



TEACHING LONDON POETRY AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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Abstract

This research aims to answer this question: how can students learn, identify, and appreciate London poetry? In the process of teaching, can cultural exchange happen? Does it give birth to a new cultural identity through English teaching and learning, focusing on the skills of reading and writing? Through narrating the self, students can express themselves in writing, to identify their own life experiences in London poems in which they read in the class. Through literacy practices in the class, students can understand not only the meaning of the texts. Rather, they develop a sort of interest in British culture through reading London poetry. After identifying with narrating subjects in the poems, my students explore cultural differences between Turkish and British ones. Through comparing both cultures, my students synthesise these two, in order to develop a new cultural identity of their own.

Keywords: London, Poetry, Cultural Exchange, Cultural Identity.

INTRODUCTION

London poetry represents writings about London, in a literary form such as a poem. As the capital of Britain and 'the flower of cities all' (Ford 3), London is, indeed, a city of rich literary power, which comes to 'inspire in the poet a sense of the sublime' (Ford 2). With full literary energy and power, poets through different historical periods and backgrounds come to write about London, celebrating the 'quality of awesome' and this 'loftiness of thought and feelings in literature' (Baldick 321). The results, as the reader can see, are 'terrifying impressive' (Baldick 321) when it comes to associate and to appreciate London impressions – London's cityscape and landscape.

And yet, for my students in the Department of Foreign Language Education, Gaziantep University, most of them (both Turkish and International students) have never been to London. The city itself, for my students, is only a name in English books. Now, in the class, they need to read, to understand, and to be able to make comments on poems which are about London. How can it be possible?

Nevertheless, most of my students do not have English problems, particularly in terms of reading and writing. The most important thing, for them, is to understand the English way of expression British culture, in the context of teaching and learning in the class, in Turkey. I, more than once, tell my students that for learning poetry, one must try to read the poem out loud, in order to listen to the sound and to feel the meaning of a poem. A poem is not a novel. It does not have too many descriptions and details of a scene, an emotion, or a thought. That is why it is not suitable to be read quietly, in order to pass a long silent time. When reading it out loud, through the changing of rhymes, images, and sounds of a poem, the reader can somehow feel the words better. When the reader does have feelings to a poem, he or she can apply personal approaches to the interpretation and the understanding of a poem, as the poetic language comes from the poet's / the speaker's personal life experiences.

TENNYSON AND EMPATHY

London poetry certainly represents a certain kinds of British culture – in terms of British ways of living, thinking, seeing the city itself and the world. For my students, this is their first time to read anything, particularly poems, about London. In that case, I did not choose something too difficult or too complicated for them, in terms of the vocabulary and the meaning of a poem. Some poems look so simple, so clear on the surface, as pure as water – as water is tasteless, does not smell – one cannot talk about something so simple as water – those poems are just like ‘pure poetry’, which are something make us ‘cry, not to lecture’ (Woolf 242). And yet, they do have deep meanings and emotions, as Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*.

Comparing to Tennyson’s *Cleopatra’s Needle*, my students feel more for *In Memoriam*, because it is a poem which expresses much more personal emotions. Let’s read these two poems first.

Cleopatra’s Needle

Here, I that stood in On beside the flow
Of sacred Nile, three thousand years ago! –
A Pharaoh, kingliest of his kingly race,
First shaped, and carved, and set me in my place.
A Caesar of a punier dynasty
Thence haled me toward the Mediterranean sea,
Whence your own citizens, for their own renown,
Through strange seas drew me to your monster town.
I have seen the four great empires disappear.
I was when London was not. I am here (Ford 387).

from *In Memoriam*

VII
Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasped no more –
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly through the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day (Ford 383).

Interestingly, nearly all my students who studied these two poems, had more feelings toward the one from *In Memoriam*. The ‘I’ in *Cleopatra’s Needle* seems to be a more powerful figure, since the Needle is still in the Embankment in London, by the River Thames. It was created by a Pharaoh, who is the king of the kings, to be a symbol of the power of the empire. Even so, the Needle has been moved from one place to another, through the flow of time and tide, it still survives when ‘four great empires’ did not. At least the Needle is proud to say that – ‘I was when London was not. / I am here’.

Even there are similar Egyptian sites and treasures in Istanbul, still, my students feel difficult to identify with the powerful images of human civilization which *Cleopatra’s Needle* in London is representing, which is more than four thousand years old. The grand history of power struggle seems to be hard to imagine, when comparing to an emotion of a personal scale. The main emotion of the part (VII) from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*



is grief – as the friend is gone, the house becomes ‘dark’, the street becomes ‘long’ and ‘unlovely’. The heart ‘used to beat so quickly’, used to be excited, because the speaker’s friend used to welcome him, with the hand of his friendship. Now, the friend is gone, he cannot sleep, as the house does not feel the same. Only the London street is alive, but it does not bring any pleasure, because it just means ‘noise’, and the tears of the speaker in ‘the drizzling rain’, because he does not know how the face another empty day, without his friend.

ARNOLD, THE POOR, AND THE SPIRITUAL POWER

The spirit of a poet has an image of the burning flame, as E B Browning sees in the French writer George Sand, in a way which ‘a poet-fire’ is the ‘burnest’ ‘large flame’ (Browning 1083), making the heart of the poet beating ‘purer’, ‘higher’ (Browning 1083). The burning flame symbolises the poet’s passion and desire for poetry. And yet, in one’s ordinary everyday life, a burning fire could cause physical and psychological pain. Some students in the class have the experience of being burnt. Even they do not experience it, their family members may have it. Or, they have seen in the hospital, the Syrian children cried and screamed and died, because those children could not take the pain – the burning pain which even the strongest painkiller cannot work.

