

The Invention of
Northern Aesthetics
in 18th-Century
English Literature

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*This book is dedicated to my beloved husband Sergio
and our daughter Theodora Giovanazzi*

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PREFACE

The Invention of Northern Aesthetics in 18th-Century English Literature examines the complex and intertwined semiotic, ideological, visual and cultural operations that took place during the 18th century and that were to be conducive to and culminate in the creation, or ‘invention’, of an aesthetics that would be promoted as if it were genuinely English, in a limited sense, and Northern in an extensive one.¹

Essentialism,² the move towards a reactionary and populist invention of characteristics believed to be inherent in a geographical region, is the vehicle through which the English culture of the 18th century marked the necessity to be free, original and independent from an outside influence that the English people did not perceive to be adherent to the aesthetic necessities of ‘their’ nation.³ British intellectuals, amongst others Thomas Warton, felt the need to free themselves from the yoke of the ‘Latin’ (Greek and Roman) solar aesthetics that imposed on them the rules and forms they used, and were expected to continue to use, respect and imitate but which they felt to be foreign and not adequate to their unique geographical region and culture. In rejecting this system, they did not fully realise that what they were doing was just substituting the former cultural, regional and geographical Southern focus with a Northern one. By choosing to favour the contemplation of the Northern elements of their region, i.e. rejecting the also present Southern ones, they were applying an essentialist perspectival choice, equivalent to the one they were trying to dismantle.

To make their claims stronger, English intellectuals recovered what they believed to be their autochthonous literary origins and traditions. This origin they set in a mythical past, prior to the effect of the melting pot of cultures and literature and the engrafting of peoples on peoples – Celts, Britons, Iberians, Belgae, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, Norwegians, Scandinavians, French, etc. – of which the English people are the result. This origin they chose to set in their ‘mythical’ and real Celtic past.

Why they decided, of the various peoples they are made up of, to focus on this specific identity core, positing the Celtic literary ancestry line at their origin, this book will try to explain in the terms of their search for an alternative to the classic Southern mythology and aesthetics. This they did to highlight their different political and religious points of view. English

intellectuals decided thus to focus on their autochthonous common Celtic identity core, which provided them with the opportunity to highlight their different aesthetic, political and religious stance, i.e. different from the values provided in the previously adopted classic Southern mythology and aesthetics.

To set themselves free from an aesthetics they felt discriminative and negative, they pinpointed all their distinct natural landscape characteristics, *de facto* ‘creating’ a Northern aesthetics. Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774-1781), in positing the autochthonous canon of English Literature in Chaucer (partly), Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare, provides an answer to Oliver Goldsmith’s request, expressed in his *An Enquiry into the Present State of Learning* (1759),⁴ that “English taste, as English Criticism, should be restrained by laws of its own promoting” (OGE: 90), and, accordingly, that criticism should consider “the nature of the climate and the country before it gives rules to direct taste. In other words, every country should have a national system of rules” (OGE: 95), giving him the opportunity to conclude thus:

it may be objected, that *this is setting up a particular standard of taste in every country*; this is *removing that universal one*, which has hitherto united the armies and enforced the commands of criticism; by this reasoning the critics of one country, will not be proper guides to the writers of another; Grecian or Roman rules will not be generally binding in France or England; but the laws designed to improve our taste, by this reasoning, must be adapted to the genius of every people, as much as those enacted to promote morality. WHAT I propose as objections, are really the sentiments I mean to prove, not to obviate. I must own it as my opinion, that if criticism be at all requisite to promote the interests of learning, its rules should be taken from among the inhabitants, and adapted to the genius and temper of the country it attempts to refine. (OGE: 88-90, my emphasis)

Furthermore, Goldsmith raises Milton above both Homer and Virgil, which had represented the elite of the Neoclassicists. Interestingly he also looks North, praising Sweden and Denmark for their sense of freedom: “They have, I am told (...) a jealous sense of liberty, and that strength of thinking, peculiar to northern climates, without its attendant ferocity” (OGE: 66-67).

Goldsmith, that is, anticipates strongly the request for ‘aesthetic regionalism’ promoted later in the century, in 1788, and this time only in aesthetic terms, by Francis Grose – an intellectual whose importance is unrecognised.⁵ Grose strongly avoids all claims of any, falsely, universal aesthetics – rejecting thus aesthetic absolutism, and the Southern one with

it, in order to avoid hierarchic peaks of ‘civilization’ (for example, that of the Greek aesthetics) in opposition to the idea of ‘cultures’ (pertaining to all different cultures of the world). The theory had enormous consequences, anticipating postmodern aesthetic regionalisms in the wake of which we still live today.

Thomas Warton, on the other hand, in indicating Spenser as one of the founding fathers of the English tradition, would initiate one of the most interesting discussions of 18th-century literature regarding the issue whether *The Faerie Queene* belonged to the elite works of English literature, being anti-classical in its design. The invective was to involve many critics and ultimately lead to the promotion of the Saxon-Gothic style as ‘the’ characteristic English style, and as the *par excellence* anti-classical ‘Northern’ one. Accordingly, *The Faerie Queene* was read as a Gothic Northern poem.

These elements are at the core of the choice made by the English intelligentsia to define their autochthonous aesthetic perspective. Fabricated to permit them to set themselves aside from the continental influence, they invented their own roots, which they chose to set in a distant, faraway past. This was done on purpose, to increase the difficulty of finding evidence, to permit them to engraft onto their Celtic past a mythological, invented, political superstructure in which King Arthur and his Round Table of the Knights figure prominently. The chivalric ethos then was to be visibly symbolised and reified in the Round Table of the knights, which would become the image for the democratic union of paratactic equals and no presiding authority: not even King Arthur. All 18th-century constitutionalists (Hughes, Hurd, Percy, Warton) would adopt and insist on this image to contrast the still-unresolved Glorious Revolution and the Jacobean Catholic crises and their related political problems, which were linked to the authoritarian claims of the Catholic kings, the Stuarts.

