



ROMANTICISM AND POSTROMANTICISM From Wordsworth to Pater*

RENÉ GALLET

Université de Caen

The object of the present collection of studies is identical to that of the preceding volume. By concentrating on major works (without entering into the discussion of how these are defined), and by resorting to various techniques of close reading, it aimed at providing an interpretative framework of some of the intellectual and literary movements of the nineteenth century in England, without ignoring the broader European context, from which they cannot always be divorced. There is no need to stress the inevitably tentative and limited nature of the enterprise. There is, however, ample precedent for it, and in the preceding volume particular reference was made to M.H. Abrams's *The Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* and J.H. Miller's *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*, both of which may be seen as taking up the enquiry where Abrams's book left off.

As in the preceding volume, attention is paid to the various dimensions of culture, in one understanding of it. Though a prominent place is given to literature, the fields of science, philosophy and religious thought have also been taken into account. This broader perspective is helpful when dealing with non recognized assumptions which may make it difficult to perceive some of the intellectual issues present in the period or even before it, in so far as it reshapes or challenges preexisting views. One example of this is the way in which philosophical naturalism (with which much of the Enlightenment can be identified) was initially developed and reasserted as one of the most powerful post-romantic intellectual traditions (though evidently other options remained available as can be seen from the impact of Kant, even in England, and the emergence later on the Continent of Bergson's philosophy or Husserl's phenomenology). But the notion of 'naturalism' usually implies an active—though negative—relation to that of 'supernature.'

The hypothesis adopted in the first volume tried to perceive English romanticism in its intellectual (and not just literary) dimension in its

* This is the slightly abridged introduction to a forthcoming book, a sequel to *Romantisme et postromantisme de Coleridge à Hardy* (Paris & Montréal : L'Harmattan, 1996). The notes have been left out.

confrontation with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and empiricism in particular. Concerning the emergence and implications of the Enlightenment, though it is an obvious oversimplification (and not new since the idea is already found in Hegel), the suggestion made is that its 'hyperhumanism' (to distinguish it from an earlier, especially Erasmian, form of humanism), might be interpreted as the inversion of the strong anti-humanistic element in the Reformation (its denial of free will in Luther's *De servo arbitrio* or Calvin's double predestination, for instance) as a result of its "hyperaugustinism," as C. Taylor calls it in his *Sources of the Self* (but at a later stage more isolated thinkers of the Enlightenment may also be felt to undermine humanism itself when the idea of personal identity is challenged as in Diderot's *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* or Hume's radical empiricism).

The Enlightenment, to use the conventional term covering an obviously chequered reality, can be felt to reverse three major assertions made by Luther while in a sense furthering them in a contrary form. The exclusiveness given to the Book of Revelation (*sola scriptura*) and the demotion of the Book of Nature may have led to the opposite position which is typical of the Enlightenment. In the frequent deistic version of it, the Book of Nature receives absolute precedence and the Book of Revelation is liable to be said, by Voltaire among others, to bring obscurity and confusion instead of additional light to the knowledge of God. At the same time, the Book of Nature may be given more or less the kind of immediate certainty, which Luther attached to the Bible. And Nature, when seen as a vast clock-like mechanism, immediately testifies to the existence of a superior clock-maker, a kind of *Deus faber* (this immediate readability of Nature was questioned by Butler in his influential *Analogy of Religion*, 1736). The assumption is still visible in W. Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) and ultimately, though in a less conspicuous way, in Darwin's deconstruction of it in connection with that of the idea of "distinct acts of creation."

Similarly, the principle of "faith alone" can also be interpreted as the assertion of faith to the detriment of reason, leading to a fideistic attitude in comparison with the conjunction of reason and faith in the Catholic view on the subject. In a sense it is then a short step to the choice of "reason alone" ('alone' representing the element of choice) as an alternative to the principle of "faith alone." The phrase "reason alone" is found in letter XIV of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*. As a reader and one-time correspondent of Swift, he may have come across such a phrase in the seventh chapter of the final book of *Gulliver's Travels* where it applies to the naturalistic rationalism of Swift's philosophical horses. In his perspective, this is likely to be part of his satire on the hyperhumanism of some of the early advocates of the Enlightenment, in the name of his somewhat idiosyncratic Christian humanism inherited from More and Erasmus.

