

A [sample entry](#) from the

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sentiments might be, actually traversing any of these categories is, at turns, impossible, impractical, or frankly undesirable. What is needed is a stand-in: a scapegoat symbolically and metonymically linked to nature who can perform an eternal return to the garden. Enter the native.

Whether in tandem with real political agitation or in place of it, indigenous peoples have been looked to as an environmental and spiritual panacea by people around the globe in their retreat from the perceived failures and implications of modernity. Surely there are positive aspects to this phenomenon, as there is much to be learned from native traditions, particularly in terms of resilience and creativity. And one might add that it is high time that native peoples be celebrated rather than denigrated. It should be noted, however, that the degree to which Indians were “the first ecologists” is a hotly contested issue. Defining, defending, and denying the Earth ethic of Native Americans has become an academic blood sport. Quite beyond the historical and institutional concerns of this debate, I would call attention to several ideological aspects of romanticism that are problematic. First, romanticism is reactionary and escapist: romantic views of indigenous peoples spring from other peoples’ needs and desires, not from an appreciation of indigenous people in their own right. Second, romantic tendencies are predicated on a kind of social evolution model, even while its valuations are ostensibly reversed from the imperial pattern. Native peoples are looked to as an antidote to modernity precisely because they are understood – however uncritically – to inhabit the social past, specifically as anachronistic representatives of an imagined natural past (which explains why Native American exhibits are frequently located in natural history museums). The ramifications of such a view are anything but comforting. Third, romanticism reifies the very traditions it exalts, paradoxically suffocating that from which it seeks inspiration. Romantic images portray tradition as fixed, stable, uncontested and, linking us back to our earlier points, anti-modern. To imagine tradition in this way eliminates the prospect that the people romanticized will be heard when they speak in their own voice – even when it comes to speaking about those things which matter to them most, like the land and nature itself.

The narrative I have painted in broad strokes is, of course, distorted in significant ways. Observing this, we want to acknowledge that most people do not imagine or inhabit the world in ways so divided. Most of all, the dichotomy as stated obscures real political efforts of people and groups to heal and sustain nature in ways that neither depend upon the Western narrative nor the burdening of indigenous peoples as surrogate messiahs. That said, the romanticization of native peoples remains – indeed, it seems to escalate with every year and with each new environmental crisis. Complicating the picture, many

indigenous people have willfully engaged this discourse, sometimes as authors.

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- See also: American Indians as “First Ecologists”; Noble Savage; Radical Environmentalism; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm.

## Romanticism in European History

Romanticism has long been recognized as a major trope in modern environmental thought and practice. Romanticism, however, was a complex, diverse, changing historical movement. Our present conceptions of Romanticism tend to be defined as much by critics and subsequent commentators as contemporary articulations by Romantic figures. Even the representations of Romanticism within academic studies are the products of different readings from different historical and theoretical positions, and seldom free of polemical overtones. As de Man has noted: “From its inception, the history of romanticism has been one of battles, polemics, and misunderstandings: personal misunderstandings between the poets themselves; between the poets, critics, and the public; between the successive generations” (de Man 1993: 4). Contested are not only the meanings of Romanticism, its very boundaries, origins and influences, and who might be considered a Romantic, but also its conception of nature, its relationship to religion and its relevance to modern environmentalism.

An emblematic text of European Romanticism has long been Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. It is precisely this emblematic status of the poem that gives contestation over its appropriate reading such significance. The poem is an account of the poet’s formation as a poet, from his childhood experiences of nature to his mature vision of the sublime. Abrams reads Wordsworth’s poem as part of his

