

NEW READINGS IN AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

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The fundamental concern of Romantic art is the tension between two different epistemological strategies: one, based on intuition, that strives towards spiritual and transcendental definitions of reality; and another, based on the rational faculties of ordinary consciousness, that sacrifices the spiritual to the criteria of expediency and skeptical materialism. The nineteenth century is riddled by the discord between the Romantic mythopoeic, intuitive mode of perception and the abstract materialism of science. Poe and Hawthorne argued that scientific thinking, with its implicit materialistic approach, translates into a will to power which eradicates the spiritual and mysterious dimension of existence. The drive to control nature gradually leads to its despoilment, as well as that of the human being.

As Whitehead remarked in *Science and the Modern World*, at the core of the Romantic reaction there “is a protest on behalf of the organic view of nature against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter” (94). This Romantic protest has wide-ranging implications even today and remains a highly pertinent issue in our materialistic, postmodern culture. Of late, the Romantic complaint has been unexpectedly echoed from scientific quarters traditionally hostile to Romantic sensibility. Einstein’s relativity theories and the postulates of quantum physics have cast doubt on the absolute validity of our rational strategies of understanding, leading some scientists to advocate a more holistic conception of reality in which matter and spirit are one (Bohm).

The Romantic revolt seems to address our present ecological and ethical concerns. Paul Scott Derrick’s *“We Stand Before the Secret of the World”: Traces along the Pathway of American Romanticism* undertakes a fascinating revision and re-assessment of Romantic tenets and re-examines the consequences of Romantic epistemology, as well as its defining concepts: imagination, nature, language, nation, and national identity. The strength of his argument consists in demonstrating the reverberations of the Romantic conflict between the two antagonistic epistemologies—logic vs. imagination—which he traces into the literary and artistic expressions of the twentieth century. Intertwined with questions about existential relevance, the book charts the epistemological and philosophical evolution of Romanticism, and draws dazzling parallels to our postmodern predicament. This defense of Romantic aesthetics is accompanied by the argument that imagination alone can provide a remedy to our alienated and fragmented world.

Derrick gives a vivid sense of how the hidden principle of Romantic continuity is related to a renewed understanding of limits, boundaries, selfhood and nature. In Romantic epistemology, imagination is the zone between knowledge and mystery, a space he relates to Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian concepts. Derrick demonstrates the way in which Romantic tenets still direct and shape our existential and ethical vision. He tests out the theoretical propositions of Romanticism against a wide range of modern texts in the belief that a reevaluation of the Romantic Imagination and the adoption of its holistic approach could possibly salvage the fractured and alienated condition of our postmodern world.

Combining informed close reading with a wide-ranging sense of Romantic philosophy and practice, this study casts an insightful eye on major Romantic texts—Emerson's key essays, "Nature," "The American Scholar," "The Poet," Poe's short stories and Dickinson's poems—in order to question the rationalistic and dualistic bias of Western culture. Derrick also places many of these familiar literary texts into unsettling relations and contexts. Emerson's *Nature* is read alongside Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Dickinson's and Poe's lyrics and those of Williams and Stevens—writers not usually associated with the Romantics. He reveals the fundamental tenets of Romantic thought, which writers as different as Poe and Emerson share, as well as the enduring—often ignored—connections between Romantic and modernist and postmodernist writers. Further connections are established with nineteenth-century American landscape painters, the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock and postmodern theories. These reevaluations provide an overview of the wider implications of Romantic epistemology.

Despite the differences that separate Poe and Emerson, Derrick reads Emerson's *Nature* as a gloss on Poe's "Sonnet-To Science" (1829). He also suggests that Heidegger's essays on the question of technology and science could be read as a later, albeit indirect, explication of Emerson's texts. Furthermore, Emerson's holistic conception of nature proves a continuum between matter and mind, validated by quantum physics, which, exposing the limits of scientific understanding, affirm the existence of a flowing reality in which thought apparently participates in the structuring of the material world.

Derrick closely examines the underlying link between rationalism, materialism and utilitarianism. He endorses Romantic epistemology and its belief in intuition as a superior mode of knowledge that, unlike analytical thinking, neither reduces existence to separate, unconnected particles nor sanctions partial accounts of reality based on the description of its material surfaces. He credits Emerson with a holistic worldview expressed in a new philosophy of "nature," a category that integrates spirit, matter, thought and language.

In Emerson's central essay, "The American Scholar," national identity depends on linguistic and cultural identity. Emerson translates the political independence of 1783 into the emancipation of the self. But, and perhaps more importantly, Emerson's intellectual independence is premised on a new, pristine relationship between the self and the world which is at the same time a drastic reformulation of the fundamental assumptions of Western culture, whose rationalistic prejudices are supplanted by a non-dual, holistic conception of existence. Emerson denies the



ultimate validity of material reality just as he denies the validity of any external value system based on an authority other than the inner voice.

