THE VICTORIAN ARTISTS OF THE STAITHES GROUP AND THE PALIMPSESTIC SENSE OF PLACE*

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Abstract: Remembered and acknowledged as the age that changed the time itself, seizing it from its patriarchal matrix and metamorphosing it in dizzying, swirling whirls of iconic makings, the Victorian era forged a nation and an empire in the incandescently bustling iron and steel works, spun the threads of its glorious story in cotton mills and textile factories, challenged the horizons of the world with daring expeditions and fragranced exploratory meanderings, wrote the chronicles of its timelessness in the tranquillity of secluded studies, and played with colours on easels, tucked away in pockets of pristine landscape and unspoilt beauty. Such a place is the village of Staithes, on the picturesque Yorkshire coast that hosted a colony of artists which came to be known by that name, while also being referred to as 'The Northern Impressionists'. Drawing its energies and identity from the spot that inspired them, just as a plant lives on the sap sucked from the fruit-bearing innards of the earth that anchors and feeds it, this group of artists (re)decorated the spirit of the age, dwelling on a Faustian loop of time that revered the moment and its immortality rather than celebrating its epic, hastened becoming. It is in this particular dimension that the palimpsestic spirit of place and time imbues the story, with its (re)turn to the original semantic connotations that define the term as "a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain" (OED). The quest goes inwards, escaping the enthralling grip of a pioneering present while searching for the original self of things, immortalising it in minute observations of landscape and people. Suffice to read the following lines of Dame Laura Knight, one of the most representative members of the group to 'plunge' into the spirit of the locus: "Staithes…. It was there that I found myself and what I might do. The life and place were what I yearned for – the freedom, the austerity, the savagery, the wilderness. I loved the cold and the northerly storms when no covering would protect you. I loved the strange race of people who lived there, whose stern almost forbidding exterior formed such contrasts to the warmth and richness of their nature."

Keywords: 'The Northern Impressionists'; Yorkshire; fisherfolk; marginality; poetics of space.

INTRODUCTION

Contemplating timelessness with a finite means of perception and understanding an infinitely more vulnerable sense of transposition has always been part of human imagining, unequivocally mesmerised by the flow of time and its elusive reflections. Having conquered the immediate spatial vicinity, first with the help of his rudimentary spear which he later shaped into

* This article is the revised version of a paper held at the International Cross-border Conference, *Embracing Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Through English*, hosted by Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, and Yuriy Fedkovici University of Chernivtsi, Ukraine, on 12-14 October, 2017.

an arrow, the faithful and audacious companion of all his searching expeditions, it was a matter of metaphoric 'gliding' that made man associate it with the concept of flow of time, and it is this allegoric representation that has written the mundane relationship between humankind and temporality. So too did Ludwig Boltzman, a nineteenth-century Austrian physicist, who undeniably argued that entropy accounts for this arrow concept of time. This is how the Second Law of Thermodynamics came into being, with entropy at its very core that accounts for the "degree of disorder or randomness in the system". The latter helps us bring another aspect into discussion, since modern science strongly believes that when the Big Bang created the Universe, it also gave birth to what some Oxford scholars refer to as 'Janus point' – a reverse perspective on the flow of time, where time can drift away in two opposite directions, simultaneously, in two mirror dimensions. Apparently, time no longer restricts its flowing to a single dimension, the moment it seems to move in opposite directions, facing, like the Roman God Janus, both what used to be as well as what is to come. If disorder provides the matrix for the lowest possible level of entropy in this 'reverse-time' scenario, the key in which we intend to build our story comes with the equally double-reflected perspective of a palimpsest. The suggested analogy, with its (re)turn to the original semantic connotations that define the term as "a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain" (OED) blurs the concept of (dis)order and (de)construction which is to be read not in terms of destruction but as (re)creation of a *brave new world* in its purest form. The palimpsestic imagery, heavily imbuing the sense of place we shall approach later, comes with the (re)turn of the artistic spirit to the canvas of creation with the same ardent drive to (re)shape the figments of its bustling imagination into the matrixes of the age; when these fail to provide the appropriate texture, the artist recalibrates the world itself to accommodate his dreams.

