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070077 Europäische Expansion/Ökologie/Globalisierung

“What can a poem prove?”

The Romanticism, the Enlightenment and the
Natural World

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All sources employed have been properly acknowledged and stated in accordance with the Chicago referencing method.

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1. Introduction.

The Romanticism was a predominantly literary and artistic movement which spread across large parts of Central Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Romantics developed their ideas during the onset of protoindustrialization and a time of great turmoil and development. The explosion of Enlightenment thought, the tumult of great scientific discoveries and new ideas, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution all took place in this period of history. Indeed, they were times of change and conflict, and the Romanticism existed as a semi-idyll amid the chaos. The study of ecological history ties in with the realm of the Romanticism in that it partially concerns itself with the way in which people think about nature; the attitudes and beliefs that we hold on nature and how this influences the way in which human interact with the environment.

This essay will look at the circumstances of the development of the Romantic movement and its' obsession with the equally terrifying and awe-inspiring natural world. The essay will centre around the guiding question: "Why did the human perception of the natural world change so drastically during the Romantic literary and artistic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, and what were the consequences of these shifts in attitude?" It will examine the Romanticism as a counter-movement to the school

of Enlightenment and how it equally benefited and was influenced by Enlightenment thought. It will look some key ideas of alienation from nature versus the intricate entwinement between humankind and its environment, and how this is reflected in a modern way in the study of ecological history. The question will be addressed of the exportation of the mid-18th to early 19th century veins of Romantic thought outward from Central Europe, including the connection between the Romanticism and the rising nationalism that characterised this period of history and would be blamed as a contributing factor in the chaos of the 20th century conflicts. Finally, this essay will ponder the modern legacy of the whimsical and contemplative world of the Romantics and whether the insights of this relatively confined artistic movement has a significant impact on the environmental attitudes of contemporary times.

2. The Enlightenment versus a Return to Nature in its' Complexity.

2.1 The Enlightenment- Romanticism as an Antithesis?

The rise of Enlightenment thinking was a part of the great wave of change in Early Modern Europe which was sweeping away the old systems of belief and rulership. The new school of thought found its' roots in the scientific revolution of the 16th century. The continuation and expansion of rationalism and

scientific discovery gradually dismantled the old system of using the church to explain complex or perplexing natural occurrences. Through European expansion and colonial acquisitions the European thinkers and scientists had come into contact with vastly different cultures and ways of living that led to many negatives for the colonised lands including hundreds of years of slavery and exploitation- on the other hand, it was “the discoveries of other cultures (which) fuelled worldlier perspectives that would evolve, during the Enlightenment, in the free thinking and progressive ideas that provided the impetus for social change.”¹

Above all the Enlightenment valued the importance of the individual and the use of reason to make judgements and decisions, a value which can be surmised in Immanuel Kant’s ground-breaking

“What is Enlightenment?” from 1784: “Have the courage to use your own understanding... and men become more and more capable of acting in freedom. At last free thought acts even on the fundamentals of government and the state finds it agreeable to treat man, who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity.”²

¹ Mercadal, Trudy. Age of Enlightenment.

² Kant, Immanuel. What is Enlightenment?

This radical new way of thinking led to the revolutions of government and mind and the Declaration of Human Rights of 1789 which aspired for the first time to a form of basic human right concept for the citizens of a country. Of course, this was not in fact the universal striving for human rights which it claimed to be, as women were entirely excluded from the claim to human rights, as were those who had not attained citizenship. This hypocrisy is never clearer than in the publishing of “The Declaration of Rights of the Woman and the Female Citizen in 1791,” wherein she made the shocking claim that, under the new wave of Enlightenment thinking, women should also be seen as equal to men and deserved a share in the human rights being demanded by their male counterparts. These claims were clearly unacceptable at the time and she was executed in 1793.³

Stringently apolitical and personal at times, it endorsed the Enlightenment focus on the importance of the individual. However, the Romanticism “rejected the primacy of reason”⁴ and turned the focus of its’ literature and artwork inward. An obsession with the concept of the so-called “sublime” and the sphere of the natural world took hold of the minds of such creative figures as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Gottfried von Herder among many others. Nature developed into

³ Gerhard, Ute, Ulla Wischermann. *Klassikerinnen feministischer Theorie*, p17

⁴ Dewey, Joseph. *Romanticism*.

an inspiring terrain for the expression of awe and wonder, although opinions varied on the existence of nature as something to which we are intrinsically connected to and affected by, or whether it is something separate to us, out of grasp and alienated from.

