[IMAGE 1]

Neither the 'simple backward look' nor the 'simple progressive thrust' : eco-criticism and the politics of prosperity

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Preliminaries: nature, the human, the role of humanities

Eco-criticism has been viewed as an engagement with literary texts that themselves constitute 'nature-writing', in other words, that explicitly seek to invoke the qualities of the natural world, animate or inanimate, and reflect upon those qualities. It has also been viewed as an engagement with texts for what they reveal about human relations with the natural environment and/or with other animals. And it has been viewed as a reading of texts with a view to drawing out the enlightenment they shed, or the lessons we can draw from them, about eco-politics and the directions it should take today. These are differing orientations rather than mutually exclusive interpretations, and their concerns are to some extent overlapping. But I myself am certainly in general agreement with Greg Gerrard's call for a move away from the 'poetics of authenticity', with its focus on the redemptive qualities of an unmediated encounter with nature, to a 'poetics of responsibility' much more centred on culture and human action (Gerrard, 2004: 168f cf. Armbruster, 2010:23) I therefore here want to

offer some reasons for favouring the third interpretation of eco-criticism's task, and to provide some illustration of how I see it most fruitfully contributing to eco-politics. But as a way of setting the context for the illustrative part of the talk, I shall begin with some fairly general remarks on the current context of eco-philosophy.

The discrimination around the concept of 'nature' that has been prompted in recent decades by the growth in environmental concern is now reflected in a complex and ramifying set of discourses. But in a broad brush way we can distinguish between two main tendencies: **[IMAGE 2]** on the one hand, in the calls to re-value nature as a site of intrinsic value, to recognise our kinship and continuity with other living creatures, and to abandon anthropocentric conceptions of humanity's privileged place within the eco-system, we have been witness to what can be termed a 'nature-endorsing' tendency. Nature endorsers lament the loss or erosion of nature, emphasise human dependency on the planetary eco-system, and demand that we acknowledge environmental limits and the confines they impose on human activity.

As a counter to this, on the other hand, although sharing some of its naturalistic arguments on human–animal affinities, the contructivist tendency emphasizes the formation or mediation of human culture in whatever comes to count as 'nature' or 'natural'. Strongly influenced by recent developments in the fields of genetics and information technology, and by post-structuralist

theories, this approach is sceptical of any redemptionist appeal to nature's powers, while also often celebrating the breakdown of clear-cut distinctions between artifice and nature (organic and inorganic) as an emancipatory advance: as freeing us from the confines of supposedly 'natural' sexualities and modes of being. [1]

Both sides to this debate have important things to say and need to be heard. But both, too, as I have argued in my writings on nature, often fail to distinguish adequately between differing invocations of the idea of nature or to explore the coherence of their normative implications. The endorsers, for example, in one aspect of their argument, invite us to believe that humanity is part of 'nature' and call upon us to 'get back' to it, or to re-cement our links with it. Yet 'nature' is also at the same time presented by them as that domain which is definitionally independent of us, but now ruined or largely lost through human 'intrusion' upon it and 'contamination' of it. And to add further to the confusion, the 'natural' environment is often identified in these arguments with parts of the landscape that are the outcome of centuries of human agricultural activity, and in that sense at least as 'culturally contaminated' as the most built-

[1] Instead of seeking social and ecological salvation by overcoming human alienation, this type of position claims that progress can only come about via the estrangements of a post-humanist ontological transcendence of the nature–culture polarity. In their recent and influential work on the condition of global 'empire' and the latter-day 'proletarian' agents of its eventual transformation, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri enthuse, for example, about the new and alien forms of subjectivity centred on gender and sexual transgression, mutant modes and cyborgism that will be the future agents of resistance to global capitalism. They call on us to recognise that human nature is in no way separate from nature as whole, and that there are therefore 'no fixed and necessary boundaries between the human and the animal, the human and the machine, the male and the female, and so forth (…) nature itself is an artificial terrain open to ever new mutations, mixtures and hybridizations' (Hardt and

up environments. In its political implications, too, the 'hands off' nature approach to conservation encouraged by the endorsing perspective has often proved too ready to give preference to wilderness preservation for the eco-tourists over the welfare of indigenous peoples; or too quick to make humanity in general responsible for the environmental destruction associated with the pursuit of Western style affluence. At its most extreme, it can licence the totalitarian control of human population advocated by some adherents of deep ecology.

