

**Adam Roberts, *Landor's Cleanness. A Study of Walter Savage Landor*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 194. £55. ISBN 9780198723271.**

In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), T. S. Eliot defined Walter Savage Landor as 'one of the very finest poets of the first part of the nineteenth century', and Ezra Pound regarded him as the most important English writer between Pope and Browning. Yet, nowadays most critics would probably not agree with these rather favourable judgements, as suggested by the fact that between Robert Pinsky's *Landor's Poetry* (1968) and this new study by Adam Roberts, no major work on Landor has appeared. Eliot's use of the adjective 'fine' to describe Landor's poetic art is hardly disputable when one considers that he was – to use an apt oxymoron, as will be explained – a Romantic classicist of the first order, a highly cultivated author who wrote a significant part of his poetry in Latin, and who constantly, almost compulsively, searched for stylistic loftiness and *le mot juste* in both verse and prose. Such penchant for formal purity and excessive care, often mistaken for affectation, might have led the most sceptical critics to be easily distracted from the intellectual depth and fervent imagination that emerge in some of his writings. Thus, like any critical attempt meant to rehabilitate an unjustly neglected artist, Roberts's book must be welcomed by all scholars of the nineteenth century.

From the outset, Roberts expounds his thesis that the 'Latinate *polish* of Landor's poetry is [...] the formal embodiment of the most fascinating and far-reaching engagement with questions of cleanness in literature' (2). Later on he qualifies this statement by adding that, in Landor, 'a desire to purify the discourse reveals itself continually and creatively as a larger process of heteroglossic contamination' (p. 8). In other words, throughout the book, the author vigorously insists on how a philosophy, or ideology, of cleanness, involving formal, linguistic, political, sexual, and ethical aspects, informs Landor's *opera omnia* combined in complex ways with an apparently opposite engagement with 'dirt'. Roberts uses the latter term to refer to a whole series of counteracting elements characterising Landor's language and themes: from his deployment of heteroglossia, instead of the unified consistent style that the concept of cleanliness would conventionally entail, to the treatment of such topics as violence, sex, wildness and anti-establishment subversion. Moreover, as Roberts shows in Chapter 2 ('Biography'), even Landor's personality, especially in his youth, was marked by sudden bouts of intemperance and rage clashing with the 'masculine gentility' that informs his writing, as his liberal republicanism and political revolutionary ideas superficially contrasted with his aristocratic attitude and taste for control and politeness. The rules of the classicist, as it were, often battle against a (post-)Romantic sensibility refusing absolute control and embracing ironic or dialectical discourses.

Through captivating close readings of Landor's works, Roberts convinces us that this apparent conflict between the author's neoclassical austerity of tone as well as image, and the intrusion in his writing of different 'contaminating' and disrupting elements in terms of style and content, is what mostly makes at least part of his output still engaging for a present-day readership. Hence the fascination of the *Ianthe* poems, in which the classical models informing language and imagery frame an emotional dimension that clearly belongs to the poet's personal experiences and whose erotic impetus seems ready to subvert the conventional commonplaces of love lyrics, while, in fact, the classical poise keeps it under control. By the same token, a formal finish, or '*aesthetic purity*' (140) characterise a novel like *Pericles and Aspasia* which is essentially about 'the most famous prostitute in Western culture' (141).

If we consider Landor's vast output, the selection of works included in this study might arouse dissatisfaction and dubiousness. Yet Roberts's slim volume is not designed to cover an entire canon but, rather, to pursue the aforesaid argument through a careful and, to

my view, generally successful sampling that, undoubtedly, is exhaustive in terms of genre coverage, ranging from Landor's shorter poetry to his epic, pastoral, Hellenic, dramatic, novelistic works, and *Imaginary Conversations*.

Roberts's overall advocacy of T. S. Eliot's judgement is cleverly – and luckily – mitigated by his admitting that Landor is not 'a poet of Shelleyan or Keatsian brilliance' (2), and that some of his copious, heterogeneous output is unlikely to be appreciated by contemporary readers (such as, for instance, his dramatic experiments except for *Count Julian*).

Roberts's own prose – curiously enough in symbiosis with his argument – displays various degrees of cleanness, in particular in the way he engages with his readership directly, distancing himself from conventional academic theorisations and focusing instead on textual analysis by means of a quasi-conversational style that is clearly influenced by his non-academic writing (Roberts is author of a long list of science-fiction novels and short stories). This informal register, for instance, often turns out to be an efficient anodyne against what Roberts himself defines as the 'boredom' (149) of certain Landorian prose passages, or against the unattractiveness at least of some of Landor's appropriations of the pastoral mode. On the other hand, though, Roberts sometimes sounds even too personal and colloquial ('I'll rummage around in the poem a moment longer to try and extract its sense' (71); 'Let me put this another way' (95); 'I'm a thoroughly urbanized individual myself' (93), and many other examples), producing the opposite impression of uncleanness by generating improper bathetic effects and unsettling oscillations between the high-flown and the down-to-earth. However, in most cases, his power to captivate readers, thus encouraging them to re-evaluate Landor, surpasses the stylistic drawbacks that may derive from excessive informality.

Unfortunately, and in this case appallingly so, uncleanness affects the general editing of the book, which is intolerable for such a highly-reputed publisher as Oxford University Press. Although the most noticeable errors are clearly imputable to careless proof-reading rather than authorial faults, Roberts's writing cannot but be 'dirtied' and, at times, even conceptually stained by them. The blurb and the acknowledgements present a disturbing number of grammatical errors, and, sadly so, almost in each chapter one can spot glaring lapses and mistakes in the syntax and morphology. Despite the reservations it might arouse, Roberts's book is undeniably a major contribution to Landorian studies. Thus, one can only hope that there will be a second edition 'cleansed' from the above mentioned occurrences of negligence.

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