

DEPICTION OF ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN BRITISH ROMANTICISM

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Literary criticism that examines the ways in which Romantic writers and thinkers participated in and responded to the history of ecological science, environmental ethics, and environmentalist activism is known as “Romantic ecology” or “green Romanticism”. Ecocritical practice is generally motivated by a sense of political urgency associated with the desire to investigate and remedy current environmental problems such as threats associated with anthropogenic pollution, deforestation, species extinction, and climate change. We witness some of the first instances of a developing awareness of nature’s ecological fragility, and the need for humans to reconsider their environmental practices, even prior to the British Romantic period. In the late seventeenth century, for example, the naturalist John Evelyn warned the Royal Society that English deforestation had reached epidemical proportions; in his book ‘*Sylva, or A Discourse of Forest-Trees*’ (1664), he advocated the creation of laws designed to ensure “the preservation of our Woods” (2. p. 108). However, it was during the Romantic era, which witnessed a sharp rise in urban populations and an increasingly industrialized economy, that environmental problems became much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency. Despite his modern reputation as nature’s Romantic adversary, even William Blake complained about the “cities turrets & towers & domes / Whose smoke destroyd the pleasant gardens & whose running Kennels / Chokd the bright rivers” (1. p. 167 lines- 9). Percy Bysshe Shelley lamented both the contaminated water and “the putrid atmosphere of crowded cities,” which he insightfully attributed to urban “filth” and “the exhalations of chemical processes” (5. p. 133).

Hargrove resists the common notion that our modern-day preservationist practices stem directly from the development of ecological science in the Victorian period, arguing instead that their historical roots are properly located in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and practice. Thus, he proposes that “our present wildlife protection attitudes would have developed even if ecology and evolution had not become part of biological science” (3. p.153). According to Hargrove, the contemporary fascination for “picturesque beauty” contributed in important ways to the development of attitudes favorable to wildlife protection. (3. p.160)

In Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novel ‘*The Mysteries of Udolpho*’ (1794) Emily St. Aubert’s ardent love of nature’s sublimity and beauty is of a piece with her desire to preserve and protect the noble stands of trees that adorn her father’s estate (7. p. 13). Some historians suggest that the kind of aesthetic sensibility Radcliffe attributes to Udolpho’s heroine helped, in its wider social manifestation, to encourage the legislative institutionalization of preservationist practices. This aspect of Romanticism’s ecological legacy, though to some extent admirable, merits critical scrutiny, for by fetishizing wilderness, the “Romantic Sublime” – a crucial component of picturesque aesthetics – tended to devalue or ignore non-spectacular landscapes like boreal forests and wetlands, the protection of which, as we now know, is vitally important to the Earth’s ecological health. By advocating the protection of wilderness in distant parklands, people could feel more comfortable about exploiting, destroying, or disregarding urban and suburban ecosystems as well. Simultaneously enabling and

undermining practices of ecological preservation, in short, the Romantic aesthetic sensibility remains an ambivalent feature of Romantic ecology.

According to the human-centered instrumentalism, nature was not valuable in and of itself but merely as a means to an all-too-human end; existing simply as a commodity or “material resource”. Because human dominion and nature’s utility are important themes in William Blake’s ‘The Book of Thel’ (1789), a brief consideration of this poem can help to illustrate the conflict between instrumental and intrinsic modes of valuing the non-human world. Set in the pastoral Vales of Har, Thel portrays a series of encounters between its eponymous female protagonist and various sentient but non-human creatures. Although she is a young shepherd, Thel is haunted by a sense of her own uselessness, and she projects this subjective concern upon everything she meets in Har. In her first encounter, she engages in conversation with a “Lilly,” a personified flower who seems to echo Thel’s own sense of purposelessness when she calls herself a “weed”(1. p.4,plate 1, line 16), a form of plant life generally deemed useless, if not altogether antithetical to human instrumental ends. Although Thel’s praise for these “valuable services” brings the Lilly’s self-proclaimed status as a useless “weed” very much into question. It does not grant the flower any inherent worth: Thel values the Lilly merely for the various functions it performs in relation to other creatures in the economy of nature – all of whom ultimately exist to serve Thel herself, who occupies a “pearly throne” (1. p. 4, plate 2, line 12) at or near the summit of Har’s cosmic hierarchy. During the course of the poem, Thel certainly comes to realize that “every thing that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself” (1. p. 5, plate 3, lines 26–7), learning that all creatures exist, in other words, to serve the needs of others in nature’s complex economy of interrelationship and interdependency. Thel’s critique of instrumental value anticipates the twentieth-century concerns of “deep ecology,” a radically egalitarian or “biocentric” discourse that “accords nature ethical status at least equal to that of humans” (6. pp. 9 –10). Following the pioneering work of Arne Naess, deep ecologists generally differentiate their practice from mainstream or “shallow” modes of environmentalism by criticizing the latter’s instrumentalist approach to the conservation or preservation of nature. Simply stated, an advocate of “deep ecological” practice does not strive to protect the non-human world because human life depends upon nature’s wellbeing, rather, the deep ecologist’s concern for nature springs from an acknowledgment that all creatures deserve human respect and care. Because, they are valuable in and of themselves and without regard to their uses. However, nature is, of course, not all daffodils and nightingales. Hence, poets like Blake – who celebrates such things as earwigs, maggots, fleas, tape-worms, and slugs (1. p. 124, plate 27, lines 11–24) – and Robert Burns – who brings poetic attention to such unlikely creatures as mice and lice (5. p. 7) – provide alternatives to an idealistic Romantic naturalism.

Romanticism has not always been viewed with a favorable eye. Indeed, contrary to the claims of some green Romanticists, the transcendental subject so often celebrated in Romantic poetry likely carries its share of philosophical culpability for the environmental crisis we face today. As Gary Harrison reminds us, therefore, the ‘dilemma for ecologically minded readers of Romantic texts is to reconcile the Romantics’ love for nature with their sense of their autonomy from it and to sort out the Romantic acknowledgment of nature for its own sake from its treatment of nature as a means to aggrandize the human.’(4. p.1064)

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