

Radical Romanticism: Democracy, Religion, and the Environmental Imagination

Mark Cladis, Brown University

In this paper, I wish to present *a triscopic hermeneutics* that illuminates a Radical Romanticism, a Romanticism that can and has nurtured a progressive political and environmental imagination. By “triscopic,” I refer to the *three-way intersection* of religion, democracy and the environment. My paper represents a section of my current, broader project, namely, an investigation of the religious, democratic, and environmental dispositions and ideologies that mutually informed each other in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Romantic literature and their subsequent and sustained legacies in America to this day. I aim to show how this multifarious Romantic legacy, which has already shaped many of our sensibilities, can serve as a resource for the cultivation of interrelated democratic and environmental beliefs and practices. I begin by addressing British Romanticism, and then I turn to American Romanticism.

Explorations of the legacy of radical Romanticism are served well by employing a *triscopic* approach, an investigation of the three-way intersection of religion, democracy and the environment. A triscopic approach yields fresh interpretations, revealing socio-political environmental perspectives embedded within Romantic religious and poetic discourse.

In more conventional accounts, the religious aspects of Romanticism (Protestant and Catholic, orthodox and heterodox, deistic and panentheistic) are

often neglected, or, if included, are narrativized as precursors of contemporary secularization. Romantic portrayals of religion are thereby belittled or privatized. Romantic poetry itself—the quintessential Romantic genre—has been similarly privatized. Moreover, Romanticism’s environmental perspectives are often reduced to nostalgic notions of the pastoral or as private gazes on the sublime.

Secularized accounts of Romanticism belittle the significance of religion, tradition, and practice for such British Romantic authors as Wordsworth and Coleridge. This belittlement exacts a heavy toll. When we neglect the salience of religion, we fail to see the close, material connections between British Romantic religious and political radicalism. We also fail to see the connection between Romantic religious and progressive environmental perspectives. And if we discount tradition and practice, we fail to see the matter and manner—the *culture* or *second nature*, including memory, stories, and customs—by which many Romantic authors conceived of and pursued their sociopolitical, religious, and environmental aspirations. (Essentially, they employed a Burkean language of traditions, habits, and virtues in service of a Rousseauian democratic and environmental vision.)

In contrast, when our narratives become more subtle, when we become aware of the salient role played by religion and by practice in British Romanticism, we find ourselves in a better position to grasp radical Romantic efforts to establish a democratic and environmental culture: an environmentally responsive democracy embodied by its citizens and embedded in its lands. The early Wordsworth and Coleridge did not understand democracy chiefly as a set of formal political

institutions, but rather as a progressive culture or spiritual ethos that included the thought, skills, practices, dispositions, and emotions of diverse citizens. They were committed to advancing an *embodied democracy* that emphasized the cultural dimensions of a democracy, including its religious and aesthetic ones; and to advancing an *environmentally responsive* democracy that emphasized virtues and practices that dispose citizens to honor and attend to the interrelated natural and social communities that sustain us.

It's important to remember that the origins of Radical Romanticism were largely rooted in the hope in, and then the disillusionment of, the French Revolution. "The Politics of Peril and Opportunity," to cite this year's conference theme, pervaded the work of these Romantic authors: the opportunity that the Revolution seemed to offer (the advent of a tangible, robust democracy), and then the peril of the bloody turn of the revolution, and the oppression that followed in Britain. As France's bloodless revolution turned increasingly bloody, British support for the Revolution largely waned. Those progressive individuals and groups that had defended the Revolution struggled, variously, to continue to champion Revolutionary ideals but not necessarily the Revolution itself. And the British government, which was embarking on what would become a twenty-year war with France and the crushing of the Irish Uprising, waged its own domestic terror, passing a series of repressive laws curtailing the people's right to engage in activity that was even remotely deemed a form of radical or seditious speech, publication, or assembly. An army of internal spies were hired to keep close watch over such dangerous British

subversives as William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and Thomas Poole. The political climate became highly repressive, and many progressives suffered greatly at the hands of the state. And many Romantics, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, were close associates with the most important reformers of the day.

It's difficult to exaggerate the significant role that religion played in British politics at the start of Romanticism. Prior to the French Revolution and to the progressive political movements that it spawned in Britain, religious activism had created the very groundwork that supported much of the progressive British politics of the 1790s and beyond. *Religious* protest, in other words, paved the way for more explicitly political *democratic* protest. Religious and political liberty traveled together—in the form of aspirational ideals, social movements, and progressive art.

