fiction is characterized by horror, violence, supernatural effects, and medieval elements, displaying an atmosphere of terror found in graveyards and haunted mansions, but most usually set against a background of gothic architecture, especially gloomy and isolated castles, with mysterious underground passages and trapdoors, and – in matters of character representation strategies – it may include insanity, often in the form of a mad relative kept locked in a room in the castle, as well as ghosts and spirits.

In 1764 Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto*, which was followed by a number of writers – Clara Reeve (*The Old English Baron*, 1777), Mathew Gregory Lewis (*The Monk*, 1796), Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794), and others – who explored every aspect of the gothic or the miraculous, and discussed the relationship between death, creation and destruction, darkness, horror, madness, terror, evil and at times weird sexuality.

Horace Walpole’s novel is full of fantastic elements and supernatural sensationalism set in the Middle Ages. The plot focuses on Manfred, an evil usurper, involved in a fateful prophesy about his downfall, and a mysterious prince and his eventual marriage to the beautiful heroine whom the usurper had intended as his own bride. This novel already suggests a number of typical to the Gothic fiction components: the foul weather, an ancient, dark castle full of closed halls, secret passages, corridors and doors, with frightening apparitions, wicked tyrants desperate for fertile women, virtuous and pure ladies, heroic lads, dark and cold forests where ghosts appear, etc.

The Castle of Otranto, as Walpole himself declared, was written in conscious reaction against the sentimentalism of Richardson. It was a deliberate attempt to divert fiction from the domesticity of the realistic concern, to transport it from the sphere of close observation to that of free invention, from the interest in the

present to that in the past, from the world of experience to that of the mysterious and the supernatural.

Clara Reeve, Walpole's successor and disciple, in *The Old English Baron*, claimed her book to be 'an attempt to unite the merits and graces of the ancient Romance and of the modern Novel'. There is 'a sufficient degree of the marvellous' in the shape of a ghost 'to excite attention; enough of the manners of real life', she declares, but the chief appeal of the novel lies upon a tale of righteous vengeance and love rather than its Gothic characteristics. Concerning the use of the Gothic element, this one is reduced to the presence of an ordinary ghost revealed by its groaning beneath the floor, which is a way of instituting proceedings against the murderer. The Gothic element and the element of terror being thus disposed of, nothing is left but that which 'engages the heart on its behalf': the eternal theme of 'virtue rewarded', and that of injured innocence triumphant over treachery and crime.

The 18th century Gothic novel represented thus a fictional phenomenon unified to a lesser extent than one may normally consider, for sometimes what is to be called 'Gothic' is just represented by little beyond medieval setting, decoration and appurtenance, and often being subject to influences from other contemporary literary manifestations.

The Gothic fictional form drew many of its intense images from the graveyard poets Gray and Thompson, intermingling a landscape of vast dark forest with vegetation that bordered on excessive, concealed ruins with horrific rooms, monasteries and a forlorn melancholic character. The development of the Gothic Novel from the melancholy overtures of sentimental literature to the rise of the sublime in the graveyard poets had a profound impact on the later Romantic Movement, as the use of the sublime and the supernatural profoundly influenced the style and material of the emerging romantics.

Modern critics have indeed come to consider Gothic fiction as one phase of the Romantic Movement in English literature, although it might have disappointed some idealistic romantic poets for the sentimental character, idealized by Ann Radcliffe, for example, who could not transcend into reality.

One may not, however, also disregard the lasting effects of the Gothic fiction on the literature of the Victorian period, following that of Romanticism, for instance Gothic elements in the realistic novels of Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, not to mention Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

The Gothic novels invaded the literary scene as a reaction against the excessive rationalism of the early 18th century literature, and, being meant to excite

suspense, these texts appeared to fill some of the reading need similarly to what in 20th century were the forms of science fiction, mystery and horror books.

In the 20th century the elements of the Gothic fiction flourished mostly in the works of American rather than British writers. American writers who used Gothic elements in their fiction include Henry James, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor. The term Gothic is nowadays also used to designate narrative prose or poetry of which the principal elements are violence, horror, and the supernatural, and many of the works of the late 20th century American novelists Stephen King and Anne Rice demonstrate the continued influence and popularity of the Gothic form.

In the history of English literature the aesthetic values of the 18th century Gothic novels are similar to the importance of sentimentalism in prose fiction and the 'sentimental philosophising' of the Pre-Romantic poetry, and should be considered in the context of a change in literary taste and a shift of focus which were to be spectacular and dominant in the further evolution of English literature, and which came to represent the dimensions of Romanticism.

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