Finally "grace alone," without any contribution from man's free will, may have led to the exclusive assertion of man's will, independent of divine assistance which now tended to be seen as external or foreign to human nature, a factor of 'alienation' as it would come to be known. This new confidence in man's capacity to achieve his own salvation by himself, especially through collective action, is reflected in the typical belief in human perfectibility (the theme is given a more individual emphasis when

viewed in the perspective of a cooperation with grace). In some cases this confidence assumes a distinctly utopian form and Condorcet or Godwin are immediate examples of this (it may be worth pointing out that More's *Utopia*, an expression of Renaissance humanism by an author familiar with Augustine's theory of the *two* cities, is unlikely to be intended as a utopian scheme in the post-Enlightenment sense of the term).

Coleridge and Wordsworth, who came to be so closely associated with the creation of English romanticism, were nonetheless originally committed, in varying degrees, to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the political expression, which they were given in France. Wordsworth's drama *The Borderers* (1796-1797) reflects the horror and bitter disillusionment felt as a result of the Terror in France. But the questioning that ensued went beyond the field of politics. And, though this was only one factor in Coleridge's case, the rethinking led to a growing dissatisfaction with Hartley's empiricist anthropology, which he had so far relied on. Subsequently, in what can be viewed as the middle phase of his intellectual career, there is evidence that he read scholastic philosophers with interest, a striking illustration of the extent of the revolution then taking place in his mind. The philosophical naturalism underlying much of the Enlightenment thus gave way to or was challenged by (since it obviously continued to exist in various intellectual quarters) a form of 'natural supernaturalism' as the process has been called (as far as the philosophy of Coleridge's first master is concerned, however, 'theistic' or even 'theocentric' would be a more adequate description from the start. And it could be argued that Hartley already provides an example of 'natural supernaturalism,' though his epistemology and anthropology are resolutely empiricist).

In this more directly religious reshaping of ideas a central—though not always apparent—issue became the linking of 'nature' and 'supernature' (the alleged pantheism, as in Wordsworth's case, usually depends on the questionable equation of the term with the idea of divine immanence). In Christian thinking this part is played essentially by Christology. It had already undergone significant restriction in Luther's interpretation. The divine Logos, also associated with the Book of Nature, had been more or less reduced to the redemptive theology of the Cross, since a theology of Glory was now felt to be inaccessible to such a radically corrupt creature as man. In Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (the impact of which is traceable even in some of Keats's letters) or Reimarus (relayed by David Strauss at the very beginning of post-romanticism in Germany), the tendency in adherents of the Enlightenment to dispense with Christology altogether by undermining its historical foundations is unmistakable, though not always declared. One means of doing so was to present the priestly authors of the New Testament as deliberately deceitful, which seemed consistent with the idea of the priest as the antithetical figure of the *philosophe*. Though more sophisticated, Hume's reflections on miracles also fit into this perspective. A substitute for Christology in the emerging romantic context was often provided by Beauty in various guises (a rival claim has been made for the sublime). But in Coleridge's case at least elements of a Christology reconstructed on a broader basis, that of the Logos, can be perceived.

The romantic episode makes the identification of 'modernity' (the notion is admittedly a flexible one) and secularisation too hasty a suggestion. And in a post-romantic perspective (not in a strictly chronological sense since romanticism took more time to develop in France) Comte advocated a "religion of humanity," albeit a God-less religion, as a necessary move if the negative ideas of anarchic "*producteurs de fumier*" (the uncomplimentary phrase used in his *Catéchisme positiviste*) are to be resisted. The advocacy of religion even within a naturalistic outlook is by no means exceptional. In a German context there are the influential examples of von Hartmann (the author, among many other books, of *Das religiöse Bewusstsein der Menschheit im Stufengang seiner Entwicklung* 1882) or of the naturalist E. Haeckel, a major contributor to the German form of *Darwinismus* and upholder of a "monistic natural religion." In England, J. Seeley favoured a religion of nature [*Natural Religion* 1882] divesting it of any supernatural associations. Even before D.H. Lawrence, archaic religious sites and rites are part of the background (and occasionally the foreground) of more than one of Hardy's novels.