The Romantic imagination sought to bring critical attention to the experiences of war, farming, displacement, urbanization, over- and under-employment, water and air pollution, and oppressive political and religious authorities and institutions. It manifested a realism of the everyday as it engaged in social criticism, bringing new sight to the social and natural worlds and the human approach to them.

In the *Preface*, Wordsworth radically redefined the normative, social role of poetry and the poet. He offered a revolutionary description of *who* the poet is, *what* poetry is, and what it's good for.

“Who, then, is the Poet?” Wordsworth's answer: the poet is a “man speaking to men” (441), or, if you'll allow me to critically reconstruct the phrase, a poet is “a human speaking to fellow humans.” It follows, then, that the poet must employ the

everyday language of fellow citizens, suitably transforming common prose into poetic forms. And not only was the medium of Wordsworth's poetry "everyday," but so were the characters, events, and places about which he wrote. Wordsworth's central characters are often located at the periphery of society—the impoverished, the homeless, the disabled, the beggar, the wounded soldier. Wordsworth vividly portrayed these characters, and in the portraits we see and feel not only their hopes and fears, their achievements and losses, and but our own as well. We glimpse their humanity and in turn discover our own. This achievement in itself is a democratic act: to acknowledge the dignity of fellow citizens, even those deemed by many as lowly or powerless.

Wordsworth's poet, then, is a *democratic* poet. The poet is a lover of his fellow humans, one who honors what Wordsworth called the fundamental dignity of humans as well as the dignity of the natural world. Even as Wordsworth stressed the interrelatedness between the social and natural world, he also acknowledged the distinctiveness and independence of the natural world. And this, too, is the work of the democrat poet: to indicate the complex relationships between those social and natural realms that hold and sustain a potentially vibrant democracy.

II. American authors

The Radical Romanticism of such authors as Wordsworth and Coleridge traveled across the Atlantic and took root in an American culture rich with Puritanism, democratic notions of freedom and equality, a vivid sense of expansive wilderness,

and Native American notions of pluralism and the transactional relation between people, place, and history. This imagination was reshaped in distinctive ways by Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Thoreau, Whitman, and Susan Fenimore Cooper, among others. If we keep in view the Romantic socio-religious environmental imagination, we see as more cohesive those works of American thought and literature, especially from 1830 to 1860, that often appear disparate and disconnected. In light of this Romantic legacy, for example, we might grasp the depth of Emerson's commitments to Romantic religious sensibilities (in this case, panentheistic immanence), Romantic democratic sensibilities (the freedom and dignity of the self-reliant individual), and Romantic environmental sensibilities (the interdependence and "relatedness" that pervades nature, including human nature). Emerson's "Nature," Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* both reflected and profoundly revised the Romantic socio-religious environmental inheritance.

A feature of this revision was a pervasive distrust of eastern, that is European, influence. Thoreau wrote, "Eastward I go only by force, but westward I go free...mankind progresses from east to west." He was weary of Americans turning eastward toward Europe for hope and light. If the American task is to imitate the past, then we turn east. But if we seek "Wildness" and "Freedom," Thoreau urges us to face Oregon, not Europe. Thoreau worried that the New World might be deemed immature because it lacked history—or worse, that it would, for the sake of legitimacy, import Old World opinion, custom, and tradition. As for the culture and

history that preexisted European settlement in America, Thoreau usually romanticized all things Native American as wild and free.

While such American Romantic thinkers as Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau were clearly uncomfortable with the Burkean language of customs, traditions, and “second nature,” they nevertheless maintained that new democratic practices and institutions must arise from, and remain embedded in, citizens’ lives and even the land that holds them. And they understood that the institution of slavery and the incarceration and murder of Native Americans would haunt and perhaps “foreclose without warning” America’s bid to achieve a democracy.

These thinkers’ suspicion of tradition and authority encouraged them to champion critique and individuality, but also to neglect the potentially beneficial role of traditions and social practice. Yet it was precisely their courage to break free from the bondage of the past that, in part, fostered their campaigns against slavery, the extermination of Native Americans, and the alienation of new market economies, as well as their campaigns for women’s rights and prison and educational reform. When they asked themselves, “How are we to honor the lessons and wisdom of history while trusting our own judgments and virtues?,” they (especially Emerson) usually placed greater weight on the self-reliant side of the scale. Nonetheless, they (especially Whitman) recognized the importance of establishing democratic traditions and customs for future generations. Ironically, self-reliance—the *culture of self*—would turn out to be their greatest contribution to America’s distinctive culture and democracy. In any case, *Wordsworth and Coleridge can stand as a corrective to injurious distrust of tradition*

and authority, even as Emerson and Thoreau can stand as a corrective to blind faith in tradition and authority.

