

Aloisia ŞOROP

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MOIRÉ

**Fluids and Fluidity in Romantic Poetry : William Wordsworth,
Samuel Taylor Coleridge**



EDITURA UNIVERSITARIA
Craiova, 2017

Referenți științifici

Conf.univ.dr. Florentina ANGHEL

Lect.univ.dr. Elena BUTOESCU

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

ȘOROP, ALOISIA

**Moiré : fluids and fluidity in romantic poetry : William
Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge / Aloisia Șorop. - Craiova :**
Universitaria, 2017

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-14-1237-2

821.111.09

Coperta: Robert Liviu Niță

ARGUMENT

The present study was born out of its author's necessity to foster a dialogue with water in a country where rain and mist have become increasingly rare. Slippery like all oozy things, the idea was to devise a grammar of fluids and develop an agreeable form of water gnosis. But the enterprise was difficult and presented at times forms of aquaphobia that endangered my amphibian method of research. I had to moor my enthusiasm and increase my prudence to negotiable limits of time and space: I have chosen two Romantic poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and restricted my analysis to the way fluids, water in most cases and in all its states, vapour, liquid, and solid, humidified their mentalities and literary oeuvre.

Each chapter is a proof that moisture is a cultural construct and people deal with it in different, sometimes contrasting ways. The fluid interplay between geography, perspective and the human mind was rendered using a metaphorical marsh map: the biographical channels were the largest and most propitious to navigate, as biographies, letters, notebook or diary entries were accessible and waterproof; the tributaries were also of great help, as they explained, interpreted and connected motifs, imagery, ideas and syntactic algae; and, last but not least, cataracts, though difficult to find in the lowlands, have majestically and in a most outpouring way contributed by adding sonority, eddies and aquatic energy to the traditional, occasionally dry, readings of the poems. Needless to

say, the historical and cultural fluidity of things, people and ideas was retained through an intricate strategy of adding salt and a gallon of water to the whole enterprise.

Fluids were identified in a variety of forms, ranging from oceans, seas, lakes, streams, to ponds and mist, garnished with an array of accessories, such as fish, skates, hallucinations or boats. Everything fluid that tried to leak or escape scrutiny was booked and shelved for future, hazy purposes.

I have chosen Wordsworth and Coleridge because they formed such a perfect lagoon of interwoven lives, personal relationships and works that I find it difficult to tell if the randomly perceived low sandy dunes actually separated or united them. They shared houses, poetry, friendship and envy with such munificence that they both turned into fabulous mariners eager to kill and tell ... eager to kill and tell...

INTRODUCTION

This book is not a study in limnology, the science of ponds and lakes, nor does it introduce a new theory in oceanology. It seeks to recover a fluid, essentially aquatic perspective of the British culture and poetry at the turn of the nineteenth century, during what is now termed *the Romantic period*.

The objects of this study are *water* and its vaporised and solid cognates, *mist* and *ice*, respectively. The versatility of the forms in which water appears in nature allows it to alternately display the qualities of a material element and of grandiose weather phenomena. Nothing is more fluid than rivers or mist, nothing more deceptive than thawing ice, nothing as deadly as a storm at sea, as the English know only too well.

In 1807, Francis Jeffrey anonymously published a very caustic review of William Wordsworth's recently issued *Poems, in Two Volumes*, in the *Edinburgh Review*. He ironically described William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey as "a certain brotherhood of poets, who have haunted for some years about the Lakes of Cumberland." The current view of lakes was that they were static, detached and, by way of consequence, provincial, as compared to the vastness of the ocean and the unlimited economic, political and expansionist opportunities the latter offered. As a result, "The Lake Poets" label was, by all means, degrading (Baker 32). Later, Coleridge wrote a letter to Lord Byron in which he was expressing his ironical stand regarding the moniker: "The cataracts of

anonymous criticism never fell on them, but I was wet thro' with the Spray" (Holmes, 1999: 377).

