Through Spanish Eyes: Robert Southey's Double Vision in *Letters from England*: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella (1807)

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Abstract

In *Letters from England*, written ostensibly from Don Manuel Espriella to his family at home in Spain, Southey declares he will also incorporate 'what I think respecting this country and these times' ('Letter to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn'). One of the aspects of society that concerned Southey was the state of the labouring classes and the detrimental effect of industrialisation on rural life. His Spanish tourist, who is 'bigoted to his religion, and willing to discover such faults and such symptoms of declining power here as may soothe or gratify [his] natural inferiority', makes a comparative study of the treatment of the poor in England and Spain ('Letter to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn'). Espriella comments negatively on the growth of manufacturing industries, the effects of the enclosure acts, and the migration of rural communities to the cities. He suggests that the English nation has lost its once stable social order, when landowners and religious institutions felt a moral obligation for the welfare of the peasantry. And, despite Southey's antipathy towards the Catholic faith after his visits to Spain (in 1795–6 and 1800–1), he states Espriella's conviction that shared religious belief is a cohesive force that binds hierarchical society together. With the help of his Spanish alter-ego, Southey invokes an idealised, English feudal past to oppose contemporary legislative solutions to rural poverty, such as workhouses and poor laws. Espriella's reverence for ancient historical sites, his criticism of commercialism, and his concern that new religious sects will imperil the religious and social order, would seem to belie his nationality and his youth. However, they complement Southey's argument that the treatment of the rural poor is one more symptom of how far England has travelled from its Arcadian past. In this article, the 'double vision' of *Letters from England* is examined to demonstrate how Southey interweaves the observations of his European commentator into the British social politics that he seeks to present.

Article

In 1807, an unknown Spanish traveller presented his three-volume account of a two-year tour of England to the British public, noting his impressions of sites of

interest. *Letters from England* describes his journey from Falmouth, through the provincial towns of the southwest to London and regales readers with the curiosities and commercial bustle of the capital, before departing on a tour of the 'grand and awful' landscape of the Lake District (II 194). However, as well as recounting the usual tourist scenes, this traveller makes an unconventional detour to visit a mill owner in the northwest of England, where:

[we] were received with that courtesy which a foreigner when he takes with him the expected recommendations is sure to experience in England. He took us to one of the great cotton manufactories, showed us the number of children who were at work there, and dwelt with delight on the infinite good which resulted from employing them at so early an age [...]. He] remarked that nothing could be so beneficial to a country as manufactures. 'You see these children, sir,' said he. 'In most parts of England poor children are a burthen to their parents and to the parish; here the parish, which would else have to support them, is rid of all expense; they get their bread almost as soon as they can run about, and by the time they are seven or eight years old bring in money. There is no idleness among us: – they come at five in the morning; we allow them half an hour for breakfast, and an hour for dinner; they leave work at six, and another set relieves them for the night; the wheels never stand still'. I was looking, while he spoke, at the unnatural dexterity with which the fingers of these little creatures were playing in the machinery, half giddy myself with the noise and the endless motion: and when he told me there was no rest in these walls, day nor night, I thought that if Dante had peopled one of his hells with children, here was a scene worthy to have supplied him with new images of torment. (II 139–41)

In this powerful description of a manufactory in Manchester, the reader perceives through the eyes of a 'foreigner' the graphic effects of industrialisation on the lives of its child workforce. Invited in by special privilege as an outsider, the irony of the passage works to show the English cotton mill owner's self-satisfied complacency in contrast to the humane concern of his Spanish visitor. The unnaturalness of the scene is conveyed through the dangerous image of vulnerable little fingers 'playing' in the machinery. And the giddy noise and motion of one brief visit is enough to overpower an adult narrator, dramatically conveying the hellish effects on its child workforce. The commentator concludes sagely that while 'this [manufacturing] system is the boast of England, – long may she continue to boast it before Spain shall rival her!' (II 149).

