The Relevance of Romanticism

Essays on German Romantic Philosophy

EDITED BY

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It has been almost two decades since the publication of Bill McKibben's book, *The End of Nature* (1989), which, as the title proclaims, announced the end of that which we have, for many centuries, called nature. McKibben's claim is that the increasing influence of human activity on the natural environment has led not only to unprecedented transformations in an extremely short amount of time, but also to the complete elimination of a reality that is outside of or independent of the sphere of human activity. “The idea of nature,” he writes, “will not survive the new global pollution—the carbon dioxide and CFCs and the like…. We have changed the atmosphere, and we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial… The world, the whole world, is touched by our work even when that work is invisible.”

Over the last decade, McKibben's claim that nature has come to an end has been reiterated and, in many cases, reconfigured. Thus, although environmental philosophers have generally agreed with the view that the idea of nature is problematic or implausible, their reasoning often differs from McKibben's. Timothy Morton is a case in point. In his recent book, *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Morton argues that ecology and ecological thought must rid itself of the idea of nature. This is not, however, because we have destroyed nature such that it no longer exists. Rather, Morton's claim is that nature is an idealized reality—an idea—that does not describe material reality or specify phenomena.
The idea of nature, he argues, “hinders authentic ecological politics, ethics philosophy and art” because it is “transcendental term in a material mask.”

In agreement with Morton’s view, recent work in environmental theory has similarly argued that the idea of nature, as Kate Rigby puts it, “is a metaphysical construct borne of a particular intertextual history and projected onto certain kinds of stuff in a variety of contexts, with a range of potentially very material effects.” Rigby claims that the emergence of the abstract concept of nature coincides with the emergence of human culture. In the Western tradition, it is when human beings achieved a fully formed alphabetical writing and theorized the purely intelligible world of ideas in classical Greece that an opposing notion of nature—whether as cosmic whole or as indwelling principle or as virgin territory or as mother—emerged. Thus, from the beginning, she argues, the idea of nature both assumes and implies a problematic and false opposition or dualism between nature and culture, natural product and human product.

In addition to these critiques of the idea of nature, a number of studies have appeared that consider (and in part reintroduce) the environmental contributions of romantic thought. These works, which largely focus on the British poetic tradition, seek to offer a reappraisal of romanticism as proto-ecological. Thus although the term “ecology” was not coined until 1866 by Ernst Haeckel, a number of scholars (primarily literary critics) have traced the origins of ecology back to romantic ideas circulating in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

This recent interest in the environmental appraisal of romanticism is not surprising. After all, the movement that we now identify as “romanticism,” and which spanned several decades and transcended national boundaries, was united in its critique of the instrumentalization of reason and industrialization—which it considered to be symptomatic of a deeply problematic relationship to nature. Furthermore, the romantics challenged the dualistic view—which underlay and legitimized modern science—of the mind as opposed to and distinct from nature. Instead, the romantics contended that mind and matter are two sides of the same reality. Or, as Schelling put it in one of his earliest writings on the philosophy of nature: “Nature should be spirit made invisible, spirit the invisible nature” (HKA 1/5, 107).

What is surprising, however, is that the rise of interest in romanticism occurred alongside—and partly in dialogue with—the critique of the idea of nature. The interest in romanticism thus seems out of place, given that the romantics were the modern thinkers who ascribed to nature a special significance. In both their philosophical and their poetic works, the romantics did not simply conceive of nature as a mysterious entity whose secrets must be (through the work of experimentation or mathematization) uncovered, but as the fundamental and underlying reality (principle) of all things—including the
human being. In other words, for the romantics, *nature*—not ecology, the environment, or, to use Morton’s most recent term, the “coexistence” of things—was the most significant and central concern.

In light of the critiques of the idea of nature, the interest in romanticism seems perplexing and perhaps even problematic. Does the romantic idea of nature not also suffer from the kinds of problems that McKibben and Morton point out? In fact, Morton’s rejection of the idea of nature begins with a critical assessment of romanticism, and it is precisely the romantic view of and approach to nature that he considers to be the source of the problem. Nonetheless, one is left to wonder whether the (or a) romantic conception of nature can contribute to contemporary debates, and whether the critical challenges to the idea of nature have either overlooked or misunderstood certain aspects of romanticism.

In the following, I offer an environmental reappraisal of romanticism, which takes account of the recent critiques of the idea of nature. My goals are historical and systematic. First, I seek to assess the validity of Morton’s critique of romanticism by distinguishing different traditions or strands within romantic thought. Thus I aim to shed light on the various conceptions of nature within romanticism, and challenge the view that romanticism offers only one account of nature, which is implausible or problematic in the contemporary context. I argue that within romanticism, we find a tradition that emphasizes empirical experience, careful observation, and methodological inquiry, and offers a conception of nature that cannot be criticized as an idealized or abstracted transcendental entity. Second, I consider the systematic significance of this “romantic empiricism,” and argue that while an abstract or idealized notion of nature is indeed problematic, a concrete conception that is achieved through the mutually supportive work of observation and reflection is essential for environmental thought. In particular, I contend that it is only on the basis of the kind of careful empirical observation and rigorous ontological account of nature that we find in the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that an environmental ethic is possible. In Goethe’s approach, we find a notion of epistemological responsibility or obligation that offers the necessary first step toward developing a sustainable environmental ethic.

16.1. GERMAN ROMANTICISM AND NATURE

As Jonathan Bate has clarified, a key difference between the British and American romantics concerns their understanding of nature. While the British romantics were interested in specific places and the ways in which these places could affect and vitalize the human spirit, the Americans were concerned with the vastness of nature, and understood nature as pristine
The term Romanticism was first used in Germany in the late 1700s when the critics August and Friedrich Schlegel wrote of romantische Poesie (“romantic poetry”). Madame de Staël, an influential leader of French intellectual life, following the publication of her account of her German travels in 1813, popularized the term in France. In 1815 the English poet William Wordsworth, who became a major voice of the Romantic movement and who felt that poetry should be “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” contrasted the “romantic harp” with the “classic lyre.” The artists that considered them in Romanticism, emotion is much more powerful than rational thought. What Are the Characteristics of Romanticism in Literature? Although literary Romanticism occurred from about 1790 through 1850, not all writers of this period worked in this style. There are certain characteristics that make a piece of literature part of the Romantic movement. You won’t find every characteristic present in every piece of Romantic literature; however, you will usually find that writing from this period has several of the key characteristics. 1. Glorification of Nature. Nature, in all its unbound glory, plays a