



Romanticism on the Net

Fragments of a History in a Dream

Clare Brant

Abstract

This suite of poems, mostly inspired by objects in *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*, engages with Romantic themes, voices, and forms to make playful literary reflections on materiality. They speak about how objects speak to us perfectly and imperfectly, how new and old words translate and transpose, and how poetry can renew lingering romantic echoes.

Biographical Note

Clare Brant has four collections of poetry published by Shoestring Press, the most recent being *Breathing Space* (2020). She is also Professor of Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture at King's College London, with a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship to write critically and poetically about underwater lives.

I.

Porlock Visitation

The man who wants money
has a leather-bound ledger
his shoes are mud-splashed
in his pockets are ciphers
the sedition of shortfall at our table

come back another day, I say
I am busy
Poetry of eglantine, labyrinthine
wording in serpentine toils
does not want me disturbed

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other disturbances call – the nation, the sunset
loose laundry aflap in the hedges
we dine again on barley and turnips
listening for rustles, for rumours
collecting taxes for a coming war.

II.

Teresa Guiccioli's Travelling Chest

In her travelling box are medicaments
against aches, agues, period pains
and miasmas

some people are walking miasmas
after their company, a potion is required
to prevent dissolution of spirits

some people are dissolute
before their company, a powder or two
to fortify liver and heart is desirable

some people are desirable
no powder or pill can provide a solution
so one might as well enjoy it

and to the full
because the fever of this roving life will all too soon
stop, as finally hearts do.

III.

The Noctograph

We haven't got to the haptic yet
those still entranced by fountains of lava
look away now

this is about not looking
he went blind in youth
eyes at sea, salt-scarred, fog-seared, infected
promising career cut short

at first he was deterred

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then he was not deterred
taken by an urge to travel
he followed it, blindly

seeking out unseeable but highly perceptible places
the other side of the world
and people
horse-scented Tartar whose leathers
held sweat that had foamed in particular patterns

he took a machine to record all this
bandying words on the road
every night through his fingers
he coaxed with tact from wires
his way of being
he could not see the moonlight but he felt it.

IV.

Iron

Draped on a sofa the Regency woman
has fiery eyes and shapely feet
tea coffee chocolate
stain her sugar white dress

beside her a candelabra
slender, tall, props a Grecian lamp
nothing is simple
it too has been worked over

wrought iron, cast iron, white iron
folding carriage steps, corkscrews, knives
railings, looms, machines and ships
iron bars to madden the insane

progress makes progress
progress makes efficiency into a superfluity of things
iron signpost with lettering readable at night
shackles and manacles

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bilboes, spiked collars
tongue gags, thumbscrews
leg irons, jaw-forcing speculum
branding irons

voyage iron, re-exported
for axes and hoes
treadle and pulley
trade in reverse

but the weight of the chains is iron
like the ironmaster's coffin
and the lock on the door
and the twisted heart topping an elegant candelabra.

V.

Heva

A Mourning Dress brought back from Tahiti by Captain James Cook.

The chief mourner carries in his hand a long flat stick, the edge of which is set with shark's teeth, and in a phrenzy, which his grief is supposed to have inspired, he runs at all he sees, and if any of them happen to be overtaken, he strikes them most unmercifully with this indented cudgel, which cannot fail to wound them in a dangerous manner.

– John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere* (1773)

The head mourner was believed to be inspired by the spirit of the deceased to take revenge on any person who had done him injustice during his lifetime.

– Barbara Schaff

Oluuahuuaooolaku
red feather spirit
flies in my body

rage of grief
sways guide-ropes of soul
it beats to be free

red bird sings
the song of our ancestors

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against injustice

it falls to me
in feathers
of anger

glimmer of pearl shells protect me
sharpness of shark teeth
arm grief

pearly morning of woe
keen hour of howl
allowable revenge

through a slit of pearl mask I can see
nothing of here
it lets in beyond

whom shall I strike to avenge the injustice
against our dead queen, our people
our green coconut world

every single European
whose foot has disturbed our sand
whose gun has blasted our magic

they who have brought diseases to us
they who trade anger with no outrigger
they who have stolen our sky

oluuahuuaooolaku
the iron-wood tree gives me breath
bark cloth takes our blood.

VI.

Address to the Scholars

You search for material remnants of our lives
as if they could speak volumes
or pamphlets at least, hot off a radical press

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inked letters spell out forms
to imagine
how the books, the sketches, the offcuts

made travels in our heads
keys to the tomb
bridges, sacrifices

orange, gold, whiteness
satin and stone
neither one nor the other

a pirate's shroud
wrapping in gladness and madness
poetics of things

which outlive us
to repeat and repeal
the purgatory of our expurgation.