Morse Peckham's "Romanticism and Behavior": A Reply

M. H. Abrams
Cornell University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Repository Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol5/iss1/8
M. H. Abrams
Professor of English Literature
Cornell University
MORSE PECKHAM'S "ROMANTICISM AND BEHAVIOR": A REPLY

by

M. H. Abrams

I

Professor Peckham's succinct and wide-ranging paper has two parts. The first is a critique of the procedures and criteria of history, including the kind of "cultural history" in which he is himself engaged. The second puts forward a set of nine concepts that constitute the "pattern of cultural re-direction", called Romantic, which emerged in England and Europe in the 1790's and the following few decades; this movement of ideas, he says, has continued without a break since that time, and manifests itself still in the "high level emergent culture" of our own era.

In the first part of the paper, Peckham undertakes to use a behavioral frame of reference for identifying, ordering, and explaining the history of Romanticism. For example, he treats the historian's language as a mode of "verbal behavior" which operates upon the "verbal behavior" exhibited in the cultural documents which are the historian's sole materials. He views these, like all other types of language, as essentially "instructions for performance"—that is, as "directions for manipulating" either "states of being . . . inside the skin" or else "the world outside the skin." And he proposes that, to be convincing, he must explain and justify the interrelationships of the various elements within the Romantic pattern of concepts by an "explanatory system," or "theory of human behavior." which, though it is itself necessarily a part of cultural history, is derived independently, from a direct "observation of human behavior."

To employ such a behavioral model to characterize and explain the history of Romanticism (which is essentially a history of ideas, and of a very complex sort) is to run a risk of drastic reduction and distortion—a risk which, it seems to me, Peckham has not escaped. Since time is short, however, I won't press this matter now. Instead, I shall pose some queries about Peckham's treatment of specific items in the Romantic complex of ideas. Some of my doubts about the use of a behavioral model for writing cultural history will be apparent in the questions I raise here; perhaps others will be brought out in the course of the discussion to follow.

II

Peckham applies to the distinctively Romantic pattern of concepts the useful term "the Romantic family." Let me try to summarize his view of the relations among the members of this family, italicizing what he calls "the key terms" by which he identifies each individual member. Romanticism, he asserts, was a widespread response to the explanatory collapse of inherited cultural certainties, sanctions, and supports. To this collapse the response was one of alienation, of
MORSE PECKHAM'S "ROMANTICISM AND BEHAVIOR": A REPLY

isolation, of the manifestation of self (as opposed to social role), and of cultural vandalism. This complex of responses Peckham classifies as the stage of "Negative Romanticism." The following stage of Romanticism, since it can't return to the cultural frame that has been destroyed, necessarily exhibits cultural transcendance—that is, a radically "innovative style of explanation." Romantic cultural innovations fall into two classes. The first class is the redemptive, or apocalyptic, mode; it has occupied an inordinate share of the attention of recent historians, but as in fact a relatively "superficial" and "regressive" type of response, in that it simply attempts to re-establish the old assurance of a future paradisal redemption, although on new, "culturally transcendent" grounds. The second, largely neglected, but much more profound and important type of Romanticism is anti-redemptive and anti-explanatory; it consists of the clear-sighted recognition that there is no ultimate explanation of the human lot, and that no mode of redemption is available to man. The epistemological tension generated by the incoherence of these two innovative strains within Romanticism "has been responsible for the astonishing culturally innovative dynamism of high explanatory culture and its artistic exemplification," which has manifested itself from the last decade of the eighteenth century into the present age.

Most of these terms seem to me, prima facie, relevant to the lives, thought, and works of innovative philosophers, writers, and artists of the several decades after the 1790's, especially in Germany and England. Some of the historian's terms, in fact—"alienation," "the self," "redemption (in an extended, secular sense)—were first given currency and their modern range of meanings by thinkers in that era. But the way Peckham interprets and interrelates these terms, and the way he explains them by reference to paradigms of human behavior, seems to me questionable, in that the result is to project a character on the major Romantics that does not at all jibe with what they actually wrote and what they in fact stood for.

