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## A COMMENTARY ON MORSE PECKHAM'S "ROMANTICISM AND BEHAVIOR"

by

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Since first reading "Romanticism and Behavior" I have found myself in and out of the lecture room enjoying the kind of energy created by what Morse Peckham terms explanatory collapse. I kept catching myself using "Romantic" in all of the usual places—only to reconsider, that's not what I meant at all. It's so easy to lean back and accept the sublimo-slipshod handbook definitions of complex cultural phases, until remarkable individuals like Morse Peckham and M. H. Abrams deftly tug the rug from beneath your easy chair. Peckham's career is distinguished by the many successful tugs he has made, as a historian, a literary critic, and even as a textual theorist. And here he is especially good in two ways.

It is very refreshing, and stimulating, to find Peckham honestly admitting the necessary tentativeness of his, and all historians', conclusions. True, Peckham comes on strong in asserting his view of the salient features of Romanticism, and runs considerable risk in insisting that Romanticism, as he defines it, continues to be the major informing sensibility in the Western world to date. What is remarkable, though, is the humility he expresses prefatory to his bold declarations. It refreshes because one so infrequently finds a commentator who will make clear the experimental character of his analysis. A historian attempting to define, let's say, American Romantic sensibilities of 1854, is, as Peckham states, simply describing his factual-imaginative construct of what the cultural remains of that time suggest—though one would hardly imagine this to be the case when reading the bulk of literary-historical scholarship today. At least, I know this to be true in my particular area of interest, American literary scholarship, where the rage is for a "history" based more upon imagery, perceived with an almost a-historical concern, than factual remains. But then, the deficiencies of American cultural historians, with their uniquely narrow visions of what constitutes history are another matter altogether. The most popular ones merely mix a pound of New Criticism with a bit of mythic patterning, and add a snicker of cocktail-party Freud for their concoctions. The shame is that they do not recognize their highly imaginative constructs for what they are. They are still generations away from the sophisticated grounds for argument that Peckham and Abrams tread. And, with their adolescent dogmatism, they are just as far away from the healthy experimental starting point from which Peckham proceeds.

The second fine feature of Peckham's paper is that its thesis invites the pragmatic response: let's see if it works. It does, I think. I will not engage myself in Abrams' quarrel with Peckham, that the Romantics were more "redemptive" as a whole than Peckham credits them with being. What I am most interested in is Peckham's proposal that, in light of his definition of the outstanding

traits of the Romantics, the dynamic molding force of Romanticism continues unabated through today. For the definition does explain what I take to be the mainstream of vital cultural expression from 1790, or thereabouts, to the present. That is, the cultural phases generally labeled as Victorian or Modern in Britain and the main movements of Realism and Naturalism, and their multiple variations in American literary history, can be coherently viewed as continued reactions to the Romantic "trauma" following explanatory collapse at the close of the eighteenth century.

In his preface to *The Anathemata*, David Jones described the nineteenth century as a Rubicon which we crossed from the relatively comfortable, coherently structured world of the eighteenth century to the more incoherent, unstructured reality that we term the modern world. And at one time I was told by a professor of modern literature that most post-1890 British expression is informed by the unsettling awareness that, to use A. O. Lovejoy's figure, the top of the "great chain of being" had been lopped off at the end of the nineteenth century. Both of these men were wrong in ascribing finality to the psychic and emotional redirection that occurred "sometime prior to the twentieth century. It goes on, through the nineteenth century, through the 1960's, and to the present. The trauma of 1790-1820 continues. Or, better, it is re-experienced by each succeeding generation, freshly—because new data of the type that unsettled the early Romantics is constantly renewing the source of trauma.

At mid-century Darwin and Marx provide new data. Later Freud makes his contribution. Then Einstein, Sartre, and so on. And all the time, what we term today The Establishment works according to and generates values derived from the life-vision of the eighteenth century. It's a neat dialectic that results. And as Peckham points out, the dialectic, deliberately and consciously accepted on the high culture level, produces the energy—and, indeed, the great sense of drama—enjoyed by high culture artists and thinkers. The tension has been the mainstay of the greatest American Romantics, men like Thoreau and Emerson who make the most of the energy potential of this dialectic by straddling the redemptive/anti-redemptive fence. It also gives strength to our most powerful anti-redemptive, explanatory prose artists, Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway. Consider the microcosmic sketch of the shift from the redemptive mode of consciousness to the anti-redemptive that takes place in Crane's "The Open Boat"—whereby we can see how Peckham's definition of Romanticism can subsume the less significant term, Naturalism, which is usually applied to Crane's vision in that short story. Or, recall the conclusion to *A Farewell to Arms*, in which Hemingway luxuriates in flaunting The Establishment by describing life as merely a biological trap. Peckham's notion of vandalism comes to mind in both instances: Crane and Hemingway must have felt awfully good when slapping the popular mind with these works (as did the more redemptive Thoreau and Emerson with their efforts). It's no wonder that the adjective "adolescent" frequently occurs in connection with these artists. Or, to use Peckham's term, a sense of "superficiality" may be what we find after reading their total artistic output. In their response to the modern world, Crane and Hemingway really were singing one simple ditty: the world isn't what we were