The constructivist position, on the other hand, is at risk of denying or abstracting from environmental pressures altogether. The treatment of 'nature' as a continuously revisable signifier does little to address material damage to the environment; nor does the unqualified stress on socialisation give due recognition to the 'nature' that grounds bioscience and environmental change and always constrains the forms of their intervention**.** After all, even the most sophisticated experiments in genetic modification are dependent for success on pre-given biological laws and processes. The same point holds for the larger-scale forms of human interaction with the environment, where there is always a distinction to be drawn between the powers and processes which are the essential precondition of all agricultural practice, on the one hand, and the humanly modified landscape and its plant and animal life, on the other. In this

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Negri, 2000: 215-216 cf. Haraway, 1991 Ch. 8; 1997; 2005; Gray, 1995; Peperell, 1995; Morton, 2007; 2010.)

sense there is always a nature that is not the construct of human culture and technology but is the primary condition and context of any cultural intervention and manipulation in the first place.

In an attempt to correct for the respective shortcomings of both endorsing and constructivist arguments, I myself have defended a position on nature that I describe as both 'realist' and 'humanist'. **[IMAGE 3]** It is *realist* in the sense that it recognises the contrast between an independent nature conceived as the permanent ground of all human bio activity and environmental change, and the 'lay' or 'surface' concept of 'nature': that use of the term 'nature' with which we refer to the empirically observable, and always historically changing and culturally conditioned life forms and environmental effects.[2] It is *humanist*, on the other hand, in the sense that, although it recognises human kinship with other species, it runs counter to the naturalism of those who would assimilate human patterns of need and consumption to those of other animals, rather than highlighting critical differences – and the role of those differences both in creating, and (potentially) in resolving ecological crisis. (Soper, 1995, pp. 149-176; 1996). It is human ways of living, after all, that - much in contrast to the cyclical and reproductive mode of

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[2] Nature in the 'realist' sense refers us to the ever present and indestructible forces and causal powers that are the condition of, and constraint upon, any human practice, however ambitious it is; 'nature' in the surface sense is the consequence of the workings and human harnessing of 'realist' nature, the conditioned and mutating environment of immediate perception and its life forms. And recognition of the distinction between 'realist' and 'surface' natures is indispensable, I claim, to the coherence both of ecological discourses about the 'changing face of nature' conceived as perceptible environment, and to any discourse about the genetically engineered or cultural 'construction' of human beings or their bodies.

existence of other animals - are wrecking the planet, and they alone who can do something about it.

In this connection, I have emphasized what I term human biological *under*-determination relative to other creatures, and the range of choice of action that is therefore in principle available to us (cf. Soper, 1996, pp.32-33). The current ecological situation, I argue, is better illuminated not by reference to the intrinsic qualities of non-animate nature nor by recalling us to our fundamental kinship with other living creatures, but by confronting the distinctively human appetite for innovative forms of cultural transcendence and individualising self-expression. Viewed in this light, the key ecological problem is whether we can find ways of living rich, complex, creative, non-repetitive lives without social injustice and without environmental damage. **[IMAGE 4]** This is not about how better to 'respect' or 'get back to nature' (in the sense of reverting to tradition and a simpler way of life), but how to advance to a form of future that is both assertively human *and* ecologically benign. The focus, in short, should fall less on the adoption of the 'right' attitudes to, or ways of valuing nature, and more on the conditions of human fulfillment and how these can be secured in an ecologically sustainable mode. I take issue, in short, with those (and they are well represented among eco-critics) who think environmental politics has more to do with appreciating 'nature' than with revising ideas about 'progress', 'prosperity' and human flourishing. In the same spirit, I question the adequacy of an eco-critical approach that points to some

Spinozan or Deleuzian unity and play of forces as linking us all into an endlessly rhizomic universe. This is not so much because it is ontologically mistaken but because it invites a positivism and fatalism of approach. To point out that we are all inter-connected in 'nature' and share much more with other animals than we previously thought is all very well. But what is important eco-politically is recognition both of the role of humanity in bringing about ecological collapse, and of the distinctive capacities humans alone have to monitor, and in principle, adjust their behaviour and environmental impact.