One of my contentions is that the Gothic novel and the a-religious Graveyard Poetry provide an indirect critique, from an enlightened English standpoint, and scorn those places of Europe (epitomised by Italy and France) where people could still believe in spirits and acquiesce to the fears of damnation. This permitted this religion and the Catholic kings, who considered themselves to be anointed by God, to dominate and manipulate people for their own interests. *The Castle of Otranto*, and the Gothic novel in general, is here, therefore, interpreted as a mock-heroic work – which is also why the first edition is unsigned – set against all demonologists, one of the works through which the Enlightenment declared war on *all religions* that proclaim obedience or acquiescence to a higher authority beyond the private and personal one.

In this way, the dichotomy North vs. South became, besides an aesthetic and literary contention, the site of a religious, political and philosophical debate, polarised as a fight between Catholic and Protestant countries, with Italy, Austria and France, the lands of authority, against the Northern countries, where the Reformation reigned: England, Germany and, partly, Holland, which set empiricism and the imagination against belief.

The 18th century was therefore to represent the rational critique of the religiously authoritarian South (implicitly and at a safe distance, providing an exposition of their own religions as well) through the mock-heroic and the rational Gothic, genres able to contrast the obscurantism of the still-in-the-dark lands. These forms of writing also attracted attention to the real, anti-universal and anti-exemplary humankind: eventually portrayed in the “comic-epic poem in prose”– the novel – as real ‘characters’ and not belittled as *caricaturas*, an enterprise on which Hogarth and Fielding jointly decide to embark. Sylphs, gnomes, and nymphs were, therefore, assigned zero power in Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714), where they appear but, significantly, do not give advice and do not have norms of behaviour to impose, limiting themselves to warning and helping people indirectly, without any possibility of direct intervention.

Celtic mythology came to represent the counter-tradition to that of the saints, successful in providing the people of the 18th century a recognisable system of chthonic elements made up of spirits and deities of extremely limited powers, completely different from the vindictive classic Greek and Roman gods, and different also from the authoritative God of the monotheistic religions and their hierocracy to which the English had been converted, up to the Reformation, and were not still entirely free from. Celtic spirits, having no religion to proselytise people into and pretending no conformity acts, represented liberty. They embodied the Protestant response to the abuse of power of Catholicism. An issue resumed, in paradigmatic terms, also in the Gothic novel, references to Italy being a shorthand for Catholicism or the South in general and its derivative from religion, authoritative political models.

Sylphs, the *sylvestri nymphae*, gnomes, descendants of the mythic Norwegian and Scandinavian trolls that reside in rocks and caves, and the fairies of the underworld of Elfame alongside the witches in Welsh, Irish and Scottish folklore constituted the core of this endeavoured cohesion literature and the complex literary historiography of the myth connected with it.

Chthonic and airy minor deities, derived from the primeval and the nature-bound elemental understanding of the world, based on air, fire, earth and water, also guaranteed the just and fair protection of the

specificities of this northern land on which these creatures presided and protected from evil human intrusions. These intermediary beings, independent from the mythology, lived in English nature and were the strongest tie literature could possibly envisage to connect people to their *homeland*, providing a strong identity trope. In the 18th century, the Celtic mythology was revived and recovered to create pride in an autochthonous literary tradition, stating implicitly and explicitly that there was no need to adopt a model that was external or inconsistent with local necessities.

As we shall see, the Celtic world provided a chivalric political model clearly connected to a non-authoritarian political rhetoric that strongly resembled the constitutional monarchy, thus creating strong links with the tradition of the ancient German law and the tradition of equity. This is also the core referred to in Matthew Arnold's defence, in the 19th century, of what he defined as "Englishism pure" qualifying it as "faith (...) in its [UK's] untransformed self".⁶ Arnold, in contesting the Welsh decision to maintain their language, tries to defend his personal nationalistic and anti-regionalist aim to prevent the splitting of the nation, recovering the purpose of the 18th-century's scholars. This ideological background collides, nevertheless, with today's agenda when the same linguistic issues are insisted upon but must be framed within a closed or strong regionalism rather than a critical and open one.⁷ A secessionist framework that does not correspond to the 18th-century national agenda and tried to evade internal regionalisms, the Celt origin provided a good, shared bait. Indeed, this mythology cast a spell that is seemingly active even in our own contemporary world, as the recent Brexit from the European Union due to law divergences has demonstrated, and is confirmed by the successful revival of recent fiction and TV series on the early Saxon period promoting strong muscular leaders and chivalric values, but also violence.⁸ It is also for this reason that this book will look at the past to try to find an origin for the present, beside the more pointed legal origin, the populist resurgence of insularity-bound values that were at work then, different from today for cohesive reasons and that, most likely, constitute the core premises for the understanding of the complex issue of Britishness and the Brexit from Europe.

In the 18th century, Thomas Warton thought that a shared foundation and the provision of Celtic roots and myths would be able to unite an internally split nation, this, notwithstanding the recent union with Scotland (1707) and the partly autonomous Irish Island that would find a formal union with the UK only in 1800. Warton's essentialism was guided by a centripetal issue, fostering an isolationist insular move to unite the nation against outward continental homogenising cultural influences. It is an

isolationist matrix that has recently repeated itself, but is today complicated by strong internal regionalisms that assume a contrary centrifugal turn, aimed at acquiring political independence, dividing from within, likely because the national homogenising stance is perceived as a menace or cancellation of some groups' relative diversity. The cohesive, rather than the secessionist, aim was also the core of Matthew Arnold's reading of Alfred Lord Tennyson's recovery of the Arthurian legend in *The Idylls of the King*, that he – in thoroughly anti-Southern terms – defines as an “*unHomeric*” poem, recovering the older autochthonous tradition and repeating the issues pursued in the 18th century,⁹ without mentioning it but along the lines of Northern aesthetics.

The popular mythological perspective runs parallel to the history of British empiricism and its defence of rationality. The founding fathers of British empiricism, Bacon, Locke and Hume, to whom I propose adding Addison and de Mandeville, represent the attack of culture against superstitions and religious belief. In their focus on the senses and the external world, and on how the senses apperceive external reality, they fostered a sense-related, nearly scientific and epistemological understanding of the world rather than a merely emotional one.