Although from a different religious background, my students have no difficulty to understand the situation of the poor, as they see in their daily lives. The homeless and the poor working class in Matthew Arnold’s ‘West London’ and ‘East London’ come to depict the ‘common human fate’ (Ford 409), which requires a generous humanity to understand. Here are the two poems:

West London

Crouched on the pavement, close by Belgrave Square,
A tramp I saw, ill, moody, and tongue-tied.
A babe was in her arms, and at her side
A girl; their clothes were rags, their feet were bare.

Some labouring men, whose work lay somewhere there,
Passed opposite; she touched her girl, hied
Across, and begged, and came back satisfied.
The rich she had let pass with frozen stare.

Thought I: “Above her state this spirit towers;
She will not ask of aliens, but of friends,
Of sharers in a common human fate.

She turns from that cold succour, which attends
The unknown little from the unknowing great,
And points us to a better time than ours.” (Ford 409).

East London

’Twas August, and the fierce sun overhead
Smote on the squalid streets of Bethnal Green,
And the pale weaver, through his windows seen
In Spitalfields, looked thrice dispirited;

I met a preacher there I knew, and said:
“Ill and o’erworked, how fare you in this scene?”
“Bravely!” said he; “for I of late have been
Much cheered with thoughts of Christ, *the living bread.*”

O human soul! as long as thou canst so



Set up a mark of everlasting light,
Above the howling senses' ebb and flow,

To cheer thee, and to right thee if thou roam,
Not with lost toil thou labourest through the night!
Thou mak'st the heaven thou hop'st indeed thy home (Ford 410).

In Arnold's two London poems, *East London* and *West London*, my students can easily identify themselves with the poor homeless woman (who does not belong to any kinds of social class) and the poor working-class 'pale weaver' (Ford 410), as they can see in their daily life, going to or coming back from school. The tramp's and the pale weaver's pain comes from another kind of suffering, although it is different from the kind of a burning pain. Both of them, although one in East London, the other is in the West, are 'ill' (Ford 409, 410). The poor woman is ill and moody, because she does not have a home. She and her children do not have enough food and clothes. That is why she is 'moody' and 'tongue-tied' (Ford 409). The pale weaver, on the other hand, is ill, because of he is 'o'erworked' (Ford 410). Too long working hours, and yet, it is still not enough for his and his family's survival.

The poet somehow reminds the reader, that only 'human soul' (Ford 410) can save us. Our soul can '[s]et up a mark of everlasting light' (Ford 410), which can reach beyond all seductions, all 'howling senses' ebb and flow' (Ford 410) – all coming and going of human desires, feelings, and illusions. Our soul can lift us to a state, which reminds us that we all share 'a common human fate' (Ford 409) – we were born, we grow, through aging, and we die. Although the future of the homeless poor woman in *West London* is unknown, the poet sincerely hopes that whenever she turns or asks to someone, it will be a turn 'to a better time than ours' (Ford 409).

CITYSCAPE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

In William Wordsworth's *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802*, the reader can see the way in which the poet depicts the view of the city with a sincere appreciation of its beauty:

Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty;
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning: silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

In the city of London, in the early morning, the glory of the Sun comes to make an atmosphere of 'dreamy tranquillity' (Pater 3). For the poet, London has its majestic power, for its stunning view. London is 'beautiful', 'silent'. In the poet's eyes, the city is 'so touching in its majesty', with its 'ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples', in a way which the poet's soul is in a deep feeling of calmness.

The poet's inner self, his soul, comes to identify with London, seeing the city as a representation of the essence of a majestic grace (nature, the Sun) and a cultural power (in different architectural forms), which touches and moves the poet's soul. The city of London here, is a great inspiration, which reinforces the poet's subjectivity,



his individual consciousness, and his self-fulfilment. Among my students, very few of them, say, two out of seventy, had visited London. Even so, from another cultural, as Turkish, as my students are, can identify themselves with the poet's appreciation to the city's greatness – for London is not only the financial and political capital of England – it is, ultimately, the cultural capital and the home of creativity of the country. My students' feeling of being able to identify with another culture, such as the poet's 'English discourse' (Easthope 57), seeing the value and the significance of a different culture, is indeed, showing love and understanding in a sense of humanity. For me, I see this capacity of identifying with another culture as a way of expressing the strength of the self, the assurance of the self, in the grand existence of humanity.

CONCLUSION

To teach London poetry to English majors in Turkey has its own significant cultural meanings. The sense of Englishness, in the poems, comes as a Spring breeze, inspiring my students to think, to see, and to feel in another way. Nevertheless, through cultural identification, this Englishness somehow transforms, from so-called 'another' culture to mingle with my students' Turkish minds, giving birth to a new cultural identity, which goes beyond the dialectic of 'English' or 'Turkish'.

The cultural transformation in my London poetry class is a complex subjective process. It goes from a cultural community, to another one, comes back with a sense of self-realization, 'self-transformation' (Connor 217), and self-recognition. It gives the creative power to the renewal of life and emotion. Moreover, it gives a creative passion and desire, after the inner calmness and peace. With that, my students are much more able to see, to understand, even to enjoy their own condition of life.

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