

INTRODUCTION: THE PERSISTENCE OF ROMANTICISM

It is no news that Romanticism has had a bad press throughout much of the twentieth century, rising to a chorus of vilification in the past fifteen or so years. Romantic works are thought to suffer from overweening sentimentality and to retail a stale plot that is at best trivial and at worst a sham that distracts attention from the real forces that shape most human lives. Typically, it is thought, a Romantic poem will present an isolated male protagonist who reflects on his life in strongly subjective terms as he is halted in a particular place. The course of this reflection runs roughly: “Here I am in the woods. Life has been pretty tough. I have trouble getting along with other people, and I’m going to die. I don’t feel very good about that. But it’s pretty nice here, and when I look at the sunlight on the trees below, then I feel a little calmer and able to go on a bit.”¹

There is more than a little truth in this caricature, and even Romanticism’s defenders often revert to it. Rene Wellek notes the importance to Romanticism of reflection-in-nature, coupled with an intensified subjective diction in which individual experiences and reflections are taken to exemplify general human possibilities of an accession to meaningfulness, as he defines Romanticism compactly as “imagination for the view of poetry,

¹ I owe this characterization of Romantic poetry to Stanley Bates, who reports that something like this is the typical structure of submissions that he has had to evaluate for placement in poetry workshops.

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nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style.”² Donald G. Marshall similarly fills in what he calls “the common view” that

in Wordsworth the synthetic, creative and sympathetic power of imagination, nourished on a popular tradition of ballad and romance with roots in the great poetry pre-dating the Enlightenment, asserted itself against an instrumentalist reason, which in poetry took the form of a masquerade in the robes of conscious and merely willed classicism. Wordsworth found the true source of imagination: in nature and particularly in the poet’s experience of nature during childhood, when he was most open to its varied and spirited influence. The language in which this recollected experience was transformed into the guide of later life and feeling derived from the ordinary language of men, particularly rural men, whose lives preserved the great rhythms of pastoral and agricultural life, recorded in and mediated by the Bible, anonymous folk poetry, and related literary forms.³

Some commentators tend to emphasize one of these three elements – imagination, nature-place, or prophetic ordinary language – at the expense of the other two. Charles Larmore notes that it is “something of a cliché that the Romantics introduced a new sense of belonging” both to a place and to a particular human community identified with a specific place. Larmore defends this sense of belonging by endorsing J. G. Herder’s thought that “The blurred heart of the indolent cosmopolitan is a shelter for no one.”⁴ Herder returning from Italy to Weimar and Wordsworth returning from France to the Lake District are central images of Romanticism’s actual and imaginative itinerary, under this emphasis. Already in 1793 Wordsworth’s sense in *Descriptive Sketches* of natural sites of recovery was attacked as clichéd by Thomas Holcroft.

He is the happiest of mortals, and plods, and is forlorn, and has a wounded heart. . . . More descriptive poetry! Have we not enough! Must eternal changes be rung on uplands and lowlands, and nodding forests, and brooding clouds, and cells, and dells, and dingles?⁵

2 Rene Wellek, “The Concept of Romanticism in Literary Scholarship,” *Comparative Literature* 1 (1949), pp. 1–23, 147–72; reprinted in Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 161.

3 Donald G. Marshall, “Forward: Wordsworth and Post-Enlightenment Culture,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. vii–xxiii, at p. vii.

4 Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 24, 38–9, citing J. G. Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784), bk. 8, §5. See also James Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), for a development of this Burkean theme in Wordsworth.

5 Thomas Holcroft, *Monthly Review* (October 1793), pp. 216–18; cited in Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 332.

