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“This Green Earth: The Vision of Nature in the Romantic Poets”

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I.

“This green earth.” Wordsworth used the phrase in his early poem, “Tintern Abbey,” and repeated it no less than eight times in his other poems. I have appropriated it as an apt identifier for my topic today: the way that many major Romantic poets envisioned “nature,” in the basic denotation of the term—that is, everything on earth other than human beings and the results of human handiwork.

Romantic poets, at the turn of the nineteenth century, introduced into the literary realm an extraordinary emphasis on the natural world and an unprecedented set of concepts, attitudes, and feelings with reference to that world. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” which he composed in 1798 at the age of 28, formulated and helped to establish a vision of nature that is distinctively Romantic. That is, the poem manifests a sense of total affinity and communion with the natural world by representing it as a living entity in whose life—Coleridge as well as Wordsworth sometimes called it “the one life”—all things, human and non-human, participate. As Coleridge later put it in “The Eolian Harp” (1817):

O the one Life, within us and abroad,
Which meets all Motion and becomes its soul . . .
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere.

“Tintern Abbey” also exemplifies what is sometimes called the Romantic “religion of nature,” for it transfers to this green earth attributes, together with the appropriate feelings of reverence and awe, that in earlier eras of Western culture had been applied exclusively to God.

I want to emphasize that the Romantic vision of the natural world is not an outmoded phenomenon, of no more than historical interest. The Romantic attitudes toward nature are in fact of crucial import to us, because they are relevant to pressing contemporary concerns. That relevance becomes evident if we substitute for the term “nature” the current term “environment,” and if we substitute for the Romantic concept of the one life, in which human beings are interrelated with all that is non-human, the current concept of “ecology”—the interrelations and interdependence of all living beings with each other and with the physical environment.

We know today that our physical and biological environment is under severe stress. We are polluting our soil, water, and air. We are rapidly depleting this green earth of its greenery, its forests and plains. We are exterminating, at an increasing pace, plant and animal species which, once lost, can never be reconstituted. And at a frightening rate we are overpopulating our crowded earth. We—or at least many of us—know these things, from what ecological scientists

tell us and from personal observation. But simply to *know* such things, on the intellectual level, is not enough, as the Romantic poet Shelley pointed out as early as 1821 in his essay, *A Defence of Poetry*. “There is no want of knowledge,” Shelley wrote, “respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy.” And about the natural sciences and their practical applications, he said: “The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world has, for want of the poetical faculty [the imagination], circumscribed those of the internal world, and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.” What we lack, Shelley said, is:

the creative faculty to imagine that which we know, we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine, we want the poetry of life.

For, he declares, it is especially poetry—defined broadly as any “expression of the Imagination”—that “compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know.”

I shall try to specify some of the chief ways in which poets of the Romantic era (the quarter-century beginning in the late 1790s) imagined what they knew about their physical environment. To stay within the limits of your patience, I have to be very selective. I’ll focus mainly on English poets, although what they say holds true for a number of poets in Germany as well; while among the English examples, I’ll attend mainly to two major poets of the first Romantic generation: William Wordsworth, born 1770, and Samuel Coleridge, born 1772. And even from these writers, I have time only to select a few passages to represent the diverse ways in which they expressed a hitherto unexampled set of attitudes and feelings toward the green earth and the forms of life that inhabit it.

In part, the Romantic representations of nature were a reaction against the products of the industrial revolution during the preceding half-century—the age of iron and steam, of the factory system (in the phrase of the Romantic poet William Blake, “the dark Satanic mills”), and of the sprawling urbanization that was making conspicuous and ugly inroads (again in a phrase from Blake) on “England’s green and pleasant land.” For example, Wordsworth’s epoch-marking poem that we call, for short, “Tintern Abbey,” was written, as the full title specifies, while he contemplated the natural scene from the banks of the river Wye “a few miles above Tintern Abbey.” As Wordsworth knew, the river a few miles *below* Tintern Abbey, to cite a popular guidebook of the time by William Gilpin, was “full of shipping, carrying coal and timber”; there were also along the banks of the river iron-manufacturing furnaces that made the water “ouzy, and discolored” in the tidal section downstream. And some fifteen years after “Tintern Abbey,” in the eighth book of his long poem *The Excursion* (1814), Wordsworth vehemently attacked what he called the “outrage done to nature” by factories and “the manufacturing spirit,” as well as by the expanding manufacturing towns, with the result, he laments, that one sees “the barren wilderness erased, / Or disappearing.”