Such arguments, of course, presuppose specifically human demands for self-realisation and self-expression, and the capacities of reason, language use, imagination and so forth, needed to act on those demands. They are committed, in short, to human 'exceptionalism' of a kind that has been challenged by *some* forms of posthumanist argument. I say 'some' because I accept a great deal of the Nietzschean-Marxian-Freudian and, more recently, post-structuralist critique of the 'humanist' subject conceived as an autonomous and epistemologically self-transparent agent of history. Human persons, like other creatures, are subject to trans-individual systemic processes and pressures (notably today market forces, which are now always spoken of as independent agents of human destiny). But there is also, of course, the more usually cited examples of language and other semiotic systems: systems that are presupposed to forms of consciousness and communication rather than purely expressive tools of them;

and these structures (though, note, humanly created rather than naturally dictated) are in many ways beyond their ken or control. Posthumanists are right in that sense to point to the ways in which modes – and the very means of – communication are involved in what it means to be human at any given point in time.

I would also, on the issue of human-animal relations, endorse a good part of the argument of those (cf. Diamond, 1991; Derrida, 2004; Haraway, 2005; Wolfe, 2010) who want to problematise the discourse of 'rights' in its application to non-human animals on the grounds that it rests on an inadequate conception of justice: one that fails to see that what generates our moral response to animals and their treatment is not some distanced and impartial calculation of what consideration is rightfully due to them, but rather our sense of the mortality and vulnerability we share with them, and the compassion that goes with that. But it is precisely with a view to sustaining the philosophical coherence of this kind of position, with its appeal to the distinctive role of human imagination and sympathy in generating moral response, [3] that we need to defend human exceptionalism. **[IMAGE 5]** Derek Mahon, wryly asks in his poem *The Mute Phenomena* what we know 'Of the revolutionary theories advanced/ By turnips, or the sex-life of cutlery', and suggests that 'Already in a

[3] Cf. Cora Diamond's point that 'The mistake is to think that the callousness [to animals] cannot be condemned without reasons which are reasons for anyone, no matter how devoid of all human imagination or sympathy.' (Diamond, 1991, p. 334).

lost hub-cap is conceived /The ideal society which will replace out own.' (Mahon, 1990: 64) But if we more seriously question whether we should continue to privilege human intellectual and emotional capacities in our dealings with other forms of being, then we shall surely also subvert the range of normative distinctions without which there would seem little point in moving the critique in the first place. In *The Ecological Thought*, Tim Morton argues that we should not 'set up consciousness as yet another defining trait of superiority over non-humans…'. Humans, he suggests, are 'fairly uniquely good at throwing and sweating', and that's about all. (Morton, 2010: 71-3; cf. 2007). But to belittle what is distinctive to us in this way, is also to undermine the idea of the human person as enjoying any special claim to self-realisation. If Morton is right, why is he writing books? Or why should we find the idea of the clone morally problematic or think of cloning as destraining on our human species-being? (And the issue becomes even more acute in relation to machines. Even those who would have us blur the mind-machine conceptual division, have argued for it on the basis of the quasi-mind-possession and 'ensouled' qualities of advanced computerisation… But if these capacities or attributes are themselves regarded as problematic because they are rooted in some regrettably 'humanist' endorsement of human powers of cognition and reflexivity, in some preferring of 'minds' and 'souls', then why should the approximations of

artificial intelligence to human capacities be accorded any special attention in this context?)