It would be a mistake, however, merely to juxtapose British and American Romanticism as mutual correctives. The Americans often intensified and radicalized their British Romantic inheritance (thus eliciting further emendations from across the Atlantic). For example, when Emerson was a student at Harvard, Wordsworth was widely assigned and extolled. Professors such as Andrew Norton saw in Wordsworth's writings some support for Harvard's Unitarian vision of liberal Christianity. But this vision was not progressive enough for the young Emerson, who would then offer a more radical interpretation that would put him in direct conflict with Norton, the "Unitarian Pope."

Wordsworth's influence on Emerson can be seen throughout his career, starting with such early works as "The Divinity School Address" and "Nature." In the "Address," for instance—which was greatly influenced by "Tintern Abbey" and quotes a line from "The world is too much with us"—Emerson announced to the Harvard graduates, "In one soul, in your soul, there are resources for the world... Man is the wonderworker."ⁱ Influenced by Wordsworth's early verse and voice, Emerson declared, *Trust, cultivate, and offer yourself, for you are part of the One Life that rolls through all things.* The good news that Emerson preached to the graduates rang with inspiration from the Wordsworthian Gospel: (1) you are a spiritual creature; (2) divine inspiration is dynamic and available; your present, intimate contact with the social and natural world can provide a source of revelation; and (3) miracles abound in the grace

and splendor of the everyday and in the character of ordinary people—not in implausible, erstwhile Biblical events and figures.

Early on, Wordsworth had connected his theological, panentheistic vision of “the One Life”—the divinity that permeates and potentially unites all humans and the natural world—with a radical democratic politics that opposed slavery and unjust war and advocated for the rights of the disenfranchised. As Emerson’s political climate changed, he increasingly made a similar connection. While the U.S. experienced rapid urbanization and industrialization, sought to expand its borders by way of invasion in the Mexican-American War, and prepared to enter a bloody civil war over the rights of slaves, Emerson’s theological and socio-critical views coalesced in the form of “lay sermons,” making use of a hybrid, religious-secular vocabulary. The aforementioned three principles continued to permeate his writings, but now these principles were more developed, more deeply connected to the struggle against slavery and the extermination of Native Americans. Around this time, Emerson and other Americans visited the now more conservative, elder Wordsworth. Their discussions with Wordsworth about abolition in America reawakened in him some of his earlier progressivism, and he lent his support to the American abolitionists. With the help of Emerson, Wordsworth recovered some of his earlier hope for a spiritual, progressive democracy sustained and nurtured by the One Life.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper, it could be argued that nineteenth-century American Romanticism has been inherited and transformed still further by such contemporary radical Romantics as Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, and

Berry Lopez. Yet to this day, privatized, conventional accounts of Romanticism distort our interpretations of these American “nature writers.” With important exceptions such as Wendell Berry, these writers’ work is often considered sentimental or spiritualized—that is, pertaining to an individual’s private, sublime encounter with the natural world. By placing American nature writers within a richer interpretive narrative of Romanticism, we make available the profound sociopolitical and religious dimensions of their work. And as our own cultural and scholarly understanding of the radical Romantic legacy is enriched, we better realize its dynamic and enduring promise. We stand to see how the palpable, sensuous literature of American nature writers—which is richly informed by Romantic religious traditions—can foster a democratic and environmental imagination and practice, enhancing our vocation as citizens working for the common good of diverse, overlapping communities—big and small, local and international.

Conclusion

I want to close by noting that the Radical Romanticism that I am championing has largely been informed by Navajo instruction. I have glimpsed many Navajos’ intimate, practical relation to the land on which they work and live. From their perspective, to be severed from an intimate connection to the land is to be alienated. And it is this very type of alienation that is commonly associated with Romanticism and its removed or “transcendent” gaze on the distant landscape. Yet the Romanticism that I have viewed through a Navajo lens is a less “romantic”

Romanticism. It does celebrate such modern Euro-American notions as individuality, interiority, and authenticity, but these are bound inextricably to practical action within the natural and social worlds. The Navajo have given me sight into the practical environmental and political perspectives within Radical Romantic religious and poetic sensibilities.
