

**Paul Scott Derrick.** *«We Stand Before the Secret of the World»: Traces Along the Pathway of American Romanticism.* Valencia: Biblioteca Javier Coy. Universidad de Valencia. 2003. 153 pp. Paperback. (ISBN: 84-370-5739-6).

As Whitehead remarked in *Science and the Modern World*, at the core of the Romantic reaction there «is a protest on behalf of the organic view of nature against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter» (94). The fundamental concern of Romantic art is the tension between two different epistemological strategies: intuition, that strives towards spiritual and transcendental definitions of reality, and understanding, a mode of knowledge based on the rational faculties of ordinary consciousness that sacrifice the spiritual to the criteria of expediency and skeptical materialism.

*Traces along the Pathway of American Romanticism* is a meticulously researched, multilayered work of literary criticism. It comprises ten densely written and insightful essays on Emerson, Poe, Emily Dickinson and, not usually associated with these writers, Faulkner. Each of the volume's essays is well presented and finely tuned. The style is refreshing and playful. Combining informed close reading with a wide-ranging sense of Romantic philosophy and practice, Paul Derrick casts an insightful eye on major Romantic texts –Emerson's key essays, «Nature,» «The American Scholar», «The Poet,» Poe's short stories and Dickinson's poems– serving up an imaginative and thought-provoking study that questions the rationalistic and dualistic bias of Western culture.

In this study, Derrick undertakes a striking rethinking of Romantic aesthetics and raises a host of fascinating questions regarding the Romantic insistence on intuition as a major mode of knowledge. The strength of his argumentation consists in demonstrating the reverberations of the Romantic conflict between the two antagonistic epistemologies –logic vs. imagination– which he traces into the literary and artistic expressions of the twentieth century. Intertwined with questions about existential relevance, the book's ten essays chart the epistemological and philosophical implications of Romanticism and startle us with dazzling parallelisms and insights.

Derrick's vibrant defense of Romantic aesthetics is accompanied by the argument that imagination alone can provide a remedy to our alienated and fragmented world. Both his argument and close readings merit our attention, placing many of these familiar literary texts into unsettling relations and contexts. His revaluations are lucid, deft, penetrating, and provide an overview of the wider implications of

Romantic epistemology. The text is studded with references, allusions, and gestures towards quantum physics, Jungian depth-psychology, Heidegger's *Dasein*, and Wittgenstein's silence, but also manages to link the deepest experiences of reading with the real experiences of our lives.

Besides being synoptic and powerful on key Romantic texts, Derrick is capable of producing accounts of philological and artistic debates that are compelling and engaging. He reveals the hidden connections between Romantic and modernist writers. Emerson's *Nature* is read alongside Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Dickinson's and Poe's lyrics and those of Williams and Stevens. Further connections are established with nineteenth-century American landscape painters, the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock and postmodern theories.

Despite the differences that separate Poe and Emerson, Derrick reads Emerson's *Nature* as a gloss on Poe's «Sonnet-To Science» (1829). He also suggests that Heidegger's essays on the question of technology and science could be read as a later, albeit indirect, explication of Emerson's texts. Furthermore, he claims that Emerson's holistic conception of nature as a continuum between matter and mind is validated by quantum physics which, exposing the limits of scientific understanding, affirms the existence of a flowing reality in which thought apparently participates in the structuring of the material world.

In discussing Emerson's central essay, «The American Scholar,» Derrick emphasizes that national identity depends on linguistic and cultural identity. He argues that Emerson translates the political independence of 1783 into the emancipation of the self. But, and perhaps more importantly, he suggests that Emerson's intellectual independence is premised on a new, pristine relationship between the self and the world which is at the same time a drastic reformulation of the fundamental assumptions of Western culture, whose rationalistic prejudices are supplanted by a non-dual, holistic conception of existence. Emerson, he claims, denies the *ultimate* validity of material reality just as he denies the validity of any external value system based on an authority other than the inner voice.

Throughout the book, Derrick examines the underlying link between rationalism, materialism and utilitarianism. He endorses Romantic epistemology and its belief in intuition as a superior mode of knowledge that, unlike analytical thinking, neither reduces existence to separate unconnected particles nor sanctions partial accounts of reality based on the description of its material surfaces. He credits Emerson with a holistic worldview expressed in a new philosophy of «nature,» a category that integrates spirit, matter, thought and language.

Nature is also Emerson's symbol for the ever-expanding self. Its incessant metamorphoses trace the map of the poet's mind, since «he and it proceed from one root.» Fluid, in continual becoming, nature is cognate with the poet's own spirit: «There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself» («The American Scholar» 932-33). Nature functions as a storehouse of limitless symbolic signs which, as Derrick remarks, imply a greater underlying unity.

Emerson's nature, Derrick concludes, is an insoluble blend of matter and spirit that transcends itself into consciousness through language. He posits a similarity between Emerson's notion of «nature» and Heidegger's *Dasein* (Being), conceived of as «an indefinable creative process through which that-which-is emerges from concealedness into presence» (55) or language. Furthermore, Derrick demonstrates that for Emily Dickinson and Poe, the ultimate form of poetry consists in giving expression of the authentic voice of Being, a voice that fuses matter, mind and language (55). Poetic language, he concludes, is the vehicle for the transcendence that establishes selfhood (63).