2.2 Nature as an Idyll.

Rousseau began to reflect on the perceived schism between nature and society in his essay “A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences” as a response to an essay competition in 1750 by the Dijon Academy, which asked “Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them?”⁵ This was the point that many would mark as a rough beginning to the Enlightenment, and indeed this work outlined that typical sentiment of humankind occupying a disconnect from their environment and in a philosophical light, from their former selves. Rousseau explores here the ideas which he would ponder for the rest of his life, whereby civilisation has had a detrimental effect on people, and that nature exists contrary to this negative civilisation. These realisations on Rousseau’s part caused a massive emotional response in him; in his autobiography *Confessions*, he recounts:

⁵ Kempf, Franz R. Noble Savages and English Gardeners.

“The moment I read this (question) I beheld another universe and became another man... I felt my head seized by a dizziness that resembled intoxication.”⁶

Thus, the natural world becomes an idyll within the imagination of the Romantics. While the initial existence of such an idyll is a matter of question, there grew a yearning desire to get “back to nature” in some way in order to find peace with oneself and with the world.

This attitude is still visible in many ways in the contemporary world, with people seeking respite in nature and the image of nature as a pure and innocent world apart from the chaos and mess of humankind is still prevalent. A way of approaching these human feelings of alienation from nature can be found in the “Kulturkritik” of the 18th century. This was a way of imagining hypothetical and opposing scenarios in which the answer to the alienation from nature was sought in the idea of healing from culture using culture. Rousseau is significant here once again—especially in his writings on education in “Emile,” he presents the idea of creating a so-called “noble savage” who can live in civilisation without being corrupted by it, thus retaining the innocence that he imagines exists within a person who is uncorrupted by human civilisation.⁷

⁶ Blanning, Tim. Romantic Revolution. p13

⁷ Kempf, Franz R. Noble Savages and English Gardeners.

The sense of inner peace that is now associated with being present among nature was recorded by other Romanticism writers as well, an example of which can be seen in Goethe's poetry on the beauty and peace of being alone in nature at night-time. His "Wandrer's Nachtlied II" from 1822 perfectly captures the sense of being at ease with oneself:

"Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh', In alln Wipfeln Spürest du Kaum einen Hauch; Die Vögeln schweigen im Walde. Warte nur, balde Ruhest du auch."⁸

This sentiment was echoed throughout the Romanticism- it combines reverence and appreciation of the natural world along with that transcendence and reference to the sublime which characterised this period.

2.3 The Sublime and the Natural World

The elusive search for the so-called "sublime" was a big preoccupation of nature Romanticism throughout this period. The sublime was difficult to pin down in definition, but Edmund Burke described it in his "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," published in 1757. He defined the sublime as a way of describing feelings of awe combined with a sense of terror. In his words, the sublime was

⁸ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. "Wandrer's Nachtlied II"

“the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling,” which has “the power to compel and destroy.”⁹ While these sentiments suggest something terrifying and unappealing, combined with a sense of awe and the presence of beauty, they provided a compelling look at the wonders of nature.

The sublime embodies many of the romantic attitudes towards nature in that it described a sense of transcendence which corresponded to the vast and intimidating beauty of nature.¹⁰ The notion of nature being something beyond mundanity and earthliness brings in that sense of seeing the beauty and rapture of God through the wonders of nature, a conceptualisation of religion which in a way tried to make sense of the place of religion in a new Enlightenment world which was confident that science could explain all of the mysteries previously attributed to a higher power. This sense of something mysterious and subliminal is no more present than in the artwork of Caspar David Friedrich. His paintings encompass a strong sense of the sublime by combining the feeling of terror and beauty into the overall appreciation of the natural world. In his artworks nature often takes centre-stage, and in the paintings in which human figures do appear, there is a definitive feeling of the power dynamic between humankind and nature.¹¹ man is a part of the nature depicted in the scene, rather than existing separately to the

⁹ Burke, Edmund. *Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

¹⁰ BBC. *The Sublime, In Our Time*.

¹¹ Amstutz, Nina. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Anatomy of Nature*.

“background” of some lowly other natural world.