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Larmore elsewhere stresses the Romantic conception of the powers and importance of individualized “creative-responsive imagination,” aptly noting both that Romantic individualism stands in tension with the emphasis on belonging and that his own project is only selectively “to draw out those strands of the Romantic legacy that connect with our present interests.”⁶ According to this conception, “our sense of reality, and of the claims it makes on us, is inseparable from the creative imagination.”⁷ We see and feel and hear not just naked material quiddities, but the sunlight and the breeze in that jagged fir tree, or playing over that ruined sheepfold, together with attendant memories and anticipations of achievement and loss, endurance and mortality.⁸ The thought here is that without the exercise of imaginatively informed, thoughtful perception there is no human habitation of reality, no place in reality for human life. It is creative-responsive imagination that both finds habitations for mindedness within natural reality and envisions further ideal habitations in the face of present disappointments. In exercising creative-responsive imagination, the Romantic poet aims, in Larmore’s phrase, not only at the sublime but also at “the recovery of *the magic of everyday life*.”⁹

Hegel likewise trenchantly notes the emphasis in Romantic art on the individual mind’s internal motions of perception fused with envisioning, in order to criticize its subjectivism, himself arguing that a lasting home for humanity can be found only in the development of appropriate social institutions, not within the individual mind.

Now since spirituality has [in Romantic art] withdrawn into itself out of the external world and immediate unity therewith, the sensuous externality of shape is for this reason accepted and represented . . . as something inessential and transient; and the same is true of the subjective finite spirit and will, right down to the particularity and caprice of individuality, character, action, etc., of incident, plot, etc. The aspect of external existence is consigned to contingency and abandoned to *the adventures designed by an imagination* whose caprice can mirror what is present to it, *exactly as it is*, just as readily as it can jumble the shapes of the external world and distort them grotesquely. For this external medium has its essence and meaning no longer, as in classical art, in itself and its own sphere, but in the heart which finds its manifestation in itself instead of in the external world and its form of reality, and this reconciliation with itself it can preserve or regain in every chance, in

6 Larmore, *Romantic Legacy*, pp. 7, 35.

7 Ibid., p. 8.

8 Larmore elegantly traces the attendance of perception by memory and anticipation and thought in Wordsworth’s “Michael,” *ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

9 Ibid., p. 10.

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every accident that takes independent shape, in all misfortune and grief, and indeed even in crime.¹⁰

The most capacious vision of Romanticism as a set of commitments draws together the emphases on nature and imagination, as it sees poets forging modes of speech, nurtured by natural places and formed in imagination, that enable them to function as the *vates* of either a nation or humanity at large, as they and their audiences might recover from political despair. Writing in 1963, M. H. Abrams argues that the central Romantic poems – preeminently Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, with the “Prospectus” to *The Recluse* taken as affording its plot archetype – “turn on the theme of hope and joy and the temptation to abandon all hope and fall into dejection and despair.”¹¹ Within a movement in Wordsworth’s experience that Abrams terms “the apocalypse of imagination,”

the militancy of overt political action has been transformed into the paradox of spiritual quietism: under such militant banners is no march, but a wise passiveness. . . . And something close to Wordsworth’s evolution – the shift to a spiritual and moral revolution which will transform our experience of the old world – is also the argument of a number of the later writings of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and, with all his differences, Hölderlin.¹²

Eight years later, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams expands this characterization as he describes a general Romantic effort “to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home.”¹³ The central metaphor in Abrams’s conception of Romanticism’s aims, and even of its accomplishment that he would urge us to repeat, is that of rebirth, renewal, renovation in a place, on grounds, at home. This rebirth is to be shared in by humanity in general, as it awakens or reawakens to possibilities of human life in nature, through following and sharing imaginatively in the movement of the poet’s exemplary mind-in-nature. Wordsworth’s “song will be an evangel to effect a spiritual resurrection among mankind – it will ‘arouse

10 G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Introduction to Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 81. First emphasis added.

11 M. H. Abrams, “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age,” in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 26–72, at p. 55.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 58, 59–60.

13 Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 12.

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the sensual from their sleep / Of death' ["Prospectus to *The Recluse*," lines 813–14] – *merely by showing what lies within any man's power to accomplish*, as he is here and now."¹⁴ Humanity is to come to live not only in hope but further in accomplishment of felt meaningfulness through finding, in the poet's exemplary progress, how mind and nature are fitted to one another, so as to sustain a human life of hope, fulfillment, and social peace under the terms of a larger, naturalized-supernatural covenant.