(1) Take, for example, the category of "explanatory collapse"—the dissolution of the inherited culture, with its established goals, its guides to making decisions, and its model of ultimate explanations—as "the traumatic experience" to which Romanticism was "the emergent response." This seems to me a valid and important observation. Again and again in the major thinkers and writers of the time we find the view that theirs is an age of cultural demoralization and disintegration, and of acute social and personal crisis. As Wordsworth expressed it in The Prelude of 1805 (II, 448 ff.), it is a time "of fear," of the "melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown/...indifference and apathy/ And Wicked exultation," a "time/ Of dereliction and dismay." Peckham also seems to me right in viewing the failure of the inordinate hopes invested in the French Revolution as the precipitating, though not the ultimate, cause of this explanatory collapse, as well as in comparing the sudden experience of recovery and release—the Romantic sense of having found new values in life and in the world by the discovery of new grounds for certainty and new structures of explanation—to a religious conversion-experience. Evidence for such generalizations can be found in many of the innovative writings of the period in prose and verse.
My demurral in this instance is to Peckham’s assertion that “the explanatory collapse to which Romanticism was a response was the collapse of an epistemology,” both in the idealist and empiricist forms of epistemology which were “culturally available” at the end of the eighteenth century. This seems to me not a mistaken claim, but too narrow a claim. A rejection of the theories of knowledge of the Enlightenment, and a reconstituted epistemology—in terms of the interaction between subject and object, ego and other, mind and nature—was indeed a central element both in the philosophy and literature of the Romantic era. Much more fundamental, however, was the incipient collapse, after a gradual dissolution through the preceding century, of the inherited certainties of the Christian creed and of the Western culture of Christian humanism. This culture had certified and sanctioned the essential truths, values, and goals of human life, as well as expectations of the human future. It was premised on three functional terms, God, man, and the natural universe, with God reigning supreme as the creator, warrantor, and providential controller of man and nature. It was because the traditional God had dropped out as the prime factor in the triad that Romantic thought was left with two operative terms only, man and nature, to account not only for epistemology, but for everything in the universe and in human history; and the essential enterprise (no less evident in poems like Wordsworth’s *Prelude* than in the philosophical “systems” of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel) was to make subject and object, man’s mind and nature, accomplish by their interaction all the functions, from the creation to the apocalypse, which had earlier been attributed to the powers of a creative and redemptive Diety.

We can use the second and third members of Peckham’s Romantic “family”—the concepts of “alienation” and “isolation”, as embodied in the pervasive Romantic plot-form of the journey and quest—in order to illustrate how Romantic writers secularized Christian paradigms, and specifically, by translating them into the relationships between man’s mind and nature. As Peckham observes, “Romantic literature is filled with wanderers” who are “alienated from their society and . . . isolated from contact with their fellow human beings,” and whose wandering “is search behavior” of which the goal is “a new integration, an innovative mode of redemption.” The point is, Romantic authors did not invent this archetypal figure and plot. They inherited it from many centuries of Christian writings, which began in the narratives and parables of the Old and New Testament and developed into the most common of Christian tropes—that of the peregrinatio vitae—which was explored in countless biblical exegeses, homilies, and sermons, and informed standard confessional autobiographies, Christian histories of the world, and the huge genre of allegorical narratives in verse and prose. The figure of the lonesome pilgrimage-and-quest pervades, for example, Augustine’s autobiographical *Confessions*; it is the organizing principle of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and of many medieval romances; while the single knights of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* exemplify the aristocratic, or equestrian, journey and quest, and the solitary wayfarer of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* exemplifies the proletarian, or pedestrian, journey and quest. The all-important difference is that the supernatural goal of the Christian quest—a reconciliation
MORSE PECKHAM’S "ROMANTICISM AND BEHAVIOR": A REPLY

(often figured as a marriage) with an alienated God in a return to man’s ancestral home in Eden or heaven—has in the Romantic era given place to a consummation which in most instances is, specifically, a reintegration of marriage of the “subject” (man’s mind or consciousness) with the “object” (nature or the external world) from which, at the “fall” that occurred at the origination of human self-consciousness, man has been alienated. The journey, in Romantic writers, has become a self-educational journey which is limited, both in its beginning and at its end, to life in this world, and is compelled by the initial catastrophic split between subject and object; its goal, the utmost of human felicity, is the stage of mature integrity, self-knowledge, and assurance of vocation, which manifests itself, above all, in the sense of being entirely at home in the world. Wordsworth (like many of his fellow poets and novelists) represents this consummation of man’s earthly quest by the figure of a marriage; like his contemporaries, however, Wordsworth substitutes man’s mind and nature for Jehovah and Israel, or the Lamb and the New Jerusalem, who had been the bride and groom in the apocalyptic passages of the Old and New Testament:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields . . .
. . . the discerning intellect of Man
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.

Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit is represented as the educational journey through history of man’s multiply divided consciousness, in progressive stages in which it continuously re-assimilates its ever-renewing divisions from its own alienated self; the consummation of this journey and quest is the stage of “absolute knowledge” in which the spirit (human consciousness) becomes fully “self conscious spirit,” entirely repossesses its alienated other, and so finally finds itself at home—“at home with itself in its otherness as such.”

