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What We Owe the Romantics

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ABSTRACT

Romanticism is recognized as a wellspring of modern-day environmental thought and enthusiasm for nature-preservation, but the character of the affinities between the two is less well understood. Essentially, the Romantics realised that nature only becomes a matter for ethical concern, inspiration and love when the mind and sensibility of the human observer/agent are properly attuned and receptive to its meaning. That attunement involves several factors: a more appropriate scientific paradigm, a subtler appreciation of the impact that the setting of human dwelling, especially landscape, may have on character; the discovery of 'life' and spontaneity as a motif in science and art; a deeper and more complex sense of time; and a feel for place drawn from the life-world rather than physics or economics. Romanticism invented a new language and set of descriptions to illuminate all of these things, one we neglect or forget at our peril.

KEYWORDS

Romanticism, Enlightenment, Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schelling, vitalism, landscape, time, wilderness

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It has long been recognised that modern environmentalism emerged from the Romantic movement and associated currents of German idealism and American transcendentalism (Oelschlaeger 1991; Roszak 1972; Glacken 1976; Hargrove 1986; Nash 1982). The Romantics gave expression to a new sensibility that anticipated and even partly evoked that of contemporary nature writers and environmental crusaders. This elective affinity has been reinforced by the modern prejudice that the 'Enlightenment' and 'humanism' are arch-antagonists of a biocentric worldview (Ophuls 1997; Ehrenfeld 1978; Merchant 1980; Leiss 1972; Berman 1981). Since the Romantics, too, frequently looked at the Enlightenment with a jaundiced eye, denouncing its mechanistic or utilitarian accounts of nature, they appear to have been environmentalists *avant la lettre*. We shall argue that this genealogy is wrong in its approach and assumptions, but correct in its conclusions. The Romantic movement was still 'humanistic', for its primary impetus was the all-sided development of the individual rather than the investigation and preservation of the natural world. Yet the Romantics' scepticism about the Cartesian-Galilean image of nature led them down paths that anticipated both ecology and the theory of natural selection. More importantly, they believed that people exiled from or insensitive to nature's deeper rhythms and patterns forfeit an essential aspect of their humanity. In that sense Romantic humanism did indeed anticipate essential impulses of modern-day environmentalism.

We will characterise Romanticism as environmentalism's 'predecessor culture', one from which our contemporaries may still recover important insights. The ongoing shift in environmental ethics toward predominantly scientific-objectivising and/or economic justifications may obscure the Romantics' great discovery: that nature only becomes a matter for ethical concern, inspiration, love and protection once certain complex shifts have occurred in the sensibility of the subject. The Romantics understood that a deeper awareness of our connections to nature requires a new kind of symmetry or mutuality between subject and object and an appropriate set of descriptions to evince that mutuality. The language they fashioned to accomplish this differed *toto coelo* from the one devised by classical liberals and their heirs in political economy, a lesson Jack Turner would have us remember: 'By now, the language of economics (and law) exhaustively describes our world and hence becomes our world … In accepting their descriptions we allow a set of experts to define our concerns in economic terms and predetermine the range of possible responses. Often we cannot even raise the issues important to us… Every vocabulary shapes the world to fit a paradigm' (Turner 1996: 58–62).

We begin from the conviction that the object language of such disciplines, however well-suited it might seem to express the insights and commitments of ecological philosophy, cannot support their full weight. We believe that the humanistic traditions associated with phenomenology and even (*mutatis mutandis*) hermeneutics provide a much firmer foundation for them, even though at first

sight the cognitive interests of these traditions' founding thinkers, men like Dilthey and Husserl, seem remote from problems of ecological sustainability and nature preservation. The broader argument for the relevance of humanistic approaches and concerns to environmentalism surpasses the limits of this article. We have outlined it in other forums (Hinchman 1995; 2004; 2005) and it has been ably defended by eminent contemporary thinkers such as Erazim Kohák (1984), Albert Borgmann (1984) and David Abram (1996). But, to elucidate some of the points to follow, we would like to recall three of the crucial premises of phenomenology. First, the starting-point for phenomenological reflection is the world as we experience it, as it presents itself to us prior to all theorising. Second, we experience that world as making sense, or as 'a matrix of meaning' (Kohák 1978: 18). That is, prior to all scientific abstraction we inhabit a pre-theoretical, meaning-laden 'life-world'. As Bill McKibben (2004) has proposed, one may develop an environmentalist 'argument from meaning' in defence of that life-world. Finally, the life-world is thoroughly historical, since the meanings it evinces form lattices stretching far back into the past and extending into the future toward as-yet-incomplete projects. Thus, understanding our relationship with our physical environment, which is part of that life-world, presupposes an interpretative or hermeneutical effort to reconstruct the history of human experiences of it. In the case of the present essay, we shall have to investigate the ways that sensitive observers (here the Romantics) have described their own contact with and responses to the natural world in works of prose and poetry. These testimonies, as much as any scientific data, show what an intact natural world has meant – and still may mean – to us. We owe the Romantics not only the invention of a new sensibility, but the perennial possibility of reliving it and thus potentially relearning the reasons why the natural world was, and ought to be, a matter of such vital concern.

