While most cultural historians depict the period between 1815 and 1848 as an age of upheaval, Virgil Nemoianu presents it as an age of “Biedermeier” figures—authors who acted as mediators between past and present amid cultural conflicts spawned by the French Revolution. In The Triumph of Imperfection, a work of extraordinary range and depth of erudition, Nemoianu demonstrates how well such authors defused and redirected revolutionary energies towards a “feasible regeneration.” Conservatives of our time could learn a lot from this work about how to slow down, defuse, and rechannel explosive change.

Romanticism was essentially unstable, “perhaps even an absence,” Nemoianu observes, since the core works of Romanticism were already laments about lost Romantic integrity. Ironically the movement proved most fertile after its “relative defeat,” when the next age achieved the “triumph of imperfection.” Instead of the Romantic age’s universalist and utopian goals, the next age had finite goals such as social reform and the revitalization of national communities. It triumphed by exchanging the perfection that exists only in the mind for the limited success that can be achieved in the real world.

While he touches on a myriad of writers, Nemoianu pays special attention to the works of Chateaubriand, Goethe, Scott, Cooper, and Southey as “historical mediators.” Poised between radical and reactionary discourses, these authors redirected the violent currents of change “into modes of intelligible accommodation.” Nemoianu also deals with the revival of religion in the same period and with the appropriation of travel literature for Biedermeier purposes, as well as with the rise of Central Europe’s “learning ethos” as a key to upward mobility.

Chateaubriand, whom Nemoianu considers one of the “founding fathers of the modern age,” embraced views similar to those of his kinsman Tocqueville. He wanted the past to have a major role in shaping the future, for he knew that even if change of an exterior sort is inevitable, morality and religion can provide continuity and a solid foundation to any new worthwhile society. He foresaw that the future would “inevitably” bring about a “mass society” with “centrifugal individualism,” but he hoped that our age-old civilization would nevertheless survive. He believed such a society could be kept from excess by the freedom that grows “out of religious values, and preeminently, Christianity.” According to him, Christianity is the most compassionate and the most universal of all religions and philosophies,” the one uniquely “capable of a growth based on transfer of values: detaching values and tenets from the physical (or historical) environment in which they are embedded and carrying them over to other shapes in which their essence can remain constant.

Chateaubriand is an exemplar of the progressive conservative who preserves the best of the past by transplanting it into new ground.

Another great Biedermeier author is
Goethe. His masterpiece *Faust* may be read as a survey of modes of government, beginning with the medieval city state, looking back to an archaic clan organization, then going forward to “imperialist macroeconomic frameworks” and a futurist “democratic, state-socialist construct.” The character of Faust pays little attention to the past, Nemoianu notes, but the work *Faust* is a “monument of the struggle with, and for, memory.” In this work Goethe brings to bear his “conservative skepticism” on the age’s “utopian pressures for progress.” Like Chateaubriand, he accepts historical change as inevitable but trusts that we can preserve the best of the past in spite of “radically modified historical environments.” The religious element at the end of *Faust* is his way of saying that “imperfection” is “too integral to ‘being-human’ to be eradicated except by transcendence of the human.”

Nemoianu finds a lesson for our times in Goethe’s view of radical change as something to which we must respond with “moderating discourses of deflection and digression.” We need to provide some time and space for the transfer of values. The big question for Goethe, as for Chateaubriand, Guizot, and Tocqueville, is how to preserve our inherited “spiritual principles” under “categorically modified historical circumstances.”

Yet another major Biedermeier figure was Sir Walter Scott. It seems that Goethe’s *Faust* was indebted in part to Scott’s *Kenilworth* and his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*. In turn, Scott was also influenced by Goethe. In 1815 *Waverley* appeared, and the historical novel reemerged as a major way of recording conflicts between “two great modes of life.” The historical novel now became a strategy for taming revolutionary energies. Not only did it provide a “gentle” explanation for what had led to the present, but it demonstrated that a transfer of values was necessary and feasible. Scott had a legion of imitators, most prominently James Fenimore Cooper, but also—to a greater or less extent—Balzac, Hugo, Vigny, Dumas Père, Pushkin, Manzoni, Mickiewicz, Arnim, Hauff, Alexis, Stifter, Immennnann, Jovellanos, Szécheny, and Eötvös.

As a follower of Burke in both politics and aesthetics, Scott was keen to show how the “spirit of tradition” might survive huge political convulsions. He realized that history was inevitably moving away from “organic bindings of blood and soil” toward a contractual “society of unattached individuals.” Even so, he thought it possible to rescue the spiritual treasures of the past by detaching them from earlier historical contexts and incorporating them in modern times. One of Scott’s strategies to instill moderation was to depict the extremes of “reactionary” and “revolutionary” as strangely alike.