The widely accepted idea of 'post-romanticism' seems indeed preferable to that of 'Victorianism' if the intellectual and cultural content of the phenomenon is given priority and its frequent European connections are borne in mind. One difficulty is that the process is not easily given a precise beginning in time. Coleridge's death in 1834 could be a convenient date. One might argue that his concerns had shifted away from literature at an earlier stage. But Gusdorf is not the only one to have made a strong case for the view that romanticism is best understood as a new *Weltanschauung*, comparable to the Enlightenment in its intellectual scope. Romantic ideas and works persist of course beyond this somewhat arbitrary limit (De Quincey's work, for example, was continued for more than two decades), though in a changing context and in the face of tougher intellectual competition. The question of the approximate date to be ascribed to the end of post-romanticism, if it has one, is even trickier. The situation is not an uncommon one as far as the categorisation of cultural history is concerned. In England the emergence of two contrasting inspirations or movements like D.H. Lawrence's neoprimitivism and modernism might be felt to mark a sufficient novelty, even if post-romantic modes of thinking continue to predominate. Another difficulty with the idea of post-romanticism, and for that matter of romanticism, is that it tends to concentrate on major creations, thus underestimating or overlooking the considerable cultural impact, notably in literature, of the Evangelical movement (but other examples, especially political ones, could be mentioned). Finally, if romanticism, in spite of its diversity, can be taken as a reasonably homogeneous phenomenon, this is no longer the case with post-romanticism. In fact the period is marked by cultural divergence.

No exhaustive examination of the conflicting movements of post-romanticism is intended here. Only four of them are mentioned or examined. G.M. Hopkins's work could be viewed as preserving the romantic heritage while giving it a new metaphysical foundation (and a somewhat 'pre-modernist' literary flavour). His feeling of divine immanence-transcendence in "God's Grandeur" thus hardly differs from that found in "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison" [41-43], though the tercets

in Hopkins's sonnet bring in a more specific theological perspective. Aestheticism as illustrated in Wilde's work and attitude, on the other hand, shows that the romantic idea of beauty has lost most, if not all, of its transcendent force. In the first phase of his reflection Pater chose to substitute the Renaissance for Ruskin's Gothic and more religious ideal of beauty, even if this image of the Renaissance (also present in Burckhardt's book on the subject published in 1860) tends to shape the period into a more homogeneous symbol of naturalism than is warranted by the conclusions of a later historian of ideas like P.O. Kristeller [*Studies in Renaissance Thought* 1969].

J.S. Mill illustrates what might be viewed as the second, post-romantic, cycle of the Enlightenment with its frequent deistic component now removed. The image of nature becomes a less favourable one so that the initial hyperhumanism is not infrequently threatened by looming tragic forces as can be seen in the conclusion of *The Mill on the Floss* or the darker mood of T.H. Huxley's late reflections in *Evolution and Ethics*. Utilitarianism as refashioned by J.S. Mill is probably the most prominent English expression of this new cycle with Comte's positivism as a French equivalent. Starting with thinkers like D. Strauss and L. Feuerbach the movement proved strikingly vigorous in Germany. Spencer is part of the same context with his new evolutionary emphasis. Mill's relationship to romanticism has occasionally led to conflicting assessments. While he approves of the emotional value of Wordsworth's poetry, for instance, there is no uncertainty about his dismissive attitude concerning romantic forays into the field of philosophy. However, the probabilistic form of theism arrived at in his last writings could be read as an opening up of his naturalism (this is Pater's interpretation in one of his unpublished essays). "Theism" appeared posthumously in 1874, just a few years after Newman's *Grammar of Assent* (1870), and both reflections are concerned with the philosophy of religion, though Newman's line of argument is focused on the subject rather than the object as in Mill's approach. *The Grammar of Assent* is even closer in time to *The Descent of Man* (1871) whose naturalistic assumptions are reinforced by Darwin's materialistic convictions concerning man. Even if man's immersion in natural processes leaves room for progress in civilisation, a utopian belief in human perfectibility has become largely irrelevant.

