

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ROMANTIC ETHOS AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION IN 20TH CENTURY NEGATIVE UTOPIAS

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Abstract The present article aims at underlining the manner in which the Romantic ethos has survived and influenced literary writings belonging to the 20th century. While researchers such as Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre have discussed the theoretical framework in which this happened, my aim is to continue their research and focus on another example that seems to exemplify their thesis, that is, 20th century negative utopias. It seems that through their specific construction of symbolic spatiality within their works, authors as varied as George Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, Robert Hugh Benson and more have been influenced by the Romantic construction of symbolic space.

Keywords Dystopia, Romanticism, Imagination, Symbolic Geography, Modernity, Modernism.

When we think about Romanticism, we tend to think of the period between approximately the end of the 18th and the second half of the 19th century. In the case of Great Britain, we think about the so called “Big 6” poets that form the canon of English Romantic Poetry: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Lord G.G Byron and John Keats. We also focus on the values and ideals set forth by the movement. However, while we can delimitate with accuracy the periods when Romanticism was in its emergent state, its peak and then decline), we cannot state either the fact that some ideas and ideals that took central stage during the above-mentioned period did not continue to play a part in sublimated form within the philosophical and literary scene in the following centuries.

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Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre in their extremely interesting book *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* show very clearly ways in which certain aspects of the Romantic Ideology or Romantic ethos were absorbed into literary, philosophical or political movements of the 20th and 21st centuries that one would not label as having anything to do with Romanticism at first sight. The two authors note how many movements and currents of the 20th century were infused with the Romantic ethos. From the youthful anti systemic counterculture rebellions of the 1960s in the US, Germany, Italy, France (May '68) to anti psychiatry experiments, pacifist and feminist demonstrations, religious revivals, liberation theology, religious revivals, all attempted to challenge industrial civilization and place imagination in the forefront.¹ Richard Löwenthal's *Der Romantische Rückfall* (The Romantic Backslide)² is another book documenting connections between the Romantic worldview and certain aspects of 20th century politics. The best example of this theory is the ecologist movement, a movement that has as a point of origin the 19th century and developed formidably during the 20th and 21st centuries. The major interest shown by the romantics towards nature, communion and the stable relationship between people and the environment determines authors such as John McKusick to conclude in *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* that British poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge or the American transcendentalist H.D Thoreau have been in fact, the true parents of the modern ecological movement. The Romantic poets have lived through the beginning of the industrial revolution and could observe a clear contrast between natural environments and the smog, noisiness and traffic congestion present in an industrial city such as London. William Wordsworth, a fierce opponent of the destruction of the environment in the context of the British industrial revolution opposed the construction of railways in the Lake District and was the first who imagined a natural reservation.³ The same thing can be said about the romantic poet John Clare. However, if Romanticism entered a period of decline in the second half of the 19th century, the same thing cannot be said about industrial civilization that continued to develop. It is noteworthy to observe that all actual natural reserves appeared in the 20th century, not the 19th as a reaction to the dramatic shifts caused by the industrial revolution. It is only then that civilization as a whole began asking questions about the repercussions of unchecked industrial development on the environment. As industrialization could not be stopped, the solution found was the creation of protected spaces, positioned marginally with respect to centres of urban development. Thus, the artistic and ideological opposition to the phenomenon of industrialization did not stop with the decline of

¹ Michael Lowy, Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2001), 220.

² Ibid., 229.

³ John McKusick, *Green Writing, Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-35.

Romanticism either but continued throughout the 20th and 21st centuries and the polarization between an urban environment presented as being debased or degenerate and the nostalgia after the marginal remnants of pre-modernity (together with other aspects of the Romantic ethos) was perpetuated through literary means as well. In this article, I will try to underline the ways through which the most important aspects of Romanticism have influenced and have been adapted to the specific needs of authors of 20th century negative utopias.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on a number of examples from a literature genre not touched upon by Lowy and Sayre in their book but one that in my opinion can also be taken into account as an example of the theory concerning the persistence of certain aspects of the romantic ethos in the 20th century. The literary genre I will be focusing upon is negative utopias. Of course, one cannot call these novels romantic in the traditional sense but I believe, and aim to prove that certain tenets of their writing, particularly with regards to their peculiar binary construction of symbolic space, their stance of opposition and anxiety towards modernity in many of its manifestation can be taken as being inherited from the romantic ethos.

