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reads

The Green Mantle of Romanticism

by Christina Avery and Michael Colebrook

and

Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology

by James C. McKusick

THE GREEN MANTLE OF ROMANTICISM (Green Spirit Press, 2008) is a critical overview of six "Romantic" writers—three from England and three from America—who cultivated an ecological ethos before the time of climate crisis. Avery and Colebrook, conscious of the need to retain and promote the Romantic "vision of nature" (7) and of "evolutionary processes" (7)—including James Hutton's 'deep time'—"at work in shaping the world" (7), present stylish "pen portraits" of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir. The "pen portraits" are quasi-biographical, quasi-philosophical, and quasi-critical investigations of a wide range of Romantic poetry and prose, including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the lyric of "The Green Linnet," Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*, Emerson's "Nature," the novel *Walden* and nature writings of Muir. Along the way, the reader also encounters Richard Tarnas, Johnathan Bate, Immanuel Kant, Thomas McFarland, Alfred North Whitehead, and many other significant writers.

The Green Mantle… has some of the advantages and disadvantages of feeling like a first foray into the intersection between the writings of the Romantics and what the authors call "a viable, philosophically defensible and humanly satisfying attitude" (40) toward nature. While it successfully presents a survey of Romantic literature fit for a general audience, readers may feel as if they are being taken on a vast tour of not uncomplicated poetry and philosophy at whirlwind speed. This approach, of course, has its strengths and weaknesses: on the one hand, we witness connections being drawn between Romanticism and ecocriticism, between English and American writers, and between the present and the past. The authors are especially good at bringing to light "deep" ideas of change and interconnectedness which are facing our species today. On the other hand, readers are sometimes left with the feeling that, as in the *Biographia Literaria*, there is a lack of systematic or unifying mechanisms which might have made the book more satisfying to some.

For example, a good portion of the section on Coleridge is devoted to an overview of his varied philosophical influences (this is where we encounter Kant, for the most part). David Hartley, Rousseau, and Schelling are also discussed at some length, though of course nowhere near as exhaustively as has been done by Boulger (*Coleridge as Religious Thinker*), Hedley (*Coleridge, Philosophy, and Religion*), or Vigus (*Platonic Coleridge*), to name just a few. One wonders how much is achieved by presenting a sketch of each of these thinkers in their relation to Coleridge without providing an intellectual context

in ecocritical terms. Whatever the case, readers meet no such philosophical overview in the sections devoted to Wordsworth, Shelley, or Emerson, in which the name of Coleridge might well appear as a philosophical influence. An attempt to show the inter-cultural influences between the six writers treated in this study would have aided the authors in the overall goal of connecting a common set of "Romantic" ideas with the social and political concerns of the ecocritical school.

However, the case can also be made that taking a more organic approach to each writer—as in the entries on "Birds" and "Mountains" in Wordsworth's section—is in keeping with the philosophy of intuitive process which the authors hope to espouse; and which they touch upon throughout the book by returning infrequently to the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead. Especially in the section on Shelley, the authors draw a parallel between Shelley's union of "Reason and Imagination" (57) and a Whiteheadian view of science which admits of equal parts intuition and rationality. It is in his "balance" of these two qualities that Shelley "sounds like a modern deep ecologist" (60). Although not explained, this remark hints at the deep pedagogical project toward which the book as a whole stands as a signpost. A truly ecological mindset—one that is becoming necessary as we face the threat of climate change—would apparently draw upon equal parts reason and rationality, and intuition and imagination, repairing what Whitehead called a "'radical inconsistency' in Western thought" (41) .

Finally, on the subject of imbalance: Avery and Colebrook clearly value John Muir highest out of the six writers covered in this book. Muir's section runs to nearly forty pages, almost a third of the book; the next longest section, Coleridge's, is half of that; and both Emerson and Thoreau together are given only six. While I am tempted to criticize them for this favoritism, I feel it is important to point out that of all the names mentioned in this book, with the exception perhaps of Jonathan Bate, Muir is most closely associated with the "green" movement into which the two authors would like to situate the other Romantic or Transcendental writers. Muir's love of the Romantic poets proper is very likely the seed out of which this book flowered. And it is in the writings of Muir that we encounter the clearest expression of "green" values. So it makes sense for Muir to stand in as a kind of anchor, both in time as in temperament, setting the tone of sympathy for the environment and for wild things which Avery and Colebrook then discover in the other writers.