Impressive though this picture is of the poet as seer, possessed of a powerful imagination stimulated by a natural place into the production of vision on behalf of humanity, it is also not hard to see how it can be criticized. In broadest terms, Romanticism is typically faulted, following Hegel's lead, for its subjectivism: too much visionary blathering; too little attention to both material reality and social forces. Larmore, who notes this criticism in order himself then to defend the Romantic imagination, unpacks the charge against Romanticism of *subjective occasionalism*, put forward by the early-twentieth-century political theorist Carl Schmitt. According to this charge,

Refusing to acknowledge the demands that reality places upon thought, [the Romantics] see the world as but the occasion for the artistic mind to assert its sovereignty. Reality counts only as the pretext for the imagination to express itself, to make up how it would like things to be, to "aestheticize." For the Romantic, Schmitt writes, "everything becomes an occasion for anything."¹⁵

Romanticism is here stigmatized as a poetry of self-indulgence and evasion.

This criticism of Romanticism as a form of subjectivism has taken two different but related forms, depending on the critic's sense of the natures of the material and social realities that Romanticism supposedly evades. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, and continuing up until at least the mid-1960s, Romanticism was criticized for sentimentalism, or wallowing in the personal, at the expense of a due respect for social convention, social order, and the classic. This line of criticism was most prominently furthered by T. S. Eliot, as for example in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), where he criticizes "our tendency," generated by our own uncritical absorption in Romantic sentimentalism, "to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁵ Larmore, *Romantic Legacy*, p. 4, citing Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1919), p. 24.

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anyone else.”¹⁶ In fact Eliot’s position, even in this essay, modulates toward something more interesting than a simple defense of the classic and of regnant social values, as he later acknowledges that “the mind of Europe . . . is a mind which changes” and that “newness is essential,” at least the sort of newness that engages with and modifies an “ideal order” of “existing monuments.”¹⁷ A purer defense of classicism against Romanticism appears in Irving Babbitt’s somewhat earlier *The New Laokoön* (1910). Babbitt criticizes Romanticism, exemplified for him by Rousseau and Wordsworth, for its “*eleutheromania*: the instinct to throw off . . . all limitations whatsoever.”¹⁸ Babbitt finds Tolstoy guilty of this in the largeness of his sympathies, Nietzsche in his resistances to any checks on his will, and Schlegel in nearly everything. To give way to this instinct is to reject a “true humanism” (189) and instead to allow one’s mind simply to wander, substituting reverie for thought that grasps the nature and importance of social order. “Wordsworth,” Babbitt writes, “would have us believe that to become wise a man needs merely to sit down on an ‘old gray stone’ and ‘dream his time away.’ . . . The romantic indolence . . . [has] no ‘determinate object’ and [is] not truly selective” (188–9). Against these lacks of selectivity and focus on an object, Babbitt defends, to the point of hysteria, “the truly classic,” that which honors “the broad, masculine, and vigorous distinction” (x), in contrast with Romantic confusion, which is “intended primarily for women and men in their unmasculine moods – for the tired scientist and the fagged philologist and the weary man of business” (244). In calling for a renovated classicism in literature and criticism, Babbitt seeks to reinstall an order of decorum and taste, a set of boundaries, that is simultaneously aesthetic and social, against what he sees as a gathering flood of sentiment, populism, femininity, and confusion. It is not uncommon still to hear Romanticism described and criticized in these terms in casual conversation.

A second, stronger indictment of Romanticism as subjective evasion has developed over the past fifteen or so years, under the influence of late Marxist theories of the influence of social structures on artistic production. Romantic tracings of movements of situated imagination are seen here too as evasions of the social, but this time of the recognition of a social order suffused with opposition and antagonism. Thus John Barrell charges that the composure or balance that is represented, he thinks, as the outcome of the isolate imagination’s encounter with nature in the typical Romantic

16 T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *The Egoist* (1919); reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eds. M. H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 2198–2205, at p. 2198.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 2200, 2199–2200, 2199.

18 Irving Babbitt, *The New Laokoön* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 196.

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poem is an image of human accomplishment that serves not the interests of persons in general, but the sectarian interests of the middle class and of men.