However, before underlining the way in which the romantic ethos influenced the development of the symbolic construction of space in negative utopias, I believe that we need to remind ourselves of a few key concepts that are absolutely necessary to the following argument. The place to start is an enumeration of the main characteristics of Romanticism with a focus on the ones that have been absorbed into the literary, philosophical and political movements of the next century. By doing this, we shall be able to have a clear image of what the romantic ethos represents and how it was constructed as a mode of opposition towards the modern one.

First of all, a good premise would be that we cannot speak of Romanticism in the singular. Due to its ambivalent tendencies, there are Romanticisms. Lowy and Sayre show how romanticism's nature as 'coincidentia oppositorum', that is, simultaneously (or alternately) being revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, individualistic and communitarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, realist and fantastic, retrograde and utopian, rebellious and melancholic, democratic and aristocratic, activist and contemplative, republican and monarchist, red and white, mystical and sensual, shape the current's different manifestations.⁴ However this does not mean that we cannot find any common values that unite different strands of Romanticism. For M. H. Abrams, the romantics shared the values of life, love, liberty, hope and joy⁵ while for Rene Wellek the common ground was to be found in

⁴ Lowy, Sayre, 1.

⁵ This idea received an in-depth approach by M.H. Abrams in two of his works, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971)

the focus on imagination symbol and myth.⁶ Isaiah Berlin noted that Romanticism is first and foremost a manifestation of counter-enlightenment thinking, rejecting the central principles of Enlightenment philosophy: universality, objectivity and rationality.⁷ A strong focus was placed on non-rational modes of perceiving the world, on intuitions, premonitions, feelings and instincts. The Romantics were also fierce anti-empiricists and anti-utilitarians. Both empiricism and utilitarianism developed in England under the influence of Enlightenment thinking and represented by figures such as John Locke, David Hume and Jeremy Bentham. The Romantics were hostile to utilitarianism and utilitarian ethics. It is very important to note the fact that Jeremy Bentham is the father of utilitarianism and the creator of the famous rationalized prison model, Panopticon.

Karl Mannheim saw in Romanticism a movement that manifests an “ideological hostility to the forces giving rise to the modern world.”⁸ We can observe within Romanticism, “the opposition between a marvelous, imaginary, ideal world and the gray, prosaic, inhuman reality of the modern world.”⁹ Similarly, Raymond Williams notes that the Romantics upheld “certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening and even destroying,¹⁰” as well as the struggle to save “a mode of human experience and activity which progress of society seemed increasingly to deny.”¹¹ The authors of negative utopias as well consciously attacked many of the tenets of modernity without restricting themselves to the issue of totalitarianism. They were concerned about the environment of their works and opposed the total disconnection of man from nature.

We can talk therefore about a clash of values between negative utopias and certain manifestations of modernity just as much as we can talk on very similar grounds about a clash between Romanticism and modernity. However, the term ‘modernity’ is not to be taken in a literary sense, it is not to be taken as a synonym for literary ‘modernism’, the literary and artistic movement that began towards the end of the 19th century. In fact, many of the authors of negative utopias that I aim to

and *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973).

⁶ Rene Wellek, “The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History” (1949), in *Romanticism: Points of View*, ed. R. F. Gleckner and G. E. Enscoe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 181–205.

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 6–20.

⁸ Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. David Kettler, Volker Meja, and Nico Stehr (London: Routledge, 1986), 90.

⁹ Lowy, Sayre, 12.

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 30–48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30–48.

discuss were called modernists by literary standards despite the fact that many, similarly to the romantics as we shall see, did not endorse many of the values of what we can generically call “modern industrial civilization” thus being in a sense “anti-modern modernists”. As I aim to show, the impulse that led to the construction of their works, specifically their symbolic geography can be linked to the remnants of a romantic ethos. The clash is thus between the Romantic ethos and modern civilization as a whole, a modern civilization that began with the Industrial Revolution and continued to expand in the 20th century. The romantic mode of critique also expanded in the following century, even if there were major aesthetic differences involved.