A word about defining Romanticism: some scholars regard it as an outgrowth of pastoral and Arcadian traditions reaching back to Roman times and still vibrant in eighteenth-century England (Williams 1973: 127; Buell 1995: 54). Others interpret it as a secularisation of inherited theological ideas (Abrams 1973), or as a subjectivist movement that portrayed the world as a stage for the display of poetic sensibility (Larmore 1996: 1–7; Taylor 1989: 368; Levere 1981). We shall leave these disputes to literary critics. We provisionally adopt the definition offered by Novalis, a self-described Romantic, that the adjective 'Romantic' means giving to the common a higher meaning, to the usual an unusual look, to the known the dignity of the unknown. In short, Romanticism concerns the 'recovery of the magic of everyday life' (Larmore 1966: 10). It involves both a discovery of what is already objectively present in the world around us and an active intervention by mind or imagination to bring it to light and reveal its true colors.

ANTICIPATIONS OF ECOLOGY

Some claim that Romanticism was the 'antithesis of everything scientific' (Pepper 1986: 77, 89). But careful scholars have come to recognise that such charges are false (Miller 2005: 298, 305). Many Romantic writers were scientists themselves, or at least enthusiastic amateurs bent on assimilating the latest research. In fact, much of nineteenth-century biology developed from early German Romanticism, which attracted not only poets and philosophers but scientists of the first rank, including Johann Friedrich Blumenbach and Alexander von Humboldt (Richards 2002: xiv, 216–229, 519–526). Goethe did considerable work on the origin of colours, optics and plant and animal morphology, and influenced Ernst Haeckel, the founder of ecology, by developing proto-evolutionary ideas of natural adaptation. Goethe stressed the way in which organisms were shaped 'from the outside' by the environments to which they had to adapt, and – though never accepting the complete indeterminacy of plant forms – rejected final causes as explanations for floral and faunal development (Miller 2005: 302). The following prescient observation helps us appreciate how scientific this Romantic writer was:

> 'The fish exists for the water' seems to me to say much less than 'the fish exists in and through the water'. For the latter expresses much more clearly that which is dimly concealed in the former: namely the idea that a creature we call a fish is only possible on the condition that there is an element that we call water in which it not only exists but becomes … The decisive shape is, as it were, an inner core that is defined and shaped variously by the external element. (Goethe n.d.; L.H. translation)

Coleridge studied science in Germany, and in England maintained close ties to some of that nation's leading scientists (Levere 1981: 2, 18). He believed that the foremost task of philosophy was to reconcile moral autonomy with natural necessity. Thoreau read Humboldt and Lyell, as well as Darwin's *Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle*, and published research on forest succession in New England. Even the less scientifically-inclined Wordsworth confessed that naturalists' precise descriptions enhanced the beauty of organisms by revealing more about their properties and powers than casual observation would disclose (Abrams 1971: 310).

How then did Romanticism get associated with an animus against science? What many Romantics opposed was not science *per se*, but the reductionist variety derived from Galileo, Descartes and their mechanistic acolytes. The Renaissance legacies of neo-Platonism, Hermeticism and historicism, which had gone underground for several centuries, made a startling comeback during the early Romantic period (Taylor 1989: 378; Robertson 1962: 193; Beiser 2003: 72; Hinchman 2005: *passim*). They were seen as a 'viable counter-metaphysics' capable of furnishing a competing paradigm to the mechanistic world view

increasingly challenged by the rise of new sciences like geology, or advances in old ones like biology and chemistry (Abrams 1973: 171; Beiser 2003: 140; Barzun 1961: 54; Kroeber 1994: 90–91). The mechanical paradigm seemed unable satisfactorily to explain life, organic relationships and historical development – indeed, anything particular or unique.

The counter-metaphysics so attractive to Romantics had several components that anticipated contemporary ecology. Schelling distilled the ideas of Plotinus, Bruno and Spinoza as well as Kant and Fichte into a *Naturphilosophie* that attracted a circle of admirers in Germany as well as the more cerebral English Romantics, notably Coleridge. Against Kant, Schelling argued that mind and nature, subject and object, and other comparable dichotomies could be resolved into an absolute identity by tracing out each side of the polarity to the full development until it revealed its identity with its putative other. Above all, nature would begin to exhibit more and more spontaneity, self-initiated motion and organic complexity as one moved up the scale toward higher life forms or 'powers'. That is, nature would demonstrate 'emergent properties', including even freedom, for which mechanistic explanations could not fully account. As a result, mind and nature could be regarded as alternative aspects of a self-same reality, not radical antitheses. In short, Romantic nature philosophy was not a speculative deviation from mainstream empirical science, but was congruent with the most advanced thinking of its day (Beiser 2003: 156; Richards 2002: 115–116).

Furthermore, because they embraced an organic paradigm, the Romantics and their successors tended to notice the interdependencies that knitted together different species, as well as humans and their natural environment. Romanticism has in fact been defined as the quest for harmony within a higher, more encompassing order (Taylor 1989: 369; Marx 1964). Coleridge and Schelling held that no part of nature is fully intelligible until one has understood the whole (Levere 1981: 83; Beiser 2003: 169). It was convictions such as these that led Goethe to the threshold of the idea of natural selection, and inspired his successor, Haeckel, to launch the study of ecology. Schelling, too, moved closer to evolutionary thinking. He pointed out that we can explain organic beings through a gradual development of one and the same organisation, assuming we posit enough time for the transformations to take place: 'there would be no permanently existing entities; every product that seems now fixed in nature would exist only for a moment and, caught up in continual evolution, would be perpetually mutable' (Schroter 1927: 19; L.H. translation). Thus, modern ecological and evolutionary sciences are rooted in certain tendencies of Romantic thought