This scene of “Two Men Contemplating the Moon” is a great example of many of these romantic qualities in that it has an uncertainty to it in the threatening tree roots while still exuding a gentle reverence which reflects the appreciation of nature in a way that does not view the natural world in terms of its’ usefulness or how it can be exploited for human advancement.



Caspar David Friedrich, “Zwei Männer in Betrachtung des Mondes“ (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

3. The Dark Side of the Romantic Dreamworld.

3.1 Nature and National identity.

The romanticism especially in Central Europe, was also strongly linked to the rise of a cultural nationalism which would define Europe in the coming centuries. The famous German national anthem was written at this time by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben, "Das Lied der Deutschen," whose rousing lyrics evoked power imagery of a German identity. Another nationalist romantic write was of course the philosopher Johann Gottlob Fichte, whose "Addresses to the German Nation" were passionately presented against a backdrop of Napoleonic occupation-

"I know very well what I risk; I know that a bullet may kill me... but it is not this that I fear, and for my cause I would gladly die."¹²

This fervour is mirrored throughout romantic writing and the cause of nationalism fits well with the emotion of the Romanticism. The presence of a foreign occupation throughout the early 19th century heightened the sense of the Germanic identity, which was tied in deeply with the German language. Herder felt especially strongly that German pride lay in close connection with its language and reviled the use of a

¹² Blanning, Tim. Romantic Revolution. p117

“foreign tongue” of French, the lingua franca of the time: “And you German, returning from abroad, Would you greet your mother in French? O spew it out before your door, Spew out the ugly slime of the Sein. Speak German, O you German!”¹³

These powerful words reflected the nationalistic and patriotic movement which would be disappointed at the lack of revolutionary change after the defeat of Napoleonic and the Vienna Congress of 1815. The Biedermeier or Vormärz period left little space for expression of the nationalist spirit that had developed during the Romanticism. The German language provided the unifying link needed to combine the hundreds of tiny regional identities in the as of yet not unified Germany. The dominance of Prussia in the German states contributed to the nationalistic sentiment in a more militaristic sense and advanced the process of German unification which was completed in 1871.¹⁴

Language was not, however, the only feature of national identity which was employed by the Romantics. The natural landscape itself featured heavily in the formation and development of national integrity. Characteristics of the people living in the land were attributed to the physical terrain itself, something which can be distinctly seen in the imagery of the forests of Central Europe. “A walk in the German forest, however manicured and

¹³ Ibid. p115

¹⁴ Vocelka, Karl. Geschichte der Neuzeit p538

signposted, is to plunge into a tradition of infinite richness.”¹⁵ This “tradition of infinite richness” manifested itself through the stories of the Grimm Brothers, the madness of Goethe’s *Faust* and in other stories such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

The stories draw from a mythologised idea of folklore and they created a narrow version of identity which would prove problematic in later history such as during the Second World War when such tales as the Grimm Fairy-tales were peddled as propaganda “to give children a sense of their Nordic heritage and race” and “to further the illusion that the Nazis were recreating a folk community.”¹⁶ This problematic use of mythology and folklore, partially created and partially organic, shows the darker side of the nation-building exercise that was linked closely with the natural terrains and landscapes of a region. These natural landscapes were a powerful source of inspiration for the Romantic artists and writers in Central Europe, praised for the natural beauty and sense of the elusive “sublime” which was such a popular buzzword during this period of time.¹⁷ The use of landscape in forming this “Heimat” idea of identity being tied to homeland ultimately fuelled the darker aspects of European development and competition between the great European powers of the 19th and 20th centuries. While the Romanticism may have been in part anything but political with its’ focus on the

¹⁵ Winder, Simon. *Germania* p287

¹⁶ Thesz, Nicole. *Nature Romanticism and Grimms’ Tales* P99

¹⁷ BBC. *The Sublime. In Our Time.*

individual and the internal world, its' artistic expressions had effects that ranged far beyond the "self-discovery" of individual thinkers.