The man who did more than any other to popularise Locke's system and his idea that the mind is a *tabula rasa* is, paradoxically, Joseph Addison. With his series of essays on *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712), he attached an unprecedented importance to personal reception and its analysis so he could be termed the spiritual father of English Romanticism. Indeed, if Romanticism existed, it existed because there was an Addison who, with William Duff, democratised the idea of ingeniousness (from Lat. *ingenium* or inborn talent), seeing it not as a gift of the gods but counterpoising the idea of the imagination as one of the faculties present in humans, a faculty that could be improved through training: an esemplastic faculty, as Coleridge, who derives his theory from Addison, defined it, a creative faculty capable of changing the world.

Addison, thus, as we shall see, taught artists to look with their own eyes and change what they did not like. Through the imagination, as Addison says, “[the artist] has the modelling of Nature in his own hands”.¹⁰ Romanticism takes over this responsibility: in England, this is to collect the most varied stances and viewpoints – avoiding continental coteries of shared beliefs and shared philosophical stances – aiming at being a transversal declaration of independence of both the imagination and the artists. In stating the liberty and possibility for everyone to become the sole stakeholder, artist, moulder and creator of one's own life, it took free will back from religion. Accordingly, as a new English Renaissance, it

celebrates a new humanity that uses free will, freedom and the imagination to envisage the new utopian worlds of the future, like Blake's *New Jerusalem* (1820-1827).

As can be seen, Romanticism is not an unexpected result but has been prepared by the 18th-century new literary and philosophical values that upset the Renaissance-oriented Neoclassicism, and this from Addison's essay of 1712 onwards, giving rise to what I prefer to call 'The Long Enlightened Romanticism'¹¹ rather than 'The Long Eighteenth Century'.

The issues that culminate in Blake are the result of the revolt of the empiricists against the rationalists, an attack they set on various fronts (religion, free will, empiricism, the imagination) to affirm an English Northern chthonic democratic past against the hypotactic, hierarchical and authoritarian mythology, founded in religion, politics and ethics, and ingrained and hidden in the Greek and Roman tradition, a tradition safely exported abroad via the Southern aesthetics.

If this hypothesis of a conscious focus on a Northern tradition during the 18th century has been examined at all, it has most certainly not been given its proper importance and place in the history of literature.¹²

This book aims to provide this new hypothetical perspective in the hope that it will result in a fresh outlook on the history of literature, identifying unheeded or misinterpreted popular trends recognisable in the timespan ranging from the 18th century to the present day, where such themes are widespread in contemporary literature.

The Northern elements connected to the elemental creatures, the recovery of the Saxon-Gothic laws and its political system, the picturesque, the sublime, the new line of beauty of Hogarth's aesthetics of the shell, the Domestic Anti-Grand-Tour, Gainsborough's and Constable's studies of clouds (nephology) and the emphasis on the dark night elements rather than the, apparently, clear and solar ones, once identified, become so evident throughout the literature of the century, and even after, to justify the feasibility of the Northern hypothesis as the master cyphered symbolism and identity politics of the 18th century.

All the above-mentioned aesthetic Northern elements draw constant attention to the different English nature that, as these theorists think, requires and deserves an aesthetics of its own. A good material proof is Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1798-1799), significantly subtitled the "Growth of a Poet's Mind", which depicts the evolution of nature as a spiritual entity come to envisage the biological *natura naturans* of physics.

The fairy way of writing, which Addison promoted, once re-established was never to be abandoned again, reappearing in the 19th, the 20th and 21st centuries. Recent works, like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of*

the Rings and more contemporary ones like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and G.R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, belong to the tradition established in the 18th century, grounded in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, through Thomas Warton's appositely created canon and his emphasis on the qualities of Chaucer, Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare. When, between 1774 and 1781, Thomas Warton published his *History of English Poetry*, these writers had lost their appeal with the public and were recovered by the Moderns, against the Southern tradition of the Ancients. Warton, being an academic, became instrumental in the creation of the new insular canon, an aim he pursued with the publication of the first *History of English Poetry*.

To sum up: although Addison was instrumental in the recovery of the Northern elemental magic spirituality, through his promotion of the fairy way of writing, and even if the myth of King Arthur represented a modern emblem of equity without a religion as a reference, without the *History of English Poetry* (1774-1781), the Northern tradition might not have made its way into this book. Thomas Percy's work (1765), Thomas Warton's Arthurian poetry (1777)¹³ and Macpherson's appropriation of the Irish Celtic elements in his 'invented' *Ossian Poems* (1739)¹⁴ gained entry in literature through Warton's *History of Poetry*. The democratic spirit of the Arthurian political model (read the English constitutional monarchy), on the contrary, that appears in emblematic and symbolic terms – as do other cyphered emblematic readings, the Rosicrucian and Freemason traditions being two of them – was offered as material evidence, seen in the blueprint and design of the English Garden (Addison, Pope, William Temple, Kent, Bridgman, Knight, Price, Repton), in Gothic architecture (the Saxon-Gothic) and in its first application as a design-oriented, structural and formal reading of literature in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Hughes, T. Warton, R. Hurd).

The development of this tradition can also be examined in the 19th century through Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites, in Charles Kingsley; and in the 20th century through J. Barrie, W.B. Yeats and the previously highlighted tradition of the fairy novel, which testifies its relevance in English literature.

The analysis will follow this outline:

- Chapter One examines the premises of the empiricist tradition (Locke and Hume and de Mandeville) that undermined the belief in inborn knowledge. Innatism represented the indirect short-cut to the creationist hypothesis and its related hierarchical and authoritarian reading of society. This outlook interpreted ingeniousness as the result of God's gift to his chosen emissaries, poets, writers and prophets. The premise of this fixed

system (the *Scala Natura*) was based on the idea that knowledge was inborn and it could only be recovered by *anamnesis* (Plato). The genius theory reflected, thus, directly a principle of authority which was already inflected in religion (God) and in the body politics of the age (the king seen as God's representative on earth), i.e. the alliance of church and state, best expressed in the *Basilikon Doron* by James I.¹⁵ The English responded to innate knowledge with the counter-claim of originality and inventiveness, grounded in the empiricist senses-revolt against the primacy of ratio and deduction considered to produce fallacies if they were not endorsed by inductive proofs.