The Romantics were wrong in their wholesale denunciations of mechanism. Coleridge and Goethe were misled into undertaking crusades against Newton in the hope that another, more organic version of science could save the values that they wished to preserve. Yet that does not mean they were wrong to worry that the Enlightenment-inspired scientific paradigm yielded a distorted picture

of nature and of people's relationship with it. In fact, this was the case, but they could have made it more persuasively by framing a different image of human knowledge, psychology and experience. What had to be understood was that the scientific image of nature was a highly artificial product of abstraction and reduction, winnowed out from the intricate, multidimensional life-world. Rather than picking a fight with Newtonian science, they might have contented themselves with delineating the scope of that science and challenging its implicit claim to represent reality *tout court*, as Husserl, Dilthey and Gadamer would later do.

LIFE, FRESHNESS OF VISION AND SPONTANEITY

One critic has flatly asserted that 'the ground concept of Romanticism is life. Life is itself the highest good, the residence and measure of other goods' (Abrams 1973: 431). Accordingly, the organic, epitomised in the growing plant, became the Romantics' favourite metaphor. Coleridge, especially, associated life with the power of imagination that enables the genius to break through the encrustation of familiarity and produce 'freshness of sensation' and 'novelty' (Coleridge in Stauffer 1951: 155). In nature as well as in mind, the Romantics hoped to draw attention to the emergent properties (life, imagination, aesthetic appreciation) that hinted at powers of creativity.

The Romantics' discovery of life tended to coincide with the waning of the older mechanistic paradigm. Cutting-edge science in the 1790s seemed to be moving toward the conviction that nature possessed a self-formative, self-expressive power manifested in polarities of increasing complexity. The highest stage of nature's self-unfolding was manifested in activities of mind that revealed its deeper-lying structure (Richards 2002: 402, 405; Kluckhorn 1966: 27, 31; Beiser 2003: 21, 138). Poets and philosophers did not simply write *about* nature; they were nature writing about itself. That implied that the artistic depiction of nature would not necessarily count as inferior to its representation in scientific theory of the organicist stamp; the approaches were complementary and flowed from the same source. Schelling, for instance, thought that the biologist needed the poet's aesthetic judgment to penetrate nature's secrets (Richards 2002: 114). When the poets confessed their feeling of kinship with all life, they did not simply mean that animals' biological processes or genetic endowments resemble those in humans; rather, they refer to the self-directing, self-expressive impulses that appear in a meadow flower, a birdsong and a poem. Quite literally, insight into the life of nature was also insight into the self and its animating principles.

Wordsworth and Coleridge both gave poetic expression to vitalism. The latter's ancient mariner, having killed the symbol of life, the albatross, is becalmed in a sea in which nothing changes except the advance of decay, an image of the passivity and deadness of the mechanical universe. What releases him from this horror is the vision of sea snakes slithering through the putrefying ocean. The

mariner loves them for being alive, and love for kindred life frees him from the static, mechanical trap; change resumes, the winds blow and eventually carry him back home. Yet – as though still in the grip of mechanical processes – he is compelled by mysterious forces to repeat his tale to every passing stranger.

The evanescence of spontaneous delight in nature occasioned some of Wordsworth's finest poems, such as 'Intimations of Immortality':

> – But there's a Tree, of many, one,
> A single Field which I have looked upon.
> Both of them speak of something that is gone:
> The Pansy at my feet
> Doth the same tale repeat:
> Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
> (Selincourt 1940, v. 4: 280, lines 51–57)

The poet's reply to his own question suggests that the poetic imagination, joined to mature understanding, may eventually recover a spark of youthful spontaneity at a higher level of reflection, enabling the poet to 'see into the life of things' (Selincourt 1940, v. 2: 260, line 49). But for most unpoetic souls, maturation and socialisation mean a long march into 'the light of common day' (Selincourt 1940, v. 4: 281, line 76).

> Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
> And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
> Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!
> (Selincourt 1940, v. 4: 282, lines 127–129)

Life as the Romantics conceive it does not connote automatic internal processes like circulation or digestion. In people, at least, it is the capacity to recover the magic of everyday life, to feel and think in ways not preordained by social convention, to become intensely aware of all that surrounds us, rather than converting it into a static backdrop for human dramas. 'Life' – for humans, anyway – is the power to break through the crust of convention and experience the world as though for the first time.

We hear similar refrains from environmental writers today. Wendell Berry (1986: 90) attacks efforts to impose 'scientific exactitude' on 'living' complexities or to use living things as though they were machines. Aldo Leopold (1949: 173) describes the supreme virtue of a naturalist as 'perception', or sensitivity to events and presences in the natural environment that most people ordinarily overlook, whether because the former are too subtle or simply deemed beneath our notice.

NATURAL LANDSCAPES AND HUMAN SENSIBILITY

In the 'Prelude' Wordsworth observes that urban life presents a kaleidoscope of sensations likely to excite curiosity, shock, revulsion and confusion. There is always something new to see; yet beneath the 'blank confusion' the mind can find nothing to sustain it: only 'the same perpetual whirl of trivial objects, melted and reduced to one identity, by differences that have no Law, no meaning, and no end' (Stillinger 1965: 288). One is struck by the sheer weight of difference, the multiplication of forms, costumes, modes of entertainment. But since those differences do not resonate with the deeper chords of human character, they leave the observer jaded. Wordsworth saw London as a terrestrial cave (à la Plato) in which 'shapes and forms and tendencies … shift and vanish, change and interchange like spectres' (Stillinger 1965: 301). The physical setting of people's lives shapes their individual psychological development. Urban life, in particular, stimulates a hunger for excitement: 'gross and violent stimulants' (Selincourt, 1940, v.2: 389); yet the overload of sensory stimuli leaves little opportunity for a 'second look' at what we experience (Simpson 1987: 2). In sum, metropolitan living may impoverish our capacity for experience, numbing us to more subtle and slowly-developing forms.