Nature is Emerson's symbol for the ever-expanding self. Its incessant metamorphoses trace the map of the poet's mind, since "he and it proceed from one root." Fluid, in continual becoming, nature is cognate with the poet's own spirit: "There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself" ("The American Scholar" 932-33). Nature functions as a storehouse of limitless symbolic signs which imply a greater underlying unity.

Thus Emerson's nature is an insoluble blend of matter and spirit that transcends itself into consciousness through language. Derrick posits a similarity between Emerson's notion of "nature" and Heidegger's *Dasein* (Being), conceived of as "an indefinable creative process through which that-which-is emerges from concealedness into presence" (55) or language. Furthermore, Derrick demonstrates that for Emily Dickinson and Poe, the ultimate form of poetry consists in giving expression of the authentic voice of Being, a voice that fuses matter, mind and language (55). Poetic language, he concludes, is the vehicle for the transcendence that establishes selfhood (63).

The Romantic hermeneutics of nature is based on a circular model, Emerson's "spires of form." Expounding on "The Final Frontier in Poe and Dickinson," Derrick recalls that the Romantic theory of emotions considers feelings as meaningful epistemological traces, which the world leaves on human sensibility. Consequently, the task of the Romantic poet is to translate these traces through poetic language into consciousness. This flow of nature *through* the mind is the perfect model of the imaginative transformation that also informs, according to Derrick, the poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, "The Idea of Order at Key West."

Romantic art, Derrick reminds us, is an art of fragmentation, an art full of gaps and arbitrary breaks, masterfully epitomized by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Emily Dickinson's poems. In the Transcendental tradition, language violates grammatical proprieties of form and meter and surpasses the need for predetermined structure and easy logical connections. Thus, with his infinite catalogues and enumerations, Whitman expands language to the point of explosion, while Emily Dickinson reduces it to a minimal expression, symbolic of her religion of renunciation.

In turn, stylistic fragmentation reflects the existence of a divided world split by allegiance to exclusively materialistic and rationalistic values. Romantic artists search for a principle of continuity underlying these fragmented surfaces. The breaks in continuity are bridged by creative acts of imagination that counteract nihilistic destructiveness. Furthermore, the aim of poetic language is to transcend limits and boundaries and to re-establish the continuum. The divorce between matter and spirit can be salvaged, as Derrick pertinently remarks, not by a cultural orientation that privileges rationality, but by imaginative acts that restore the mysterious sense of union between the self and the world. With ample textual evidence and a wide range of judicious quotations, Derrick traces the legacy of Wordsworthian



and Coleridgean principles in what he calls “the Emersonian tradition,” a tradition made up of poets like Poe, Dickinson, Whitman, Stevens and Williams, all of whom attempt to express in different ways the aura of mystery upon which “so much depends.”

The Romantic frontier marks not only a physical borderline, the frontier between nature and civilization, the known and the unknown, but also the more tenuous line between the rational and the irrational, language and silence, and the final boundary, so central to the issues of Romanticism, of life and death. Derrick analyzes Poe’s fictive constructs in terms of “the interface” (to use a term made popular by Thomas Pynchon) between the world that is beyond the mind and the world as we think it. Poe’s voyages into unknown seas are journeys across the borderline of consciousness. His and Dickinson’s incursions into the unknown resonate well into the twentieth century, anticipating, as Derrick shows, Kafka’s or Beckett’s concern with the incomprehensible.

Derrick also re-interprets *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner’s saga of the South, in the light of the dangerous consequences of the positivistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Since the novel brings issues of race and our relationship with land and nature into a single complex, Derrick sets out to examine Faulkner’s affinity with Emerson’s Romantic ethos of nature. He aptly demonstrates that the destruction of the natural world entails a subsequent destruction of the self and the violation of the humanity of another race. He interprets Ike McCaslin’s renunciation of his heritage in the light of Emerson’s apology for self-reliance and renunciation in “The American Scholar.” Faulkner’s anti-hero reiterates the attitude adopted by Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson and Whitman, whom he describes as the great nineteenth-century masters of renunciation. Derrick understands the novel’s concern with the mysterious frontier between life and death as the metaphysical borderline between matter and spirit, and he refreshingly relates it to Poe’s and Dickinson’s frontier, which separates the material from the wondrous and the unknown.

One of Derrick’s theses is that the philosophy of Transcendentalism, as a reaction against the materialistic orientation of Western culture, tended toward a retrieval of the mystical spirit of “primitive” cultures and the East. If there is a significant criticism to be leveled against this thesis, it is that on occasions the Romantic revolution is presented as a break with Occidental culture (23, 44, 49) when, in fact, the axiological shift it initiates is more a return to and a revaluation of its own latent tradition —Plotinus, neo-Platonism, through Bruno, Böhme, the hermetic trends of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance— suppressed by the militantly positivistic spirit of modernity; and second, that there are certain aspects inherent in the ethos of Transcendentalism and in Emerson’s own thought that run counter to this holistic vision which all Romantics otherwise genuinely embrace. For, once the supernatural is delivered to the natural and the will of the imperial self is acknowledged as absolute law, the fluid transparency of the world can be easily sundered.



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