(2) So far, I have proposed to qualify certain of Peckham’s generalizations, but not to deny their pertinence. His treatment of other terms in the Romantic family, on the other hand, results in a sketch of early Romanticism which clashes sharply with—and in important respects is directly contrary to—the typical Romantic attitudes to European culture, and the relation to that culture of their own innovative forms of thought and imagination.

I refer especially to Peckham’s discussion of what he calls “a sub-family . . . of Romantic factors: alienation, cultural vandalism, and selfhood.” He interprets the performative meaning of references to “the self” as “negational behavior,” which is opposed to the acceptance of the “social roles” which are defined for us by the prevailing culture; and he asserts that Romantic selfhood serves to explain “the phenomena of alienation and cultural vandalism,” by virtue of the fact that “what vandalism produces in the individual is a powerful sense of selfhood, of being a man, and his own man.” Peckham undertakes
to explain this Romantic syndrome in behavioral terms, by equating it with the "apparently pointless vandalism" ("including occasionally murder") of "young men and women who have been well brought up in middle-class homes." The distinction is that Romantic vandalism is "symbolic vandalism," although it is "no less real for being symbolic."

With the Romantics it was different, for they were not vandalizing empty houses but rather the behavior-validating and -instructing rhetorical modes of European high culture, and the Romantics were cultural vandals, without exception . . . . That cultural vandalism, that all-encompassing negation of available high-level explanations and validations, is the behavior subsumed by the term "self" as distinguished from "role."

There are several serious difficulties with this depiction of the typically Romantic pattern of concepts and behavior. In the first place, it seems to confound cause and effect, in that it conflates the traumatic experience of "explanatory collapse" to which, as Peckham has earlier said, Romanticism was a "response", with that response itself, which he describes as an "all-encompassing negation of available high-level explanations." In the second place, I fail to see on what valid grounds Peckham refers the "symbolic" operations of Romantic thinkers to the behavioral model of adolescent vandalism. Insofar as such a model is pertinent to any large-scale development in European thought, it may clarify some aspects of the later nineteenth-century movement of social Nihilism, and of such recent offshoots of Nihilism as the Weathermen movement in America. But the behavioral model of youthful vandalism is at best extraordinarily reductive; and when applied to Romanticism it serves (and this is my third and most serious objection to Peckham's view) to distort beyond recognition the typical Romantic attitudes to their cultural heritage and the typical Romantic attempts to come to terms with that heritage. And by Romantic I signify, as Peckham does, the innovative thinkers and writers of the 1790's and the several succeeding decades, including Herder, Schiller, Goethe, Holderlin, and the Schlegel brothers; the post-Kantian philosophers Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel; and in England, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley.

What lends a surface plausibility to the view that these Romantics "were cultural vandals, without exception," is the unanimity and vigor of their attack against prominent aspects of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, especially against favorite cultural culprits such as Newton and Locke. But a ruling enterprise of Romantic thinking was not to reject, but to rescue and preserve earlier truths by incorporating them into a higher and more inclusive intellectual system. As Coleridge stated this enterprise in his Biographia Literaria, "a true philosophy" must "at once explain and collect the fragments of truth scattered through systems the most incongruous," by uniting them "in one perspective point . . . . We have imprisoned our own conceptions by the lines, which we have drawn, in order to exclude the conceptions of others." As their histories of earlier philosophy show, Romantic thinkers for the most part treated their intellectual forbears with respect, including those who voiced views
MORSE PECKHAM'S "ROMANTICISM AND BEHAVIOR": A REPLY

that they strenuously opposed; and this respect, in the highest degree, was extended to the Bible and to Christian theology, even by those thinkers who rejected Christianity as a creed. Hegel was both explicit and representative when he asserted that his philosophy did not subvert the truths of Christianity, but instead preserved and sublimated them by translating them from a mythology (the "picture-thinking" of religion) to the conceptual structure of his own philosophical system.

From the beginning, in other words, the innovative Romantic thinkers, far from setting out to vandalize their culture, deliberately undertook a large-scale salvage operation that would rescue inherited certainties and values, by transferring them from their earlier foundation in a dissolving creed to a secure and coherent intellectual structure that would achieve consent in the new age. The operative principle by which most Romantic thinkers justified the incorporation of diverse or conflicting views, old and new, was the principle of polarity, or the "reconciliation of opposites," or the fusion of thesis and antithesis in a higher synthesis. As Blake expressed this central principle in his early work, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, independently of German influence, any intellectual advance is necessarily a strenuous conflict of opposing views, for "without contraries is no progression." Furthermore major Romantic thinkers—including not only the professional philosophers, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, but also Coleridge and Blake—were architects of immense intellectual systems. They set out, that is, to incorporate all earlier partial truths in a system that would account for no less than everything in the universe—for nature and man, the physical and mental, the past and present, together with all aspects of human thought, action, and creative making. Whatever the very diverse modes of their later influence, the Romantics were in intention not cultural vandals but cultural builders, and on a scale comparable to the great intellectual enterprises of Aristotle and Aquinas.