The rural life and landscapes of Wales and the English Lake District assumed an almost mythic restorative and formative power in Wordsworth's career. They represent the antithesis of London, not least because their inhabitants are much freer and more self-reliant:

> Man free, man working for himself, his choice
> Of time, and place, and object… (Stillinger 1965: 291)

Second, the sparse population and quiet, settled life offer less direct stimulation to the senses, encouraging people to notice and reflect on the land itself. Natural landscape becomes a presence in their lives, apt to leave an imprint on their sensibility and character. Unlike the variegated, intense whirl of cities, the Lake District impressed on the mind just a few permanent objects, but ones that changed subtly with the weather, the seasons and the characteristic activities pursued at different times of year. Instead of meaningless differences, random variety and blank confusion, the setting of life in rural England conveyed a sense of order and permanence, of change within stable and predictable limits. In this sense Renaissance Platonism lived on in Wordsworth's poetry, with the Forms now drawn down from the transcendent realm and objectified in rocks, mountains, lakes and forests. Wordsworth's own verse expresses that idea gracefully and powerfully:

> Ye Presences of Nature in the sky
> And on earth! Ye Visions of the hills!
> And souls of lonely places! Can I think
> A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed

> Such ministry, when ye through many a year
> Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
> On caves and trees, upon woods and hills,
> Impressed upon all forms the characters
> Of danger or desire; and thus did make
> The surface of the universal earth
> With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
> Work like a sea? (Stillinger 1965: 203)

Wordsworth realised that his poetry embodied a novel conception of the way that nature affects human sensibility, and he defended it explicitly in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. In places like the Lake Country, 'the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity … [because they] are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature' (Selincourt 1940, v. 2: 386–387). Thus, rural enclaves acted almost like cultural amber, preserving modes of speech, thought and feeling, that were fading elsewhere under the onslaught of modernisation. There, a poet could discover the 'image of man and nature' as it once had been when the forms of nature spoke more directly to people and affected their mental and emotional life more profoundly. Writing of the Alpine Swiss, Wordsworth noted that 'here the traces of primaeval Man appear … Nature's child' (Birdsall 1984: 82).

The intuition that the land itself may mould our perceptions and sensibility unites many modern environmentalists with the Romantics. Edward Abbey echoes the poet in his description of the impression that Utah's Delicate Arch makes on the observer. For him, the natural world both presupposes and encourages a different view of oneself, an insight into a more elemental human reality easily lost sight of amid one's daily business. His comments also echo Novalis' definition of Romanticism as the recovery of the magic of everyday life.

> A weird, lovely, fantastic object like Delicate Arch has the curious ability to remind us – like rock and sunlight and wind and wilderness – that *out there* is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours … For a little while we are again able to see, as the child sees, a world of marvels … For if this ring of stone is marvelous then all which shaped it is marvelous, and our journey here on earth, able to see and touch and hear in the midst of tangible and mysterious things in themselves, is the most strange and daring of all adventures. (Abbey 1968: 41–42)

It is from the conviction that external landscapes shape the inner person that the modern enthusiasm for wilderness derives (Nash 1982: 47). The English Romantics were inveterate hikers and explorers of the remote mountains and forests. Coleridge practically invented mountaineering as a form of recreation (Levere 1981: 18). Wordsworth claimed to have walked some 175,000 miles, and had his spiritual epiphany atop Mount Snowden, memorialised in the 'Prelude' (Bate 1991: 49).

What set wild nature apart from its civilised counterpart was its remoteness from human use. As Emerson noted, the sky, the mountains, the wild animal 'give us delight *in and for themselves*' (Spiller 1954: 7). They evoke different feelings, thoughts and self-evaluations than a ploughed field or a barnyard, let alone a city. Wild places save people from the maze of mirrors in which a too self-reflexive culture can trap them. That notion of wilderness as a sphere that ought to remain exempt from utilitarian calculus has been taken up, of course, by modern environmentalists like Leopold (Gottlieb 1993: 33), Berry (1986: 29) and Turner (1996). For all of them wilderness helps establish a baseline sense of how the world would be if it were not subjected to the unrelenting pressure of human desires and resource-exploitation. Although the Romantics could not have foreseen that the natural environment would end up as besieged as it is today, they recognised the potential impact on it of what Abbey (1968: 45–67) called 'industrial tourism'. Wordsworth opposed a plan to bring a rail line to the Lake District, because he feared that day-tripping tourists on mass excursions would not really experience the land and its subtleties, while their presence would alter its rural, secluded ambience. The stance of these authors bespeaks more than elitism. They recognise that the natural world cannot be treated as a mere curiosity by gawking visitors without losing its power to stir and transform. So they recommend that tourists eschew mechanical conveyances in favour of walking. Wordsworth wrote a guidebook to the Lake District for that very purpose (Simpson 1987: 69–71). We must therefore take exception to the way that Pepper (1986: 79, 84) and others dismiss Romantic enthusiasm for wild, rural settings as a 'myth' and Arcadian/pastoral dream of a life and society that never existed. It is an indispensable tenet of both Romanticism and contemporary environmentalism that there really is something in rural and wilderness landscapes that might transform us, as long as they have not become mere tourist attractions or venues for 'extreme' sports.