The observer is 'Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella', a pseudonym employed by the poet, reviewer and translator, Robert Southey, and this account of deplorable working conditions is a deliberate attempt to publicise the state of England's labouring poor. In Espriella's letters to his family in Spain, like other faux travel accounts supposedly written by visitors to Britain, such as Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762), Southey adopts the detached perspective of an outsider from which to critique his own society. His domestic travel narrative therefore describes English life through foreign eyes, to gain a novel, alien and often humorous perspective on the customs and practices familiar to its readers. But in passages like the one above, Southey's social conscience comes to the fore to expose the inequities within his own country. He publicises the widening divisions between those who benefit from England's wealth, industrial productivity and commercial dominance, and the labourers who are exploited to produce it. Like his emotive poems on the slave trade in support of abolition, Southey opposes capitalist models of production that use labour at the lowest expense for the highest profit, but ignore the great human cost in the process. To do so he uses the voice of a fellow European, from a nation he considered retrogressive in its domination by the church, and feudal in its social structures, but nevertheless showed greater concern for the welfare of the poor than his own. This article examines how Southey employs his 'foreign' voice to convey antipathy towards England's growing commercialism and industrialisation. It also reveals Southey's opinions of Spanish society and its values, which he knew well after visiting the Iberian Peninsula (in 1795–6 and 1800–1), to demonstrate how his exercise in cultural relativity throws light on Romantic-period attitudes through the 'double vision' of its narrator.

Esriella's tour of England spans April 1802 and September 1803, during the peace of Amiens, a temporary ceasefire in the French Revolutionary wars. After a prolonged period of closed borders, travellers could cross the English Channel again, and as a result there was a spate of published tours through Britain and the continent. Southey took advantage of this peace to invent his back story of a Spanish tourist, who is:

A young man, of good family, travelling solely for instruction. he is come to England with a Mr J. a London merchant, with whom he had

become acquainted in Spain, & in whose family he is domesticated in London [...]. He brings some knowledge of the language with him, is indefatigably industrious, & has an eye for every thing around him, & is fortunate in having intelligent friends to assist his enquiries. in short as able a man as I can make him, with high notions of family, & a rooted belief in the Catholic faith, even in its absurdities, – which weakness is not inconsistent with his general talents, if you conceive that his fathers [*sic*] *solar* (family seat) is in a remote province, & not in a town, – & that he is affectionately attached to his Confessor. ('Letter to Richard Duppa')

Southey chose a naïve, devout, provincial Spaniard because he wanted to poke fun at the idiosyncrasies of the Spanish people, as well as the British. But a more serious design, as Southey was a life-long, vocal opponent of Catholic emancipation, was to expose the fallaciousness of Espriella's 'popish' beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, using a Spanish character allowed Southey to distance himself from English norms and comment on them. This ambivalent position suited him as a renowned Jacobin on a pension from the government, who nevertheless insisted on his independence. The combination of factual account and fictional matter presents knowledgeable, yet slyly detached, observations on British life, and Southey's account is shrewd, lively and far-sighted in understanding the national character and its contradictions.

Adopting the persona of Espriella gave Southey the freedom to release an entertaining aspect of his character, his sense of humour. *Letters from England* complicates and invigorates our modern view of Southey as a writer, allowing us to reassess the traditional route of his literary career from serious-minded radical to holier-than-thou Tory reactionary. It broadens our knowledge of Southey's literary *oeuvre*, as well as our understanding of Romantic-period culture and society. It enables readers to question established perceptions of genre and form through an innovative text that combines factual accounts with fictional characters, on-the-spot reportage with prescient predictions of society's progression, and an epistolary novel with a travel narrative. And in doing so it presents the domestic and the familiar in a new light, by looking through 'Spanish spectacles', as Southey referred to it ('Letter to Richard Duppa').

Among the topics covered in *Letters from England* are: provincial customs; the urban centres of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham; contemporary political intrigues; descriptions of English houses and lifestyles; accounts of recreational activities such as theatre-going, fox-hunting and boxing; long digressions on English religious sects such as the Quakers, Swedenborgians and Southcottians, and assessments of recent trends in 'quackery', faith healing and animal magnetism. Georgian London springs to life with its scenes of entertainment, important buildings, notable figures, fashions and hairstyles, and Espriella rises to lyrical heights to describe the Lake District, which was fast becoming a centre of tourism. But what haunts all Southey's descriptions of English life are the social changes he sees taking place: a widening gap between rich and poor as poverty increases, his fears of revolution, the detrimental effects of industrialisation on rural life, and the decline of the small gentry.