In conclusion, this is a wide-ranging book which makes a strong case for seeing the color green in the writings of some of the major Romantic poets and Transcendentalists. However, it may leave one feeling as if there is more focused work to be done in showing the full range of connections that exist between Romanticism and the ecological ethos. Avery and Colebrook show us many ways in which the six writers in their book share beliefs that could be called ecological. Yet, they make less of an attempt to work out how the differences between such thinkers as Coleridge and Shelley, or Wordsworth and Emerson, are smoothed out or resolved by the ecocritical lens. There is

also the simple question of who else might be included under the mantle of green Romantic: what of Keats, Byron, and Blake, to name only a few, on the English side; and what of Fuller, Alcott, and Hedge, on the American? At the end of the day, we feel stimulated for a study of Romanticism and ecology that goes into greater detail.

ENTER James C. McKusick's *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). McKusick expands upon the suggestive portraiture of *The Green Mantle* in many ways, as well as broadening and deepening the scope of the Romantic ecocritical discourse.

What I like best about McKusick's study—which, like Colebrook and Avery's, focuses on the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir; and likewise includes William Blake, John Clare, Mary Shelley, and Mary Austin—is that it focuses on the centrality of ecocritical *discourse* as well as seeking to provide the subject matter for that discourse through detailed analysis of Romantic and Transcendental literature. McKusick, true to the values of ecocriticism, has written a book which is permeated by a nexus of ideas. *Green Writing* is a doorway to other books and other authors. McKusick recognizes the value of the student of literature, who, having picked up his book out of a desire to learn more about a particular poet or novelist, goes on to discover *The Environmental Imagination*, *Nature's Economy*, *The Idea of the Wilderness*, and other foundational ecocritical texts.

McKusick also provides a context for the relevance of ecocriticism and Romanticism in the history of ideas. Beginning with D.H. Lawrence, who, in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) "argues that the essential act of the American is the murder of Father Europe, and another is rebaptism in the Wilderness" (3), McKusick connects the topic of wilderness in American literature to the act of forgetting. Yet what is it that is forgotten? McKusick shifts the erasure of Westward expansion from the Old World to the new: "entire ecosystems… unique flora and fauna, indigenous peoples, autonomous creatures, free-flowing waterways, and unfenced horizons" (3). McKusick sees in Thoreau's dismissal of English literature, and of the Lake Poets in particular, one of the earliest representations of the vexed concept of "wilderness" which nevertheless builds a green link between the British Romantics and their later American counterparts. But McKusick seeks, contra Thoreau and Emerson, to unify English and American green writing: "the *topos* of rejecting book-learning in favor of meditative walking out-of-doors is in fact immediately derived from Wordsworth" (5).

The link which McKusick draws between English and American green writing is a subtle one. In fact, it is Wordsworth and Coleridge's "haunting evocations of the *most subtle natural phenomena*" (10, my emphasis)—as opposed to the storm and stress of Romantic Sublimity proper—which connects them to the legacy of ecological writing. Failure on the part of literary critics to appreciate the subtlety of British Romantic writing, seeing in it only the high passionate display of a skillful but anthrocentric rhetoric, creates a

"one-sided caricature" which "entails a distinct loss of our intellectual and cultural heritage" (11). In speaking of "our" heritage, McKusick is working in the ecocritical mode to erode any traces of nationalism which remain to separate the merits of ecological writing from either side of the Atlantic. The Romantic and Transcendental literary traditions are not opposing, or even stylistically distinct in an important way, but taken together form "a far more rich and varied set of responses to the natural world than is dreamed of in the conventional history of ideas" (11).

The richness and variety of the Romantic legacy of nature writing—which includes both the British Romantics proper and the Transcendentalists—with its "innate sense of wonder in the presence of things we have not created ourselves" (10) is what McKusick seeks to evoke, and in some cases to invoke, in the remainder of *Green Writing*. But first he explores ecocriticism's legacy and methodology in three important, interrelated sections: "On the Methodology of Ecocriticism"; "On the Origin of Ecological Consciousness"; and "The Emergency of Romantic Ecology."