What epitomised the Romantic sensibility was an overflowing sense that the religious promises of yore – an afterlife in which this 'vale of tears' would be left behind – do the earth an injustice. If we just look at the land around us, we will recognise that it is and always has been a paradise. Wordsworth intimated as much in the 'Prelude,' when he wrote of

> … the very world, which is the world
> Of all of us, – the place where, in the end,
> We find our happiness or not at all. (Stillinger 1965: 333)

As one critic observed: 'In Wordsworth, man's ancient dream of felicity is brought down from a transcendent heaven and located in this very world' (Abrams 1973: 289). Thoreau's sojourn at Walden Pond taught him a similar lesson: anyone can become the 'new Adam' who inhabits a pristine garden, an Eden (Abrams 1973: 412). Abbey (1968: 190) echoes their discovery: 'But the love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is

also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need – if only we had the eyes to see.'

But that, of course, is precisely the rub. Too few of us have eyes to see. Romanticism's mission was to teach people to cultivate their power of seeing, whether through poetry, novels, painting, music or (eventually) ecological science. The emphasis on life as against dead mechanical processes in nature has its exact counterpart in the summons to awaken the life within, the power of vision, perception and receptivity that circumstances – especially those connected to modern urban life – conspire to stifle. As Charles Taylor (1989: 372) comments, Romanticism was a quest to disclose a new 'way of experiencing our lives … and the larger natural order in which they are set.' Objective descriptions of landscape, organisms and natural interrelationships had the double task of revealing what nature was and creating or reviving the capacity to respond to it. This insight helps illuminate the paradox that Romanticism aspired simultaneously to represent artistically the inner truth of nature, and to express the self (Taylor 1989: 374). As Elaine Miller remarks, Goethe – as well as other Romantics – postulated a 'fundamental sympathy between the order of nature and the order of self-consciousness…' (Miller 2005: 303)

ROMANTIC RECONSTRUCTIONS OF TIME

The psychological theories propounded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were appallingly unsuited to make sense of Romantic intuitions about nature and the self. In particular, these theories offered an impoverished depiction of time. They fashioned from the Galilean/Newtonian worldview an image of the individual as pushed and pulled by expectations of future pleasures and pains, or recollections of past ones. The future looms as an inscrutable, disquieting source of possible pleasures and pains, while the past is at best an unreliable guide to successful behaviour.

The most striking examples of anti-Romantic conceptions of time may be extracted from the writings of Hobbes and Bentham. Hobbes compares human beings, perpetually fearful about the future (especially the afterlife), to the suffering Prometheus, their 'heart all the day long gnawed on by fear of death, poverty or other calamity' (Hobbes 1958: 93–94). Hobbes does not regard happiness as a state of mind, character or emotion, but as a fleeting feeling of pleasure that accompanies the satisfaction of a desire (Hobbes 1958: 61). Having attained an object of desire, the trick is to acquire the power to hang onto it. So life degenerates into a 'perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceases only in death' (Hobbes 1958: 86). Anxiety inevitably pervades the deepest layers of temporal experience and can never be extinguished even by the most cunning gambits of instrumental reason.

Bentham likewise places people under 'two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure,' that motivate all their action (Mack 1969: 85). And, like Hobbes, he worries about the tendency for fear to overwhelm society: not so much fear of the afterlife, in his case, but of crime. A theft in the neighbourhood stirs up painful feelings not only in the victim of the crime but in everybody else, the 'pain of apprehension' or 'alarm' caused by the fear that they might be next (Mack 1969: 118). As 'danger and alarm' spread throughout society, 'the pain is for a thousand, for ten thousand, for all'. Unless repressed, one theft could lead to 'universal and durable discouragement, a cessation of labour, and at last the dissolution of society' (Mack 1969: 119). As in Hobbes, anxiety about the future dominates the psyche, especially since the social bonds appeared so fragile to Bentham.

In both philosophers, the past has significance chiefly as the environment in which learning by association works and habits have therefore been acquired. Time resembles Newtonian space: an indifferent medium through which beings move along trajectories established in the past that are continually being modified by new forces active in the present or expected in the future. The chief task of wise legislators is prediction and control of the future. The tone, the language, the imagery here are so thoroughly instrumental, so wedded to a mechanistic or 'economic' paradigm of human behaviour, that they cannot disclose the complex interweaving of the tenses in actual human, lived time.

Indeed, because the entire temporal process is conceived so reductionistically, it is difficult to find language capable of evoking constitutive, meaningful ties to either past experiences or future possibilities. To the extent that people actually began to resemble the calculators of pain and pleasure that thinkers like Hobbes and Bentham supposed them to be, they would begin to lose those constitutive ties. Tocqueville, who often thought of America as the place where liberal psychology had 'come true', described its long-term consequences better than anyone else: 'In democratic peoples … the fabric of time is torn at every moment and the trace of generations is effaced. You easily forget those who have preceded you, and you have no ideas of those who will follow you … democracy…separates [man] from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in the solitude of his own heart' (Tocqueville 2000: 481–482).