Southey was particularly concerned by the state of the labouring classes, but he had to explain why Espriella would share this interest. Because his Spaniard is 'bigoted to his religion, and willing to discover such faults and such symptoms of declining power here as may soothe or gratify the natural inferiority, which he cannot but feel', he makes a comparative study of the treatment of the poor in England and Spain (*Selected Letters* I, 282). Unlike Spain, England has lost its once stable social order, when landowners and religious institutions felt a moral obligation for the welfare of the lower orders. In Espriella's view 'the peasantry are, and ought to be, the strength of every country; and woe to that country where the peasantry and the poor are the same!' (*Letters from England* I, 306). Despite Southey's hostility towards Catholicism, he permits Espriella to express his conviction that shared religious faith is a cohesive force which binds hierarchical society together. In opposing contemporary legislative solutions to rural poverty, such as the workhouses and the poor laws, Southey invokes an idealised, romantic view of England's feudal past. Espriella's reverence for ancient historical sites, his criticism of modern fashions, and his concern that new religious sects will imperil the social order, would seem to belie both his nationality and his youth. However, they complement Southey's view that the treatment of the rural poor is a symptom of how far England has travelled from its Arcadian past.

The examples of cultural contact that Southey provides in his work raise important questions about what it is to be English, by juxtaposing the political systems, religious beliefs and social practices of its observer and subjects. But, unlike contact narratives in English that take place abroad, here there are competing forms of civility, which complicate the familiar perspective of the metropolitan commentator reporting on foreign, and often more primitive, societal structures and cultural curiosities. Southey's real target is rampant commercialism which he presents as a uniquely English attribute, contrasting it with life in Valencia which is leisurely, relaxed and less concerned with profit. So, as Southey reveals in private letters to friends, 'what [Espriella] most abominates [in England] (except our heresy) is the spirit of trading which has poisoned every thing' ('Letter to Richard Duppa'). It is responsible for the growth in manufacturing, the enclosure acts, and the migration of rural communities to the cities. It extends throughout society so that the 'literature, arts, religion, government are alike tainted, it is a *lues* [meaning plague or syphilis] which has got into the system of the country, and is rotting flesh and bone' (*Letters from England* III, 116–17). Because it is a foreign narrator who says this, Southey can evince his graphic, physical disgust without seeming disloyal or alarmist in the way that an English commentator would.

From the moment of Espriella's arrival in Falmouth, business – or 'busyness' – seems to be the mode of English life. The leisurely Spanish tourist finds himself caught up in a fast-paced existence, where noise and speed dominate his senses. The continual progress that the English seek in travelling is a metaphor for their energy and industry in all walks of life. Unlike the curious, restless English, Espriella explains that the Spanish rarely travel abroad, which is why his journal has a unique perspective to offer. But in England 'every thing that can possibly facilitate travelling seems to have been produced by the commercial spirit of this people' (*Letters from England* I, 29), and Espriella finds himself rocketing around in a chaise at a fearsome speed of six miles an hour. The English bustle through towns and inns at a speed which does not allow them to admire the countryside between. But what Espriella does see of rural England compares poorly with Spain, as 'the beauty of the country is much injured by inclosures, which intercept the view, or cut it into patches' (I 20), and where the land is not enclosed it is 'cheerless and naked' (I 34). While 'England

seems to be the paradise of sheep and cattle; Valencia [is that] of the human race' (I 30).

Another consequence of English commercialism is that their towns have become denuded of history and are generally soulless:

The prosperity of the kingdom has been fatal to the antiquities, and consequently to the picturesque beauty of the towns. Walls, gates, and castles have been demolished to make room for the growth of streets. You are delighted with the appearance of opulence in the houses, and the perfect cleanliness every where when you are within the town; but without, there is nothing which the painter would choose for his subject, nothing to call up the recollections of old times, and those feelings with which we always remember the age of the shield and the lance. (*Letters from England* I, 46)

All the social classes wear similar clothes, and there is little provincial difference in dress. So there is a general dearth of history, custom, culture or beauty. Espriella's anti-commercialism presents him as a romantic wandering soul, who looks through the lustre of progress and 'opulence' to see the mean-spirited, cultural impoverishment below the surface. A technique Espriella uses, as Southey does in his long narrative poems on oriental cultures in *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), is to extrapolate from specific instances – here details of provincial towns such as Falmouth, Exeter and Blandford – to make sweeping generalisations about the customs and manners of this European, but also oddly alien, country.