[The] notion of balance, as something which proceeds from a position beyond the political, is in fact a thoroughly political notion. That position, a middle point between and above all merely partial and particular situations, bears a close resemblance to a certain ideal construction of the situation of the middle class – neither aristocratic nor vulgar, neither reactionary nor progressive. And similarly, the balance and resolution which literary texts seek to achieve bear a close resemblance to the political balance which, in England especially, was both cause and effect of the increasing power of the middle class, and which has made the notion of “balance” itself a term of value with a crucial function in middle-class ideology, underwriting the political authority of “consensus” or the “middle ground,” by representing as irrational extremism whatever cannot, or whatever refuses to be, gathered into the middle ground. . . . The universal, the fully human position, from which properly literary texts, and properly literary criticism, can be produced, is also a masculine position.¹⁹

Even more sharply, Marjorie Levinson argues that the Romantic imagination’s encounter with nature is both a suppression of the political and, as such, a weapon in the class struggle. That encounter props up the fiction – useful to the middle class in its struggle for social hegemony – that the most important human problems can be solved through taking a walk in the woods.

Romantic transcendence is a bit of a white elephant. . . . No one would wish to deny the heroic uses of retreat, but one would wish to see whether they also serve more urgent interests, such as *accommodating* the poet to the dominant social structures, without whose recognition he has no voice to praise *or* condemn his times. . . . In order to hear again the voice of a man speaking to men, one must expose that powerful definition as a platform, one that denies the historicity and instrumentality of literature.²⁰

Working out this stance through a close reading of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” in particular, Levinson argues that the poet “excludes from his field certain conflictual sights and meanings – roughly, the *life* of things” (25): class conflict over the possession of the instruments of the reproduction of social life. “The primary poetic act [of ‘Tintern Abbey’] is the suppres-

19 John Barrell, *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 5–6.

20 Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 57, 56.

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sion of the social. [It] achieves its fiercely private vision by directing a continuous energy toward the nonrepresentation of objects and points of view expressive of a public – we would say, ideological – dimension” (37–8). Levinson supports these claims by undertaking “to elaborate some general, then concrete and immediate conditions of the poem’s transcendentalizing impulse” (25), that is, to trace the linguistic mechanisms through which details of social life are noticed by the poet and then overwritten or subjectivized as privately symbolic. To a canny reader, “Tintern Abbey” then emerges as a “palimpsest” (34) whose overwritings and suppressions can be read, in specific detail, as archetypes of ultimately self-betraying Romantic evasion in general.

The charge against Romanticism of the evasion of social reality has been worked out most fully – in the widest theoretical terms and with reference to various Romantic authors and poetic strategies – by Jerome J. McGann in *The Romantic Ideology*. McGann too notes

that familiar argument of Romantic and Romantic-influenced works: that poetry, and art in general, has no essential relation to partisan, didactic, or doctrinal matters. . . . Romantic poetry develops an argument that [complex sociopolitical divisions and conflicts] can only be resolved at the level of the mind’s idea or the heart’s desire. The Romantic position . . . is that the poet operates at such levels of reality, and hence that poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transiencies of this time and that place.²¹

McGann too criticizes this position as an evasion and suppression of sociopolitical conflict as the real life of things. Romantic poems, he writes, “tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations. This act of evasion, as it were, operates most powerfully whenever the poem is most deeply immersed in its cognitive (i.e., its ideological) materials and commitments” (82).

A principal reason why we are now able to be aware of Romantic plots and philosophical stances as occlusions and evasions, according to McGann, is that our sociopolitical position is different. Though we are neither free of nor clear-sighted about our own entanglements in historical nexus of power and conflict, we are at least differently entangled, so that we are afforded some distance from and some vision of what is now for us past. In McGann’s formulation,

21 Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 69.