- Chapter Two revises the history of literature, attributing to Joseph Addison's work the appropriate centrality and importance that has so far been neglected. It examines the focus on the senses and their bodily *ratio* as applied in the ground-breaking *ante litteram* Romantic aesthetics in his *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712). Addison popularises Locke's principle that there is no innate knowledge and that the mind is a *tabula rasa* on which the senses inscribe impressions that are then reworked into ideas. Ingeniousness is not seen as a gift of God but is reworked into the imagination-faculty, interpreted as being present in all human beings, and seen as a pliable organ that has the potential to be exercised and perfected by everyone.

Without this undermining of the theory of *ingegnum*, Romanticism would not have existed as it represents the most direct consequence of its dismissal, replacing God with the human artist as the creative entity of the world and thus returning accountability for the universe to humankind and to their abilities. Furthermore, in contrast to the Southern tradition of the Greek and Roman classics, Addison provided a different, autochthonous tradition, which was that of the fairy way of writing, linked to the use of "Fairies, Magicians, Demons, and departed Spirits" (JA: 419, 84), in which Milton and Spenser show "an admirable Talent in Representations of this kind" (JA: 419, 87) but where Shakespeare "has incomparably excelled all others" (JA: 419, 86). Thus, Shakespeare's and Spenser's use of the Celtic tradition is examined, keeping the pairing of the Celtic tradition with Englishness in mind, in the belief that, as Addison says: "the Genius of our Country is fitter for this sort of Poetry. For the English are naturally Fanciful, and very often disposed by that Gloominess and wild Melancholy of Temper, which is so frequent in our Nation, to many wild Notions and Visions, to which others are not so liable" (JA: 419, 86) "wild Notions" at which the Gothic novel was to poke fun, and to which, in a different way, also the invented fake-works by James Macpherson, in his *Poems* by Ossian, testify.

- Chapter Three examines the invention of the North as the product of an imaginary geography that leads to a wealth of consequences¹⁶ from aesthetic, climatic and cultural perspectives. This chapter examines the way the invention translated itself into the fully rational literature of the Graveyard Poets and into Horace Walpole's mock-heroic Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, the Italian environment where superstitions take the place of rationality – i.e. into the “pleasing kind of Horror”¹⁷ that the English fear no more.

- Chapter Four turns to the way the Northern perspective discourse was first translated into aesthetic categories that were then applied to works of art. The chapter examines the centrality of Reverend Gilpin's ‘picturesque’, a focus that gave rise to the Domestic Anti-Grand-Tour travel tradition and which also informed the political reading of the English garden. This hinges on William Hogarth's double vision and his revolutionary conceptualisation of Variety through his line of beauty: issues that Burke translated into his study of the Sublime that dismantles, once and for all, the idea of perfection in art, which had guided the aesthetics of the beautiful since the Greeks. Furthermore, the chapter establishes the aesthetic relevance of Francis Grose, who breaks down all claims of aesthetic absolutism, unequivocally establishing the revolutionary claims for aesthetic regionalism.¹⁸

- Chapter Five considers Thomas Warton's role in backing up the Northern aesthetics in three important moves.

Firstly, he revises the *stemma codicum* of the Arthurian Romance and sets the English Anglo-Saxon romance tradition as the distinguished core of English literature and its democracy by linking it to the shared power model of King Arthur's version of the chivalric values based on the tradition of Equity Law. Secondly, in writing the first history of the literature of England, he establishes the first English canon, institutionalising the founding poets of the Northern tradition – Chaucer, Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare (the rise of the novel is contemporary to this work). Thirdly, he sets the Saxon-Gothic as the ‘English’ autochthonous and muscular ‘architectural’ style. This will encourage the readings of the *Faerie Queene* as a ‘Gothic’ poem (Hughes, Warton, Hurd, Walpole), and promote the ‘Gothic’ as a stark literary style that dismisses religion and superstitions, producing the a-religious Graveyard Poets and Horace Walpole's mock-heroic “pleasing kind of Horror” tradition (JA: 419, 85) of the anti-Catholic Gothic fiction that the English fear no more. The creation of the English canon provides us also with the opportunity to examine and focus our attention on the differences between types of essentialisms, ranging from the invention of tradition (Ossian's poems) to

the favouring of cultural standpoints and differences between a strong and a critical regionalism.

The book closes with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Even though this novel was produced in the mid-19th century, it has been chosen because the book uses the Northern aesthetics to present the perils of an upgrade of a North/South essentialist logic. Brontë's early awareness, that these dichotomies produce non-collateral damage if they undergo an essentialist escalation in the ethnic direction, is strong. And this, more often than not, fatally happens, imaginary geographies being all too easily transformed by means of ethnic and nationalistic filters, as history has taught us,¹⁹ into ethnic typologisations always lurking on the doorstep, even though they may on the surface appear to be merely matters of aesthetics and geography. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* provides the results, in fact, of the ethnic escalation of these filters.

Notes

¹ The proxemic term 'Northern' can mean anything if it is not qualified through a centre of reference; every place is north of somewhere else. The centre of reference in this book is Europe, and to be absolutely clear from the beginning, I am fully aware that the 'North' on a map is always the South of something more North than the place in question.

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the term "strategic essentialism" to describe a negative, but sometimes necessary, sort of mystic union brought about by a focus on some shared 'essential' cultural properties that provisionally erode the differences between the people within a group, in this case Subaltern groups, or even of a nation, to contrast with an outside enemy, so to gain, as a minority, more dialogic force within the majority. See Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson (1993) 'An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *Boundary 2*, 20 (2): 24-50, and G.C. Spivak (1988) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. In (eds) (1988) L. Grossberg, C. Nelson *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), pp. 271-313.