(RE)DIMENSIONG MARGINALITY

This is what the artists of the Staithes Group most skilfully managed to do, namely to add a special stroke to a painting that is called to tell the story of a place and of its people as reflected in the eyes of some artists that made it their home. While time froze, as the artistic spirit decided to dwell on a Faustian loop that revered the moment and its immortality, rather than celebrate its epic, hastened becoming, emphasizing thus its one-dimensional nature, space made the most of its three-dimensional character, interpreted not so much in strict Euclidian terms, but in volatile contours of *chronotopes*. Here, the idea of *marginalia* would be revered as it would blend time into the larger picture of space-time and its unique *continuum*. The special relationship between the two is splendidly captured by Michel Foucault who, in his essay *Of Other Spaces* defines the idea as "The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us" (23) with its peculiar textuality of a '*lieu de mémoire*', if we refer to the concept coined by the French historian Pierre Nora in his three-volume work *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. In his words, "A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community." (XVII)

This is how our story begins, in *A North Country Fishing Town* which N. Erichsen describes, in 1886, as located on:

> the very edge of the North Sea, thrust out on rocky ledges, washed in winter by the salt foam, and climbing backwards up two steep headlands that tower above a brawling beck, lies a little fishing town…Even before the dawn it is alive with flitting lanterns, and you may hear the regular rhythmical shouts of the fishermen as they haul down their cobles to the sea. (Erichsen 462, apud Slater 76)

A pocket of pristine beauty in Yorkshire, near Whitby, known as Staithes, turned painting from a two dimensional art into one elegiac expression of a realm of memory with its own spatial and temporal laws. Many have fallen under its spell, Henry James, amongst others, being a regular visitor, Mrs Gaskell, Bram Stoker, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens having also dipped their 'literary' brush into the spectral blue that made the place unique for the colours of its skies and for the translucently vibrating light. Mesmerised by its beauty, these artists proved with colours and words what science was to discover years later, namely that blue is the only colour that can be 'sensed' through a special receptacle of the brain even by blind people. A truth J. M. V Turner 'sensed', as early as 1818, in his lectures to the students of the Royal Academy, when he said that light is colour, while shadow is but the lack of it. It was this magnetic poetry of the York blues and greys that attracted artists from every nook and corner of England's industrially-blighted landscape, offering them shelter in their refuge, bestowing peace in turmoil, promising timelessness at times of fecund transiency.

Such artists' colonies, as the one from the small fishing village of Staithes, were just pieces of a much larger mosaic that told the story of a back to nature movement, which gained contour in both Europe and the United States. If looking at the wider framework of the nineteenth-century is an image one can overlap the texture of a palimpsest still wearing its original encoding, then the graphic representation of these artists' colonies annuls, in its escapism, the increasing mechanisation and urbanisation that epitomised the resourceful spirit of the age, while imbuing its fibres with a new chromatics, slightly nostalgic, wonderfully timeless. Nina Lübbren, in her article *'Toilers of the sea': fisherfolk and the geographies of tourism in England, 1880-1920*, argues that:

> […] painters of fisherfolk nearly always banished steam trawlers, recently erected piers, the rail transport of fish (modernising forces within the fishing industry) and newly built hotels, pleasure yachts and urban bathers (the modernising impact of tourism) from their canvases. (qtd. in Corbett, Holt and Russell, eds., 31)

The artists shared the same peripheral destiny as the sea that borders the fringed contours of the mainland, empowering the concept of *marginalia*, they majestically stood for with the untamed power of nature that invades their canvases. The unleashed forces this unique blend of water and land captures, effaces the former texture of the manuscript that not only comes to tell a new story, but it also plays with the back and forth dance of the time pendulum, suspending its swing in a dimension of its own. *Marginalia* becomes a crucial threshold – that place which, according to John House in his essay *The Viewer on the Beach* is "both land and sea, land at low tide, sea at high" (5), "danger and foe", "bountiful and fecund, a source of love, not fear." (6) It is through the same concept that we can put things in their appropriate perspective when attempting to sketch the portrayal of the nineteenth-century English artist. *Marginalia* seems to acquire multifaceted reflections, all somatically rooted in the equally previously mentioned notion of threshold. Thus, it comes to outline not only the spatial fringes of physical

peripherality, the moment it also hints at societal scaffolding and its architecture of power, while it also embraces the intricately refined mechanisms of art.

