Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Almeida Garrett, João Baptista

Author: Melo, Daniel

Title: Garrett, Almeida (João Baptista da Silva Leitão)

Almeida Garrett (João Baptista da Silva Leitão de Almeida Garrett (Porto 1799 – Lisbon 1854) is still considered one of the key names of Portuguese Romanticism and of 19th-century liberalism; the two are deeply associated in his political, civic, literary and cultural biography. “Poet-citizen-dandy”, his stance (resembling that of Chateaubriand and Mme de Staël) embodied a strong interaction between his literary writing, his intervention in public life and his personal relationships.

Born into a noble family which fled from Napoleonic rule to the Azores, he began publishing poetry after enrolling in the University of Coimbra in 1818; their liberal-patriotic tone rendered some poems popular during the liberal revolution of 1820. The reactionary coup d'état of 1823 forced him to take refuge in England, where he was introduced to Shakespeare, Scott and Gothic Romanticism. In exile, he published the poems Camões (1825) and Dona Branca (1826), both set in key periods of the past and considered the first manifestation of Portuguese Romanticism; they are imbued with a patriotic applicability to contemporary national issues and by a critical disenchantment with Portugal’s political situation.

After a brief return to Portugal in 1826, he reverted to his English exile in 1828, from where he took active part in the Liberal Wars of 1828-34. Afterwards, he settled in Portugal, in favour with the regime; his most important publication from the 1840s being the folksong collection Romanceiro e cancioneiro geral (1843-51), whose initial gestation dates back to the exile period and to Adozinda (1828), and which stands out as the pioneering work of Portuguese cultural Romanticism, case seeking to collect, systematize and disseminate a canonical repository of traditional Portuguese folk-poetry. In contrast to earlier examples of this type of enterprise, Garrett has greater attention to variants, and undertakes a source criticism of the oral and the written provenance. He is not afraid to see contamination as a hallmark of national repertoires, resulting from the mobility of poets and texts, and develops a comparatist view in linking Portuguese tradition with the Castilian, English and German ones. Even so, his conclusion vindicates the superiority of Portuguese poetry. The Medievalism, which sees the Middle Ages as the nation’s cultural bedrock, is part of an established European pattern.

Himself an adept of literary historicism, Garrett adopted drama and romance as the best models for modern literature to emulate. His Um auto de Gil Vicente (1838), and Frei Luís de Sousa (1843) celebrate great figures in Portuguese literature and key episodes of national history, while intending to provide national drama with a new model. Garrett’s theatrical mission was also pursued through his newspaper Entre-Act (1837) and his foundation of the
National Theatre (1836). He also published two novels, the seminal *O arco de Sant'Ana* ("The Arc of Saint Anne", 1845-51) and *Viagens na minha terra* ("Travels in my homeland", 1843 and 1845-46), the former a historical novel in the social-Romantic mode of Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the latter combining different registers and genres (philosophical reflection, written correspondence, novel) to present a saturnine view of the nation’s greed, spiritual apathy and tastelessness.

His political writings include the influential *Portugal na balança da Europa* ("Portugal in the European weighing-scale", 1828) and *Da educação* ("On education", 1829), proposes a liberal, if slightly elitist, programme of national regeneration along constitutional-monarchist lines.

This vision also inspired his intense public activity as journalist / publicist and in his political career as a diplomat (1832-33), parliamentary delegate (1837), legislator (co-author of the Constitution of 1838) and Foreign Minister (1852). His view on public affairs are expressed also in his *Carta de guia de eleitores. Em que se trata da opinião publica, das qualidades para deputado, e do modo de as conhecer* ("Instructive charter for voters, concerning public opinion, the qualities for parliamentary delegates and how to recognize these", 1826) and *Discursos parlamentares e memorias biográficas* ("Parliamentary Speeches and biographical memoirs", 1871, posthumous).


All articles in the *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* edited by Joep Leerssen are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at http://www.spinnet.eu.