Posthumanism, then, subverts itself if it attempts to go beyond human exceptionalism, and the most persuasive of the posthumanist discourses are those which are prepared to recognize and talk about the lurking humanism of the forms of questioning of the nature and limits of the 'human' that are opened up through the posthumanist project. For in the last analysis, the rhetorical address of the posthuman only makes sense as an appeal to the imagination or moral sensibility of those already within the human community, even if it invites a reappraisal of the confines or self-imaging of that community. [4] (As Stanley Cavell has suggested, 'what is so human is that we share the fact with other animals, that animals are also our others. That we are animals. Being struck with this is something one might call "seeing us as human". It is a feeling of wonder.' (Cavell, 1979: 412). **[IMAGE 6]**

It follows from my emphasis on the importance of re-thinking human prosperity rather than the nature of nature, that global environmental problems have to be re-cast as problems of consumption – and in a two-fold and

[4] To make these points is, I grant, to invoke the critical Enlightenment framework of thinking about human development that posthumanists have sought to deconstruct. Yet there is a paradox at the heart of the ethico-political project of that deconstruction given that the more complex and flexible forms of personal fulfilment that it seeks to open up around issues of self expression, animal connectedness, gender, sexuality, disability, and so forth, have, in truth, much more in common with the Enlightenment project for self realisation than any prior framework of thinking. about human subjectivity.

interconnected way. Firstly there is the problem of the huge disparity between rich and poor in their access to resources, and hence to the minimum of material conditions essential to any further flourishing. Redressing this imbalance, I would argue, is both a moral and pragmatic imperative, a demand not only of social justice, but a prerequisite of any longterm global ecological survival**.** **[IMAGE 7 (Davis); IMAGES 8-11 'Evil Paradises')** The other problem is that of consumerism, the problem, namely, that human flourishing is currently so widely perceived, both by those in a position to 'enjoy' it (hitherto mainly affluent people in the West), and by those who lack the means to do so, as dependent on an ever enhanced consumption of material goods and luxury services. The two problems connect in the sense that pressures for a more egalitarian distribution of global resources are unlikely to be applied unless and until the 'good life' is reconceived along less consumerist lines. In the absence, that is to say, of a seductive and compelling alternative to existing patterns of 'affluent' consumption and commodity dependent forms of self-expression and self-realisation, it will prove extremely difficult to provide a better deal either for the environment and its non-human life forms or for the less privileged within the human community. **[IMAGE 12]**

What is needed, then, is a new 'political imaginary' that would draw on the social complexity and reflexivity of the globalised era in order to break with the assumption that enlightened polices on race, gender and human rights can

only be carried on the back of conventional economic growth and its shopping-mall culture. It would also offer a profoundly different – secular but less materialist – conception of human flourishing as dependent on the shortening of the working-week, the expansion of free-time, slower and less stressful modes of transport, and more evolved and universally available educational and aesthetic pleasures, rather than on enhanced productivity, stressed out work routines, and ever expanding material acquisition.

This, for me, is where the humanities in general have most to offer. Not only can they help to promote a cultural revolution in our thinking about human pleasure, and personal fulfilment; they can also provide the pedagogic resources to allow people in a future greener society better to enjoy a materially re-productive, and therefore slower paced and less time scarce mode of existence. And it is against the background of this general sketch of the potential contribution of the humanities to the reconceptualisation of the 'politics of prosperity', that I want now to turn in the remainder of my talk to some exemplification of how it might shift the focus of literary eco-criticism. My illustrations will be very programmatic, since I shall offer no more than pointers to some possible readings, but will not be in a position to explore any of them in detail here (although in one or two cases I have elaborated on them elsewhere.) The two main considerations determining my selection of texts is, firstly - as you will expect from what I have already said - that they offer insights on

human consumption and the politics of the good life; and, secondly, that they are sensitive to the humanity-nature dialectic, and, in particular, to the need to recognise both the rationale for the critique of capitalist modernity, *and* the limitations of a naive nostalgia for earlier and 'greener' ways of living.