3.2 Ecocriticism and the Romanticism.

Modern readings of literature suggest that the way in which nature is portrayed in works of creativity reflect the way in which people at the time viewed the natural world. Ecocriticism as a form of critical reading incorporates an understanding of the environment and the place that it holds within a text, and reading it from this perspective. The discipline of eco-criticism developed in the 1960s and 1970s alongside other methods of analysing texts such as the prominent feminist literature criticism.¹⁸ The Romanticism and romantic works fall into a way of venerating nature which can be seen in Grimm fairy-tale among others such as the mention by Jakob Grimm of the "Herrlichkeit der Natur" and his musings: "Wenn ich traurig bin und spazieren gehe, so finde ich Trost in der Macht und Wahrheit der Natur, ich habe nur einen Halm aufzuheben."¹⁹ Such admiration of nature of course brings the more negative aspect of the so-called Romantic revolution and its' insidious nationalistic undertones. As noted by Nicole Thesz, these "images of the German forest also remind us of the unsettling longing for purity that not only links

¹⁸ Gladwin, Derek. Ecocriticism: Literary And Critical Theory.

¹⁹ Thesz, Nicole. Nature Romanticism and the Grimms' Tales.

Romanticism and ecologism but also fueled obsessions with racial hygiene.²⁰ Thus, the concept of a purity of nature and the idyllic form of nature carried both positive and extremely negative mindsets into the future centuries after the romantic enthusiasm of the 18th century dulled.

4. Lasting Effects: Colonialism and Romantic Mindsets.

There is in many ways a modern divide in people's mind between nature and humanity. The attitudes towards nature which emerged throughout the Industrial Revolution clearly designated the value of nature to that of how its' resources can be best used to the purpose of humans. The philosophies of those such as Kant separate the mind from physical matter and places the faculty of pure intellect and reason above all else. This ideology naturally sets people up to "think that we are entitled to use natural beings and processes however they best suit us—superior to nature as we are, we are thus its rightful masters."²¹ This attitude explains why we feel so separate from the natural world, and not, as has been argued by both contemporary historians studying the environment and in a more whimsical way through the literature of the Romanticism in all its' praise of the beauty and awe of the natural world, entirely entwined with the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stone, Alison. Alienation and German Romanticism, p43

world in which we exist solely as an element of ecological history and not living a totally separate existence.

Furthermore, the concept that humans are the natural masters over the environment stems from an idea of white superiority which was fuelled and exponentially increased during the European colonisation which succeeded the Age of Enlightenment. All of the classification of the natural world and its' inhabitants by the likes of Carl Linnaeus in his comprehensive taxonomic system which neatly ordered living organisms into categories and this made it easy to allocate to value to things which did not necessarily need to be ranked.²² This way of thinking gave the Europeans a sense of superiority and justified their expansion and conquest of overseas territories and in particular almost the entire continent of Africa and parts of Asia. While it is not accurate to pinpoint the Romanticism as the cause of this colonial explosion towards the end of the 19th century, as previously discussed the Romanticism did contributed culturally to a rise in nationalism. This nationalism and the international competition it led to between powers contributed to the push for attaining greater empires.²³ Thus, it can be seen how inadvertently the Romantics could have played a part in the expansionism that overtook the European psyche in the following centuries.

²² Lecture continuity and rupture.

²³ Voelke, Karl. Geschichte der Neuzeit.

5. Conclusion.

The Romanticism was essentially a short-lived movement confined largely to the realm of literature and art; however, it produced many ideas and concepts that greatly outlived its' initial popularity. The key ideas in relation to nature and its relationship to mankind have been extremely influential in the way in which we conceptualise the natural world. The Romanticism was overshadowed by the overarching tumult of social change which was the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution irreversibly changed the way we consume and produce in human society and under capitalism this way of living tends to treat nature as an amenity to be used up and exploited by its' natural superior master- humans. On a philosophical and artistic level, however, the Romanticism attempted to make sense of a world where humans existed not separate to nature, and not above it in their superior use of reason and logic; but rather, that we co-existed within the greater ecosystem.

There was a sense of urgency in their work which showed itself in between the dreaminess of the descriptions of the wonder of nature. The link between nationhood, identity and nature had a profound effect on the way their surroundings, an effect that led to both beautiful works of prose and poetry, but also to darker strands of nationalistic thought. An overwhelming necessity of the role of nature in finding peace within oneself was identified during this time, and that idea of taking the values of individualism and one's own thoughts which was promoted in the Enlightenment. However, these thoughts should be combined with an irrationalism that allowed the chaos of the natural world to be something that humans should appreciate and not simply strive to control and subdue. This way of thinking and relating to the environment is perhaps the idea which best survived the movement and continue to persist to this day.

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