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This book conceives that our present culture has advanced, for better and for worse, well beyond those forms of consciousness which came to dominance in the Romantic Period and which are the object of this study. . . . In my view ideology will necessarily be seen as false consciousness when observed from any *critical vantage*, and particularly from the point of view of a materialist and historical criticism. Since this book assumes that a critical vantage can and must be taken toward its subject, the ideology represented through Romantic works is *a fortiori* seen as a body of illusions. (13, 12)

To suppose otherwise – that is, not to see that we are beyond Romanticism, and not to “clarify and promote” our difference from it – is “to serve only the most reactionary purposes” (2) of one’s society. It is to be a conservator both of increasingly stale literary values and of social orders that can prop themselves up only through repression, in the face of the continuing historical dynamics of material class struggles.

Here McGann’s analysis, drawing on the late Marxisms of Althusser (see Chapter 9) and Macherey, emphasizes the dynamic persistence of struggles over the means of the reproduction of social life and over the social surplus generated in a reproduction cycle. Different groups have different relations to these means and different legally sanctioned entitlements to shares in the surplus; but always there is an underlying “truth about social relations: that the rich and the ruling classes dominate the poor and the exploited” (8). Romanticism – functioning in its own terms of imagination and nature as “a closed idealistic system” (9), according to McGann – is simply, or not so simply, one complex, self-deluding story about human powers and possibilities of life that is retailed by intellectuals who are themselves the “first dupes” (8) of the social system they elaborate and defend.

It is, McGann argues, all too understandable, and human, and interesting that self-deluding idealist defenses of always already-decaying social forms should be mounted, particularly by educated intellectuals who remain just at the margins of the dominant social group. But no such idealist defense of any social forms can either stand or deserve our allegiance. The configurations of social/material conflict just will change. “Time and the world’s force will obliterate the material being of the past. . . . All human culture is bound for the abyss” (147).

It is hard not to feel the force of the critical materialist-historicist stance that Barrell, Levinson, and McGann work out, and it would be unreasonable not to feel it. Human history is significantly a record of materially motivated social violence and repression. Barrell, Levinson, McGann, and other critics have found manifold bits of textual detail in which Romantic

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writers seem *sotto voce* to acknowledge and then insistently to deny the social conflicts of their times. In reading for such details, criticism of this kind manages both to avoid aestheticizing the literary text into an object of absorbed but contentless formal worship *and* to escape any simple reductionism, insofar as literary texts in general are taken subtly both to reflect and to engage quasi-critically, through displacement and apparent counterplotting, with the social conflicts that surround them. It is by no means clear to which patterns of idealization, to which imaginative envisionings of human possibilities, we ought attach our trusts. Any plots of human possibility, and preeminently Romanticism's, seem – at least when most literalized – one-sided, and destined at best to function for a time as sectarian weapons in the shaping of social imagination, thence to die when the pattern of regnant social conflict changes and they are no longer serviceable.

Yet how are we to react to the facts of persistent social/material conflict and to Romantic envisionings of human possibility in the face of them? How do we react? Can we, and do we, just stand apart, critically, in clear consciousness that Romantic imagination and its material situation are simply, in McGann's phrase, "from our point of view – *different*" (2)? Is it even so clear that we have quite fully grasped the workings of Romantic imagination, when we have focused our attentions on its most literalized envisionings?

Here it is worth noticing what Geoffrey Hartman has aptly called the "special negativity"²² – the resistance to stable envisioning – of Wordsworth's style and, these essays argue, of Romantic poetic imagination in general at its most powerful. This resistance in Wordsworth takes the form of continual swerves back into self-scrutiny, as he anxiously queries his ability to formulate an authoritative doctrine of value (Chapter 6). In Hölderlin it takes the form of philosophical stuttering in syntactic ambiguity, leaving a demonstrative gesture toward his, and our, divided and self-divided condition that remains unhealed, in the face of the self-occlusion of the divine-absolute (Chapters 2, 5, 12). In Keats, and then later in Updike, it takes the form of allowing envisioning to be distracted by the protagonist's intense and unexpected engagements with sensual surfaces, such as those with which Augustine struggled in attempting to find his plot (Chapter 11). Or it takes the form of multiple, overlapping envisionings, without any single master plot, and often ending in either ambiguity or tragedy. The author's powers of envisioning human freedom and fulfillment are

²² Hartman, *Unremarkable Wordsworth*, p. 208.