> As Raymond Williams has observed, this turning to the past as a way of addressing the problems of a dysfunctional modernity was common amongst nineteenth-century social theorists. One may suggest therefore that, like William Cobbett who criticised emerging industrial society from the perspective of the countryman, the painters challenged a raw new present by adopting a visual language given authority by a lengthy venerated past. (Morrison 23)

Building one's becoming outside the general frame of the age that accelerated the pulse of time, forcing its pendulum to host febrile and fecund seconds that redrew the face of the world, is the purest expression of a state of withdrawal that became creative principle. Robert Herbert, in his influential essay *City vs. Country* wrote that for those artists who embraced the 'construction of rural subjects',

> It represented release and freedom from the regularity of mechanised life, from the impurity of city slums, from the degradation of factory labour. It permitted the expression by proxy of feelings hard to articulate directly...from nostalgia for that past being assaulted and torn asunder by industrialization, to admiration for the nobility of the man whose gestures force a pattern upon nature. (qtd. in Morrison 23)

Marginality gained a double-fold perspective, talking of destinies, both artistic and occupational, in the key of social isolation and obsolescence. John Ruskin, the leading art critic of the Victorian era, was deeply concerned with the way in which cities put the human psyche in great danger and voiced his anguish in his well-known work, *The Nature of the Gothic, The Stones of Venice*:

> The great cry that arises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnaces blast, is all in every deed for this, - that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton and strengthen steel, and refine sugar and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine or to form a single living spirit never enters into our estimate of advantages. (qtd. in Morrison 26-27)

Art critic Kenneth Bendiner, in a study dedicated to the Victorian painting, argued that even the existence of such artists' colonies is nothing but a poignant reflection of such a marginal context, as they were thought to be a 'healing' response of artistic expression towards an excruciatingly alienating feeling of exclusion experienced by many of the young artists who returned from apprenticing at art academies in France, Belgium or the Netherlands. (apud Slater 62)

Reluctance and disbelief describe the way in which contemporary artists relate to their artistically alienated foreign taught fellows. Two such voices were J. D. Linton's and Ruskin's who did not hesitate to argue that "in their endeavour to become sentimentally German, dramatically Parisian or decoratively Asiatic" they were at risk "of losing" their already "broken" "national character." (apud Slater 62) Adopting a less refined artistic milieu than the private intimacy of a studio, these epigones praised *en plen air* painting which no longer paid tribute to either gods of forgotten mythologies or heroic figures of the past, but revered, instead, the robust manliness of fisherfolk. (Slater 124) In a sort of iconoclastic attitude, the artists of these colonies, Staithes included, turned a blind eye and a 'dry' brush to modernity and its

technological wonders, dedicating themselves, almost totally and exclusively to portraying what many considered to be a national symbol of England, the fisherman, the primitive Patriarch of both land and sea, not tied to the soil, daring master of untamed waters and architect of his own destiny, described by Corbett, Holt and Russel as "the nostalgic embodiment of noble, Anglo-Saxon virtues and an exemplary figure in an authentic and stable golden age entirely unaffected by change." (Introduction xiii)

The emotion which the canvases of these artists, also known as 'The Impressionists of the North', encapsulate in special colourings and shadings tells a story of its own, with glimpses of a world that refuses to dim its lights. There, at Staithes, in Runswick Bay, Yorkshire, the spectre of light has not even once failed to master the boundless canvas of the sky, at times when celestial velvety blue was blurred to annihilation by the greedy and always insatiable smoke-spitting furnaces' mouths which wove an era and built its history. It may have changed its rich reflections and chromatics, but it has always been there. It is this special light that became the second skin of the fisherman almost turning him into a mythical figure. Although Staithes' artists did not sign canvases destined to praise mythology and its supreme, abstract imagery, Ulysses and Penelope seem to have sailed the cobbles and baited the nets along the Yorkshire coast, in almost the same ritualistic pattern in which the legend speaks of them. When mythification appears, it is merely a logical extension of the 'pastoral' tones that defined the idealised, embodiment of the 'Anglo-Saxon virtues'. Robert Slater argues that "paintings depicting fisherfolk were exhibited throughout the nineteenth century, but from 1880 they were some of the most popular subjects displayed at the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of British Artists" (124), as he also quotes a fragment from Kenneth McConkey's *Memory and Desire: Painting in Britain and Ireland at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, where he advocates that:

> Nationalist glorification was nevertheless an important aspect of the marine and coastal genre painting which emerged. The growth of genre painting in places like Staithes, Cullercoats, Newlyn, St. Ives and Walberswick underscored primitive community values while it graphically addressed the lives of the fishing communities. (apud Slater 125)

