

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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Backgrounds to the English Romantics- Nature and the Environment

In the fourth lesson for this week, we shall be looking at nature and environment and the rise of certain attitudes to the environment which inform the English Romantics. We open with lines from a poet who was not often read within our canonical assessments of English Literature from this period. John Clare's poem, "I Am":

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I long for scenes, where man hath never trod.
A place where woman never smiled or wept,
 There to abide with my creator, God;
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
 Untroubling and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below—above the vaulted sky.

It seems like odd poem, an odd excerpt to use as an opening to the talk on nature and environment. But pay attention to what that poem is doing: No man has ever trod; no woman has ever slept, wept, smiled, walked, no humans basically have ever been there. The poet would rather lie in such a place with the grass below and the sky above.

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For critics like Bridget Keegan, these lines embody a great romantic fantasy, access to a world without humans, a pristine natural world devoid of human contamination and therefore divine. Clare wishes to exist there as he does in all landscapes he loved and wrote about, "untroubling and untroubled," a nature liberated from the destructiveness of human intervention, agricultural or aesthetic. We have already in preceding lessons spoken about the binary between nature and culture. In this particular poem, "untroubling and untroubled where I lie," is the clear embodiment of that binary: nature as pure, uncontaminated, pristine, clean, almost divine as opposed to the human.

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The Romantic response to nature is not merely self-indulgent. These writers offer a vision of humankind living in peaceful coexistence with the natural world. This view has been echoed in our own times as well. The well-known ecological critic Jonathan Bate has argued that much of Wordsworth's environmental imagination can be seen as inaugurating a history of environmentalism manifest in 20th century writings as well. Lawrence Buell also attributes much of the environmentalist thought and environmentalist philosophies to this particular period.

The Romantics believed in the fusion of the soul of nature with the soul of the sensitive, passionate individual, that is the poet. Wordsworth's *Prelude* contains notions of the love of nature leading to the love of humankind. For Wordsworth the verses that celebrate the intrinsic value of the human mind also celebrate the intrinsic value of nature. Natural scenes are rendered differently, loved due to acts of imagination in Wordsworth. However, feminist readings point out, nature is coded as female and as an object, while the observer-poet is the male subject. As Ann Mellor has famously described it in *romanticism in gender*, "the oft-described exploration of nature found in canonical romantic poetry often masks sexual politics" (1993:21).

If you look at a poem like *Nutting*, you will see this very clearly where Wordsworth's boy engages in the act of wanton destruction in nature. He breaks the branches of a tree with his axe and then the poem concludes - Wordsworth says the boy's sister will have to go into the forest because she is the one who will treat the trees with tenderness, almost as though there is the necessity of gendered equivalence between nature and woman. And that as eco-feminists would tell you, is a classic binary: the male masculine control over nature and woman, where the concerns with nature are basically that of the woman.

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Romantic concerns with landscape, nature and appreciation were organized along particular lines. One, there was an environmentalist approach to the land—this included in the wish for a land devoid of humanity. Two, the aesthetics of landscape appreciation had a political theme hidden in it where, as critics such as John Barrel have noted, landscape appreciation was something that came, supposedly, to particular classes of people, and was for these people, a social responsibility. That is, the ability to admire a land's beauty, its picturesque appeal belongs to a certain class of people, usually land owners. There is thus, an

implicit and very often an explicit link between aesthetic appreciations of the land and land ownership.

This would constitute a political reading of the aesthetics of nature in Wordsworth's generation. For instance, in Wordsworth, it was important to see how people emerge from and are tied into the natural world. We also need to be alert to the fact that questions of aesthetics in these texts are often asked at the cost of asking larger social questions of land ownership. Many of their concerns about the land, about environment, come from European thought.

Rousseau, for example, evoked environmental catastrophe:

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As men consume enormous quantities of wood and plants for fire and other uses, it follows that the layer of vegetative earth in an inhabited country must always diminish and finally become like the terrain of Arabia Petraea, and like that of so many other provinces of the East – which is in fact the region of most ancient habitation – where only salt and sand are found.

Rousseau here, is predicting the use of fossil fuels leading to a barrenness

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The development of technology, notes Rousseau, in the long run will threaten the very existence of humankind. Rousseau's *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* foreshadows many of the essential ideas of modern environmentalism.

The English Romantics believed that to be situated *in* nature was not just the question of location. It meant to be able to absorb right with one's soul, the animate being of nature. The fusion of nature with the soul was of course the privilege of an imaginative and sensitive human: the poet. The sensory overload in the poem "To Autumn" of sights, sounds and smells is an instance of this connection. This revaluation of place in the sense of landscape [in Romantic literature] was also connected with the romantic recovery of a sense of the divine as manifest in the more-than-human natural world.

