

Romantic Achievements

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The history of Romantic poetry in England falls into two sections. In one, a bold and original outlook is developed and practised. In other, it is criticized or exaggerated or limited. On the one hand, there is straight line of development, on the other hand, there are variations and divagation and secessions.

But both sections belong to a single movement which rises from a prevailing mood of longing for something more complete and more satisfying than the familiar world. Such a mood, of course, is not in the least new or uncommon, but in the Romantic period and afterwards it dominated many creative minds and had an enormous influence on poetry.

This was truly a European phenomenon. France, Germany, Russia and Spain all show it, but almost alone in England is the poetry which rises with a visionary insight into superior order of being. There is hardly a trace of this in Hugo or Heine or Lermontov or Esronceda. They have their full share of Romantic

longing , but almost nothing of Romantic vision. Indeed, almost the only Continental poets who resemble the great five are the German, Friedrich Holderlin, and the Russian , Fedor Tyutchev. Holderlin sought to find through a living Germany the lost vision of the Greek gods, and Tyutchev, who had something like Wordsworth's capacity for responding to the unregarded appeal of natural things, saw behind them another world of powers and dangers and conflicts.

These are exceptions. The five English poets did something to which there is no parallel in their age. Their works were a peculiar kind. They were so original and so devoted to their special aim, they excite the readers with their wonderful capacity of imagination. Not all poets were as fortunate as Wordsworth and Keats their discontents could be cured by contact with nature which lay at their doors, or that, by following their instinctive love of visible things, they could find themselves in the presence of what they called 'eternity'. Others were content to dream on the chance that they might someday prove to be true, but they did not really care very much whether this happened or not.

Of this number, Poe is a notable example. In him the impulse to escape was so powerful that he surrendered to it and did not care what relations his dreams might have to come to the common world. The result is that his poetry touches

actuality at too few points and even then in a tentative, shrinking way. His work has still the attraction which belongs to youthful desires, but, despite its varied accomplishment, it never quite moves as a record of natural experience and is a criticism of life only in the sense that it is a rejection of it.

Poe's ultimate failure is a comment on the Romantic position, which makes it possible for a man to be so absorbed in the Beyond that he pays little attention to the here and now. In contrast to Poe are those other poets who spoiled their work in an opposite way, by assuming the airs of visionaries although they had no visions. It was all too easy to enjoy irresponsible fancies for their own sake and to persuade oneself that did not matter what was said, provided that it was new and exciting.

The achievements of Romantics is the narrations of Eco-criticism today. Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. But should we call it 'ecocriticism' or 'green studies'. Ecocriticism , as it now exists in the USA , takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrate nature, the life force , and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson(1803-82), Margaret Fuller (1803-50)and Henry David Thoreau (1817-62).All three were members of the group of New England writers , essayists and philosophers known

collectively as transcendentalists , the first major literary movement in America to achieve cultural independence from European models.

The UK version of ecocriticism or green studies takes its bearings from the British Romanticism of the 1790s rather than American transcendentalists of 1940s. The founding figure of the British side is the critic Jonathan Bate, author of *Romantic Ecology : Wordsworth and Environmental Tradition*. (Routledge, 1991) British Eco-critics also make the point that many of their concerns are evident (before the term 'ecocriticism') in Raymond William's book *The Country and City* (Chatto and Windus , 1973)

If we return to the four environmental areas , it will be clear that most of what is called 'nature writing' concerns the two middle ones: eighteenth –century topographical writing , which might be exemplified by James Thomson's *The Season* (1730), Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in Country Churchyard' (1751) and William Cowper's *The Task* (1785) had area three as its preferred location, while British Romantic writing , like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805) often centered on area two, but American transcentalist of the nineteenth century was predominantly interested in area one (mountain ranges, prairies, colossal cataracts, space itself)

Areas three and four are often the settings for domestic fiction and lyric poetry, both of which centre upon relationships between human beings , while the first two areas are the preferred settings for epic and saga, which centre on relations on between human beings and cosmic forces (fate, destiny and deity)

Reflecting on the achievements of Romantics, the notion of Anthropocene had strong impact on ecocriticism. Its attributes and effects are worth debating. The current consensus (2017) seems to be its starting date. It enables the effects of nuclear bombs , nuclear tests and nuclear accidents to become decisive, but plays down the effects the effects of at least a couple of hundred years of industrial , steam-powered pollution- Ruskin's conviction , as a systematic and life-long observer ,that the quality of air and light had very much changed since his own childhood in 1820s.

Another development since the previous edition of this book is the increasing prominence in anthropocentric eco-studies of Timothy Morton, a British –born scholar of the Romantic period who , at the time of writing is a professor in the English Department at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Morton's early work, as represented by *Shelly and the Revolution of Taste* (1995)and *The Poetics of Space* (2000) was a blended post-structuralist/postmodernist/Marxist 'take'on

aspects of Romantic writing. In the decade of roughly 1995-2005, there was a shift towards 'commodification' in literary criticism with a spate of books being published about the depiction of objects, substances in literature. This later developed into what became more generally known as 'object studies' or studies in 'material culture' and then fully blown, so to speak, as 'Thing Theory'.

This drew upon the theory of Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, and others and this whole constellation of interests was characterized by an intensified concern with the thingness and materiality and switching of attentions to human interactions with, and influence on or by, objects. All this represented a major turn in literary study, which had previously centered mainly on human relations, interactions, etc, with other humans, so that places, objects and commodities, and so on were merely the 'props' which featured in human drama. The 'turn' represented by the 'new materialism' or 'post-humanist materiality' approach directs the spotlight elsewhere, or elsewhere as well, to be more precise, and to continue with the theatre metaphor. All this can be viewed as repeating in new ways the decentering of humanity and human agency which is seen in different forms in most of the theories.

References

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