In the first section, McKusick argues that the Romantic poets' "new holistic paradigm" which is exemplified, says McKusick later, by Coleridge, was in fact the "conceptual and ideological basis for American environmentalism" (11). McKusick's goal is to provide a "fresh perspective" (12) as well as to "suggest possibilities of remedial intervention . . . presently outside the mainstream of political and literary discourse" (12). *Green Writing* represents an attempt to invoke a combined politics of literary analysis which will naturally demonstrate the marginalized nature of responses to the current environmental crisis—which are bereft of the subtleties of literary thought. The effect of this on the reader is the key to the book's foresight: McKusick anticipates a new generation of literary critics for whom the looming environmental crisis is at the center, not just of their scholarship, but of their entire way of thinking.

McKusick is concerned specifically to enrich the discourse of the contemporary environmental movement in America because of its recent evolution into a "mainstream political force" (12). As a former canvasser for political organizations such as MassPirg and Environment America, I can attest to the need for such enrichment. "There is always a danger," writes McKusick, "that by becoming mainstream, a movement that began as a radical critique of modern consumer culture may become tamed and assimilated to the point that it is entirely co-opted by the very forces that it set out to oppose" (12). The availability of the Romantic legacy of nature writing prompts any conscientious person who has identified its ecological themes to ask whether the holistic message of "wise passiveness" expostulated by Coleridge and Wordsworth is in fact present in "the modern phenomenon of 'green' advertising and 'environmentally friendly' merchandising" (12). However, there is also danger in such a critique, if it should see the modern environmental movement as having somehow corrupted the purity of its Romantic origins (the danger of "mythologizing" origins).

In "On the Origin of Ecological Consciousness," McKusick acknowledges

the continuity of the "environmental awareness" (19) which the British Romantics inherited from earlier literary and cultural epochs (most obviously from the pastoralism of ancient writers). But the thrust of this section is that it is the Romantics who "formulated an innovative and in many respects original" (19) kind of awareness of the natural world. McKusick butts heads with critic Karl Kroeber over the Romantics' claim to this distinction. Kroeber calls the Romantics "proto-ecological"; where McKusick calls them "full-fledged" ecologists (19). McKusick divorces the Romantics from the "tradition of Sensibility" which he argues "falls short of an authentically ecological understanding of the natural world" (23). With acuteness, he identifies in the *Lyrical Ballads* not an obsession with pleasant scenery to the detriment of real human concerns such as hardship and work; but sees that the interest of Wordsworth and Coleridge lies in the illustrated connection between the natural world and the people who dwell there: in Wordsworth's case, they dwell in harmony; in Coleridge's, the link between human and non-human creature is sometimes vexed by language, custom, or religious belief. But the originality of the Romantics lies specifically in seeing the world cohomologically, to borrow a mathematical term: as a series of relationships.

Finally, in "The Emergence of Romantic Ecology," McKusick analyzes the etymology of the word *ecology*, "derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning *house* or *dwelling-place*" (29). The idea of ecological writing as being that which foregrounds an "holistic conception of the Earth as a household" (29) becomes central to the literary analyses which follow. And it is a return to this deeper notion of the meaning of ecological writing that McKusick suggests in the pages that follow. His analyses of both the Romantic and Transcendental environmentally-aware writers are grounded in the flexibility of the concept of *oikos* as a tool for literary criticism which is on the lookout for green work. And McKusick holds up the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge and Wordsworth, as the fathers of ecological poetry which sees man in his house wherever he resides, be it in cot, village, hill, or dale.

The majority of the book is given over to chapters which consider English and American green writers and their work in closer and more biographical detail, attempting to situate them within the particular historical and conceptual framework which McKusick lays out in the opening pages. I find that, overall, McKusick's book probes the writings of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Austin, Muir, and others—he is especially illuminating about the ecological consciousness of Clare—with clearness and with sensitivity to the deeper conceptual pairing (Romanticism and ecology) which it is the book's greater purpose to bring to light. Additionally, this book points the way to other important ecological works. It also heralds the beginning of a new tradition of ecological Romanticism which hinges upon the study of dwelling in the Earth, as in a house—rather than merely living "on" it.