Shakespeare (King Lear)

My first example is *King Lear*, a play which (along with *The Winter's Tale*; *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*) has of course figured centrally in commentary on Shakespeare's ideas of nature (notably in John Danby's study (Danto: 1941). But mine would be an approach that did not go to it for its green imagery or for its cosmological and human parallels (cf. Danby, 1941), nor even, as Gabriel Egan has recently for its foreshadowing of chaos and fractal theory and the new genetics (Egan, 2006: 132-171), but rather for its insights into the tensions between tradition and progress, and, above all, on the politics of need.

As many have pointed out, the play turns on contrasting normative conceptions of 'nature' (a two-way allegory in which different ways of being human are figuring different ways of responding to nature, and vice-versa.) This applies both environmentally in the actual – and metaphoric – contrast between wild and cultivated nature: the nature of weeds and rank growth versus the husbanded nature of agriculture; but also to human affairs, in the contrast between the 'orthodoxy' of a benign and biddable 'Nature' as represented by Lear, Gloucester, Albany and Kent, and the rebellious 'Nature' that is indifferent

to social order and customs (and registered primarily in the figures of Edmund, Goneril and Regan). On the one hand, then, we have respect for tradition, hierarchy, conventional sexual mores and family values, on the other, the individualizing, self-seeking, modernising values of the Edmund camp. And whether or not one follows Danby in seeing Cordelia as registering the possibility of redemption from this conflictual nature, the tension itself, and the suggestion of the play that we need to find a way to surpass it, is surely of some relevance to thinking through our responses to the contemporary ecological situation – where we need to avoid both complacent endorsement of tradition with its supposedly naturally ordered hierarchical community, and the unqualified pursuit of progress, modernity, and relentless individualism. (Or, in Raymond Williams' terms quoted in my title, where we need to avoid both the 'simple backward look' with its patrician (and patriarchal) forms of nostalgia and the 'simple progressive thrust' with its unthinking adulation of entrepreurial progress (Williams, 1973, pp. 184; 36-7; cf. Ryle, 2009).

Turning to the commentary on needs, the play complies with this demand both in the counsel it seems to offer for some Aristotelian mean between overly luxurious provision and the mere survivalism of the unaccommodated 'bare-forked animal'; and in its dialectical insight on the question of 'true' need, where it recognizes the importance in human affairs of always questioning what is truly needed for humans to prosper, while at the same time acknowledging

the impossibility of ever pronouncing upon that 'truth' in some final essentialist manner. As Lear famously puts it in response to Regan's asking why he needs so extensive a retinue: [**IMAGE 13]**

> O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
>
> Are in the poorest things superfluous.
>
> Allow not nature more than nature needs,
>
> Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
>
> If only to go warm were gorgeous,
>
> Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
>
> Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need –
>
> You heavens give that patience, patience I need.

'True' need, Lear implies here, cannot be finally agreed upon, because all attempts to define it are either misleadingly restrictive or vacuously uninformative. To reduce human needs to a brutish minimum is no more helpful than to justify the necessity of every luxury. If we restrict our needs today to barest essentials, it will lead to the absurdity of claiming that bread and water are alone 'truly' needed while bread factories and anti-biotics are luxuries. When employed vacuously, on the other hand, it will result in the claim that everything we currently consume, and the entire system of their production and delivery, are all equally needed. Our 'true' needs are more than a matter of basic biology and both more – and less – than what we actually consume.

Deciding, then, on the 'truth' of human needing will always involves some choosing-positing of value, of a certain way of life as better than another; it is not something that can be read off from some set of facts about human nature, or imputed to you as in your 'true' interest by some supposedly objective set of experts claiming to know better than you do what you 'truly' need.

The essential point here concerns the complexity of a distinctively human consumption, its irreducible symbolic dimensions, and the difficulties of specifying some supposedly naturally determined set of 'true' needs of the kind implicit in simplistic denunciations of the 'falsity' of consumerist provision. At the same time, however, there is no chance of a greener future unless we put to ourselves this question of 'true' need, and place the politics of a 'true' prosperity much more at the centre of our environmental concerns.