When Espriella arrives in London, he finds the commercial heart of England to be an alienating metropolis. Extending six miles from one end to the other, it is 'an endless labyrinth of streets' (I 72), as Thomas De Quincey would also describe it in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (83). Inhabited by nearly a twelfth of the island's population, those 'who live at one end know little or nothing of the other' (I 72–3). The English even 'calculate the value of time' in walking through the city (I 74). From east to west there is an eternal movement of 'two regular counter-currents', which continue 'the usual course of business' at rapid speed (I 74). Unlike Espriella:

Nobody was loitering to look at the beautiful things in the shop windows; none were stopping to converse, every one was in haste, yet no one in a hurry; the quickest possible step seemed to be the natural pace. The carriages were numerous in proportion, and were driven with answerable velocity. (l 75)

Arriving at St. Paul's cathedral, Espriella is disappointed by its aspect, where it is crowded among other buildings because the 'value of ground in this capital is too great to be sacrificed to beauty by a commercial nation' (l 76).

Esperiella's view of the English is that they 'have more money than taste, and are satisfied with any absurdity if it has but the merit of being new' (l 79). Like children they are intrigued by the latest inventions, such as 'pocket-toasting-forks [...] as if it were possible to want a toasting-fork in the pocket' (l 185) or the 'hunting razor, with which you may shave yourself while riding at full gallop' (l 186). These novelties are 'the devices of a people made wanton by prosperity' (l 186) and another manifestation of the 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation', which Wordsworth had identified in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) several years earlier (xix). This materialism knows no bounds. Because an Englishman delights to show off his wealth, 'all parts of the world are ransacked' for his table (l 169), and his taste for Chinese, Japanese and Etruscan ornaments and decoration means that what he cannot procure he commissions to be imitated. Like other poets who celebrated the pastoral by vilifying the city, Southey's construction of London sits alongside William Cowper's view of it:

[...] where has commerce such a mart,
So rich, so throng'd, so drain'd, and so supplied
As London, opulent, enlarged, and still
Increasing London? Babylon of old
Not more the glory of the earth, than she
A more accomplish'd world's chief glory now
(l ll.719–24)

Despite the factual element of Southey's work, as in Cowper's *The Task* (1785), the fictional aspects are given licence to exaggerate the effects of commercialism, so presenting it as a modern-world wonder with its huge market-places and expanding wealth. Both accounts also highlight the harmful aspects of such rapidly growing

materialism, in 'that so fair/ May yet be foul' (I ll.727–8). Southey's representation of London was a hallmark of his increased conservatism, and a withdrawal from the centre to the margins, as Byron and Francis Jeffrey perceived it. Jeffrey particularly, Southey's *bête noire* in the *Edinburgh Review*, had attacked him for being the disaffected leader of that troublesome provincial sect, the 'Lake School' of poets. By January 1808, Southey recognised that, as 'Espriella is so generally ascribed to me', his authorship of this work had been discovered (*New Letters* I, 467). Jeffrey's review of *Letters from England*, written in the same month, reveals his suspicion that a foreign pseudonym protected a native writer, and blasts the weak 'powers of reasoning' that are so overlaid with sentiment. Whenever the narrator:

approaches any great manufacturing town, instead of any expression of admiration at the wonderful exertions of ingenuity and industry which are there displayed, we are sure to be presented with a highly coloured and most lamentable picture of misery and vice into which a great portion of the inhabitants are plunged. (123)

Jeffrey recognised that Southey's response to cityscapes was limited by his polemical purpose, but, as Raymond Williams has shown, the contrast of values between country and city is one of the major forms through which crises in society are explored (289). Southey maps the divisions of wealth and poverty onto the dichotomy of rural and urban (as William Cobbett also did) to attack conventional views of increasing industrialisation and expanding cities as progressive.