On the issue of defining specifically this modern ethos that angered authors belonging to two different centuries, Max Weber observed the fact that the principal features of modernity were (and we can safely say still are): the calculating spirit (Rechnenhaftigkeit), the disenchantment of the world (Entzauberung der Welt), instrumental rationality (Zweckrationalität), and bureaucratic domination.¹² Charles Cooley also mentions as effects of modernity the urbanization, secularization and reification of the social landscape.¹³ Reification is defined as, “the dehumanization of human life, the transforming of human relations into relations among things, inert objects.”¹⁴ To these we can add “the decline of all qualitative, social, and religious values; the death of the imagination and the novelistic spirit; the tedious uniformization of life; the purely utilitarian relations of human beings among themselves and with nature.”¹⁵ The poisoning of social life by money and the poisoning of the air by industrial smoke are understood by several Romantics as parallel phenomena, stemming from the same perverse root.¹⁶

Interestingly enough if we take a look at many 20th century negative utopias we can observe the critique of modernity as taking shape along the same lines. The topography of the modern negative utopian city is presented as a dehumanized space where we can observe the phenomenon of social reification, and in the case of politically charged negative utopias we can see the same horror in the face of uniformization and detachment from nature. The fictional worlds lack qualitative, social and religious values and are presented to us as disenchanted universes. In many cases there is a complete overlap between the nightmare world of the Romantics and that of 20th century authors. Some negative utopias like *Robert Hugh Benson’s Lord of the World* are aimed specifically at criticizing the disenchantment of

¹² Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 347.

¹³ Lowy, Sayre, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ Thomas Carlyle, “*Signs of the Times*” (1829), in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), 233- 243.

¹⁶ Lowy, Sayre, 35.

the world, the secularization and the disappearance of religious values while others present these traits as the result of a modern political evil (i.e., totalitarianism). With respect to the issue of nature, the authors of negative utopias, being further down the road of modernization than the Romantics were have been more sceptical with regards to the usage of natural environments in their texts. This does not mean that these environments do not exist within the works, because they do and as I aim to show they have a very important symbolic role, however these natural environments do not dominate the literary landscape as was the case of the Romantics. Many negative utopian cities have on their margins repressed natural locations that are often romanticized as possible escape havens from the city. The main parallel between the Romantics and 20th century authors of negative utopias is not necessarily aesthetic but ideological. Each in their own way they oppose the same structure, the onslaught of modernity and the modern ethos.

Lowy and Sayre mention ten major Romantic strands that have mingled with other forms of ideology and have perpetuated themselves into the 20th century. Sometimes even strange hybrids between romantic and ideologies that originated in Enlightenment thinking have been conceived. These have been elaborated in their opinion as critiques of modern capitalist industrial societies. The ten strands according to the authors are: Restitutionist Romanticism, Conservative Romanticism, Fascistic Romanticism, Resigned Romanticism, Reformist Romanticism, Revolutionary and/or utopian Romanticism. Within revolutionary-utopian Romanticism, one can distinguish several distinct tendencies: 1. Jacobin-democratic 2. populist 3. utopian-humanist socialist 4. libertarian 5. Marxist.¹⁷

However, from our perspective of studying 20th century negative utopias, many of the above have to be eliminated from the list. This is because, some of the above-mentioned strands have failed by the second half of the 20th century into authoritarian regimes thus becoming themselves part of the modern condition they were originally constructed against. These have proven just as mechanical and harmful to the environment as well as to humanity as was industrial society initially thought of by the Romantics. Jacobinism failed in the terror of the French Revolution while fascism failed in the totalitarian state.