Romanticism and the hedonist dialectic

Let me turn now to a second example, one that has figured very prominently in eco-criticism, namely Romanticism. The English Romantic poets have rightly been valued by eco-critics for their nature-writing. And they have been read as revelatory of an authentic way of being in harmony with nature – perhaps most influentially by Jonathan Bate in his *The Song of the Earth*, (where he follows Heidegger in presenting what he terms 'eco-poetics' as phenomenologically indicative of an originary and ecologically redemptive

'dwelling' (Bate, 2001)). My own reading would emphasise instead the dialectical aspects of Romanticism's approach to the nature-culture divide and its on-going critique or subversion of its own yearnings for immersion in nature. It would also note the role that Romanticism in a broad sense, can play in the revisions of thinking about pleasure and the good life that I have argued are crucial to the furtherance of a green political agenda.

In defence of the first point, I would suggest that Romantic poetry is almost always pointing us beyond a simplistic endorsement of nature or simple message about our alienation from it. It is true that it summons the otherness of nature and celebrates its independence. But even as it does so, it also recalls us to the culturally mediating role of the summons, and to the extent of the dependence of the aesthetic response to nature on its human representation. It is a characteristic of much of Wordworth's poetry, for example, notably such works as 'Animal Tranquility and Decay', 'Resolution and Independence', 'Michael' and 'Old Man Travelling', that it reflects the yearning for a 'return' to nature', an immersion within the natural world, or closeness to it, even as it registers that impossibility by giving the final word to poetic expression itself. In 'Animal Tranquility and Decay', the old laborer is so unintrusive in his progress that 'The little hedgerow birds, / That peck along the road, regard him not;' his peace is so perfect that 'the young behold / With envy, what the Old Man hardly feels.' (Wordsworth, 1958, pp.42-3). In 'Resolution and

Independence', the leech gatherer is compared, on first encounter, to a huge stone 'endued with sense' and to a 'sea-beast' that has crawled out to sun itself. His silence or inarticulacy 'was like a stream / Scarce heard: nor word from word could I divide,' and it is presented in idealized contrast to the voluble angst of the poet: 'I could have laughed myself to scorn to find / In that decrepit Man so firm a mind' (Wordsworth, 1958, p. 87; 89-90). Yet the essential point is that poetry is being written, the alienated writer 'envies' the supposed immersion, but cannot but give voice to the envy and thereby acknowledges that he is a fully realized human being only by doing so (cf. Soper, 1995, pp. 236-243; 1993, p. 69).

We might compare here Adorno's claim in his *Aesthetic Theory* that even as nature transcends expression, anyone capable of experiencing its beauty feels compelled to speak as a way of signalling the momentary liberation it affords from the confines of the enclosure within the perceiving and representing self. [5] The aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty also, Adorno argues, recollects a world without domination: it acts as a kind of reminder of, or utopian gesture

[5] One might note in this context the detachment or erasure of self-consciousness that critics have associated with Keats' 'negative capability' and his aspiration to an 'art of sensations rather than an art of thought.' As Keats himself put it, in his Letter of December 22 1817 to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Bloom and Trilling, 1973, p. 495; cf. Hartman, 1975, pp. 124-46; McGann, 1985, p. 59). This spirit is also associated with Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* or 'letting be' (see his 'Conversation' in *Discourse on Thinking*, 1966; Cf. Nathan Scott, *Negative Capability* 1969). Comparable, too, is Wordsworth's famous concluding sentiment in the 'Intimations of Immortality': 'To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.' What nature prompts at times is a grief beyond emotion or an understanding that transcends articulation. Speech cannot fathom it, nor in the spirit of acceptance of the unfathomable associated with 'negative capability', does it even want to. Yet the poetic reminder of this natural power, and that it can reside in the 'meanest flower', helps to keep alive that potency by rendering us more sensible of it.

towards, a world in which humanity would enjoy a harmonious and egalitarian existence. But this romance, too, is paradoxical. Not only is this a world that almost certainly never existed (so that any recollection of it could only be a fantasy), there is the further consideration that it is 'through this recollection that experience dissolves back into that amorphousness out of which genius arose and for the first time became conscious of the idea of freedom that could be realised in the world free of domination.' (Adorno, 1997, p.66). Harmonious immersion in nature is incompatible with the human consciousness that comes to an understanding of freedom and desires the release from domination.