In order to further shock his readers, Southey uses narratorial effects to exploit the gap between the assumptions a visitor might make whose prior knowledge of England is limited through hearsay or reading, and the reality. So Espriella's preconceptions of its prosperity are undermined in relating his startled discovery that though the nation's wealth is 'the envy of all the rest of Europe; yet in no other country is there so much poverty' (I 303). Espriella's surprise is intended to embarrass his English reader and this is further heightened by questions he asks, such as 'wealth flows into the country, but how does it circulate there?' (II 147). In reply, Southey uses his favourite trope, or 'rhetorical obsession' as Philip Connell refers to it, of comparing the English commercial system to a diseased body (248). Espriella observes that wealth does not flow 'equally and healthfully through the whole system; it sprouts into wens and tumours, and collects in aneurisms which

starve and palsy the extremities' (II 147). The affluent members of society are unnatural growths, who swell and prosper by diverting the current of wealth to themselves that should nourish the entire social organism. And Espriella extends his scrutiny of England's economic progress to other commonly held views about this country to test their validity. So, in examining the highly regarded concept of English liberty, Espriella finds 'there is no liberty in England for the poor. They are no longer sold with the soil, it is true; but they cannot quit the soil, if there be any probability or suspicion that age or infirmity may disable them' (I, 298). Because paupers are tied to their parish by the duties calculated for their welfare, they cannot leave their place of birth without being continually moved on or being forcibly returned, to prevent them becoming a financial burden elsewhere.

The irony for Romantic-period commentators was that although Britain was one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the gap between rich and poor was increasing. And since the 1780s the consequences of this for the moral health of the nation was causing widespread anxiety. Also worrying was the cost of the poor laws, which in 1802–1803, due to inaccuracies in their calculation, as David Craig has pointed out, indicated that there were more than a million paupers in the country. In fact 'only 200,000 able-bodied men and women were in receipt of permanent relief' (Craig 68), but the artificially inflated numbers caused widespread concern and Southey describes the poor laws as the 'disgrace of the statutes' (I 297). When Espriella writes to his Spanish family of the work house, he says 'I cannot express to you the feeling of hopelessness and dread with which all the decent poor look on to this wretched termination of a life of labour' (I 301). The same vignettes of poverty in Southey's 'English Eclogues' appear in *Letters from England*, where the effects of deprivation are seen on the weaker members of society at both ends of the age spectrum to create pathos:

[w]hat a picture does one of their houses present in the depth of winter! the old cowering over a few embers – the children shivering in rags, pale and livid – all the activity and joyousness natural to their time of life chilled within them. The numbers who perish from diseases produced by exposure to cold and rain, by unwholesome food, and by the want of enough even of that, would startle as well as shock you. Of the children of the poor, hardly one third are reared. (I 304)

But unlike Southey's poetry of the 1790s, the cloying sentimentalism is diluted by the realism of statistical accounts and anecdotal naturalism. And the incorporation of such scenes in an entertaining travel account, related by a 'foreign' observer, presents an unexpected view of the familiar that makes readers question their own preconceptions. It allows Southey to indulge in pungent critique without risking criticism, in a fractious and divided public sphere, where seven years previously his fellow radical Gilbert Wakefield had died in prison for publishing his views in his own name.

So, rather than engage in a rigorous examination of the economic system, Southey presents a heartfelt, impassioned plea for pity based on his knowledge and experience. But there is more to Espriella's response than shocked sensibility. Southey held an entrenched view of the proponents of political economy, loathing particularly the statistical science of Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus, which he believed was irresponsible and hard-hearted in its treatment of the poor. Southey found Malthus' economic realism morally reprehensible, referring to him privately as a 'wretched Philistine' (Robberds 481). In his identification of checks on population growth such as war, famine and disease, he believed Malthus was at worst advocating them as solutions to overpopulation, and at best encouraging the wealthy to abandon the poor. Southey was happy to sensationalise and even misrepresent Malthus' views, but there is a case to be made, as William Hazlitt did, for the statistics covering prejudice and repressive ideology. Having recently reviewed Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Southey could not resist putting these words in the mouth of his Spaniard:

It has been discovered that the world is over-peopled and that it must always be so, from an error in the constitution of nature – that the law which says 'Increase and Multiply', was given without sufficient consideration; in short that He who made the world does not know how to manage it properly, and therefore there are serious thoughts of requesting the English parliament to take the business out of his hands. (III 316–17)

Southey uses Espriella's religiosity to portray economists such as Malthus as secular transgressors who abrogate God's laws by questioning the very 'constitution of nature'. His anti-Malthusian stance links him to the radical politics of the 'Lake School' and their youthful enthusiasm for William Godwin's *Political Justice*. Southey

still believed that the upper class desire for idleness condemned the poor to excessive labour, and he constantly refuted the idea that luxury was desirable or beneficial to society. In this way he clings on to his radical, anti-establishment views under cover of Espriella, in order to shame his English readers into greater virtue and benevolence; the only way he perceived society would become more egalitarian.