told it is, and isn't it sad. It's a song that goes on, in cinema, on the stage, in poetry and prose. There are multiple variations, but basically it seems safe to me to claim that this is *the* theme, the phoenix that won't die--though I, and probably Peckham too, wish that it would. For, even on the highest cultural levels where it accounts for most of our dynamic artistic expression, it is beginning to seem sappy, repetitive, regressive, and false. False, because behind all of the bellowing and whimpering there almost always is implied a desire to return to the happy valley, to return to the garden landscape of the eighteenth century. Viciously anti-redemptive explanatory artists like Edward Albee, even, seem to have this notion, blasted wish though it may be, somewhere in the backs of their minds. Thus their outrage and unnecessary vehemence.

It's time to move on to something else.

This, I presume, is one of the main reasons Peckham finds the anti-redemptive, anti-explanatory mode so attractive. It is genuinely attractive in that it may very well mark the beginning of Man's movement from adolescence to maturity, the point at which the last crutch was thrown away. Peckham is right: there is no "consolation for the irresolvable tension of human existence." Thus the enduring greatness of our two finest Romantics, Herman Melville and William Faulkner--Faulkner especially, who had the wisdom to content himself with the task of truthfully depicting "the furious motion of being alive." No stale consolations there, no definitive explanations or resolutions of the problems of being human, and no cheap cop-outs.

Peckham's conclusion may raise grave problems for some. That is, the anti-redemptive, anti-explanatory view may seem to many to very closely resemble what we have traditionally termed pessimism, or even nihilism. Peckham, though, is not suggesting or advocating this extreme; it is not necessarily the shabby and, worst of all, boring pessimism of a Eugene O'Neill that he describes, I think. Nor, as he makes clear, is it the apocalyptic despair of a Nathanael West. Rather, the anti-redemptive, -explanatory view can lead to a new sensitivity and, I believe, a kind of joy--a new redemption by which men can discover what it means to exist in a world free of trauma- and simple frustration-inducing systems of explanation. Consider the necessary angel of reality that William Carlos Williams, much better than Wallace Stevens, comes to in an utterly uncomplicated way.

#### TO A POOR OLD WOMAN

munching a plum on  
the street a paper bag  
of them in her hand

They taste good to her  
They taste good  
to her. They taste  
good to her

You can see it by

A COMMENTARY ON "ROMANTICISM AND BEHAVIOR"

the way she gives herself  
to the one half  
sucked out in her hand

Comforted  
a solace of ripe plums  
seeming to fill the air  
They taste good to her

D. H. Lawrence judged that the greatest onus America has had to bear was the early importation of white European consciousness. It was a curse, this intellectuality that was newly sown in the seventeenth century. The explanatory systems were dismantled, safely stowed in the hull of the *Arbella*, and re-assembled in Massachusetts. And business went on as usual. The great fruit of the late eighteenth century explanatory collapse was the beginning of the dismantlement of these heady superstructures. Now, in 1974, we are perhaps ready to begin enjoying those plums, even the bruised ones. What I am wondering about, though, is the future need for art in light of this development. Avant-garde artists are now "busily engaged in a self-conscious destruction of art"—redemptive art. But even anti-redemptive, anti-explanatory artists who are not deliberately anti-art, such as William Carlos Williams, William Heyen, and Robert Bly (despite his puerile mythologies which actually have nothing to do with his finest expression), seem also to be working against themselves as they perform their most constructive labors. Beyond belief, beyond the obsessive drive to explain, they bring us to things (objects and relationships) for their own sake. They bring us face to face with realities, and, once there, we can go on our own, the thing itself being much more engaging than the description or the descriptor as the poet silently admits when he judges it worthy of description.

Looking back, we might remember that Thoreau faced such a dilemma, that several of the Realist writers proceeded from the assumption that "life is better than literature," and that in modern poetry there has developed a school which views the act of perception itself as a self-contained end. To quote Williams again,

So much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

It may be that this is the direction in which we will move, away from art to the world, or to art as mainly a means of developing a finer perception of realities. And that's not bad, although it may mean that poetry and other art forms will have to assume a new, less flashy role in men's lives. Art has been and still is the "fortress" from which attacks are launched or pro-something-or-other propaganda is issued. A century or two from now, available data suggests that we might end up with the idea of art as a lense with which we will see and understand life, and thus finally come to terms with ourselves.

I suspect that Morse Peckham perhaps does not envision quite so happy an outcome. I think that he rather enjoys the dialectic, and would be loath to see it lose its hold on men's imagination. And, in some ways, so would I. But my reading of the picture he presents pushes me to the conclusion that Romanticism may have been the several painful steps by which we have come to a beginning of true Realism in art and life. This Realism may bring us beyond not only metaphysics but all anti-metaphysics to comfort with what is.