A comparable idea is to be found in Keats' 'Ode to Autumn' in which, as Jerome McGann has put it, Keats asks us to believe in a universal 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' because he knows that it is not true, and that so perfect an autumn is purely an 'autumn of the mind.' (McGann,1985, pp. 58-60). According to Keats, it is *only* the poetic imagination that can create the image of beauty that we, who are caught up in temporality and historical contradictions, project on nature as a mirror of our desire for unity and reconciliation. There cannot, in the end, be any immersion in nature because that itself is in contradiction to its own desire. In all this, the dialectical position on nature that is intimated by the Romantic poets is more complex and politically perceptive than that of the many nature lovers and environmentalists who have more recently emphasised the dumb-striking and ineffable qualities of natural

beauty (especially wilderness) but who fail to acknowledge its dependency on subjective representation and articulation and the always aesthetically mediated quality of what we value or find beautiful in landscape.[6].

Romanticism and 'Avant Garde Nostalgia'

Romanticism, construed in this more dialectical way, can also, as suggested, offer resources for an 'alternative hedonist' critique of consumerism. [7] Romantic reflection on vanished or vanishing times and spaces, is one such resource, since it is a form of retrospection that offers us a model for reconnecting with a tradition of acknowledged and lamented, if also always cognitively transcended, forms of loss. In this connection I have coined the idea of an 'avant-garde nostalgia', which is obviously a provocatively contradictory notion. But I invoke it in order to capture a movement of thought that remembers, and mourns, that which is irretrievable, but also attains to a more complex political wisdom and energy in the memorialising process itself. [*A poetic register might be found in the 'Immortality Ode,' with its sense that even with advanced years and the shifts of sensibility and loss of immediacy in the response to the world, something is still retained--some life in the embers, to use Wordsworth's image--that points to the possibility of personal transcendence*

[6] See, for example, Nicholsen, 2002, pp. 7-33; Snyder, 1990, p. 21.

[7] Cf. Soper, 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2009; Soper, Ryle and Thomas, 2009. For details of the research project on 'Alternative Hedonism and the Theory and Politics of a new Anti-Consumerism', in the ESRC/AHRC 'Cultures of Consumption Programme', see www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

over death and destruction. Can we think today of the poem, in this sense, as offering a kind of metaphor or analogue of a social and collective process of transition in which a green renaissance is energised through the heightened sense of what has now gone missing, but might possibly be restored in a transmuted, less politically divisive and more sustainable form? Perhaps this is too fanciful. But certainly I would claim a Romantic dialectic in the perspective of those theorists who have insisted on the links between emancipatory futures and the scrupulous remembrance of things past, both in their negative and their more positive aspects.] Raymond Williams' argument is obviously central here. But so, too, is that of some of the Frankfurt school thinkers, who have also insisted on the importance of remembrance to revolutionary progress. As Adorno has said, in explanation, if not justification, of 'avant garde nostalgia'**:**

[IMAGE 14]

> So long as progress, deformed by utilitarianism, does violence to the surface of the earth, it will be impossible--in spite of all proof to the contrary--completely to counter the perception that what antedates the trend is in its backwardness better and more humane ...Rationalization is not yet rational; the universality of mediation has yet to be transformed into living life; and this endows the traces of immediacy, however dubious and antiquated, with the element of corrective justice... If today the aesthetic relation to the past is poisoned by a reactionary tendency

> with which this relation is in league, an ahistorical aesthetic consciousness that sweeps aside the dimension of the past as rubbish is no better. Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty (Adorno, 1997, pp.64-5)1

This emphasises the importance of the 'backward' look even as it acknowledges its fantastical dimension and the impossibility – and undesirability - of an unmediated return to past experience.). Herbert Marcuse, likewise, acknowledged that the 'romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth, and these in turn were the background of all pleasure and joy.' But he also at the same time lamented, as he put it, ' a "landscape," a medium of libidinal experience which no longer exists.' (Marcuse, 1986: 73). And all these theorists would have us see what is truly progressive as lying beyond these antitheses.[8]