³ In this sense, the philosopher to be quoted here is Johann Gottfried Herder, who in his work (1784-1791) *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* became the first theorist of the idea of a 'characteristic' beauty different for each culture and related to its peculiar tradition, history and education; thus not something inherently there, but a product of experience. On the subject of *Cultur* [the old word Herder uses for *Kultur*], he says: "Nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods"; see Raymond Williams' (1983, 1976) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 89), in which Herder is quoted to dismantle an overarching idea of Europe if its meaning is to cancel the difference within the cultures composing it: "Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth

with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature.”

⁴ Goldsmith, O. (1759) *An Enquiry into the State of Polite Learning in Europe* (London: Dodsley), hereafter referred to in the text as OGE: and p. no.

⁵ I have pointed to the importance of Francis Grose’s aesthetics in Y. Bezručka (2002) *Genio ed immaginazione nel Settecento inglese*, Università di Verona (Verona: Valdona), pp. 116-123. See also Stephen Bending (2003) ‘Every Man is Naturally an Antiquarian: Francis Grose and Polite Antiquities’. In (eds) Dana Arnold and Stephen Bending (2003) *Tracing Architecture* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 100-110.

⁶ M. Arnold (1891) *Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co) Kindle version, p. 139.

⁷ I have examined the issue of ‘critical’ and ‘strong regionalism’ in Bezručka, Y. (2008a) “‘The Well-Beloved’: Thomas Hardy’s Manifesto of “Regional Aesthetics””, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36.1, 227-45; Y. Bezručka (ed.) (1999a) *Regionalismo e antiregionalismo* (Trento: Luoghi/Edizioni); Y. Bezručka (ed.) (1999/2) *Forme e caratteri del regionalismo. Mitteleuropa ed oltre* (Trento: Luoghi/Edizioni); Y. Bezručka (ed.) (1997) *Le identità regionali e l'Europa* (Trento: Luoghi/Edizioni); Y. Bezručka (1995) *Tra passato e futuro. Assaggi di teoria dell'architettura*, (Trento: Autem).

⁸ See the transposition of Martin, George R.R. (1996) *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a number-one *New York Times* bestseller in 2011, transcoded into the successful TV-series (2011) *Game of Thrones* by David Benioff.

⁹ See M. Arnold (1862) *On Translating Homer: Last Words* (London: Longman, Green, Roberts), pp. 54-57, here 55. Indeed, Arnold admired the Arthurian revival works by Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, the set of 12 poems on the Arthurian cycle published between 1856-1885.

¹⁰ See Joseph Addison (1907 [1711-1714]) *The Pleasures of the Imagination, The Spectator*, 4 vols., (ed.) G. Gregory Smith (London: Dent) vol. 3, no. 418, p. 83, hereafter referred to in the text with JA: essay no. and page no.

¹¹ A new name for what Northrop Frye has called the “Age of Sensibility” (1959) ‘Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility’. In (ed.) James L. Clifford (1955) *Eighteenth-Century English Literature. Modern Essays in Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp. 311-18. See also Tuveson, E. (1960) *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

¹² The only book that I have been able to trace is Fjagesund, Peter (2014) *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), which presents a historical study of the Scandinavian region. The other work that elaborates on this perspective and should be read as an important adjunct to my perspective is the work by (ed.) Berger, M. (1964) *Madame de Staël. On Politics Literature and National Character* (New York: Doubleday), which focuses on the same North/South issues from the point of view of philosophy and religion, that I comment upon in ch. 3.2. Scattered Northern references appear in Howard D.

Weinbrot, (1993) *Britannia's Issue. The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) but are not completely developed.

¹³ Thomas Warton, 'Ode X: The Grave of King Arthur', in (1777) *Poems: A New Edition, with Additions* (London: T. Becket) pp. 62-71: the poem relates King Arthur's death as told to Henry II in Wales by Welsh Bards. One minstrel sets the tomb of King Arthur before the high altar at Glastonbury Abbey, where it is said his body was later found. In the same edition, on p. 82, his other important Arthurian poem, 'On King Arthur's Round Table at Winchester', also appears. This last poem is at the same time a eulogy of Spenser and a tribute to King Arthur and his "capacious" Round Table of equals, the knights, with whom he democratically shares power. If the table – the Druid frame – will corrupt under blind Time, in "Spenser's" page, that chants in verse sublime// Those Chiefs, shall live, unconscious of decay."

¹⁴ Macpherson, James (1762 [1761]) *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books: Together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal*, tr. from the Galic Language by J. Macpherson (London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt). See also his other works: Macpherson, J. (1760) *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (Edinburgh: Hamilton Balfour); see also Macpherson, J. (1818 [1763]) *Temora: An Epic Poem by Ossian* (Perth: Morison).

¹⁵ "The State of Monarchie is the supremest thing upon earth. For Kings are not only God's Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon Gods throne, but even by God himselfe they are called Gods. There bee three principall similitudes that illustrate the state of Monarchie. One taken out of the word of GOD; and the two other out of the grounds of Policie and Philosophie. In the Scriptures Kings are called Gods, and so their power after a certaine relation compared to the Divine power. Kings are also compared to Fathers of families: for a King is truly Parens patriae, the politique father of his people. And lastly Kings are compared to the head of this Microcosme of the body of man." James I (1599) *Basilikon Doron. Or his Majesty Instructions to his dearest Sonne Henry the Prince* (Edinburgh) reprinted from the edition of 1616 in (1887) (ed.) Charles Howard McIlwain, *The Political Works of James I* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), p. 307.

¹⁶ Cf. Edward W. Said, (1995 [1978]) *Orientalism. Western Conception of the Orient* (London: Penguin).

¹⁷ See Joseph Addison (1907 [1711-1714]) *The Pleasures of the Imagination, The Spectator*, 4 vols. (ed.) G. Gregory Smith (London: Dent), no. 419, p. 85, hereafter referred to in the text with JA: essay no. and page of this edition. Noteworthy, vol. V, of the internal subdivision of volumes of *The Spectator*, in vol. 3, is dedicated to Thomas Warton, cf. pp. 1-2.