Southey's use of Espriella's religious convictions is another manifestation of the 'double vision' he employs in his text, scathing of it at moments, but using it when it suits him to criticise English society. So, while Southey rejects 'the bloody & brutalizing spirit of popery' and its powerful hold over a large proportion of the world's population, he uses Espriella to argue for greater soul and passion in religious, as well as social and cultural, life ('Letter to Charles Danvers'). For instance the spiritual impoverishment of 'the schism with Rome' is mourned when Espriella visits a church in Dorchester and finds 'divine office' performed not at an altar but at 'a desk' (l 42). There are 'no lights burning, nor any church vessels, nor ornaments to be seen', and a smell of damp prevails instead of frankincense (l 42). Southey is seduced by Catholic ritual and reverence, and romantically inclined towards the rich fabric of life it provided in countries such as Spain, even while lamenting its tyranny there. So, despite reviling this dominant, passionate religion, his attraction to it creates ambiguity. The ironic mask of his Spanish commentator slips further when Espriella states:

[w]ith us charity is a religious duty, with the English it is an affair of law. We support the poor by alms; in England a tax is levied to keep them from starving, and, enormous as this tax is, it is scarcely sufficient for the purpose. This evil began immediately upon the dissolution of the monasteries. (l 296)

Though a plausible statement for a Roman Catholic to make, it was one that Southey repeated elsewhere (such as in *Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, 1829) to evoke an idyllic view of the English poor, who were protected by paternalistic feudalism before commerce and industry took hold. Using the lens of his Spaniard, therefore, he shows how his own society has lost its close protective relationship with the poor, which was reinforced through the structures of a national religion, to demonstrate the cold-hearted nature of nineteenth-century English society. Southey's foreigner evinces 'correct' beliefs in his

emotive responses to the poor that are closer to an ancient spirit of Englishness (mythical though that may be), and which is lamentable in its absence now. However, Southey's humanity also emerges from his fearful concern to avoid what he felt was a very real danger of violence erupting among those who are left to 'starve and palsy' at the 'extremities' of the English social body.

Written on the cusp of Southey's apostasy, *Letters from England* incorporates another dual perspective in moving from radical to conservative ideology. Southey warns his contemporaries of the dangerous consequences of Jacobinism on the lower classes, but also pours scorn on the unreformed electoral system, and advocates the secret ballot – as extreme radicals like Henry Hunt would do ten years later. Despite Southey's reactionary credentials, Hazlitt recognised that 'he is decidedly *revolutionary*. He may have given up the reform of the state: but depend on it, he has some other *hobby* of the same kind' (88). For Hazlitt, Southey was an unpredictable writer in support of the establishment, who was liable to break out into effusions of 'independence and liberality' (93). His contradictory politics meant he was often vilified alike by aristocratic Tories and reformist Whigs, and his belief that England's commercial spirit had created an iniquitous manufacturing system would also divide later generations of politicians and writers. Thomas Babington Macaulay found Southey's account of Britain's feudal past revisionist, his anti-industrialism backward, and his response to the forces of progress short-sighted. But Southey's warnings would be taken up by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin in their own resistance to the effects of a commercial, manufacturing spirit on Victorian culture. And Southey pre-empted Elizabeth Gaskell's descriptions of the Mancunian poor, in demonstrating the impact on them of urban industrialisation and *laissez faire* politics, by at least forty years.

For readers now, therefore, Southey's 'Spanish spectacles' seem far-sighted in the problematic picture of English progress they present, and in exploring their consequences for modern society. The dual Jacobin/conservative focus enabled by the foreign narrator makes *Letters from England* an anxious, unstable text, which for that very reason provides uncomfortable, de-familiarising reading for the English. This effect is caused by the mixed genres of fact and fiction, as well as the combined perspective of his narrator. It is also a feature of Southey's foreign epic poems,

where the notes contradict the narrative to unbalance the reader. Here then, in his domestic work, Southey provides a home visitation of the anxieties manifested in his responses to empire. And the destabilising view it offers is Southey's chief innovation and contribution to Romanticism.

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