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Emerging from this theme of interlinked nature and the power of the imagination, is an organismic view (as opposed to the mechanistic view of the preceding era, that of the

Enlightenment) of the world. When, for example, Shelley's speaker in "Ode to the West Wind" poem describes himself as a leaf and a cloud, he is not drawing parallels between the poet and nature: he is telling us that the poet *is nature* itself, that nature and the poet constitute a dynamic relation where the poet has assimilated the soul of nature. This approach of the Romantics treated nature as a self-transforming, dynamic whole, but one into which the poet can merge. Wordsworth, Joel Pace argues, transplants nature from external reality into a landscape of the mind. In Coleridge's *Conversation poems* ("The Eolian Harp", "Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement", "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison" and several others), he reinforces the idea of the receptive poetic mind. Now please recall what we have said from the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: a poet is a man speaking to men but he is also, the poet that is, imbued with a greater sensibility. As Paul Magnuson puts it, "Coleridge adopts a natural symbolism in which the perceiving, remembering, imagining mind searches for images of itself and God in nature. Most of the poems begin with the poet in a state of repose, receiving sensations from nature." Magnuson cites the following instances:

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And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

Coleridge, "Eolian Harp"

earth and sky
With one sensation, and those wakeful Birds
Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,
As if one quick and sudden Gale had swept
An hundred airy harps!

Coleridge, "The Nightingale"

Occasionally, this link between mind and nature is broken, as happens in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode". In this particular poem Coleridge mourns the fact that he is no longer able to take inspiration from nature, and the fact that he is unable to gain this inspiration, assimilate nature, also means his poetic output has dried up. He says,

O Lady! We receive but what we give,

And in our life alone does nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! From the soul itself must issue forth
a light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth –
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

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What is he doing here? Look at what he is saying: We cannot expect nature to be providing us all of this. It is my soul which must generate it. From within the soul must issue forth, as he says, “a light, a glory, a luminous cloud enveloping the earth”. So, when there is no external source of nature providing inspiration, when there is no external source of poetic sensibility, then you have to turn inwards. The failure to assimilate is not the failure of nature, it is an inner failure. It is a failure as Lucy Newlyn points out in her reading of “Dejection: An Ode”, it is the failure of the mind, the soul, the consciousness of the poet. This, therefore, explores the break of the link between nature and the poetic mind.

For the Romantics, nature was a pastoral ideal in rural England, the organicist view of life where man and nature are linked, nature as teacher, nature ruined (both through catastrophe and human efforts), the rejection of the city as a place, among other. Nature is often a teacher (in WW), punished those who violate Nature (Ancient Mariner). The ruin of nature was a major subject in many of the poets (texts like Byron’s “Darkness”), as we shall see. The ruined building and the ruined village were also the subjects of poetry.

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They mourned the disappearance of the countryside due to greed and so-called civilization, most of the poets saw the city (London) as having abandoned the organic link of man and nature. The city is corrupt – as in Blake’s “London” and WW’s “Upon Westminster Bridge” where if you recall how the poem ends, Wordsworth will say everything is nice and

quiet, and then he says “this great city whose heart is lying still”, I am quoting from the poem where he says that the great heart, that is London's heart, is lying still.

Now it is possible that he is speaking about a city which is asleep because the poem, as I recall it, is situated in the morning hours of the day. He is speaking about the great heart of London and he is speaking about commercial London lying still. But I sometimes wonder whether the word ‘lying’ is not a subliminal pun, as several critics have pointed out Wordsworth is full of subliminal puns.

Geoffrey Hartman's work on Wordsworth will direct you to this. Is Wordsworth saying that even when it is asleep, London is lying, as in speaking falsehoods? Is he referring to, therefore, the corruption in London's heart which is at work even when it is asleep? Is this a kind of moral allegory that the city is so corrupt, and even when asleep it is full of falsehoods and lies?

The link between nature and humanity is an organic one. And for the English poets, they draw their inspiration from this particular link. Sometimes however the link fails as in the case of “Dejection: An Ode”. And at that point, Coleridge would say “we cannot hope from outward forms to win/ the fountain, the passion in the life whose fountains are within”. What does he mean? He says if the link between humans and nature has been destroyed, then maybe we are responsible for it but it also means that we have the duty to “envelop the earth”. There is a clear binary nature and culture. Nature is pristine, pure, uncontaminated. Culture is artifice and corrupt. There is the fantasy of nature untouched, which is how it began, as in John Clare’s “I am”. “Upon Westminster Bridge” and Blake's “London” are two poems that talk about the corruption of nature.

This forms the background to our understanding of nature and the environment in the Romantic Age. We will have reasons to return to it as we discuss various poets through the course.