program for the secularization of inherited theological ideas, for a “natural supernaturalism.” The “high argument” of *The Prelude* is that the heights and depths of the mind of man are to replace heaven and hell, and restore the lost paradise; we need only to unite our minds to nature in a holy marriage, and paradise is ours (Abrams 1971: 17–140). Hartman gives central place to the cultivation of the imagination in Wordsworth’s poem, attending particularly to the role that “spots of time” – places in nature and time, and in creative time – play in this cultivation. The spirit that lurks in spots of time renews the poet *vis-à-vis* nature; as the *genius loci* or the indwelling spirit of a place, it also acts as spirit inspiring the genial powers of the poet. But for Hartman, the spots of time bring the poet closer to his imagination, not to nature, and the transference of significant experiences to nature acts solely to allow such events, such moments, to reach through time. *The Prelude* is an exercise in soul making, the development of the imagination and the formation of a poet, in which nature takes a secondary role (Hartman 1964: 208–59). McGann, in contrast, sets out to expose the ideology within Wordsworth’s poetry, and within such readings of his poetry. McGann is critical of Wordsworth for finding consolation in nature when he should be worrying about the economic realities of the rural life he idealizes. He reads Romantic poetry as an escape from or even suppression of socio-political conditions (McGann 1983: 81–92). These readings of Wordsworth have been highly influential.

Recent critics, however, have found in *The Prelude* both a Romantic ecology and an important religiosity. Bate, for example, argues that Wordsworth’s pastoral poetry, highlighting the life and beauty in nature, and finding poetry not only in language but also in nature, has a permanent, enduring power – it is a language that is “evergreen.” By fostering an emotional communication between human beings and nature, a love of nature leading to a love of humankind, Bate contends that Wordsworth’s poetry offers a political model for modern environmentalism, an “ideology” based on a harmonious relationship with nature that goes beyond, and in many ways deeper, than the neo-Marxist political model to which McGann appeals (Bate 1991: 12–35). Prickett, on the other hand, challenges Abrams’ reading, arguing that *The Prelude*, given its historical context, displays not so much the language of secularization as religious revival. Pointing to the relative absence of God from neoclassical literature and critique, and more generally from public life at the end of the eighteenth century, Prickett finds Wordsworth’s poem striking for its overtly religious language. Abrams represents Romantic poets as rhetorically adorning the robes of prophets who through the illumination of the mind of man and its communion with nature could restore paradise on Earth. Thus Wordsworth represented himself as the chosen son for his time, the poet now replacing the priest. But

Prickett contends that this claim is not simply the poet’s retention of the rhetoric of the religious tradition he sought to displace. He argues that we need to take seriously Wordsworth’s claims for the religious calling of the poet, and reads *The Prelude* as a pious account of divine election modeled on St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (Prickett 1986: 95–104).

*The Prelude* closes with an image of the poet’s ultimate confrontation with nature, the divine and himself; climbing Mount Snowdon, he emerges from a fog to confront a terrifying alpine vista – brooding masses of hills and the dark sea receding into infinity, a chasm of raging waters. The experience of the sublime is the response of the viewer to such a vision that transcends the powers of understanding and imagination, with fear giving way to pleasure as the mind is expanded to encompass what previously seemed beyond comprehension. For Wordsworth, the imagination matured through “spots of time” has the power and autonomy to grasp the whole and dwell in the infinite. An alternative image of such a scene of a wanderer arrested by an infinite alpine landscape is offered by Friedrich’s famous 1818 painting “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog.” In this image the view remains veiled in part by the fog, which, in addition to heightening the role of the imagination, fragments the visible, eradicates the connecting ground and renders the scene insubstantial. The unusual, distorted perspective only finds its connection in the central figure of the wanderer, which orders and mediates our view of the landscape. This large, central figure with his back to us, viewing the scene, reminds us that the sublime lies not in the object viewed but in the subjective effect on the viewer; it is the experience of nature that is depicted in the painting, how we as viewers participate in what we see. The *Rückenfigur* thus leads us to reflect on our own views of nature. Friedrich’s landscapes are natural scenes infused with the divine, yet not explicitly; the divine is both present and absent. His landscapes also represent the alterity of nature, a nature the human subject is not able to appropriate. Indeed, a chasm stands between the wanderer and the landscape before him, a disjunction in the planes of the painting. Whereas in Wordsworth’s poem the divine power of the imagination enables the poet to feel at home in the infinite, in Friedrich’s image the play between proximity and distance, familiarity and estrangement, revelation and concealment, serves to depict the longing for unity with the infinite rather than its realization.