REVERSING THE ANGLE

Against the dramatic marine backdrop, the interest in portraying fisherfolk as idealised human typology, symbol of former and current national pride – may be read in an equally 'reversed' *regressus ad uterum* key. Motherly womb and nature's womb of silvery tones of water as life-engendering matrixes, encode a regressive journey towards the first embryos, nostalgic destinations of all our golden memories and early recollections. Thence, the seeds of life, utterly indebted to water – (re)create the same unique story when human beings and everything else that lives stepped into the light. This is precisely the reason why we reverse the image, since it is not about immersing into total darkness, as it is about wrapping it all in that special northerly Yorkshire light. If time can change its movement backwards, creating an alternative flow, a journey towards the roots of life can scatter darkness – making it bloom in shades of blue and silvery light. We can paraphrase John Ruskin who contended that "the purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love colour the most" by adding light to this perspective and creating a wholesome standpoint. Even the chromatic palette can be read in the same 'reversed' key and since blue is the major vibrant tonal presence in the paintings authored

by 'The Northern Impressionists', we can revert its vibration from cold, as blue has been perceived as a cool colour since the eighteenth-century, to very warm, since that was the way in which painters would regard it during the Middle Ages. (St. Clair 26) To all these we add the words of the same John Ruskin who believed that "blue colour is everlastingly appointed by the deity to be a source of delight."

There is little delight in the hard life and work of the fisherfolk, but contemplating the osmotic fluidity of the watercolours that flood the canvases signed by J. R. Bangshawe (1870-1909) most certainly is. For all the Staithes' artists the sea is that special 'place-myth' Rob Shields, the sociologer, speaks about referring to it as "the powerful motor of meaning" that "stubbornly continues to govern what people think" (apud Lübbren 115-116) – namely, that the sea has always had a special influence over people's imagination, bordering with its fluid body the telluric confinement of man, earth-bound by his limited physical construction, audacious in his dreams and conquests.

> Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean - roll!
> Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
> Man marks the earth with ruin - his control
> Stops with the shore; (Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, CLXXIX*)

In 'Putting Out in Rough Weather' the cobbles approach the shores on a stormy day with high tides, while men and women alike assist in the process; mere silhouettes, they are portrayed as crossing the shoreline and stepping into the water, compact, as a group – an allegoric human isthmus that bridges the two realms – the land and the sea. Even the tonal palette combines the two horizons, as blue shades melt into an assortment of beiges and earth-tones that manage to visually blur the borders away. The perspective changes in 'Two Ships' where the sea reigns supreme with its beautiful bluish tones, while the cobbles smudge their contours in ochre tones. Born in Staithes, George Weatherwill (1810-1890), the watercolourist known as 'The Turner of the North', grew among fishermen and he captured like no other the lacelike translucency of the Northern coastal light. The 'Harbour Scenes' that he so delicately painted with almost ethereal colours, as well as the cobbles moored in of J. R. Bangshawe's with their solitary, 'undressed' masts add a sense of evanescently mythical presence. Contemplating Frank Henry Mason's (1875-1965) harbour watercolours implies the same feeling of endless sacrality that comes with the way in which he painted the sky-piercing masts of the cobbles that might as well be the pillars of a temple or the lofty columns of a medieval cathedral. Also members of the Staithes Group were the Jobling spouses, Isa Thompson (1851-1926) and Robert Jobling (1841-1923) among whose canvases are portrayals of local women, the 'silenced' partners of the intrepid sailors, mostly painted in 'muted' shadowy tones while impersonating Penelopes, in their enduring waiting for their husbands' return from the sea. Always left ashore, stoic in their vigil, overwhelmed by love and anguish, always at the mercy of the unleashed forces of nature, these women's eyes sail over the foamy bluish white of the sea in search of the slightest silhouette that would pierce the line of the horizon and bloom a smile of hope on their faces. This is the same story Lizzy Hindmarsh, from Robert Jobling's homonymous painting of 1882, and the anonymous heroine of Isa Thompson's 'A Staithes Fishergirl Seated Looking Out to Sea' share in equally bluish attires, having the sea with them, and *on* them.

CONCLUSIONS

The final stroke the painter laid on his canvas draws a marine echoing of Alfred Tennyson's famous lines from *The Princess*:

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
> Man for the sword and for the needle she:
> Man with the head and woman with the heart. (Tennyson, *The Princess*)

where man has abandoned the field and dared the gods of water with his agile cobbles, swapping his sword for equally sharp fishing hooks and harpoons, while she remains the vestal that looks after the fire of the hearth, patiently weaving and repairing the nets with her own symbolic harpoon, the needle – part of her history as a weaver, a left-behind. The palimpsest makes room for other stories which, though based on common imaginaries, narrate differently, each time the brush approaches the easel and the mind contemplates new and new ideas.

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