¹⁸ Cf. Y. Bezručka (2002) *Genio ed immaginazione nel Settecento inglese*, Università di Verona (Verona: Valdonega), pp. 116-23.

¹⁹ Cf. Said, E.W. (1995 [1978]) *Orientalism. Western Conception of the Orient* (London: Penguin).

CHAPTER ONE

INNATISM *VS.* EMPIRICISM

Knowledge is not from maxims.
—John Locke

1.1 Innatism vs. Empiricism

The intellectual battle fought in the 18th century was based on a contention between an epistemology that envisaged an ordered, holistic universe – a world that could be brought back to a single explanation (e.g. the creationist hypothesis) – and the opposing one that envisaged a varied universe that needed space-time-specific (scientific) explanations relative to issues: in short, a battle between past and present. Innatism became the main point of contention discussed by the new philosophers. In claiming that people were born with universal innate ideas on which they could faithfully rely, innatism postulated and presupposed that the ideas that the mind innately possessed had been provided before birth. Plato, Plotinus and, in more recent times, Descartes and Leibniz, in fact, posited that these derived from God himself.

This idea was defended by the rationalists, who believed in the capacity of reaching conclusions about reality via the process of mere syllogistic reasoning, without the necessity of scientific proof to back up one's argument. The choice of the inductive perspective, in contrast to the deductive one, runs parallel to and has its basis in the history of British empiricism.

Bacon, Locke and Hume, to whom I propose to add de Mandeville, are, of course, the founding fathers of empiricism: the founding of the Royal Society dating back to 1660. Empiricism, as I want to demonstrate, is one of the core elements of Britishness. The innovative choice, which was ahead of its time, that the English made to trust in science and not in religion, notwithstanding the deists, was a stance that differentiated them from the people on the continent who hindered this kind of progress. As a result of the new orientation, English intellectuals and scientists perceived themselves as pertaining to the most advanced society of their time. This is

a core conviction behind the intelligentsia's choice to distance themselves from the continent that was influenced also, later, by Addison and the invention of 'their' own literary roots, choices that need to be taken into careful consideration. These roots, Addison and others, as we shall see, set in a distant and faraway past, using literature as a powerful persuasive medium to spread their point. The founding of the moment in the past and the connected scarcity of evidence allowed them, building on their real Celtic past, to create the superstructure of a foundational mythological moment set in a democratic, invented political past. Writers, antiquarians and historians, following the lead of Addison's choice of setting the fairy way of writing as the English way of writing, connected it thus to the mythological King Arthur and his Round Table of Knights. The self-evident proxemics of the Round Table bears witness to the absence of an imposed hierarchical leader and is presented as the icon of a democratic union of paratactic equals, a cogent amalgam of ethos and medievalism, whose message is that the knights are not inferior to the king. This emblem became the symbol of British democracy, embodying the communal and democratic equity law system, the negotiable and pliable jurisprudence based on precedents. This is a system pliable to change if change is needed. The choice of adopting the Common Law, where it is the judge who modifies the law according to a changed reality, despised the continental 'once and for all' letter of the law.

The acquisition of national pride, which paved the way for this mythological foundation and is involved in the stance the British intelligentsia adopted in the 18th century, is therefore likely to be linked to core philosophical issues that have been debated from the 17th century, starting with Francis Bacon's discussion of the inductive method. The method was later developed in the ground core of Locke's attack on innatism, based on his requirement for the evidence of the senses and material proofs for hypotheses made about reality— and not only about *reflection*, as the rationalists claimed.

In John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690),¹ senses were given a primary role in the development of understanding and knowledge: "it is *not possible*, for anyone to *imagine* any other *qualities* in bodies, howsoever constituted, whereby they can be taken notice of, besides sounds, tastes, smells, visible and tangible qualities." (JL: 122, Bk. 2, ch. 2, § 3). Senses were for Locke the filters for the apprehension of reality in our species. Aware of the critique that would be levelled against his theory of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, rather than a repository of innate ideas, he set his system in direct contrast to the creationist hypothesis, "spirits", of which God is one, being strongly

present in his work.

Locke, therefore, firmly grounds his epistemic theory of understanding on “sensation and reflection,” which are the basis for simple ideas (JL: 284, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 32). The two are nevertheless markedly different. Sensations are self-evident and come first, and they direct reflections such as creating the complex idea of God, which is itself only the result of simple ideas:

For whensoever we would proceed beyond these simple ideas, we have from sensation and reflection, and dive further into the nature of things, we fall presently into darkness and obscurity, perplexedness and difficulties; and can discover nothing further, but our own blindness and ignorance. But whichever of these complex ideas be clearest, that of body, or immaterial spirit, this is evident, that the simple ideas that make them up, are no other than what we have received from sensation or reflection; and so it is of all our other ideas of substances, even of God himself. (JL: 284, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 32) (...) For though in his own essence, (which certainly we do not know, not knowing the real essence of a pebble, or a fly, or of our own selves) God be simple and uncompounded; yet, I think, I may say we have no other idea of him, but a complex one of existence, knowledge, power, happiness, etc. infinite and eternal: which are all distinct ideas (...) all which being, as has been shown, originally got from *sensation* and *reflection*, go to make up the idea or notion we have of God. (JL: 285, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 35)

The idea of God is, therefore, the result of the sensations our species have and of the reflection springing from the observation of the variety and excellence of “this fabric”, the universe (JL: 122, Bk. 2, ch. 2, §3). “[T]he Supreme Being” is thus the product of the enlargement of simple ideas “with *our* ideas of infinity” (JL: 284, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 284, my emphasis); which, together, make up our complex idea of God. Locke, however, clearly sees it as the product of *reflection* only: “all our ideas of the several sorts of substances, are nothing but collections of simple ideas, with *a supposition* of something, to which they belong, and in which they subsist; though of this supposed something, we have no clear distinct idea at all” (JL: 285, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 37, my emphasis).