These images of the experience of the sublime depict on a grandiose and abstract scale what was a concrete and common experience of Romantic figures – a sense of alienation from oneself, from society, from the divine, and from nature. Reflection on this sense of alienation was also a critical consciousness of the limits of all knowledge and experience. Romanticism has often been depicted as a form of idealism in which all is resolved into the human

subject. Certainly Romantic thinkers were acutely aware of the role of the mind in knowledge of the world. Yet they were also aware of the impossibility of a full representation of the material world or the divine, of their irreducible otherness. Reflection on the alterity of nature was an acknowledgement of its potent presence, that the material world cannot be wholly abstracted into conceptual knowledge, that nature is at once impenetrable and the ground of all being. Poetic renderings of nature articulated the ultimate indecipherability of nature's script, and hence the need for a continual creative reading and writing, rereading and rewriting, as an unending exploration of its elusive meaning.

Historically, these reflections were not so much a reaction to Enlightenment thought as a development of it. Romanticism has significant continuities with the critical philosophies of the Enlightenment and their radical questioning of social, political and religious institutions, and of traditional systems of thought. Its expression of the impossibility of complete systems of thought or perfect works of art, of the fragmentary nature of all human production, is an extension of Enlightenment critical tendencies. The experience of the French Revolution, in particular, its promise and its failure, was pivotal to its preoccupation with the tensions between illimitable aspiration and actual limitation. The eighteenth century's discrediting of traditional authorities and certainties, its faith in intellectual, moral and material progress, its faith in humanity and earthly happiness, generated an atmosphere of optimism about new freedoms and new possibilities for individuals and society as a whole that was formative for many early Romantics. The failure of this promise, and the violence unleashed by the Revolution and its aftermath both in France and elsewhere in Europe, led to a conception of modernity in which a sense of crisis, a sense of alienation from nature, the self and society, and a sense of the infinite gulf between the ideal and its realization was central. Many poets used the metaphor of the Fall for this crisis, but now figured as a secular history of the individual and humankind, with the current suffering alleviated by the hope of redemption through communion with nature or a strengthened imagination. The celebration of "country" so characteristic of Romanticism was also an eighteenth-century theme – the glorification of the countryside and local places in opposition to the metropolis, of indigenous experiences of nature and culture as opposed to universal truths, of the songs and lore of common folk as opposed to elites or aristocrats. But many Romantic exaltations of country life were written from the distant perspective of privilege rather than direct experience, or ignored the physical and social hardships endured by country folk. Moreover, in the aftermath of the revolutionary wars the love of country often turned into the love of nation and virulent forms of nationalism.

What is not contested is the privileged place of the

artist in Romanticism. As the example of Wordsworth shows, Romanticism saw artists cease to be representatives of religious and political powers, and assume the authority in their own right to speak in the name of the concerns of humanity. Bénichou argues that in France the dethronement of former spiritual powers and the elevation of the self to the highest level of critique and edification begun in the eighteenth century led in the Romantic period to the investment of writers with high social function and spiritual power, what he terms the consecration of the writer. In Germany, Schiller gave aesthetics a political role, arguing that an aesthetic education alone is capable of exciting and refining feelings, of cultivating sensibility, so that citizens could take pleasure in the form of things and thus be ready to act according to rational principles rather than out of self-interest. It is through beauty that the human being achieves freedom. Friedrich Schlegel argued that by possessing an element of divinity in his soul, the poeticizing philosopher or the philosophizing poet is the modern prophet. But for all the discussion of artists and their productions, few artists managed to live from their art alone and their aesthetic manifestos did not translate into real political power.