In great part, however, the Romantic vision of nature was in vehement reaction against the post-Newtonian and post-Cartesian world view that was prevalent among the philosophers and intellectuals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Newton’s science had postulated a

universe in which the ultimate elements are particles of matter in motion—for the very good reason that these are things that can be numbered and measured, and thus are capable of being managed mathematically. But later thinkers, building on some passages in Newton’s own speculations, had converted these scientific postulates from a conceptual model into a world picture; that is, into the representation of the way, deep down, things really are. S. T. Coleridge, for example, who was a metaphysician as well as a poet, greatly admired what he called “the immortal Newton” as a theoretical and experimental physicist; he decried, however, the conversion of Newton’s postulate of particles in motion from what he called “a fiction of science” into “a truth of fact,” thereby making this vital world into “a lifeless Machine whirled about by the dust of its own grinding” (“Conclusion” to *Aids to Reflection*).

Equally intolerable to Romantic sensibility was the dualism of the reigning philosophy and psychology of the preceding century, which established an absolute division between the human mind, or “subject,” and its material physical milieu, and so replaced the concrete, vital, and companionable world of traditional European culture with a world consisting, fundamentally, of particles in purposeless motion, connected by purely causal relationships.

From such a representation of the world both Romantic philosophers and Romantic poets recoiled with repulsion and disbelief. Typical is the response of the young Goethe and his friends to the Baron d’Holbach’s *System of Nature* (1770), a book that undertook to reduce the phenomenal world—and also human consciousness and purposiveness—to the operation of causal laws on material particles. This book, Goethe wrote, “appeared to us so dark, so Cimmerian, so deathlike, that we found it difficult to endure its presence, and shuddered at it as at a specter.”

How hollow and empty did we feel in this melancholy, atheistical half-night, in which earth vanished with all its images, heaven with all its stars. There was to be an eternal matter in eternal motion, and by this motion, right and left and in all directions, without anything further, were to be produced the infinite phenomena of existence. (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Pt. III, Bk. xi)

Similarly repelled, Coleridge in his periodical, *The Friend*, described the predominant world view of the preceding century as “that intuition of things” in which “we think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life.” And as he wrote to Wordsworth in May of 1815, “the philosophy of mechanism . . . in every thing that is most worthy of the human intellect strikes *Death*.” Wordsworth agreed that the philosophical separation of mind from nature is lethal; as he wrote in a manuscript version of *The Ruined Cottage*, 1797–1798: “solitary objects . . . beheld / In disconnection are dead and spiritless,” as opposed to the unifying vision in which “all things shall live in us and we shall live / In all things that surround us.”

To many Romantic writers, the theory-world posited by philosophical mechanism and dualism was not only intolerable to human needs, but drastically incompatible with ordinary human experience. The central enterprise of the philosophical systems of Schelling, Hegel, and other German thinkers was to reunite the “subject and object”—or in their alternate terms, “ego

and non-ego,” “spirit and the other,” “mind and nature”—that Descartes and post-Cartesian philosophers had put asunder; they would thus restore to the lived world its sensuous concreteness and human values, and thereby make it possible for human beings to feel that they belonged again in a world from which—in a term that Hegel established to define the basic human malaise—they have been *entfremdet*, “alienated.”

For early Romantic poets, as for contemporary philosophers, a cardinal enterprise was to heal the breach that culture had imposed between subject and object, between the self and the natural world, so as to revivify and re-humanize the world and make it adequate to human experience and responsive to human needs. In an essay “On Poesy or Art,” S. T. Coleridge elaborated the views of the German philosopher F. S. Schelling, in a statement that serves to identify what is most distinctive in the literature of his time. Poetry or art, he says:

is the mediatrix between, the reconciler of nature and man. It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into every thing which is the object of his contemplation. . . . To make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature,—this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts.

II.

In reaction against the bleak theory-world of mechanism and dualism, Romantic poets achieved intellectual and emotional relationships to the natural world unexampled in earlier cultural history. To formulate these experiences in words, they did not invent new terms; instead, they enlarged the expressive possibilities of the existing vocabulary by inventing types of metaphor that would make the old vocabulary adequate to express the new states of consciousness. Let me present several passages, to indicate how early Romantic poets developed metaphors that, as Coleridge put it, would humanize nature, and serve to “make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature.”