Romantic authors sought to craft a novel language for capturing our experiences in and of time. That experience features a much more complex relationship to the past than the one articulated in the commonplaces of Enlightenment-era and 'economic' psychology. For Goethe, 'the so-called Romantic aspect of a region is a quiet feeling of sublimity *under the form of the past* or, what is the same, a feeling of loneliness, absence, isolation' (Richards 2002: 21). By this he meant that we may experience a place as still suffused, or even haunted, by what it used to be or by experiences we once had of it. That form of experience also pervades environmental thought, which is sensitive to the integrity, beauty

and stability of ecosystems and the disturbances that human activity may have imported into them. As Kroeber (1994: 55) notices, an ecosystem is temporal as well as spatial – an ongoing process made up of subordinate temporal processes. Immediate sensation is permeated by language that is both 'recollective and premonitory … '

It is Wordsworth, above all, who invented a new temporal structure meant to express the individual and collective experience of time as actually lived, not as abstracted by the pain–pleasure calculus. In that structure time draws us inexorably away from our immediate integration into the natural environment, yet also returns us to it at a higher, more reflective level, in which we can relive and reinterpret earlier events. So there is development and change in an individual life and sensibility, yet within that linear trajectory nests another, circular movement. In *Tintern Abbey* the mature Wordsworth, gazing down on the Wye Valley, thinks back to the hours he spent in the same spot during his youth, as well as the occasions when he recalled those times with relief and pleasure during his stay in the 'lonely rooms' of 'cities and towns'. Then, looking to the future, he adds:

> … here I stand not only with the sense
> Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
> That in this moment there is life and food
> For future years. (Selincourt 1940, v. 2: 261, lines 62–65)

Romantic time does not flow by at a constant rate; it eddies and swirls, densely present in certain defining experiences and moments that hold the tenses together. Each visit to the Wye Valley includes, recapitulates and anticipates the others; the later visits reconnect Wordsworth the man to the spontaneous, unself-conscious boy he once was. In such mediated experiences we encounter Wordsworth's renowned 'spots of time':

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> That with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought
> Or aught of heavier and more deadly weight,
> In trivial occupations, and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired. (Stillinger 1965: 345)

Wordsworth's spots of time foreshadow modern environmental thought in several ways. First, people sometimes bond to a specific place that has been experienced repeatedly in the many seasons and phases of life. All of us who have lived in and with the natural world have our own equivalent of the Wye Valley and Lake District. We sense that our experiences anchor us against the fraying and snapping of temporal bonds depicted by Tocqueville. Long and

thoughtful acquaintance with a place breeds both understanding of its subtleties and a sense of personal, psychological continuity that reflects the continuity of the place itself (Kemmis 1990). As Berry (1986: 45) remarks, a culture closely tied to the land will sustain 'ties across generations, sublimation of self-interest by bonds of loyalty, memory, and tradition'. But that requires – and helps foster – a more expansive sense of time, one stretching across generations with strong communal memories. Moreover, durable bonds across generations assuage the anxiety and alarm that Bentham and Hobbes associate with the human condition. Since our individual fates are so entwined with the destiny of our beloved places and their continuity through time, the only thing that can really turn one into a latter-day Prometheus is the fear that they will be destroyed by callous developers.

Second, to see time as circling back on oneself discourages the obsession with progress and technological mastery associated with the Cartesian/Baconian tradition. Meaning is sought not in what might be, but what already is or what may be slipping away. Indeed, as one critic notes, Romantic writing emphasises the way that an instant of consciousness, even an ordinary event, 'suddenly blazes up into revelation … the intersection of time and eternity' (Abrams 1973: 385). The psychological theories of Hobbes and Bentham could make no sense of such an experience; in order to do so, a different and more subtle language had to be invented.

Third, Wordsworth's spots of time suggest a programme for ecological investigation. Thoreau, among the Romantics and Transcendentalists, inaugurated that method. As a historical ecologist and inveterate wanderer, he came to think of the environment around Concord as a book missing many pages, a 'maimed and imperfect nature' (Worster 1994: 66) Only if we understand what that environment once was, might it be possible for us to try to restore it. More broadly, Thoreau aimed at a 'retrieval' of small, homely, rustic things that tie the present to the ancient past (Buell 1005: 401). Only those who revisit a place and come to know it intimately will perceive the changes wrought by human intervention over many years. Perhaps more importantly, attention to the passages and transitions in the natural world alerts observers to their own affinity to deep time, far older than merely human history. Leopold's (1949: 97) famous elegy to the crane illustrates that point:

> Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia, which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.

Leopold's encounter with the crane qualifies as a Wordsworthian 'spot of time' in which the present moment fuses with others past and future, though now

the past is far more ancient even than human memory can encompass. The crane lifts us out of the anxiety-ridden time experience of Hobbes and Bentham, and bestows a certain repose nourished by the reflection that our little lives intersect patterns far older and deeper than human civilisation. As Leopold (1949: 112) observes, 'to love what *was* is a new thing under the sun … To see America as history, to see destiny as a becoming, to smell a hickory tree through the still lapse of ages.'