One area where artistic genius and the role of imagination did come to be especially valued was in the study of nature. Kant drew parallels between the judgment of art and the judgment of organic nature in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. Schelling developed Kant's philosophy of nature, making a powerful argument for all of nature and each natural product to be conceived as organic, as a complex, dynamic organization of formal and material principles. Schelling held that what is essential to art as well as to the organism is the creative or productive activity of relating matter and form, the real and ideal. It is the *daemon*, the creative spirit or indwelling element of divinity that is part of the nature of all human beings that is alone able to comprehend the productive, synthetic forces of art and nature. But although the study of nature during the Romantic period emphasized the correspondences between the hidden forces of nature, the imaginative genius within human nature and divine creator, it would be oversimplifying their insights to label such philosophies of nature pantheism. Romantics were acutely aware of the gap between infinite aspiration and its actualization, and of the limits of articulation, and often resorted to metaphor when approaching what defied definition, whether it be the absolute or the fundamental forces of nature.

Indeed, the greatest danger in reading Romanticism is confusing the figural with the literal. Perhaps the continued contestation over Romanticism arises from its excessively figurative expressions, from its deceptive play with language, and from its unusually reflexive and ironic critical positioning. Confronting the boundaries of human comprehension and language, even as they had a vision of

what exceeded such boundaries, Romantic works are often difficult to engage and hence it is understandable that their significance has been variously construed. As Bate and Oerlemans convincingly demonstrate, however, critical engagement with Romantic works can be an important stimulus for reflection on nature and religion of particular relevance to the concerns of modern environmentalism.

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- See also: Romanticism in European Literature; Western Esotericism.

### Romanticism in European Literature

European Romanticism's complex understanding of the word "nature" must be seen against the background of the eighteenth century and the growth of the industrial city, which gave rise to a new understanding of the beauties of nature as these ceased to be a mere backdrop to human activity and became the place where human beings could be closest to themselves and to God. Appreciation of the grander landscape beauties of nature and a fascination for

the "sublime," encouraged by the popularity of artists like Salvator Rosa (1615–73), resulted in a new "aesthetics of the infinite" that coincided with changing religious views of nature.

Behind the Latin tags *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* lie roots extending as far back as Classical times, but now revived in complex ways. The latter consists of the "forms of nature," laid out to be investigated and observed. The former, literally "nature naturing," is nature experienced as active, dynamic and constantly changing. It refers to that animating principle that gives life to the objects of nature, which may remain at the disposal of God, or else be regarded as a pantheistic "presence" or a "power of harmony" that in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" "rolls through all things" without God's help. For the Anglican priest John Keble, however, the Book of Nature is precisely to be "read" as an indication of the workings of God. In Keble's poems in *The Christian Year* (1827), nature is a book "which heavenly truth imparts" to the Christian "reader." In a very different Romantic portrayal of Christianity, Chateaubriand's *Genie du Christianisme* (1802), drew his experience of nature from his visit in 1791 to America, where the "cultivated fields" of Europe, which "everywhere meet with the habitations of men," are replaced by virgin forests and the "abysses of cataracts" where alone the unknown "Supreme Being manifests himself to the human heart" and we can find ourselves solely with God. Nature is only truly appreciated where it has escaped the destroying hand of human cultivation.

In the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth claimed to be writing in the "real language of men," deliberately giving attention to rustic life lived "among the natural abodes of men, Fields with their rural works" (*The Prelude* XIII, 102–3). It was here that the poet sought to recover the roots and affections of human nature. For the young Wordsworth, at least, and certainly for Shelley and Rousseau, human nature is fundamentally good, and most truly discovers itself as it recovers an affinity with nature that the city-dweller has lost. Though their aspirations remained highly idealized, the Romantic poets at least abandoned the classical literary conventions of Theocritus or Virgil, so beloved of the eighteenth century, and donning their walking boots gave minute attention to "the mighty world / Of eye, and ear," and "the beauteous forms / of nature" ("Tintern Abbey"). Yet, at the same time, they were not blind to the heartlessness of nature's creatures, and Keats, even while he celebrates the "flowers gay / Of periwinkle and wild strawberry," laments the "fierce destruction" wrought by the shark, the hawk or even the "gentle robin" as "ravening," as it attacks the worm. For William Blake, this same worm is a canker which destroys the rose by its "dark secret love." Nevertheless, though we live in a fallen world (an acknowledgment which awaited the advent of Darwinian theory later in the nineteenth century), still, for some Romantics the goodness of nature