My first instance is from Wordsworth’s great narrative poem, “The Ruined Cottage,” that he composed in 1797–1798 but left in manuscript. Wordsworth describes an eight-year-old shepherd boy—patently modeled on his own young self—who from a mountaintop sees the sun “rise up and bathe the world in light.”

He looked,
The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched
And in their silent faces did he read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none
Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
The spectacle. Sensation, soul and form
All melted into him. They swallowed up
His animal being; in them did he live
And by them did he live. They were his life.

Here we have the paradigmatic Wordsworthian—and widely Romantic—situation: a human being, solitary, confronts a scene (“He *looked*”), and the interaction between the viewer and the scene, the subject and the object, generates the poetic passage. Now, note Wordsworth’s metaphors for this interaction. The observer’s spirit “drank / The spectacle”; that is, the observer ingested the objects of the natural world, so that these, in another metaphor “melted into him,” and thus became part of his identity. Note in addition that the metaphoric process goes two ways: as the observer “drank” the spectacle, so the objects in that spectacle “swallowed up” his animal being. The observer, having ingested the scene, is in turn ingested by it; in Coleridge’s terms, the observer, having internalized the external, is then himself internalized. The result of this mutual appropriation is the interfusion of outer and inner, of the human self and the natural world, into one being: “They were his life.” And this visionary condition, in which Wordsworth expresses the one life not as a concept but as a moment of experience, is signaled by an enraptured state of mind that Wordsworth twice calls “joy.”

Metaphors of ingestion, especially drinking, occur repeatedly in Wordsworth’s descriptions of the interpenetration, through the senses, of mind and nature. One example is Wordsworth’s representation, in *The Prelude*, of what he calls “a Spot of Time”; that is, a visionary moment of perception of the outer world, by which, as Wordsworth puts it in another of his ingestive metaphors, “our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired.”

And afterwards the wind and sleety rain,
 And all the business of the elements,
 The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
 And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
 The noise of wood and water . . .
 All these were spectacles and sounds to which
 I often would repair, and thence would drink
 As at a fountain.

Wordsworth exploits a variety of other metaphors to express the integration of the external with the internal, of the human with the non-human. As a prime example, here is a passage, drafted in 1799, that Wordsworth later reworked for inclusion in his poetic autobiography, *The Prelude* (1805). As a boy, he mimicked the hooting of owls that they might answer him:

But at times they did not answer.
 Then often in that silence, while I hung
 Listening, a sudden shock of mild surprize
 Would carry far into my heart the voice
 Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
 Would enter unawares into my mind
 With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
 Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
 Into the bosom of the steady lake.

Of this passage, Coleridge remarked: “Had I met these lines running wild in the desert of Arabia, I should instantly have screamed out, ‘Wordsworth.’” Why are these lines unmistakably Wordsworthian?

Note that by the phrase “far into my heart” Wordsworth attributes to the mind, metaphorically, the spatial dimension of depth—a space into which the sound of torrents is carried, and into which “the visible scene” can “enter” and be internalized. At the same time, outer objects are unobtrusively humanized. The torrents are given, metaphorically, a human feature, a “voice”; and to the lake is attributed another human feature, a maternal “bosom,” into which it receives, comfortingly, the “uncertain heaven”—that is, the shimmering reflection of the sky in the still water of the lake. In a final stroke of invention, Wordsworth annuls the division between mind and nature by tacitly equating the mind’s perception of the outer scene with the outer scene’s reception of the objects that it reflects. That is, in the same way that the lake receives the rocks, woods, and uncertain heaven, so the mind receives the lake, including its reflected imagery of rocks, woods, and the uncertain heaven. Inner and outer, human and non-human, mind and nature are merged, metaphorically, into a seamless unity.

I have time for one other example, related to the closing lines of the passage I have just quoted, which ascribes to the lake a comforting maternal bosom. In the second book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth struggles to invent a vocabulary—inescapably, a metaphoric vocabulary—in the attempt to say what no one, so far as I know, had said before. Wordsworth’s point is that a world that an infant gets to know while in the security of his mother’s arms, and while nursing at his mother’s breast, is a world transformed:

Blest the infant Babe . . .
 Nursed in his mother’s arms, who sinks to sleep
 Rocked on his Mother’s breast; who with his soul
 Drinks in the feelings of his Mother’s eye!
 For him, in one dear Presence, there exists
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts
 Objects through widest intercourse of sense.
 No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
 Along his infant veins are interfused
 The gravitation and the filial bond
 Of nature that connect him with the world.

