



DOI: 10.2478/abcsj-2018-0012

Aloisia Şorop. *Moiré. Fluids and Fluidity in Romantic Poetry: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. (Craiova: Editura Universitaria, 2017). Pp. 325. ISBN 978-606-14-1237-2.

Aloisia Şorop's book is captivating, thought-provoking and as fluid as the poetry of the two first-generation Romantics that fall under her scrutiny. Taken at face value, her work may be deemed as an exegetical study of fluids and fluidity, which specialists or erudite readers would immediately connect to Gaston Bachelard's hermeneutics of water images thoroughly expounded in his *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, published in 1983. In light of this analogy, Şorop's intellectual endeavour would be seriously undermined if one could further expect the reader to anticipate a psychoanalytical approach to William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's artistic production. This is because such a reading grid would render the requirement of originality null and void when it comes to the status of Romantic studies today. Attuned to the latest interpretive and methodological trends, the present volume shatters the foregoing impression or expectation. By blending life writing with the treatment of water as a cultural and, I would add, political construct, Şorop aims "to devise a grammar of fluids and develop an agreeable form of water gnosis" (9) in Wordsworth and Coleridge. Her recourse to biographies, letters, notebooks or diary entries, as well as to pertinently applied critical theory and cultural history, has the merit of refreshing dry or obsolete readings of both Romantic poets and, more importantly, of proposing challenging and astute interpretations of both canonical and less studied poems and of relating water and its solid forms, mist and ice, to British culture and poetry at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Şorop's study is preceded by an Argument and an Introduction. In the former she states her objectives and motivates the choice of her topic in a language revealing the "interplay between geography, perspective and the human mind" (9). Informed by Samuel Baker's 2010 groundbreaking study titled *Written on the Water: British Romanticism and the Maritime Empire of Culture*, the argument mounted in the Introduction will be a

serviceable instrument for showing how the Romantic poets built “a fluid concept of Britain at home” (13) able to define British space, British culture and the British psyche. Cleverly employed in three chapters partitioned into subchapters whose titles are actually epigraphs from poems penned by the two Romantics, the argument gains even more weight thanks to Şorop’s own semiotic construction of fluidity.

The first chapter, titled “Water, water, every where,” discusses water as a cultural and political construct and the manner in which this protean term (metaphorically translated as *moiré*, i.e. the wavering quality of the vast sea or ocean) was appropriated by Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the first subchapter, “Water as culture,” special attention is given to the Romantic reinterpretation of the concept of culture in relation with the ocean as an aquatic *topos* and trope, rather than with nature and agriculture, as was the case before the eighteenth century. Viewed as a spiritual and abstract concept in the early nineteenth century, culture was, on the one hand, associated with water in order to highlight Britain’s imperialist ambitions as a maritime state and, on the other, it played a crucial role in advocating that the creative power of the imagination was possessed only by the landed gentry and the polite. Though Şorop does not refer to civic humanism as such – initially revived by Shaftesbury in the first decades of the eighteenth century –, she borrows John Barrell’s argument so as to speak about a model of abstract thinking generated by Adam Smith’s theorisation of political economy, which gained momentum in the late eighteenth century. By following Baker, the author cogently argues that the Romantics renovated the concept of culture in a moment of crisis, when they juxtaposed their literature and personal experience, such as Coleridge’s travel to Malta and Sicily, with Britain’s expansionist policy and, implicitly, its sea imagery. Şorop later considers water in its solid form, delving into Captain Cook’s, John Dee’s or John Barrow’s accounts of the exploration of the poles identified by the British as *terra nullius*. She argues that Arctic narratives had little in common with *terra firma*, though they participated in the construction of British imperial identity thanks to print culture, travelogues and other fictitious materials that nourished the public’s mental projections upon such fabulous landscapes. This subchapter concludes with a brief analysis of the importance of water to British

culture by recourse to the oil and watercolour paintings of William Turner. His seascapes and weather-scapes, argues Şorop, relied on liquid water, ice and mist as an ordinary background and paved the way for Claude Monet's impressionism after the French painter had admired Turner's works at the National Gallery in 1870.

The second subchapter, "Water as space," focuses on the specular image of water seen both as a "smooth" (infinite and deterritorialised like the steppe, the ocean or the desert) and "striated" (fragmented and reterritorialised like walls, forests, cities and enclosures) space, according to Deleuze and Guattari's terminology coined in *A Thousand Plateaus*. With respect to the new Romantic paradigm imposed by the relationship between water and culture as metaphorically contiguous terms, Şorop contends that the national rhetoric of the time replaced the image of the island (by extension Britain itself) with the image of the sea as the paragon of Britain's colonising power. At a smaller scale, water as *propinquity* manifests itself in the pleasurable form of artificial ponds and lakes designed by the rich for recreational and aesthetic purposes. Vauxhall Gardens and Hampton Court are two cases in point.