The aim of many dystopian authors was precisely to offer a critique of such failures. For many critics of modernity as well as authors of negative utopias, the Soviet Union and societies constructed on that model are themselves only variants of the industrial system that the romantic ethos was hostile to.¹⁸ This was the critique made by social libertarians as well as Trotskyite dissidents in opposition to Stalin's Russia. The Russian author of negative utopias and former member of the Bolshevik Party, Yevgeny Zamyatin, seems to have shared this view, as well as the

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸ Ibid., 152.

young socialist Eric Arthur Blair, more commonly known by the name of George Orwell. It is particularly important to note that the two authors were thus not targeting only authoritarian socialism and fascism but 20th century political modernity as a whole, including industrial capitalism. They did not believe that socialism as it was applied in the Soviet Union was preferable and that it had broken off completely from the capitalist-industrial paradigm. Although politically on the left, neither believed in scientific socialism, nor supported Karl Marx's idea that the city should become the epicentre of socialism, both harbouring as we shall see, nostalgias of pre-modern communities.

George Orwell's defined history as "a series of victories won by the scientific man over the romantic man."¹⁹ He called himself a "Tory Anarchist"²⁰ and indeed, at a first glance, he seems to be split between the right and left of the political spectrum. On the one hand, in issues of history and nationhood he looked quite fondly and nostalgically towards the past, particularly to the period before the two world wars that changed England's face forever. He believed national identity is stronger than class identity (thus opposing Karl Marx). On the other side of Orwell's politics, it is interesting to note the fact that in his 'Homage to Catalonia' as well as well as during his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell seemed to prefer the cause of the social libertarian anarchists who were against capitalism, communism and fascism (i.e., the main political manifestations of 20th century modernity).

Lowy and Sayre note in their book the fact that some strands of anarchism (as understood and proposed by their main ideologues: P.J Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin and Piotr Kropotkin) are heavily influenced by the Romantic ethos, particularly those strands of anarchism that emphasize the importance of setting up agrarian communes and the importance of a move away from the city and towards the country (in opposition to Karl Marx's view that emphasis should be placed on the urban environment and the proletariat). Anarchism thus combines progressive Enlightenment principles with the Romantic move away from the city.²¹ While in Spain, Orwell manifested empathy for the cause of the anarchists. It follows naturally that his critique is not aimed solely against modern totalitarianism but political modernity as a whole. The symbolic geography of his work attests to the presence of the romantic ethos used as vehicle for this type of critique.

Lowy and Sayre note in *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* that we can find similar themes and parallelisms between 19th and 20th century thinking. I believe that negative utopias are a particularly good example of this if we have in mind the themes of the disenchantment of the world, the critique of quantification,

¹⁹ George Orwell, "Wells, Hitler and the World State," in *Horizon*, August, London, UK, 1941.

²⁰ Ian Williams, "Orwell and the British Left," in Rodden, John, *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101.

²¹ Lowy, Sayre, 43-80.

mechanization, rationalist abstraction, the modern state, modern politics and the dissolution of the social bonds. The important point I am trying to make in the present article is that diluted forms of conservative, restitutionist, resigned but also populist, libertarian and anarchist strands of Romanticism have survived and played a part in the construction of many negative utopias. In some, the emphasis is placed on the importance of the past, history and memory (precisely because the works portray dark futures in which memory itself seems to be erased). Interestingly enough, despite such erasure of historical continuity attributed to the dominating political system within the negative utopia, many authors construct marginal locations, natural or artificial, or make use of objects in their novels that are associated with the pre-dystopian past and memory. These locations are small in number and usually accessible only by the main characters. These allusions to a lost pre-dystopian, sometimes idealized past, whether one containing traditional conservative values or one containing progressive ones is a sign in my opinion of the presence of the romantic ethos. These heterochroniaes are small in size and, usually accessible to the main characters. Such places include “the forbidden forest” (from the novel *Anthem* by Ayn Rand); the nature reserve (in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley); the forest in which Guy Montag retreats (in *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury); or that in which Winston Smith meets with Julia in 1984. In a Russian literary context, we have the forest that is beyond the Green Wall (*We* - Yevgeny Zamiatin). The textual allusions that make reference to a pre-dystopian past, idealized, almost Edenic that lies beyond the evil influence of industrial civilization as well as the manner in which certain characters are constructed betray literary influences from the 19th century. These marginal spaces seem to be presented as alternatives that are intimately connected with the pre-dystopian, pre-urban and finally pre-modern past of the fictional universes.