In these circumstances, a world that would otherwise be an alien object is experienced (in Wordsworth’s figure) as irradiated by human feelings, with the result that the infant is bound doubly to the world—he is bound physically, by the pull of gravity, and emotionally, by a transference to the world of the loving interrelations between mother and son. In Wordsworth’s terse phrasing: “No outcast he,” for:

Along his infant veins are interfused
 The gravitation and filial bond
 Of nature that connect him with the world.

As in these examples, so elsewhere in Wordsworth's early poetry, natural objects are metaphorically received, enter, flow into, sink down, and melt into the mind, while the mind dwells on, drinks, feeds upon, and conducts emotional interchanges with natural objects. The division between what is external and internal thus dissipates, transforming a divorced and alien world, in which the human being would feel himself to be outcast, into a congenial world, in which he can feel thoroughly at home.

III.

The need to be at home again in the world—that is a persistent motif in Romantic literature, and in Romantic philosophy as well. A widespread structural trope, shared by poets and philosophers, figures human life as a circuitous journey away from home, through an estranged world, in an irremissive but unknowing quest for the home that has been left behind. Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, is structured as a laborious spiritual journey which, at its end, turns out to be preliminary to another poem which has been the unrecognized goal of the author's spiritual quest from the beginning; that goal, as the title of the following poem specifies, is home—"Home at Grasmere." Hegel's exactly contemporaneous philosophical work, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, turns out to have the same plot. It represents the evolving vicissitudes of the Universal Spirit in its self-educative journey through history, starting with its departure from its own alienated self, around and up and back, toward the culmination in which it will repossess its alienated self, and so find itself, in Hegel's phrase, "bei sich"—"at home with itself in its otherness." As the poet Novalis described this dominant philosophical trope of his era: "Philosophy is really homesickness—the compulsion to be everywhere at home" (Trieb überall zu Hause zu sein).

I want to glance at Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* to show how all strands of the great Romantic theme—the circular journey through alienation back to integration, involving the joyous recognition of the one shared life and the realization of what it means to be at home again in a world from which we have been estranged—are incorporated in the plot of the best-known narrative poem in English. The Mariner departs from his native land and sails toward the Antarctic. In a desolate icy setting, a lone albatross appears. The sailors hail it "as if it had been a Christian soul," and in the ancient ritual of welcoming a human traveler, give it food. Suddenly the Mariner, "in contempt of the laws of hospitality," as Coleridge's marginal gloss specifies, kills the albatross with his cross-bow. This seemingly gratuitous act expresses the condition of the Mariner's spirit: his prideful self-sufficiency, his readiness to sever himself from a universal community, the fellow participants in a shared life. The Mariner's punishment, as the ship moves north in the Pacific Ocean toward the equator, is to experience the full measure of the isolation that he has elected—his fellow sailors fall dead, and he finds himself becalmed in a dead and static nature that has become alien and inimical to him:

Alone, alone, all, all alone
Alone on a wide, wide sea

The only living things he sees are the water snakes on a rotting sea—“only a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on, and so did I.” As Coleridge’s marginal gloss explains, “He despiseth the creatures of the calm.”

At this lowest point of total stasis comes the narrative reversal, announced in the lines, “The moving Moon went up the sky, / And nowhere did abide.” Coleridge’s matchless prose gloss on these lines is designed to make clear to the reader what the Mariner, by suffering alienation and solitude, has learned. The Mariner humanizes the motions of the moon and stars; and the insistent repetitions in his interpretation of their circular courses reveal how profoundly he has learned what it means to belong—to belong to a place, a native land, a family, a home:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

The lesson of community thus achieved, the Mariner looks again at the water snakes; but what he had earlier seen as loathsome, he now sees to be beautiful, and to be joying in the life they share with their penitent observer; and in an unpremeditated burst of familial love, he blesses them:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware.

At once the terrible spell snaps; the dead elements of nature “burst into life” and move the Mariner to complete the circle of his spiritual journey. In literal geographic fact, he completes his circumnavigation of the globe, to end his voyage at the precise place where it had begun. But only now, after the alienation he has deserved and suffered, does he become aware of what it means to be at home in what the gloss specifies as “his native country.”

Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
The light-house top I see?
Is this the hill? Is this the kirk?
Is this mine own countree?

IV.

To be estranged from the natural world was to Coleridge, as to fellow Romantics, the radical affliction of the human condition; it is to experience as a lived reality what he regarded as the post-Newtonian world view, “the intuition” in which, as he wrote in *The Friend*, we “place

nature in antithesis to the mind, as . . . death to life.” To such a view Coleridge opposed that alternative “intuition of things which arises when we possess ourselves, as one with the whole.” This is the condition in which alienation is annulled, and the human individual breaks through the barrier of self to achieve awareness of the one life that he shares with all living beings, and with all nature. And of this intuition the emotional accompaniment is what Coleridge—in what for him, as for many of his contemporaries is a specialized term—calls “joy” or “joyance.” As Coleridge put it in his *Philosophical Lectures*:

In joy individuality is lost. . . . To have a genius is to live in the universal, to know no self but that which is reflected not only from the faces of all around us, our fellow creatures, but reflected from the flowers, the trees, the beasts, yea from the very surface of the [waters and the] sands of the desert.

Repeatedly in other Romantic writers, we find the acme of human experience represented as a breakthrough to a joyous participation with the abundant diversity of all living species. William Blake, in his buoyant middle-thirties, wrote of the renewal of “the fiery joy”:

For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life;
Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil’d.

In “Night,” the ninth of his *Four Zoas*, Blake represents mankind’s climatic recognition that outer nature is no other than his own estranged self—Blake’s equivalent in myth of Hegel’s philosophy of alienation and reintegration—as an exuberant celebration of the rebirth of a dead and wintry world:

For Lo the winter melted away upon the distant hills
And all the black mould sings. She speaks to her infant race, her milk
Descends down on the sand. . . .
The roots shoot thick thro the solid rocks bursting their way
They cry out in joys of existence. . . .
The bats burst forth from the hardened slime crying
To one another, What are we & whence is our joy and delight?

Twice in this passage this apocalypse of the imagination is signaled by the term “joy.”

We don’t think of Wordsworth as an exuberant poet, yet his elation equals Blake’s at moments of imaginative insight when, as he says in the eighth book of *The Prelude*, “The pulse of Being everywhere was felt . . . / One galaxy of life and joy.” Hence, in the second book of *The Prelude*, he expresses his exultant response, again called “joy,” to his achieved sense that he participates in the plenitude and diversity of the one life, whether on land, in the air, or within the depths of the sea:

I was only then
Contented when with bliss ineffable

I felt the sentiment of Being spread
 O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
 Or beats the gladsome air; o'er all that glides
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,
 And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
 If such my transports were, for in all things
 I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.

As a reminder that the Romantic vision of nature was voiced by German, as well as by English writers, I shall cite a passage by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. In the 1790s the young Hölderlin wrote a romance in prose, entitled *Hyperion*, of which the plot, as he summarizes it in his preface, reiterates the central Romantic theme of the basic human need to reintegrate with an alienated nature:

To end that eternal conflict between our self and the world . . . to unite ourselves with nature so as to form one endless whole—that is the goal of all our striving.

In the course of the narrative, the protagonist momentarily reaches this goal, in an achievement of unison with the vigor and variousness of life in the natural world. Although in prose instead of verse, Hölderlin's rapturous expression of such an imaginative moment is remarkably close to that of Wordsworth:

Each living thing flew and leaped and struggled out into the divine air, and beetles and swallows and doves and storks wheeled and mingled in joyous confusion in the depths and heights, and the steps of those who were bound to earth turned into flight; over the furrows charged the horse and over the hedges the roe, and out of the depths of the sea the fish rose and leaped over its surface.

So didst thou lie poured forth, sweet Life. . . .

I have time for only one other example of the Romantic celebration of the sense of the one shared life. It is from Shelley's great elegy, "Adonais," composed in the Italian springtime of 1821. The poem memorializes the death of young John Keats, and concludes with a death wish by Shelley himself; yet in the course of the poem, the poet responds to the upsurge of life in the spring, and to the joyous urgency in all living things to procreate more life, in a rapture that outsoars even his Romantic contemporaries. Here Shelley comes close to the expressive limits of language, yet without strain, despite the stringencies in meter and rhyme of the complex Spenserian stanza.