Implicit today, I would argue, in the diverse range of contemporary laments over lost spaces and communities, the commercialisation of children, the vocational shifts in education, the ravages of 'development,' the 'cloning' of our cities, and so forth, is a Romantically-accented hankering for a society that can reclaim the libidinal experience of the past without sacrificing the very real political gains of modernity. Diffuse and unfocussed though these laments may

[8] For Williams, the importance of transcending the modernizing thrust was seen as increasingly urgent in his later writings, notably *Towards 2000*, where he comes implicitly to acknowledge that socialism, engendered from within the dynamic of modernity, seemed incapable of framing an adequate critique of 'progress': 'In every

be, they speak to a now quite widely felt sense of the opportunities that have been squandered in recent decades for acceding to a fairer, less harassed, less environmentally destructive and more enjoyable existence. To defend the progressive dimension of this kind of nostalgia against subsumption to consumerist 'progress' and its pressures is not to recommend a more ascetic or less sensually enriching existence. On the contrary, it is to highlight the more exploitative, puritanical, disquieting, and irrational aspects of contemporary consumer culture. It is to represent the forms of sensual enhancement and complex fulfilments that people might be able to enjoy were they to opt for an alternative economic order.

Lastly, and even more cursorily, let me say a word on the potential contribution of more contemporary literature, since here, too, of course, there is much interesting work exposing the more nightmarish aspects of modern consumer culture and even some that can be said to be signalling the more rewarding libidinal experience that could be enjoyed in a postconsumerist society. Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised* and *Platform*, for example, are novels about techno-cultural sex and metropolitan sex-tourism that are all the more unsettling because their narratives are so co-optively one-dimensional - as uncritical of the quasi-pornographic and narcissistic pleasures they relate as

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kind of radicalism the moment comes when any critique of the present must choose its bearings, between past

consumer culture is more generally of its shopping-mall enticements. The critical knife is surely inserted here, but only by making the reader all too uncomfortably aware of the power of dominant culture to subvert critique. Martin Ryle's recent reading of Houellebecq's fiction and Margaret Atwoods' *Oryx and Crake* as contemporary engagements with a *Brave New World* dystopia are very instructive in this respect. (Ryle, 2010). Even more relevant to an 'alternative hedonist' eco-criticism is his commentary on Ali's Smith's *The Accidental*, a novel which charts the ecologically sensitive intervention and erotic impact of the mythico-magical Amber on a stylish middle-class family (Ryle, 2010;2008). Describing it as a neo-pastoral intervention in current culture and politics, Ryle argues that it represents how we both 'know and deny that we are facing an ecological crisis of perhaps disastrous proportions'. It is a novel that indicts the complacent retrospections - ('the simple backwards look') - in other contemporary fictions that focus on earlier moments of history, notably the current obsession with World War II, but avoid any engagement with the role of the oil economy and consumerism in creating our current crises and our new wars. But in contrast to the dystopian fictions of Atwood and Houellebecq, this is a novel that also gestures towards redemption by summoning the more erotic and sensual pleasures that a greener life could provide. Even as it dispenses with any straightforward pastoral lament for the

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and future' (Williams, 1985, p. 36).

past, it distances itself from any postmodernist celebration of cyborgism and our mobile and internet dominated ways of relating to the world.

To conclude: a cultural revolution in our thinking about consumption and the 'good life' is now widely accepted as a condition of warding off the worst consequences of global warming regardless of any other attractions it may have. But it takes a different kind of imagination, and shift of moral and aesthetic focus, to see that even were it ecologically possible to sustain consumerism forever, and to extend the shopping-mall culture to all parts of the planet (and maybe beyond), that would be not a relief but a curse, a blight rather than a blessing. Literary texts (and critical readings of them) that can offer this form of dialectical insight into the displeasures of the consumer lifestyle and its possible transcendence can help to keep alive that needed imagination.

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