Besides the historical novel, histories of the literary sort became the rage after 1815. One example is Thierry’s “literary-visionary” history of the Merovingians that influenced Marx. Nemoianu also mentions bellettristic histories penned by Michelet, Guizot, Lamartine, Schiller, Carlyle, Macaulay, Karamzin, Raumer, Bälcescu and Palacky. A big demand arose for historical portraits in the manner of Landor and Sainte-Beuve and for historical paintings like those of Delacroix. Memoirs, too, promoted a kind of history that made much use of imagination and empathy. The Biedermeier effect of these works is that they showed, despite real differences, “large areas of commonality” between races and cultures.

Nemoianu places James Fenimore Cooper among the “most serious” of Biedermeier “thinkers,” on the same plane as Chateaubriand, Scott, and even Goethe. In the Leatherstocking tales, Cooper dramatized the tragic conflict between Amerindians and Euro-Americans in the New World.
Nemoianu praises Cooper for reflecting deeply on multiculturalism and for attempting to find models for the “interpenetration of cultures.” One model was the deep, abiding friendship between Chingachgook and Leatherstocking, but since friendship between men is sterile, this model implied the failure of the “intercultural and interracial project.”

Cooper presents us with the inevitable problem that besets all multiculturalism, namely “the need for integration and the need for distinction (or specificity).” Since he did not regard racial distinction as ultimate, Cooper made a point of emphasizing the common capacity of mankind for good and evil by distributing across cultural lines many “gestures of moral rectitude and integrity,” as well as “of aggression and ruthlessness.” Due to this vision of our human commonality in spiritual matters, he was not in favor of an “absolute separation of cultures” on racial or ethnic grounds, and he was also doubtful that human history would culminate in the “unquestioning” adoption of Western models.

In a densely packed chapter devoted to religion, Nemoianu begins by chronicling how religion had suffered in the years leading up to 1815. A striking example he gives is that only thirty out of one thousand five hundred Benedictine abbeys still remained in all of Europe. Little wonder then that when the violence and upheaval subsided, many thought it was time to “reassess” the place of religion in society. Catholicism now regained much of its social and intellectual influence, the Oxford Movement reawakened Anglicanism, while Methodism, Pietism, and Hasidism gained new legitimacy. A sign of the times was that Hannah More, a “typical Biedermeier figure” who wrote moral and religious works, became the first person in history to sell a million copies of a book. This showed a widespread thirst for a “more complete understanding of human nature.”

There was a new debate about how religious needs might be accommodated, for very few asked for a “full restoration” of former church privileges. Schleiermacher developed his theory that religion was founded on sentiment and intuition, while Chateaubriand emphasized the beauty, rather than the truth, of Christianity. There were many European writers of that age who took up Chateaubriand’s “aesthetic argument.”

The study of comparative religion arose at this time, too, particularly in Montalambert, Ozanam, Lacordaire, Lamennais, and Migne—Catholics who accepted the idea of a “double revelation” and saw non-Christian religions as forerunners of Christianity. Thus, after the radical secularization that led up to 1815, religion was welcomed back in the Biedermeier age, only now in the new role of “guardian of the emotional, imaginative, and symbolic resources of humanity.”

Another manifestation of the Biedermeier spirit can be found in travel literature. As people became aware of the world’s immensity and variety, travel guides from Baedeker and Cook appeared, as well as informative accounts of transcontinental expeditions. Such works sought “in exotic alterity salvation from the pressures of the home situation.”

One kind of conservative response to this escapism was to put greater value on the immediate locale. In his Rural Rides (1830), William Cobbett showed there is “infinity in smallness” as he traveled through just a few English counties, reporting not merely on their natural delights, but also on their “spider’s web of parasitism, artificiality, and alienation.” Like other Biedermeier figures, Cobbett wanted to transfer the spiritual treasures of the past into the present, as well as to channel revolutionary energies into local reform. Likewise De Quincey and Immermann demonstrated “how the close can become the distant and how the intimate
can become the picturesque and the unusual.” Another example of this genre is Xavier de Maistre’s *Expedition nocturne autour de ma chambre* (1825), where the author travels around his room, making this intimate space interesting by revealing “the thickness of existence and the delights of limitation.”

Cultural history and geography were also useful in the transfer of values, as seen in Hazlitt’s *Notes of a Journey through Italy and France* (1826), which influenced Burckhardt and Pater, and in Germaine de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* (1813), where the “internal structures and contradictions” of a single culture were mapped out for the sake of offering political alternatives to “dictatorship, revolution, and stagnation.” There was also the political treatise in the guise of travel literature, as in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. In this kind of travel literature, Nemoianu remarks, romantic “universality” is “ parcelled out (much in Biedermeier fashion)” and “organized into practical units.”

