

A Brief Note on Prof. Kroll's Talk about the Romantics

The Romantics realize that they can overcome "alienation" only through "division of labor"--which is what their poetic acts amount to. The poet, as they well know, has by the Industrial Revolution become a specialist. The conditions of production in the Industrial capitalist age work against lyric utterance. By claiming status as "poets," the Romantics repeat the very problem they are trying to address. Notice that Blake refers to his "ink-stained waters." Byron's Don Juan exposes all its own Romantic devices, all its strategies of Romantic irony. The same exposure occurs in the work of Paul deMan and other such theorists.

Manfred (the subject of Manfred was an obsession with the Romantics) amounts to the secularization of the Christian model of subjectivity, which centers around *loss* and *alienation*. The lost unity between subject and object may be recaptured in a lyrical moment, in incest, and so on. See Raymond Williams' Culture and Society--Williams sees Romanticism as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, itself structurally similar to the Christian Fall. It is necessary to historicise the movements of Romanticism; we can't simply say that Kant resolved Hume's problems with respect to knowing the outside world. Marx and Wagner might serve as models of romanticism. Freud could also be seen as a romantic. All three authors describe a fall from a primal unity or moment through some kind of trauma.

Why is it almost impossible for the romantics to write dramas? Well, they are concerned with expression, not plot. They can only write a drama of the self, and how on earth can you put *that* on stage? (Prof. Perkins mentioned in 1996 that during the early nineteenth century, stage dimensions and conditions hardly allowed for emotional or "expressive" subtlety on the part of actors. To show anger, you would have to distort your features and stamp your boot in an exaggerated way.) The prime romantic mode is, of course, lyric: Tintern Abbey, Frost at Midnight, Keats' odes. In such pieces, the "subject" records the failure of his attempt to embrace some "object"--a bird, a woman, Wordsworth's other self, and so on. The moment of failure is knowledge. For example, Wordsworth the solipsism of his attempts to embrace his other self, of his projection onto the object. Thanks to his attempt to embrace the other, he is thrown back upon himself; he goes from Isaian prophetic mode to post-coital depression. As Earl Wasserman says, the English romantics were much concerned with the grounds of knowledge.

A romantic cannot attain completion; the only thing he can do perfectly is die. [Note 1996--this also has to do with the concept of genius, of course--if the creative mind of the poet operates like nature, and nature is seen as processive, then it would not be possible truly to "finish" a poem because doing so would not be replicating the infinite process of nature.]

The ode's very form is about itself. This is inherently so, thanks to its long history.

The romantics recognize that language is mediative. We cannot get "through" it. This is why Blake writes of "ink-stained waters."

de Man and other so-called “post-structuralists” would emphasize the poem’s recording of the poet’s failure to embrace the object. In other words, post-structuralism amounts to a critique of and engagement with romanticism. There is no immediate knowledge; one may not touch the ark and live. See Hartmann on Wordsworth’s poetry.

Basic Points about the Romantics:

(a) Secularization of Christian model--the theme of loss and alienation, of the fragmentation of *self*, dissolution of relationship with nature and fragmentation of language. Freud writes about a fall, too.

(b) Culturally, English romanticism is a reaction to the early Industrial Revolution. Blake’s dark Satanic mills (though he may not have been referring to the factories) and in part to the empiricism and sometimes rationalist tendencies of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, the alleged quantifiers of spirit, the materialists; and against so-called Neoclassical restraint, generality, and social decorum. See Marx on alienation, too.

(c) Kant paves the way; he sees the mind as basically constitutive of the “outside world.” Later romantics like Schiller will take Kant overboard and claim that the subject/object are unified in the perceiver’s mind. Man appears to create the world.

(d) The romantic poem records the solipsistic *attempt* of the subject to reappropriate the object--the other self, the woman, the skylark singing, the urn, or whatever. The attempt at projection fails, is recognized as having failed; this leads to something like “post-coital depression.” [neither bliss nor oblivion is attained.]

(e) Knowledge is the moment of failure. Language and self are seen as mediative. (See Adam naming the animals, or Shelley’s fading coal; the tower of Babel; Augustinian sign theory.) There is no immediate knowledge--you cannot see God’s face or touch the ark.

(f) The poem records the poet’s experience of failure. Even being a “specialist”--namely, a poet, repeats the division the poet set out to heal. [objectification and isolation of “imagination] [An ode is about itself]

(g) The structure of Byron’s piece is almost Freudian--Manfred falls through trauma from a primal unity or moment, and keeps trying to return to it but is not satisfied. Finally, he dies, the only thing a romantic can do without misgiving.

(h) So if romantic plays amount to a dramaturgy of the self, if they record a failed internal attempt to regain spiritual unity, how can one stage them in public?