

Topics in Romanticism (R.F.W. Kroll)

1. Philosophical Trends

- (a) the power of the Mind: the Mind determines how we see reality—cf. Kant's *a priori* categories of space and time
- (b) desire to unite subject (perceiver) and object (perceived) without either being quite absorbed in the other: see "Ode to a Nightingale," etc.
- (c) belief in an intrinsic and internal morality *vs.* externally imposed moralities
- (d) individualism
- (e) importance of childhood, madness, the primitive: forms of non-reason

2. Language, Poetry, Art

- (a) programs for poetry (the Preface to Lyrical Ballads)
- (b) attack on neoclassical reason, orderliness, "frigidity"—Augustan verse
- (c) attempt to forge a secular scripture; to overcome "fallen" or "alienated" language: how can we overcome the effects of Babel? How rediscover Pentecost (Acts 2)?
- (d) the search for a prophetic/bardic voice (see c. above)
- (e) problem: how, in addressing/invoking the Muse, do we know when our words are infused with Spirit?
- (f) the power of Milton: he sets up the same problems; provides blank verse as a tool
- (g) artistic apprehension *as* redemption: cf. Keats

3. Narrative Patterns, Myths

- (a) journey as Romantic motif
- (b) importance of move from the Fall, sin, guilt, to regeneration—see Saint Augustine's Confessions
- (c) self-consciousness (adulthood) as a Fall: the attempt to recover a naive apprehension of reality (Nature, Spirit, the Self): how recover the Garden of Eden?
- (d) Cain, the Wandering Jew, Faust

(e) journey from childhood to adulthood

4. Ethics and Politics

(a) problem: how to turn individual enlightenment into a positive and public social or political program? Are men bound merely by “sympathy”? See Wordsworth

(b) the French Revolution: as the secular Millennium; as a disappointment—how to adjust views of the Revolution? Do first and second-generation Romantics differ in their approaches?

(c) nationalism: new emphasis on self-determination—Byron in Greece

(d) attacks on the establishment: Shelley attacks Castlereagh; Blake on “charity”

(e) attack on traditional learning: the failure of Oxford and Cambridge

(f) attack on the Church: attempt to defy traditional forms of morality as merely excuses to justify traditional institutional oppression

5. The Classics

(a) self-contained, Apollonian past or inspired Dionysian past?

(b) importance of Italy: the sun and light vs. English gloom and damp

(c) the Augustan myth: the union of arts and empire renewed in the light of imagination

(d) the Elgin marbles

6. The Country/Landscape vs. City

(a) relationship between poet and landscape

(b) how does landscape symbolize Mind or Spirit?

(c) how is Man integrated into or fused with Nature? (achieve communion)

(d) how does the city symbolize the Industrial Revolution? does it ever become a valid Romantic subject of its own?

7. The Self

(a) how does the Self have identity without being alienated by self-consciousness?

- (b) Romantic journey as quest for true identity: recovery of lost self
- (c) the Self as revolutionary, outsider, as unrepentant: the manifestation of Will
- (d) development of national selfhood

8. History

- (a) history as cycle, pattern, gyre (myth): understanding of the cycle unites present (subject) with past (object)
- (b) private history (The Prelude) vs. public history
- (c) the public vs. private hero
- (d) problem: how can the Romantic agent (hero) act within history without contributing to the institutional forces of oppression?

9. Dream, Trance, Vision, Folk Stories, Myth

- (a) the drama of the mind: closet dramas (Manfred)
- (b) dream or trance as the moment of twilight (*dammerung*) where we shift from this world, the harsh alienated daylight world, to the enticing and forbidding realm of darkness, and potentially, death: the place where subject and object are *perhaps* united, where desire is fulfilled—cf. Keats
- (c) recovery of naive apprehension of reality *via* folk wisdom, i.e. the language of ordinary men
- (d) psychological renewal in the act of retelling dream/story—see Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner”

10. Sex

- (a) the woman as object of desire: a reminder of alienation and of potential union and recovery
- (b) incest as firstly an attack on traditional institutional morality and secondly as the union of alienated individuals

11. Symbols (see Abrams’ Glossary of Literary Terms)

- (a) wind/air: *pneuma* means “spirit” and “wind”—prophecy, infusion, Spirit

- (b) light/sun: illumination, knowledge
- (c) night: the inviting primal womb; death; union
- (d) water: unstable realm between spirit and earth—another twilight zone?
- (e) fire: infusion, rhapsody, revolution, destruction
- (f) moon: both reflects and gives light: the imagination
- (g) birds: aspirations of the beyond; fusion of body and spirit; transformation

12. Miscellaneous

- (a) how do the Romantics use satire, if at all? what makes Romantic satire difficult?
- (b) use of Romantic irony (Byron)