Reflection, as we have seen, is thus linked solely to hypothetical thinking, Locke reminding us that we need to have evidence from our sensations to back up our reflections when we speak of spirits, “even of God himself.” (JL: 284, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 32). He then closes the argument of how simple ideas can be ‘enlarged’ by reflection via a metaphor:

most of the simple ideas, that make up our complex ideas of substances, when truly considered, are only powers, however we are apt to take them

for positive qualities; v.g. the greatest part of the ideas, that make our complex idea of gold, are yellowness, great weight, ductility, flexibility, and solubility in *aqua regia*, etc. all united together in an unknown *substratum* all of which ideas are nothing else but so many relations to other substances, and are not really in the gold, considered barely in itself.” (JL: 286, Bk. 2, ch. 23, § 37)

Thus, he marks the difference between the spontaneous, unwilled acquisition of the senses – for example, seeing *vs.* watching – i.e. of sensations, and the way reflection reworks them into more complex ideas that do not belong to the object of thought itself, as the complex ideas of gold demonstrate.

Locke is thus demystifying all ideas of spirits rather than directly that of God, notwithstanding God being one.² Considering these entities as the result of only (unproven) reflections, he seems to be keeping the idea of God as a principle of general goodness, as a sort of positive regulatory system that facilitates the peaceful cohabitation of people. As for proof of the existence of God, he clearly says we can rely only on “revelation”, that is, by “assent on the credit of the proposer” even though these “cannot introduce any (...) formerly unknown simple ideas” (JL: 608, Bk. 4, ch. 18, § 2, 3), relying thus, again, only on, untrustworthy, reflection, and not on:

simple ideas (...) which are the foundation, and sole matter of all our notions, and knowledge, we must depend wholly on our reason, I mean, our natural faculties [the senses] and we can by no means receive them, or any of them, from *traditional revelation*, I say, *traditional revelation*, in distinction to *original revelation*. By the one, I mean, that first impression, which is made immediately by God, on the mind of any man, to which we cannot set any bounds; and by the other, those impressions delivered over to others in words (...) yet nothing, I think can, under that title, shake or overrule plain knowledge (...) in a direct contradiction to the clear evidence of his own understanding (JL: 609-10, Bk. 4, ch. 18, § 3),

pertinently adding: “In Propositions (...) whose certainty is built upon clear perception (...) we need not the assistance of *revelation*” (JL: 609-610, Bk. 4, ch. 18, § 5).

To this conclusion, to rely on knowledge merely based on “clear perception”, we should compare what he says in chapter 10, where Locke discusses the unreliability of “intuitive knowledge” (JL: 547, Bk. 4, ch. 10, § 1) of our idea of “*a most perfect being*” (JL: 549, Bk. 4, ch. 10, § 7) that appears to us as “certain” but that he clearly sees as the product of reflection: “a knowledge (...) a man may frame in his mind” (JL: 549, Bk.

4, ch. 10, § 6-7). The interesting choice of the verb he uses here, “framing”, is to me evidence that those who proceed merely by reflection, proceed by choosing a perspective through which they would then construct their argument, their framed perspective, excluding other possible points of view and, therefore, already implying the conclusion they aim to reach.

Of the effort to establish whether there is enough evidence of God’s existence, his stance relies on the fact that “God has given us no innate ideas of himself (...) wherein we may read his being”, so we can only rely on “our intuitive knowledge” (JL: 547, Bk. 4, ch. 10, § 1). All his further argument is then constructed upon hypothetical clauses – if, whether, let us suppose, perhaps it will be said – and adversative ones – but, notwithstanding, others would have, etc. – aimed at dismantling the tenets of the innatists; but, and this needs to be strongly underlined, inspired by his awareness of the consequences of any position, knowing that innatism, which he dismantles, is the core tenet of ethics: “this being so fundamental a truth, and of that consequence, that all religion and genuine morality depend thereon” (JL: Bk. 4, ch. 10, § 7).

In his “Epistle to the Reader”, he focused on innatism, pointing out how dangerous the issue was and the censure it could cause: “I have been told, that a short epitome of this treatise, which was printed in 1688, was by some condemned without reading, because innate ideas were denied in it (...) concluding that if innate ideas were not supposed, there would be little left, either of the notion or proof of spirits” (JL: 11), of which God is one.

Whenever the creationist hypothesis is called in, it is always to foster ethics and justify a principle of order based on goodness among humankind.³ When, for example, Locke speaks about the divine law, he explains it thus: “*divine* law (...) [is] promulgated (...) by the light of nature [the *Codex Dei*, a “framing” also merely based on an ‘intuitive’ knowledge he distrusts], or by the voice of revelation [thus unreliable, and that he, again, as seen, distrusts]”; God can exercise his law because “we are his creatures” [a hypothesis which has no proof for those who do not believe], enforcing it via: “rewards and punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another life” (JL: 317, Bk. 2, ch. 28) but whose compliance produces the victory of virtue over vice.

Basil Willey, rightly, in his study of the 17th century, points out that the system of positive spirits was upheld also by the contrary spirits, the demonic ones, and thus used by religions to foster belief. A system of good and evil that:

was tapping a reservoir of traditional supernatural belief which lay deeper in the national consciousness than Christianity itself, and deeper, certainly, than the new ice-crust of rationalism which now covered it. Christianity, as is well known, had not abolished the older divinities, it had merely deposed and demonised them; and Protestantism, aiming at the purification of Christianity from the 'pagan' accretions of the middle ages, had produced at first not a diminished but a greatly heightened Satan-consciousness, so that the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries, when witch-burnings reached their maximum, were Satan's palmiest time in England. By the time of More, it is true, this Puritan horror which had persecuted without pity much that had been tolerated in the less self-conscious pre-Reformation days, had greatly weakened, under 'philosophic' influences. But primitive picture-thinking is not destroyed at a blow, and the persistent if furtive acknowledgement of things undreamed of in the 'new philosophy' was now unexpectedly available as a reinforcement to *the philosophic defence of the faith*. It may be, one may now conjecture, that in making the most of this crude material the defenders of religion were guided by a sound instinct. They may have obscurely felt, though they could not have realised or admitted it, that the ancient springs of popular demonology were also those of religion itself, and that in the emotion of the supernatural, however evoked, they had a surer foundation for faith than all the 'proofs' of philosophic theism. (Willey: 1968 p. 167, my emphasis).

