

Conversations with a British Romantic

It was the industrial revolution and machine was god. Machine was god, London was soot, rationality reigned as King. And then Blake said,

"I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's."

To be a romantic is tragedy, failure, influence. The reinvention of emotion, imagination, passion, nature, the infinite, the individual. It was two hundred years before and it is today.

"They say they're giants." "Hmm?" My ear perked up at the dignified accents in conversation next to me. "They say they were giants, caught dancing by the sun. So now they're frozen. Forever trapped dancing." Perhaps the conversation continued, but the couple walked out of earshot. A fleeting moment of poetry to describe the circle of mathematical symbols and then it was gone.

London is fleeting poetry.

The city swallows you whole. I didn't ease into London, it usurped me. One morning I was indulging in an Eggo waffle and the next a waiter was offering me something called a ham hock in a voice so slight my ear strained to hear him. There was no transition, no grace period. It was either hit the ground running or get lost in the shuffle. I don't hail from a big city. Nashville is often considered America's largest small town and the chaos of this metropolis struck my senses like a monster. For better or worse, I was completely submerged in this city.

Only once did William Blake travel outside of London. Only once in his life did he go farther than a mile outside the city limits. London was his home, his inspiration. He saw it for what it was; he found the poetry.

*I wandered through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

*In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:*

*How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackening church appals,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace-walls.*

*But most, through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse.*

The visceral experience of my first tube ride will be embedded to memory long after I cross back over the Atlantic. The train sparked as it slid into Holborn station, and the doors opened with the sound of a vacuum seal being broken. I quickly hopped off the platform into the car and grasped the cold railing with an open palm. A woman with a \$5,000 dollar bag sat quietly next to a man whose stench radiated from his person. A sudden jerk and all together, we were off.

John Keats died thinking he was a failure. In Rome. Away from his Hampstead, away from his beloved Fanny Brawne. He died in debt, alone, unknowing the future of his country, his words.

*O solitude! if I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep,-
Nature's observatory - whence the dell,
Its flowery slopes, its river's crystal swell,
May seem a span; let me thy vigils keep
'Mongst boughs pavillion'd, where the deer's swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the fox-glove bell.
But though I'll gladly trace these scenes with thee,
Yet the sweet converse of an innocent mind,
Whose words are images of thoughts refin'd,
Is my soul's pleasure; and it sure must be
Almost the highest bliss of human-kind,
When to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee.*

I worry my parents. They worry I'm going to get robbed, or mugged. Or that no one likes me. I like to go places by myself. I like to do things by myself. I like to experience London *by myself*. I am my own best company. Call it what it is, I am selfish. There is nothing I like more than doing exactly what I want to do, exactly when I want to do it. No waiting. No compromising. No sharing. To wander the streets of London holding no agenda but my own.



You can barely see it. I stood looking effortlessly at Turner's Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway. Somewhere it's hidden- faded by time to the point of invisibility. But then, my focus changes. I see the point. Industry running down nature. The hare being chased by the locomotive.

Nature is contained. Parks fit in square grids and have fences, locks. No longer expanding freely, metal bars enclose the fierce vegetation that used to flourish. Walk down my street on either end and nature is imprisoned. Two parks face each other. But walk into the center of either and close your eyes. Forget that you're in a city. The air smells green.

The Romantics knew the train had left the station.

The subtle shake of the Millennium Bridge, the Mayerling's graceful violence, the heartache of sight and sound without touch. Pret's Christmas sandwich. The taste of the first Thanksgiving and the feeling of a stomach filled to satisfaction. A day of pure selfishness and pure solitude. The mechanized wind in your hair as the train whooshes past.

Shelley's time in England was short. Perhaps the distance tinged his writing. The Italian sun would not allow his heart to grow fonder.

*An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,--
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn, mud from a muddy spring,--
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,--*

*A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field,--
An army which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,--
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless, a book sealed,--
A Senate--Time's worst statute unrepealed,--
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst to illumine our tempestuous day*

Had he been here, perhaps he would've noticed, London's streets are filled with poetry. In the voices or the car horns or the sound of your boot schlepping through the rain. In the jingle of your coins. Listen for it. In the creases and cracks of treasures looted for the empire. In the desperate face of the homeless man. In the oil spill rainbow splashed in the gutter. It's there if you know where to look. Poetry is shortbread dipped in hot chocolate sold from any coffee shop but Starbucks. It's the onion covered hotdog sold outside the British Museum whose smell alone can make your stomach grumble. Close your eyes and taste it. You can find it on the crowded underground where human contact is forced. Someone's arm brushes your shoulder. It's beautiful, it's dirty, but it's real. London is poetry. It's beautiful, it's dirty but it's real.