Still another strategy for redirecting the revolutionary impetus into constructive channels was the central-European “learning ethos” which posited that a person or group might advance through increased “access to science, information, and humanistic values.” Europe was envisioned as a place where people, regardless of background, might better themselves through learning that would then “justify” their wealth and status. This ethos was “officially sanctioned,” with the result that many from marginal groups, such as Jews, Transylvanian Romanians, and Serbians in Hungary, achieved titles and high positions based on military, economic, or scholarly merit. Nemoianu mentions Joseph von Sonnenfels, a Freemason of Jewish background, as the “architect and prime mover of the central-European learning ethos.”

In connection with this “learning ethos,” national academies arose across Europe, half of which pursued cultural and intellectual goals, and reading clubs, as well as “reading cabinets” stocked with foreign books proliferated. A new competitiveness emerged regarding native literature, now seen as the “indispensable” validation of an ethnic or national group. At this time *Beowulf*, *Das Nibelungenlied*, and *Le Chanson de Roland* were published and reached the status of founding myths.

In a chapter on Robert Southey, Nemoianu contends that he was yet another Biedermeier figure who espoused the ideology of smallness, local attachment, and fertile imperfection. In *The Doctor*, for example, a work of multitudinous digressions, Southey wanted to protect the older kind of thinking by opting for “radical intertextuality” and drawing from such disparate sources as Brahmins, Druids, Moses, and George Fox. This chapter failed to persuade this reader that Southey can be put on a par with Chateaubriand and Goethe, or even Scott and Cooper.

What all these Biedermeier figures had in common was the “pacifying power” they exerted when they married progress to tradition. They embraced imperfection to prevent Western society from unraveling in a moon-eyed pursuit of utopian perfection. Such mediators are needed in every age to add “graduality” to the pace of change, while not “denying the validity of this emancipatory progress itself.”

Throughout this learned and judicious work, Nemoianu makes incisive applications to the contemporary American academy. He warns of “a powerful system” which has taken root in literary criticism and cultural studies and is drawn from both “recent western European theories of deconstruction” and from “left-oriented interpretations of the Nietzsche-Heidegger philosophical tradition.” When combined,
these ingredients become “dogmatic,” and although the system is “squarely rooted inside Western horizons,” it is “mostly bent on undercutting Western certitudes, affirmations, and modes of behavior.” This dogmatic nihilism, which has “inscribed itself in the family of leveling utopianisms,” Nemoianu explains, is the “heir or ally of doctrines that have produced and justified totalitarian and destructive regimes in the twentieth century.” Despite its claims, too, it actually diminishes human difference. In another place, Nemoianu declares that, contrary to Edward Said, “some of the worst forms of mental and physical oppression invented by the West were but a consequence of high-minded progressive and utopian purposes.” Evidently our age, too, has need of Biedermeier figures to redirect destructive intellectual energies into creative channels.

Robert Frost: Philosopher-Poet
John F. Desmond


Probably no other American poet has suffered more misunderstanding at the hands of his readers, admirers and detractors alike, than Robert Frost. The range and variety of misreadings of both the man and his poetry are legion: he was simply a nature poet, child of the Romantics; a clever versifier with little depth; a genial country wit; a moral monster; a cranky, iconoclastic reactionary against modernity, and so on. The problem of understanding this complex man and poet was vastly compounded by the publication of Lawrence Thompson’s three-volume biography, authorized by Frost himself, which portrayed much of the poet’s life, his thought and his poetry in a glaringly simplistic and often negative light.

In his monumental study, Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher, Peter J. Stanlis offers the most comprehensive and penetrating analysis to date of the intellectual foundations of Frost’s general philosophy and his practice as a poet. The result of more than fifty years of close study of and personal friendship with Frost, Stanlis’ book sets out to correct the many misperceptions of Frost by elucidating the development of the poet’s personal and poetic responses to the rapidly-changing current of ideas in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Stanlis demonstrates, Frost was an immensely learned, largely autodidactic philosopher who absorbed the prevailing ideas of his time and fashioned his own independent thought in the face of turbulent cultural changes. To explicate his complicated subject, Stanlis situates each aspect of Frost’s beliefs within its larger historical context and then examines it in relation to Frost’s growth as man and poet. His attendant goal is to refute the reductive view created by Thompson and other critics, and to show Frost as a true philosopher, a “seeker of wisdom.”

Frost was an unsystematic philosopher, but he emphatically affirmed the bedrock of his views of man, God, nature, and history when he said: “I am a dualist” (4). Dualism for Frost meant that all reality is comprised of matter and mind, or as he preferred, matter and spirit; as opposed to a monism that sees

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