The idea of an ambivalent natural process eliminating some organic forms while improving others gives way to a more gloomy vision of nature in Hardy's more characteristic novels. The blind, almost systematically blundering, force called "Immanent Will" appears essentially as a destructive principle. Though Hardy had some use for the word "meliorism" until late in his life, the scope for human perfectibility or hope seems to be very limited in the face of such monstrous natural powers, and "pessimism" or "nihilism" (this option is considered by Pater in chapter VIII of *Marius of the Epicurean*) is difficult to resist. Hardy's example is not the only one testifying to the increasing relevance among Victorians of such a philosophy of pessimism developed in particular by Schopenhauer and later by von Hartmann. *The Westminster Review*, founded by a prominent believer in human perfectibility, J.S. Mill himself, had drawn attention to it in an article of 1853. *Mind*, in which Mill's disciple, Bain, played a major role, published various reviews and articles on this intellectual movement

contradicting its own assumptions. Von Hartmann's "three stages of illusion" may even appear as the direct negative counterpart to Comte's more optimistic "law of the three states." The foundation of the utilitarian definition of happiness may also be irreparably damaged when the pains of existence are felt to outweigh its pleasures inexorably (H. Sidgwick made the point in an article published in *Mind* in 1880).

The diversity of intellectual forces at work in English post-romanticism is made apparent by the numerous fronts of controversy (not always with equally important stakes, of course) thus making it difficult to stick to a binary interpretation, in which progressive advocates of scientific principles gradually get the upper hand over backward-looking adherents of religious views. Though it is not entirely without foundation, this simplifying image fails to account for the deep reshaping undergone by the conceptions of the Absolute, nature, and man in a post-romantic context. Newman's *Apologia* (1864) is situated on one of these fronts of controversy, and within his own Church, his philosophical or theological singularity cannot be overlooked. Conflicts can also be seen between various supporters of the evolution of species. The arguments marshalled by Mivart in *The Genesis of Species* (1871) against natural selection as the exclusive or primary factor in the evolutionary process were mostly borrowed from others. The difficulties faced by the theory of natural selection during the last two decades of the century, before it was given a new life by being combined with Mendel's theory, are occasionally overlooked.

The impact of the idea of evolution, which became widely known in England after the publication of Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in 1844, often prevents another scientific revolution from receiving full attention. Yet, in a sense, the latter is more radical since it affects the most elementary constituent of the universe, matter, which was now redefined and, as it were, 'dematerialized' in the conceptions of Faraday and Maxwell. Whereas Darwin's natural selection may deal a fatal blow to Paley's type of natural theology, Maxwell felt it possible to derive another form of it, as well as a revised conception of human freedom, from this new conception of matter. It may also not be entirely without significance that one of the most forceful arguments against natural selection (in the estimation of the historian of Darwinism, J. Gayon) was put forward by Fleeming Jenkin, who belonged to Maxwell's circle. If the possible philosophical and theological consequences of the two revolutions may thus tend to balance each other, their cultural impact presents a different picture. Combined with criticism of biblical Revelation (the opposition becoming frontal when the alternative assumption was predominantly literalistic or marked by "Bibliolatry" as Coleridge and De Quincey saw it) the theory of evolution could be incorporated into a naturalistic philosophy of the type offered by Huxley though technically its 'agnosticism' would make ultimate answers impossible.

However, the strong Kantian element in the philosophical debate should not be underestimated. In an article published in 1883 in *Mind*, H. Sidgwick writes:

It will be generally admitted that the amount of attention given to the philosophy of Kant is one of the most noteworthy phenomena in recent English philosophical literature.