Most certainly, one of the "*the philosophic defence[s] of the faith*" was the tenet of innatism.

Locke sustains his theory of the enormous difference between sensation and reflection, basing his conclusion on the capacity the mind has for enlarging what it acquires through the senses by focusing on its ability to create unembodied forms, the products of 'reflection' and its specific capacity for enlargement, or what we would call imagination. I base my contention that Addison will become the populariser of Locke on the fact that Addison will precisely underline the 'creative' ability of the imagination on two grounds: first, that the imagination is powerful and able to envisage non-existent reality, and second that this non-existent reality should be used positively to foster pleasures, and not to transport the mind thus losing the "sight of Nature" as happens with "superstitious" people, who "fall in with our natural prejudices" and who, "very well versed in legends and fables, antiquated romances", make "fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits (...) talk like people of his own species, and not like other sets of beings", this being a world created by the artist "out of his own Invention" (JA: 419, 84-85). Nevertheless, Locke's stance on everything concerned with the colliding principle of nativism is restricted to the sensations that children might retain from the life in their mothers' womb: sensations of hunger or

warmth but “*not* the least appearance of any settled ideas at all in them; especially of *ideas, answering the terms which make up those universal propositions*, that are esteemed innate principles” (JL: 91, Bk. 1, ch. 4), ideas he rejects. Indeed, in ch. 11, Locke makes the point that innatists have been led to their conclusions for want of any knowledge of why certain propositions are universally accepted; these ideas should rather be referred to our capacity for discerning and not seen as the result of inborn ideas set in our mind by a Designer or Maker:

On this faculty of distinguishing one thing from another depends the evidence and certainty of several, even very general propositions, which have passed for innate truths; because men, overlooking the true cause why those propositions find universal assent, impute it wholly to native uniform impressions; whereas it in truth depends upon this clear discerning faculty of the mind, whereby it perceives two ideas to be the same, or different. (JL: 152-53, Bk. 1, ch. 11)

And this conclusion can also be applied to Locke’s dismantling chapter on the existence of God, which is a perfect example of a rhetorical, eristically set, philosophical thesis where all conclusions are admitted (existence and non-existence) but one of them is refuted by the master syllogistic premise that, talking about spirits (of which God is one), no facts can be asserted so there can be no proof about their existence.

I disagree with those who conclude that Locke belonged to “the contemporary reconcilers of science and religion” (Willey 1967, 279), deists like Boyle and Joseph Glanvill; nor is he searching for a ‘Mechanic’ like the one Newton proposes. Seen from the point of view of innatism, a standpoint not examined by Basil Willey, there is no doubt about Locke’s conclusion.

Innatism, as we have seen, is a highly controversial notion, which primarily means claiming proof of God’s existence and for the creationist hypothesis. Nevertheless, the truth claims of the various religions cannot dependably be ascertained. Locke proposes the standpoint of tolerance in his work: *Letters Concerning Toleration* (1689–1692). In the essay, he says: “If any idea can be imagined *innate*, the idea of God may of all others, for many reasons, be thought so; since it is hard to conceive, how there should be innate moral principles, without an innate idea of a Deity: without a notion of a law-maker, it is impossible to have a notion of law, and an obligation to serve it.” (JL: 93, Bk. 1, § 8). The last remark on the obligation is extremely significant in that it expresses clearly that moral restrictions must be imposed by an authority. The passage continues with a list of peoples of the world where the concept of a God does not exist, the

humankind of *nulla idola*, concluding with the remark that in “civilized” countries, if people did not fear “the magistrates’ sword, or their neighbour’s censure, (...) apprehensions of punishment [they] would as openly proclaim their atheism, as their lives do.” (JL: 94, Bk. 1, § 8). This notation was probably the origin of Swift’s pointed remark that people of the Church were apprehensive about the fact that: “People are likely to improve their understanding much with Locke; it is not his ‘Human Understanding’, but other works that people dislike, although in that there are some dangerous tenets, as that of [no] innate ideas.”⁴ Sir Thomas Browne, in *Religio Medici* (Bk. 1, 30), wrote: “For my part I have ever believed, and do now know, that there are Witches: they that doubt of these, do not only deny them, but Spirits; and are obliquely and upon consequence a sort not of Infidels, but Atheists.”

The connection between innatism and theology was presented in its clearest way in Gottfried Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, where the presence of evil in the world is justified by the unknown-to-man teleological and theological finality of God, which is always oriented to the best possible outcome. Therefore, humankind must, in this way, submissively accept (partial) evil, always the minimum possible one, because God, who can holistically encompass infinite time, is always oriented to a future good and what is best for us. Alexander Pope, who accepts and embodies Leibniz’s Design Theory in his *Essay on Man*, concludes Epistle 1, devoted to the nature of the universe, with the self-evident words: “Whatever is, is Right.” These words constitute the most laconic expression of the acquiescence theory implied in the old, hierarchical and fixed, *Scala Natura*,⁵ based on a fixed and unchangeable order-and-degree world model. The other convinced proponent of this internal, innate, gnoseological system of the mind was Descartes, who believed that the mind had inborn, intuitive clear ideas that could, and should, be recovered.

If innatism was an unavoidable notion for dismantling deduction and instituting induction, it was also strongly linked with the Genius theory. It is thus crucially important for literature, where it has been used to maintain that artists differ from common humankind. Indeed, ingeniousness was interpreted as if it were a gift of God to his chosen emissaries, artists, saints and prophets and, circularly, the theory of inborn genius was then taken as proof of God’s existence. A counter confirmation of this is the Greek myth of Prometheus, who is forever punished by the Gods, for having autonomously chosen to help humankind with the gift of fire, which produces light – metaphorical rationality – without being authorised by them.