In these Romantic philosophical systems—and in the imaginative constructions of many thoughtful poets and novelists—the concept of the "self," or "self-hood," indeed played the central role that Peckham claims; it was, however, a role entirely opposed to the negative and destructive function that he attributes to the self.

Romantic thinkers and mythographers begin, typically, by positing an aboriginal unity of undivided being. The radical cause of the fragmentation of this unity was the emergence of human consciousness and awareness of the self, hence of that ego-centrism of the individual unit which Schelling called "Ichheit," Hegel called "the self-centered being-for-itself," Blake called "self-hood," Coleridge called "egoism," and Shelley called "the dark idolatry of self." According to the common procedure of translating biblical myth into prevailing conceptual terms, Herder, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Coleridge, and others all proposed that the deep structural meaning of the biblical account of the fall of man was the emergence of human consciousness of the self, that this selfhood was the original sin posited by Christian theology, and that the evil consequence of selfhood was a multi-faceted alienation—a radical division of the individual man within himself, from his fellow humans, and from the natural
world. But (continuing the biblical parallel) the original fall into consciousness was a fortunate fall, in that it was the necessary condition of all knowledge and morality, and also in that, by the very conflict of contraries that it poses, it opens up the possibility of intellectual, moral, and imaginative progress to a higher unity. The human goal—the "redemption" in this world to be achieved by an apocalypse, or consummation, of consciousness—is signaled by a triumph over selfhood by its opponent principle; that is, by the selfless, all-embracing passion that the Romantics called "love." The consequence will be a return from alienation to the original unity, but on the immeasurably higher level in which the achieved unity is what Coleridge called a "unity in multeity"—the ultimate synthesis, or reintegration, that incorporates all previous divisions. Whether presented in philosophical and conceptual terms or in poetic and imaginative terms, the Romantic vision of man's redeemed state in this life is of a condition in which, all alienation overcome, man will be in harmony with himself, in community with his fellow men, and thoroughly at home in his world.

One final comment. Professor Peckham recognizes this apocalyptic and redemptive pattern in Romanticism—the salvaging of the Christian-humanist hopes for mankind, but translated into secular terms that he calls the mode of "culturally transcendent explanations"; he derogates it, however, as "a historically regressive mode of Romanticism" which was "relatively superficial." The deeper, subtler, and permanently valid aspect of Romanticism, he asserts, is the mode of "anti-redemptive, anti-explanatory Romanticism," which consists in the recognition of "the collapse of explanation itself" and "the refusal to accept any consolation for the irresolvable tension of human existence."

About these claims I have two questions. The first is: who, specifically, were the early Romantic writers who proposed an anti-redemptive and anti-explanatory view of man's life and destiny? Peckham offers only two documentary examples. The first is Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In his brief explication of this work, however, Peckham seems to conflate the content and structure of the *Phenomenology* with that of Hegel's *Logic*; and then, quite arbitrarily, he interprets the central purport of the Phenomenology—although it clearly ends with an apocalyptic redemption of the divided and conflicting human consciousness—to consist in the thesis that "an explanation is to be found only in the acceptance of the impossibility of redemption." Peckham's only other example is a poem by Wallace Stevens; but Stevens, whether or not we choose to classify him as a Romantic, is not a member of the early Romantic generation whose thought-patterns Peckham undertakes to describe and explain.

My second question concerns the grounds on which Peckham bases his judgment that the explanatory and redemptive mode of Romanticism is both regressive and superficial. The cash-value of this claim, one suspects, is that Peckham himself is certain that there is no ultimate explanation of the way things are, and no inherent guarantee of redemption from "the irresolvable tensions of human existence." Now, I happen to share something like this view, in that I think that the Romantic explanations of the human malaise, and the Romantic warrant for expecting a general redemption from that malaise, are
forms which have been imposed on experience by the human imagination in response to deep-rooted human needs. But such a belief does not seem to me to justify a discrediting of the Romantic attempt to rescue and reconstitute the redemptive hope that was essential in the culture they had inherited. For what the Romantics taught us seems to me to be permanently valid, independently of the particular explanatory and validative myths in which they embodied their insights. They taught us, for example, what it is to exist as self-divided and alienated individuals in the modern world; they also taught us what it means, knowing our isolation, to be humanly whole and really to belong to a family, a place, a community, and in the world.