Finally, the Romantics inherited the fascination of many Renaissance figures with historically unique cultural artefacts and natural kinds, rather than laws or law-like generalisations. Here it was Herder who made the greatest advances, substituting organic for mechanical metaphors in attempting to account for cultural efflorescence. Just as plants thrive in certain soils and not in others, so every *Volk* has a unique stock of historical memories and stories out of which it fashions its own idiosyncratic cultural artefacts (Abrams 1971: 204–205). To impose a uniform artistic regimen or universal standards of value, taste, behaviour or knowledge on all peoples would undermine the very conditions that fostered artistic creation. It is not a long step from Herder's theory concerning a *Volksgeist's* artefacts to the recognition that the earth itself teems with unique and unrepeatable creations of nature, each as valuable in its own way as the legends, poems and songs of a nation. The common thread is a new way of looking at time. Instead of seeing time as an inessential husk to be peeled away to lay bare the constant, mathematical relationships and laws beneath it, Romantics began to interpret it as a creative protagonist, tossing off cultural and natural products that, once gone, will never return, and therefore should be protected against wear and destruction. Nor is it a long step from Herder to Berry's emphasis on the fragility of culture and the imperative of nurturing its continuity and keeping its collective memories alive. The only conceptual move that needs to be made is to shift the level of argument from the entire nation (a rather artificial unit anyway) to the local community. But in any case, the Romantic obsession with concrete, historical particulars easily segues into the hermeneutical position of Gadamer: 'historical research does not endeavour to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a universal rule…Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness…to understand that something is so because it understands that it has come about so' (Gadamer 1993: 5) That position, in turn, perfectly captures the aims of ecologists like Leopold or Thoreau investigating the unique ecosystems of their localities.

ROMANTICISM AND THE SENSE OF PLACE

The reconstruction of time described above slides easily into a more intimate, nuanced sense of place. In the categories of economics and Enlightenment-era psychology, what matters is obtaining pleasure (or money, pleasure's place-

holder in economics) and avoiding pain. But Romantic writers tried to articulate a different feeling for the physical and emotional setting of a life. We saw earlier that they understood certain landscapes – mountains, crags, lakes – as beneficent influences on human character. We may now add that their project fit into a more ambitious quest to rediscover the earth, including its harshest terrain, as humanity's proper home (Abrams 1973: 12). Formerly, that would have seemed a strange and vaguely blasphemous enterprise, since mountains, seas and deserts were regarded as evidence of the destruction of Paradise. In contrast, Romantic authors value places more highly when they have not been intensively used and abused.

It is perhaps Goethe who gives the most succinct and poignant expression to the ethic of place through his rendition of the Philemon and Baucis legend, adapted from Ovid, in *Faust II*. By this point in the story, Faust has become a land reclamation specialist and developer in the best capitalist spirit. His factotum, Mephistopheles, has dyked and channelled the ocean, reclaiming land for housing and farms. However, Philemon and Baucis have lived amid the beach dunes from time immemorial, ringing the bell of their little chapel and aiding travellers. By the time the scene unfolds, Faust's reclaimed tract has completely encircled their hut and plot of land, which he now seeks to purchase. But the kindly old couple refuses his offer. This drives Faust to distraction, as his words attest when he hears the ringing of their chapel bell:

> That cursed bell. It hurts me cruelly like a stab in the dark. Before my eyes my dominion is complete, but from behind vexation teases me, reminding me with taunting noise that my vast estate is not unblemished. I don't possess the linden trees, nor the brown cottage, nor the crumbling chapel … It's a thorn in the flesh, an offence to the sight. (Goethe 1970: 190)

He orders Mephistopheles to evict the couple, explaining: 'I want those lindens for my recreation. This handful of trees that are not my trees, wrecks everything … [T]he freedom of my mighty will is brought to nothing here in the sand' (Goethe 1970: 191). Mephistopheles sends his enforcers to do the job, but they end up killing Philemon and Baucis and burning down their cottage.

Although both Faust and the old couple want the same place, their attachments are entirely different. The personal histories of Philemon and Baucis are intertwined with this plot of land on which they had always lived so lightly and gently. They hold out against Faust's pressure because the land is so much a part of them that they cannot envision living anywhere else. Faust, however, only wants their cottage because it is not his; its mere existence reminds him that he does not exercise total control, that his will is limited. Of course, he has benevolent intentions and boasts about the human benefits of his land reclamation scheme, but at bottom it appeals to him primarily as confirmation of his power. 'Place' for him lacks personal associations; it is merely an objectification of will: something to own, not to inhabit. Goethe here anticipates a whole genre

of environmental writing, in which the sense of place is central (e.g., Krutch 1971; Dillard 1975; Callenbach 1975; Meyer 2001, ch.6)).

Thoreau adds another dimension to the Romantics' sense of place by linking it more explicitly to exploration of the local environment. Unlike Wordsworth, who praised the noble simplicity of the dwellers in his home region, Thoreau criticised his neighbours for their obsession with unremitting toil, a self-imposed 'servitude' and the 'quiet desperation' it inflicted on them (Thoreau 1962: 5–6), which blinded them to the marvels in the forest around Concord. By contrast, Thoreau had time for daily walks, quiet reflection, close study of local ecology, and an appreciation for the myriad ways in which human life intertwined with nature. He realised that maintaining a lively sense of place required not only 'habitual familiarity with its phenomena', but also 'keeping alive a sense of strangeness', not becoming so absorbed in the trivia of everyday life that the natural environment would become mere wallpaper, losing its power to evoke surprise, curiosity and reverence (Thoreau 1962: 261, 264).

