

Review

David Stewart, *Romantic Magazines and Metropolitan Literary Culture*. London: Palgrave, 2011. 232 pp. ISBN: 978-0-2302-5178-6, €80,99.

In 1818, at the beginning of his monumental epic poem *Don Juan*, Byron familiarises his readers with the tremendous impact of the modern print media on literature: heroes evaporate into nothingness when every month a new one is created, and the avid readers of the myriads of gazettes are cloyed with cant, gossip and trivialities. Although David Stewart's study on the Romantic magazines does not deal with the ephemerality of early 19th-century journalism, the effect that he describes in five well-argued chapters is similar, but the demarcation line between newspaper and magazine proves to be blurrier than he wants us to believe.

Taking the risk of confusing his readers with the various titles of and personae involved with the numerous magazines, Stewart paints a rich picture of the age of Romanticism in which the search for the Wordsworthian 'spots of time' in poetry clashes with the discovery of fragmentation, improvisation and velocity in the Regency magazines: 'helter-skelter, head-over-heels, and leap-frog, to the endless amazement of the wide-mouthed

world.' It is the sketchiness of the new magazines which gives the early decades of the 19th century an atmosphere of impressionism *avant la lettre*, which not only anticipates Dickens's sketches, but also Pater's awareness of life as a Heraclitean stream of incoherent moments. Stewart never tires of highlighting the transitoriness of this new medium (which differs conspicuously from the early 18th-century magazines such as the *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*), and he reiterates one quality which clearly pinpoints a memorable shift of paradigm at the time: the miscellany. In these multitudes of transient magazines we have a dizzying juxtaposition of heterogeneous topics – literature, sporting events, travel writing, gossip and other sensational news – which alert the new historicist to the unprecedented fact that aesthetic and epistemological hierarchies were crumbling and that high and pop culture were almost on a par.

It is one of the (minor) disadvantages of Stewart's book that he scarcely shows to what extent that principle of 'miscellenisation' not only fuels the competing magazines, but also seeps into the 'high culture' of contemporary poetry: when Byron remotely relates his meandering poem to an *olla-podrida* in which he mixes philosophy and obscenity, gos-

sipy satire and sport, history and mythology, he seems to utilise the very strategies of the gazettes and magazines and to make them fruitful for the poetry of his age. The ‘decentred miscellaneity’ is thus not only a feature of the *New Monthly*, *Blackwood’s* or other magazines, it is the predominant quality of an age that must be defined in terms of a mix of audiences, classes and political persuasions and before the backdrop of a new urban feeling. Stewart is at his strongest when he tries to contextualise the new magazine culture in a Cockneyfied London. At the time when Keats was disparaged for belonging to the Cockney School of Poetry, the Cockney was, according to Stewart, a liminal figure, who moved on the margins of urban life and aspired to, but lacked the ease of the leisured classes. It is essentially Cockney London, which ‘connects footman and dandy, Prince Regent and Printer’s Devil’ and stirs aristocrats, *flâneurs*, Thackeray’s snobs and servants into a new spicy social stew that gives rise to a new Cockney genre, the magazine, which in its endless variety of chunks of information gratifies an anonymous mass of consumers. It is hardly a coincidence that the proliferation of the magazines and their catchy advertisements predates the opening of another levelling element of metropolitan life: the *magasins*, the department stores in London (Harrods in 1834) and Paris (Le Bon Marché in 1838). It is a pity that Stewart does not see this striking parallel since the words – magazine and *magasin* – are etymologically related and pinpoint the fact that the emergence of the consumer of miscellaneous literary titbits eventually paves the way for the department store

flâneur who takes a stroll through the miscellaneous assortment of goods. Stewart is right when he says that magazines straddle a ‘series of borderlines’, those ‘between literature and trash, between the commercial and the aesthetic, and between readers and writers’, but the trajectory leading from the commodification of Romantic writers in magazines to the sublime aesthetics of capitalism in *magasins* should not be forgotten.

Taking Wordsworth as an example, Stewart picks up on Julian Wolfreys’s hypothesis that the poet’s problems with the London books in *The Prelude* mirror the confusion and incoherence of the metropolis itself. As Stewart contends, the overwhelming profusion of impressions in a Cockneyfied city can only be adequately conveyed by the repetitiveness of the list, the *vertigine della lista*, which Umberto Eco detects in various literary epochs, but inexplicably fails to see in the Romantic miscellanisation of life. While Wordsworth tries to evade the chaos of metropolitan London, where people are reduced to the vomit of crude pleasures, other writers see in the new democratisation of culture an opportunity to use magazines as apt vehicles for chatty, fragmentary, and self-revealing texts. More than 150 years prior to Michel Foucault’s characterisation of the 19th century as an age of confession and self-revelations, it was *Blackwood’s* magazine that made its readers aware of the fact that the ‘triumphant reign of the first person singular’ had started. The ‘conversational style’ of a new generation of writers triggered a flood of texts in which semi-fictional characters open their minds, let the

readers peep into the dark recesses of their souls and discuss physical ailments such as gouty toes. What cannot be denied is the fact that writing like this, which pretends to engage its readers in a conversation, is artificial and 'elegiac'; but what is even more elegiac (if this is the right term) and disconcerting is the fact that our post-modern exhibitionism on TV, in magazines and on internet platforms such as Facebook is not a new phenomenon, but has its sad roots in Regency culture. It is these obvious links

that Stewart should have highlighted more in order to alert his audience to a neglected facet of Romantic culture which has been going on for almost two centuries and whose depths of squalid vulgarity have not been fully sounded yet.

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