The attitude of the authors towards their own universes is sometimes resigned, sometimes combative. Many authors of negative utopias are resigned in the face of the nightmarish realities they create, others pose spatial alternatives. There are even cases where the dystopia has a happy end, with the main character manages to rebel against the totalitarian system or manages to cause its collapse.

Sayre notes that, “*from the Romantic perspective, everything that is new can easily become hateful. In this case Romanticism produces a blindness as to the positive, or potentially positive, elements in what is conventionally called ‘progress’—the counterpart of the blindness of positivists, utilitarians, and liberals toward the values of the past.*”²² It is important to note that progress, modernity and enlightenment values are directly attacked in many dystopias. There are a great number of authors of negative utopias whose critique falls precisely on the values of modernity, the same that were attacked by the Romantics in the previous century.

²² Lowy, Sayre, 249.

Progressive systems of social organization are attacked by authors such as George Orwell or Aldous Huxley. The difference is that while Orwell looks extremely fondly towards the past, Huxley maintains a more neutral tone, balancing both the good and the bad aspects that the pre-dystopian past had to offer. One of his central characters in *Brave New World*, John, nicknamed “the savage” is the product of two time spans. On the one hand, he is the son of a member of the Alpha cast of the World State while on the other; his mother is an inhabitant of the reservation on the margin of the state. He is nicknamed “the savage” because he has lived the greater part of his life on the reservation beyond the border of the state. Huxley obviously alludes to Rousseau’s noble savage bringing Romanticism to the forefront. However, this is with the mention that, as stated earlier, John is not a ‘pure’ savage, he is the product of both worlds; genetically he is the child of a biologically engineered Alpha, however, living the whole life in the environment and among the savages in the reservation. Huxley thus shrewdly uses this opportunity to explore the potentialities of both worlds. However, when it comes to the symbolism of his geography, the polarization is between a natural order belonging to the past incorporating values absent from the second one, a modern dystopian present. These values are valued as good and positive by Huxley and many others like him while the “reification, quantification, the loss of qualitative human and cultural values, the solitude of individuals, uprootedness, alienation through merchandise, the uncontrollable dynamic of machines and technology, temporality reduced to the instantaneous, the degradation of nature” (i.e., the values that Lowy and Sayre underline as being part of the modern ethos) are underlined as negative features of modernity.

The twentieth century in fact experienced a certain number of monstrous events and phenomena: two world wars, fascism, the extermination camps. The force of the ideology of progress is such that one always describes these phenomena as “regressions,” instances of “falling back into barbarity.” People are astonished that such horrors were still possible “in our time,” in the middle of the twentieth century. Yet these events—and other, similar ones, such as the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the Vietnam War—are intimately tied in form and content to industrial modernity. We find nothing comparable either in the Middle Ages or among the so called barbarian tribes, or at any time at all in the past. (...) Disturbed by the progression of the malady we call modernity; the nineteenth and twentieth-century Romantics were often melancholic and pessimistic in their outlook: moved by a tragic sentiment of the world and by terrible

premonitions, they presented the future under the darkest possible colors.²³

George Orwell, an author very sensitive to issues of temporality observed that modern individuals find themselves trapped “in an everlasting present without past and without future.” And indeed in *1984* this is precisely the way in which the great majority of the inhabitants of his fictional world live. Only the main character struggles to gather the broken pieces of the past and re-create a mental image of it. Orwell’s Romanticism and idealization of the past is more than obvious upon a close inspection of the text, an analysis of certain environments presented in his work as well as of the objects that serve as memory triggers. It is precisely the darkness of his present and the hopelessness of his world’s future that emphasizes the immense importance of even the smallest fragments of the now forbidden past because, as Orwell himself argues in *1984*, he that controls the past controls the future.

All in all, this is only a theoretical context that should be followed by more detailed works focusing on each negative utopia in particular as well as other relevant theoretical points, a task I aim to undertake in future articles.

²³ Lowy, Sayre, 25.