The interest it received is certainly visible in *Mind*, even if the perception of Kant's philosophy may have received an inflexion from the persistent reading of Berkeley. The empiricist conception of epistemology was affected by, if not caught in, a circle: states of consciousness were said to be dependent on external objects, which were themselves known through these states of consciousness (Pater was well aware of this difficulty when picturing Marius' initial philosophical stage). The difficulty was also acute when an attempt was made to establish the foundations of ethics on naturalistic assumptions. H. Sidgwick pointed out that there is an unbridgeable gap between "what is" and "what should be" (and at the beginning of the next century G.E. Moore thought it justified to speak of a "naturalistic fallacy" when the second element is made to rest on the first). Though coming from a different direction, this criticism is not unlike that of Ruskin concerning instances of "pathetic fallacy." The "naturalistic fallacy" amounts to an attempt to extract subjective value from things, whereas in "pathetic fallacy," subjective attitudes are projected onto them. T.H. Huxley was painfully aware of the difficulty in his lecture "Evolution and Ethics" (1893). Man's place, as a *moral* being, no longer appeared to be within Nature. In a highly paradoxical situation if naturalistic assumptions are maintained, human morality is characterised by its "opposition" to or even its "war" against the "cosmic struggle for existence" or the war raging in Nature from which natural man is not immune. The "hyperhumanism" asserting itself against "supernature" (or the extraneous and tyrannical image drawn from Calvinist or Jansenist definitions) at the dawn of the Enlightenment was, in the present case, confronting Nature as its main "enemy" in a titanic endeavour to bring moral light into the world.

Reverting to an earlier stage of Huxley's intellectual development, it may be helpful to compare his naturalistic position with the views of a philosopher like T.H. Green (the comparison is not quite equal since Huxley was largely self-taught in this field and Green was a professional philosopher). In his essay "On the relations of man to the lower animals," one of the texts collected in *Man's Place in Nature* (1863), his discussion covers not only his particular branch of science but the whole of human reality and nature, and in this sense can be said to move to a wider, philosophical or even metaphysical ground (though the latter term would not have been welcome to a professed empiricist). The conclusion of the essay is apparently uncertain, placing Man, considered "in his substance and structure, one with the brutes." Yet to this "substance" seems to be added "the marvellous endowment of intelligible and rational speech," which "he alone possesses." And the final sentence in the conclusion reflects this confidence:

He stands [...] far above the level of his humble fellows, and transfigured from his grosser nature by reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth.

A new examination of the issue of "man's place in nature" a few years later by T.H. Green, from an explicitly philosophical perspective (Green was also

known for his discussion of Hume's principles) leads to a direct challenge of Huxley's conclusions. In his posthumous *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), he finds no justification in the "naturalistic view of human action." But more is at stake than "action." The ultimate essence of the subject is seen as a form of transcendence. Going one step further, the very notion of nature, taken for granted by Huxley, is redefined in the light of Kant's Copernican revolution. As the "system of related phenomena," the very idea of nature depends, in as much as it is known, on the synthetic faculty of a transnatural subject. The natural phenomena considered by Green include the new data concerning "the theory of descent and evolution," especially in its Darwinian expression. Beyond its biological anchoring, however, the knowing subject is seen as depending more essentially on an "eternal subject," a transcosmic divine subject of which the human Ego is a reproduction.

There seems to exist a close affinity between such a reproduction and Coleridge's idea of a "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (and it is worth remembering that the "primary imagination" referred to here is related ultimately to the faculty of Reason as is made apparent in *The Statesman's Manual*). Another echo might be with Wordsworth's idea of the prephenomenal self in his ode "Intimations of Immortality." At the beginning of his book, Green expresses the view that "much excellent philosophy" can be found in the works of poets like Tennyson, Browning, but earlier names are also mentioned. This is a far cry from Mill's rather contemptuous attitude to Coleridge's philosophical endeavours, and his somewhat ambiguous praise of Wordsworth's poetry as a valuable source of emotion.

In *Romantisme et postromantisme de Coleridge à Hardy*, the works of Coleridge and Hardy had been chosen to illustrate two contrasting views of Nature. The second collection of studies concentrates more on the changing idea of the subject as one moves away from the romantic rediscovery of the inner self, also seen as the locus where a transcendent reality can be glimpsed or experienced, towards a more elusive entity, as in Mill's inconclusive presentation of it as a "final inexplicability," while matter is best defined as "a permanent possibility of sensation" [*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* 1865]. Different conclusions could be drawn if the second term of comparison was Hopkins's notion, or indeed experience, of the self as a metaphysical entity. While confirming the persistence of romantic principles and inviting comparison with Green's philosophy, his views merely confirm how conflictual postromantic attitudes could be. Pater is an interesting case in this respect. Even if his conception of the self reflects the influence of empiricism, this did not prevent him from admiring Wordsworth as "the most philosophic of English poets," as he writes in one of his essays for *The Guardian*.