The third subchapter, "Water as atopia," elaborates on the ocean and the poles as cartographically blank spaces which "reflected 'innocence' of knowledge and cried for completion" (72). Şorop borrows the term "atopia" from Siobhan Carroll in order to comment on the imagination as the sole means of taking hold of uncolonizable and uninhabitable spaces that are the opposite of *oikumene*, i.e. a domesticated space inhabited by man. Last but not least, she details on the 1800 reformation of the Navy, which determined the British to turn the ocean from *atopia* into a dwelling place and the ship into a symbolic representation of *terra firma* "in the middle of *sea-where*, the only inhabited British territory afloat" (17).

Finally, the fourth subchapter, "Water as image," discusses sight as a skilled way of looking at water and its multifarious meanings. After establishing a stark contrast between myopia, which the ocean or the desert induces to the viewer, and highly visual and visually pleasurable brooks, ponds, mist and dew subsumed to a micro-level perception, Şorop concentrates on the image of the river as a yardstick of natural beauty supported by William Gilpin's theory of the picturesque. In a Romantic

scenery in which the imagination rules supreme, this theory could not have been more fitting, particularly when references to panoramas and dioramas – “sight-specific forms of entertainment” (18) – enabled the British to embark on a fictitious voyage to the Arctic regions.

The second chapter, “And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters,” takes a hard look at Wordsworth’s understanding of water not only in his *poème fleuve*, *The Prelude*, but also in his letters and fragments from other poems in which water and mist are prevalent. Wordsworth’s well-known definition of poetry as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” represents the trigger for this section, in which Şorop thoroughly demonstrates that fluidity is tightly related to landscapes, memory, youth and women and poeticised under various forms, such as mist, vapours, streams, ponds, the sea and the ocean, all of them present in the relevant quotations chosen as subchapter titles and instrumental in grasping the sublimity of nature subsumed to that of freedom upheld by Revolutionary France. Relevant details about the poet’s childhood spent in Cumberland, on the banks of the Derwent River, and diary entries merge with text analysis with a view to pointing out the way in which Wordsworth internalised his experience with nature and translated it in a poetic language that unravels emotions “recollected in tranquillity.” “The Vale of Easthwaite,” “An Evening Walk” or “Dion” are just a few of the poems interpreted in this vein. “A truly postmodern poem,” in Şorop’s opinion, *The Prelude* – a paragon of fluidity and ongoing change – is examined in relation to memory retrieved as “spots of time” which nourish the poet’s imagination while “Salisbury Plain,” a poem composed in 1793-94, is analysed in accordance with Carroll’s concept of *atopia*. Towards the end of the chapter, Şorop explores “the floating island,” a trope which stands for Wordsworth’s freedom and unleashed creativity, the River Wye as a *locus amoenus* suggestive of his past memories and love for his sister Dorothy, ponds with hypnotic powers construed as Foucauldian heterotopias and Wordsworth’s praise of insularity in poems that speak about Britain’s imperialism and civilising mission assisted by the ocean as the most efficient means of spreading British culture worldwide.

More fluid than Wordsworth in his approach to life, poetry and metaphysics, Coleridge is the focal point of the third chapter, titled “Snatched at the foam as the wave passed by me.” His eloquence,

erudition, unbounded imagination and unalloyed passions associated with torrents and floods are investigated under a more personal lens with the help of Notebook entries, letters and Richard Holmes's two-volume biography of the poet. Şorop warns us that these sources will be more heavily exploited, as compared to the previous chapter. Always concerned with imagery able to mirror his abstract thinking, Coleridge used "the small water insect" metaphor in order to refer to "the mind's self-awareness which accumulates through small and steady progress," with the imagination "as a catalyst in the process" (23). Most subchapters are a pleasure to read, particularly those in which Şorop develops a syntax of Coleridgean landscapes that unveil not only the same insular pride extolled by Wordsworth, but also humidity or the *atopian* character of the poles or "sacred rivers" ("Kubla Khan"). The ample discussion of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a modern myth offers insightful observations on polar alienation and terror of unknown territories, whereas "the swimming book" image depicted in two conversation poems epitomises Coleridge's school memories as well as the infelicitous type of education practised in the school he attended.

Gathered under the title "Semiotics of fluidity," which could easily have passed for the subject matter of a separate book, Şorop's conclusions categorise Wordsworth's fluidity as "a method" (314) of interpreting reality. This runs counter to Coleridge's fluidity, which is related to human nature and "the workings of the human brain" (314). I believe that this final section should have followed, or been incorporated into, the first theoretical chapter.

To conclude, his study is overall an excellent contribution to the field of Romantic studies, especially inasmuch as it will aid in studies of fluids and fluidity in other Romantic poets. Şorop's analytic subtlety and well-documented remarks are on display in the entirety of this book, which I find a noteworthy source of information and textual analysis for students, researchers and academics with a penchant for the study of English Romanticism.

DRAGOŞ IVANA,
University of Bucharest, Romania