The Romantics' evocations of place were part of a much broader project: to discover an alternative language and imagery to the commonplaces of philosophers and psychologists from Bacon to Bentham. Just as their reconstruction of time had been intended to challenge the empty, undifferentiated medium pictured by the new physics, so too the space of the Romantics was defined by human and natural ties. The space of physics was an abstraction from space as experienced by real people in their life-worlds.

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF THE ROMANTICS

Despite its affinities with modern-day environmentalism, the Romantic worldview strikes us today as quaint, mainly because of its association with discredited scientific ideas. Too many Romantics fought a pointless battle against Galilean and Newtonian physics. Although their more holistic vision inspired – and still superficially resembles – ecological thinking, no scientist today takes seriously Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. Romantic ideas may indeed have influenced the *origins* of ecology, but they are irrelevant to its *validity*, which is established by the scientific method.

The Romantics' commitment to obsolete scientific ideas tells a cautionary tale for contemporary environmentalism. Not long ago, many environmentalists thought they could deduce the features of an ecologically-correct society directly from the characteristics of a stable ecological order, especially in the climax phase (Sale 1991; Ophuls 1997; Commoner 1971; Goldsmith et al., 1972). That aspiration has been criticised not only for its logical difficulties, but also because ecology has abandoned or strongly modified its claims about stable ecosystems (Stevens 1990; Golly 1998; Botkin 1990). Others believe that an environmental ethic can be elicited from some version of Darwinian evolutionary theory

(Wilson 1984; Callicott 1987). But Darwinism is equivocal; it can be made to support Herbert Spencer as easily as Aldo Leopold. At bottom, no natural scientific theory or set of facts, in and of itself, can form the foundation of such a complex moral, ethical and political doctrine as modern environmentalism, any more than Schellingian physics could sustain the edifice of Romanticism. Science lends an aura of objectivity to doctrines that are essentially non-scientific, and that might seem to be a good enough reason to invoke them. But one pays a heavy price when scientific foundations shift, or appear to justify drastically different conclusions than one would wish. Environmentalism should avoid the trap Romanticism fell into by not making its validity depend on any particular set of scientific theories or findings. For, if the scientific consensus changes, one is left with the unpalatable alternative of either abandoning one's ethical commitments or clinging to the discredited version of science that supported them. The latter is what helped Romanticism earn the reputation of being anti-scientific and anti-modern.

But in other ways, Romanticism succeeded. Its adherents developed an alternative language and psychology capable of explaining why a life entwined with natural landscapes and temporal rhythms offers deeper satisfactions than one addicted to intense sensory stimuli. Above all, they had an intuitive feel for the integrity of the life-world. Wordsworth and his contemporaries preferred rustic settings not so much because they were anti-modern, but because they sensed that the life-world was more intact there, permitting them more easily to identify the 'primary laws of our nature' (Selincourt 1940, v. 2: 386).

The life-world thrives where the fabric of human time and memories remain intact, where place has not yielded to abstract space, and where the mind and imagination still resonate with the forms of nature, not having been overwhelmed by 'gross and violent stimulants'. It is no coincidence that such a setting is one in which natural landscapes and processes *also* remain unscathed. Under those circumstances, sky and sun, rain and rock, mountain and valley insinuate themselves into a person's character, speech and thought almost as though they formed part of the life-world itself. One can poke fun at a Thoreau or Muir for 'anthropomorphising' trees and animals, but insofar as such natural entities enter into the life-world, they become tinged with a human significance that transcends their mere physical properties. That is why people often fight to save a threatened lake, meadow or mountain from development. It may resemble a hundred others to a developer, but to the person who has lived with it for many years, it acquires the semblance of individuality, and does not seem abstract and interchangeable like a machine part. The recovery of the magic of everyday life touches both the natural environment and the mind of its perceiver.

In short, the Romantics were right to think that a life in harmony with nature was inseparable from the effort to preserve the human world from being overwhelmed by industrialisation and technology as well as its intellectual cutting-edge, mechanistic, behaviourist and 'economic' philosophy. Those who

decry 'humanism' as the root cause of environmental destruction simply do not know what they are saying: humanism is nothing but the commitment to preserve what is genuinely human (what the Romantics thought of as 'life') from reification, trivialisation and routinisation. And that is largely the same fight as the one against environmental despoliation. Part of that struggle involves a choice of language and metaphor, a decision about how to define what one wishes to preserve and endorse. Here again Romanticism provides a salutary lesson. Many environmentalists have fallen under the spell of ecological economics, which shows in extremely clever ways why mainstream economic theory blocks off the kinds of questions environmentalists want to ask (Daly 1996). It is attractive to think that the world will pay attention if we can measure ecosystem services and the like in scientifically acceptable ways, thereby 'proving' that environmental destruction is irrational. We can and should do this in the proper forums and settings (e.g., legislative committee hearings). But it would be a mistake to conclude that ecological economics – or any kind of economics – can provide a philosophical foundation for environmentalism. Its language is still that of Bentham and the mechanistic psychologists who preceded him. And that language is entirely unsuited to explain why anyone should care a bit about the natural world, except insofar as it serves that person's narrowly defined self-interest. The language of economics is a Trojan Horse that leaves no way to talk about the experiences of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Abbey and Muir without rendering them unrecognisable – *unless* one treats that language as provisional, an abstraction from the life-world in which the real significance of nature can be articulated and understood. In this sense the Romantics, despite their untenable scientific ideas, saw more deeply than we do.

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