"Ah woe is me!" The passage begins with the classical cry of elegiac mourning, and proceeds to an equally traditional topos—introduced into the pastoral elegy by Theocritus, more than two thousand years earlier—which laments the finality of human death in contrast to the rebirth of the natural world in spring. But in Shelley, the ancient commonplace triggers an ecstatic realization of a teeming universal life:

The amorous birds now pair in every brake,
And build their mossy homes in field and brere;
And the green lizard, and the golden snake,
Like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake.

Now, the Shelleyan lift-off:

Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean
A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst
As it has ever done, with change and motion,
From the great morning of the world when first
God dawned on Chaos; in its stream immersed
All baser things pant with life's sacred thirst;
Diffuse themselves, and spend in love's delight,
The beauty and the joy of their renewed might.

V.

Some version of cosmic ecology—the sense of close affinity between the human and the natural world, and of joyous participation in their shared life—is to be found in later writers who, in this aspect, are recognizably in the Romantic lineage. I shall cite three instances, two English and one American

The first is D. H. Lawrence, who put forward the Romantic concept of alienation and reintegration in its uncompromisingly primitive form; that is, in the mythical mode of the One Primal Man who has fallen into division, but yearns to be reunified with his estranged natural self. In his book entitled *Apocalypse*, written in 1932, Lawrence announced: “We and the cosmos are one. The cosmos is a vast living body, of which we are still parts. . . . Now all this is *literally* true, as men knew in the great past, and as they will know again.” The development of human self-consciousness and the expansion of abstract knowledge gradually divided this cosmos, in a process that reached a crisis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the scientific world view “substituted the non-vital universe of forces and mechanistic order . . . and the long slow death of the human being set in.” Lawrence continues, in his haunting rhetoric:

What man most passionately wants is his living wholeness and his living unison. . . . I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. . . .

What we want is to . . . re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen.

My next reference is the opening stanza of a poem by Dylan Thomas, composed in 1933, “The Force that through the Green Fuse.” (The “green fuse” is the hollow stem of a plant.) Note

the interchanges of “green” and “wintry,” which are literal for the natural plant and season but metaphorical for human beings, and of “fever,” which is literal for human beings but metaphorical for a plant:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
 Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
 Is my destroyer.
 And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
 My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The metaphoric interplay between the human and the non-human, between the internal and the external, is recognizably Wordsworthian, although the voice is unmistakably that of Dylan Thomas.

The poetic voices both of Wordsworth and of Thomas are remote from that of A. R. Ammons, who wrote free verse in the American vernacular, and with the rhythms of everyday conversation. We nonetheless recognize in Ammons’s nature poems—“Mansion” is an example—his expression of a Romantic sense of commonalty with the life and death of all natural things, on the earth from which all originate, and to which all return. The poem named “Still” records Ammons’s sudden accession to a state of consciousness that Romantic writers called “joy,” the ecstatic awareness that the self is inter-involved with the natural world in one all-inclusive life:

everything is
 magnificent with existence, is in
 surfeit of glory. . . .
 I whirled through transfigurations up and down,
 transfigurations of size and shape and place:
 at one sudden point came still,
 stood in wonder:
 moss, beggar, weed, tick, pine, self, magnificent
 with being!

Whatever the difference in its linguistic register, the similarity of this passage is patent to Wordsworth’s expression of “bliss ineffable” when he “felt the sentiment of Being, spread / O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still.” And Ammons’s short poem entitled “Reflective” is recognizably, although in a whimsical rendering, a Wordsworthian recognition of kinship with even so lowly a being as a common weed:

I found a
 weed
 that had a

 mirror in it
 and that

mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in

me that
had a
weed in it.

Coleridge and his philosophical contemporaries, as we have seen, claimed that the alienation of humanity from nature “strikes death.” Science and the technology it fosters, when applied heedlessly or with unbridled greed, has turned Coleridge’s metaphoric death of nature into a grimly literal possibility. Many scientists and ecologists have recently taken the lead in trying to persuade us, by an appeal to the facts, of this lethal threat to the natural world. It remains to be seen whether merely to know the facts is enough, or whether it will take a revival and dissemination of some equivalent to the Romantic vision of nature to enable us, in Shelley’s great phrase, “to imagine that which we know.” It seems likely that only such a motive power—such an *emotive* power—will suffice to release the energies, the invention, and the will to make the sacrifices that are needed, if we are to salvage this no longer quite-so-green earth while it is still fit to live on.