

[Robert Southey], *Letters from England* by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, ed. Carol Bolton. The Pickering Masters Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. xv+639. £110. ISBN: 9781848932098.

First published in 1807, *Letters from England* is the first-person account of an imaginary Spanish gentleman's journey across the country. Not everyone was taken in by Southey's pretence, and his identity as the book's author was revealed six months after publication. Whereas Jack Simmons's 1951 edition for the Cresset Press was explicitly titled '*Letters from England* by Robert Southey', this new edition, expertly prepared by Carol Bolton, reproduces the original frontispiece and therefore renews the imposture. Though it may prove confusing for some readers, the return to the original author/title is welcome, for the implications of the Spanish persona are crucial to Southey's reprise of the eighteenth-century 'trend for faux travel accounts' (9) such as Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and Goldsmith's *Chinese Letters*. In line with this tradition, Bolton reminds us, the Spaniard's alien viewpoint transforms 'our' nation into a strange territory akin to 'that found in the first footfalls of explorers stepping onto a new continent' (15). The sense of radical novelty conveyed by Bolton's exploratory image captures the specific nature of Southey's work, which not only updates a literary formula, but also reorients its focus on a spectacle of modernity characterized by rapid and astonishing changes.

Bolton's edition allows us to explore this complex and rewarding work with the help of a full editorial apparatus, richly detailed introduction, and extensive annotations. A book primarily aimed at libraries in view of its price, this work is another outstanding product of the ongoing revival in Southey studies, to which Bolton has already made several important editorial and critical contributions. Hers is set to be *the* edition of Southey's *Letters* for the foreseeable future. Based on the first edition, it contains newly transcribed annotations made by Southey on his own copy of the first edition (kept at the Brotherton Library in Leeds), as well as featuring a detailed description of the only known manuscript of *Letters* (held at Chetham's Library, Manchester) and a reproduction of Southey's notes for the project and for an aborted additional volume. Finally, Bolton's abundant endnotes provide an indispensable tool for navigating this multifaceted work.

The presence of Spain obviously looms large over a book that confirms further Southey's status as the foremost Hispanist in Romantic-period Britain. *Letters* is also a significant testimony of the perception of Spain and its culture prior to the outbreak of the Peninsular War, which event introduced major changes in the British image of the Iberian country and the relations and exchanges between the two cultures. In this respect, Bolton is particularly convincing on why Southey chose a Spaniard for a protagonist, as well as on the 'contradictory nature' of his approach to Catholicism in the text (40). Indeed, what this edition returns to us fully is the sense of an intercultural, multi-layered work based on a sustained performance of literary ventriloquism. Bolton aptly defines *Letters* as a 'bi-vocal' narrative (1), one that multiplies points of view and incorporates different voices as Southey gathered information from various correspondents and borrowed from other travel accounts, such as Celia Fiennes's tours of England (4). As Bolton repeatedly reminds us, this is a complexly structured text exploring a variety of contentious issues from a combination of ironic, amused, anguished, and polemically embattled perspectives. *Letters* is, she notes, 'primarily a repository for Southey's own, often inflammatory, opinions on society and politics' (7); and the book's thematic strands Bolton reconstructs and examines in her extensive preface include Englishness, society and economics, religion, and the Lakes.

Among these, a particularly emblematic case is Southey/Espriella's engagement with the Lake District in a section that challenges and corrects popular contemporary guides to the region and their prescriptive tendencies by sending character and readers 'off the beaten

track' (51). A metadiscursive examination of guidebook conventions, this section offers a critique of the culture industry that had developed in and about the Lakes. It also provides a telling instance of Southey's double or indeed, 'bi-focal' vision in *Letters*, since Espriella views this most English of landscapes through 'Spanish spectacles' (11) and thus writes about the Lakes through an insistent use of Spanish lexis and comparisons with Spanish geography and culture.

In other words, the section on the Lakes exemplifies the book's distinctive ability to hold two visions and perspectives in balance through a bi-focal approach, while also clarifying that Espriella's Spanish gaze is not a mere exotic masquerade. Starting from the Spaniard's 'sheltered, parochial background' (2), the book sets up a transnational and cosmopolitan vision that simultaneously intersects with an inward-looking propensity to concentrate on one's own cultural identity, thereby demonstrating one of the main reasons why Southey's *Letters* is eminently relevant to the current agenda of Romantic studies. Another reason, which this edition enables us to appreciate fully, is that it collects and reflects on the 'detailed minutiae' (58) of a quickly evolving, fraught, and contradictory modernity, a fact that amply justifies our rediscovery and re-evaluation of what Bolton calls an 'anxious, unstable text' (61).

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