Derrick also points out that the Romantic hermeneutics of nature is based on a circular model, Emerson's «spires of form.» Expounding on «The Final Frontier in Poe and Dickinson,» he recalls that the Romantic theory of emotions considers feelings as meaningful epistemological traces, which the world leaves on human sensibility (89). Consequently, the task of the Romantic poet is to translate these traces through poetic language into consciousness. This flow of nature *through* the mind is the perfect model of the imaginative transformation that also informs, according to Derrick, the poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, «The Idea of Order at Key West» (51).

Romantic art, Derrick reminds us, is an art of fragmentation, an art full of gaps and arbitrary breaks, masterfully epitomized by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Emily Dickinson's poems. In the Transcendental tradition, he notes, language violates grammatical proprieties of form and meter and surpasses the need for predetermined structure and easy logical connections. Thus, with his infinite catalogues and enumerations, Whitman expands language to the point of explosion, while Emily Dickinson reduces it to a minimal expression, symbolic of her religion of renunciation.

In turn, stylistic fragmentation reflects, in his opinion, the existence of a divided world split by allegiance to exclusively materialistic and rationalistic values. Romantic artists, Derrick argues, search for a principle of continuity underlying these fragmented surfaces. The breaks in continuity are bridged by creative acts of imagination that counteract nihilistic destructiveness.

In Derrick's opinion, the aim of poetic language is to transcend limits and boundaries and to re-establish the continuum. The divorce between matter and spirit can be salvaged, he insists, not by a cultural orientation that privileges rationality, but by imaginative acts that restore the mysterious sense of union between the self and the world. With ample textual evidence and a wide range of judicious quotations which he brings to his theoretical assumptions, Derrick traces the legacy of Wordsworthian and Coleridgean principles in what he calls «the Emersonian tradition,» a tradition made up of poets like Poe, Dickinson, Whitman, Stevens and Williams, all of whom attempt to express in different ways the aura of mystery upon which «so much depends.»

Throughout the book, Derrick gives a vivid sense of how the hidden principle of Romantic continuity is related to a renewed understanding of limits, boundaries, selfhood and nature. He remarks that in the Romantic epistemology, imagination is

the zone between knowledge and mystery, a space he relates to Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian concepts.

In the third part, he argues that the Romantic frontier marks not only a physical borderline, the frontier between nature and civilization, the known and the unknown, but also the more tenuous line between the rational and the irrational, language and silence, and the final boundary, so central to the issues of Romanticism, of life and death. Derrick analyzes Poe's fictive constructs in terms of «the interface» (to use a Pynchonian term) between the world that is beyond the mind and the world as we think it. Poe's voyages into unknown seas are journeys across the borderline of consciousness. His and Dickinson's incursions into the unknown resonate well into the twentieth century anticipating, as Derrick remarks, Kafka's or Beckett's concern with the incomprehensible.

In the last three essays, Derrick re-interprets *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner's saga of the South, in the light of the dangerous consequences of the positivistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Since the novel brings issues of race and our relationship with land and nature into a single complex, Derrick sets out to examine Faulkner's affinity with Emerson's Romantic ethos of nature. He aptly demonstrates that the destruction of the natural world entails a subsequent destruction of the self and the violation of the humanity of another race. Derrick interprets Ike McCaslin's renunciation of his heritage in the light of Emerson's apology for self-reliance and renunciation in «The American Scholar.» In his opinion, Faulkner's anti-hero reiterates the attitude adopted by Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson and Whitman, whom he describes as the great nineteenth-century masters of renunciation. The last chapter is devoted to the analysis of «Pantaloon in Black,» the third narrative of *Go Down, Moses*. Derrick understands the novel's concern with the mysterious frontier between life and death as the metaphysical borderline between matter and spirit, and he refreshingly relates it to Poe's and Dickinson's frontier, which separates the material from the wondrous and the unknown.

Derrick's book is complex and contains a very advanced level of scholarship. Its strength lies in demonstrating the way in which Romantic tenets still direct and shape our existential and ethical vision. He offers scholars the opportunity to test out the theoretical propositions of Romanticism against a wide range of modern texts. He believes that the revaluation of the Romantic Imagination and the adoption of its holistic approach could possibly salvage the fractured and alienated condition of our postmodern world.

One of Derrick's theses is that the philosophy of Transcendentalism, as a reaction against the materialistic orientation of Western culture, tended toward a retrieval of the mystical spirit of primitive cultures and the East. If there is a significant criticism to be leveled against this thesis, it is that on occasions the Romantic revolution is presented as a break with Occidental culture (23, 44, 49) when, in fact, the axiological shift it initiates is more a return to and a revaluation of its own latent tradition—Plotinus, neo-Platonism, through Bruno, Böhme, the hermetic trends of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—suppressed by the militantly positivistic

spirit of modernity; and second, that there are certain aspects inherent in the ethos of Transcendentalism and in Emerson's own thought that run counter to this holistic vision which all Romantics otherwise genuinely embrace. For, once the supernatural is delivered to the natural and the will of the imperial self is acknowledged as absolute law, the fluid transparency of the world can be easily sundered.

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