My study aims to do justice to at least two of the Lake Poets, i.e. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose oeuvre, letters and notebook entries I examined with a view to identify and discuss a set of related imagery pertaining to water and its significance for British culture at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Water has always played a vital role in the life of a nation essentially maritime like Britain. In the eighteenth century, the sea defined British identity in more ways than one and led to the construction of a particular perception of the world. The growing awareness that *insularity* was both an impediment and a natural advantage led Britain to envisage a daring, long-term enterprise: that of extending her domination over other territories by means of the sea. The phrase "rule the waves" was borrowed from James Thomson's patriotic poem *Rule Britannia* and characterized both the spirit and the aspirations of the English during the last decades of the long eighteenth century. Britain was building a strong and imperative appetite for a global empire.

In the context of a geographically larger perspective, the sea ceased to be perceived as an alien space. It became a fluid continuation of the British mainland and its appropriation marked a turning point in Britain's history as a naval power.

The Romantic poets, consciously or unconsciously, were drawn into this maelstrom of maritime imagery and approved of their nation's endeavour to take possession of the sea. Though hampered in their holistic vision of Britain by their geographical insularity, they finally shared the prevailing imperialistic

outlook and contributed to promoting the idea of British exceptionalism and its duty to “civilize” other cultures.

In their poems one can perceive a tension between the small forms of water that they describe (springs, rain drops, “slices of lakes”) and the vast, overwhelming expanses of water (roaring streams, the poles, the sea). This tension epitomizes their relationship with the dominant cultural modes at the time: on the one hand, there was the domestic outlook, according to which sailors were educated to be able to manage high seas, but also to cultivate the land when they returned to *terra firma*; on the other, there was the expansionist perspective, based on which navigators were expected to explore the remotest regions of the globe seeking for more territories to attach to the British crown.

Besides the international engagement of their poetry, the Romantic poets were instrumental in building a prevailing *fluid concept of Britain* at home. Their poems structured an imaginary normative world in which water pervades, rules and defines not only British space, but also British psyche. Water and fluidity came to be regarded as informing human experience in an essential and preeminent way. The characters of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s narrative poems are caught in the middle of *mist-where*, or *waves-where*, and their responses are mainly concerned with *fluidity*. They reject, embrace or identify with it. But they cannot ignore it.

The Romantic poets’ perception of the British landscape (native or where they spent most of their adult lives), teeming with streams and lakes, morphed into a *pattern of vision and emotion* that they applied not only to poetry, but even to their general outlook of life. It is unsurprising, then, that they

associated fluids with such vital issues as memory, life, death, the imagination, the human mind, or dreams. Their minute observation of the natural world of rivers prompted them to elaborate upon the process of artistic creation in terms of the “small water insect” which leaps forward against the current (Coleridge) or upon the hypnotizing powers of ponds (Wordsworth).

Fluidity accompanied the Romantic poets everywhere, from their long walks and reveries to their syntax. It is with them that the concept of poetry becomes postmodernly fluid, it meanders like a stream among new metaphors, familiar language, and pellucid / translucent / opaque images. Fluidity regulates the pace of the verse, while ideas and musicality flow in a mutually supportive harmony. Their poems read like rich, sonorous, tumultuous rivers that reflect the image above and disclose the soul within. Wordsworth’s greatest work, *The Prelude*, published posthumously, is *un poème fleuve*, a poem that covers fourteen Books, written in blank verse, whose fluidity of conception matches its numerous aquatic allegories and water images.

In the *Preface* written for the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth defined poetry to be “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” He lay emphasis on two basic phases of the creative act: the emotional stage, when feelings and first-hand experiences are absorbed and accumulated in the poets’ mind, is followed by the moment when, in utter solitude, away from disruptors, the poets remember the details of their experience and pen down the fruition of their artistic endeavour. The definition subliminally contains a truth that Wordsworth failed