Nathaniel Teague

October 20th, 2016

Engl 203-50

“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”

**“Are They Here? The Dead of the Other Days” an examination of “The Prairies”**

During the early 1800’s American author William Cullen Bryant changed the face of American literature with his poem “The Prairies” by turning to a romantic writing style, there by rejecting the polar opposite of romanticism: neoclassicism. Neoclassical ideals such as an emphasis on reason and logic, society being more important than the individual and a focus on science were abandoned in this piece for a wide variety of romantic traits. Such as: a concentration on imagination and emotions, a focus on individuality, and the acceptance of faith and belief as equal counterparts to fact. However, in order to properly demonstrate that “The prairies” is thoroughly romantic, and therefore non-neoclassical, an understanding of how both period styles began and ended, and the influence they had, is required.

As the age of reason and the Enlightenment began to flourish in Europe, an inquisitive state of mind became more and more popular, accompanied by a desire to question everything. This resulted in a logic based society that thrived on science and reason. New ways of thinking began to pop up everywhere. Before long, the religious philosophy of deism and the social philosophy of utilitarianism became popularized. deism, in essence, was the belief in a supreme being or god, that created the universe and set everything into motion. Afterwards leaving the universe to function on its own, without any further interference. A popular comparison was that God was like a watchmaker, who crafted a watch (or in this case a universe) but then left it to function, without any tinkering. Furthermore, deists saw this God’s presence in the world through the natural function of the world around them, claiming that the presence of physical laws that govern how the universe behaves, are proof of God’s existence. However, it is important to note that deists saw these laws not as an act of direct interference by God, but more as a part of the inner functioning of the watch itself. Deistic values were additionally paired with utilitarian morals, which placed a strong emphasis on making as many people as happy as possible. Started by a man named Jeremy Bentham, utilitarianism came in several different versions, ranging from act utilitarianism, to negative utilitarianism. Yet despite a wide variety of sub-philosophies, most of utilitarianism can be simplified down to the concept of trying to help the greater good by either preventing as much suffering as possible, or by causing as much happiness as possible. Both deism and utilitarianism flourished in Europe, However, the colonies, separated by the Atlantic ocean, only started to incorporate these ideas once they were on the decline in Europe, around the latter mid 1700’s. This time period from 1765 until 1820, is generally considered the American neoclassical time period and is reflected in the opinions and writings of several of America’s most historic figures such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin.

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is considered one of the most famous neoclassical works ever written, reflecting not just Franklin’s outlook on the world, but also many of the traits that have come to define neoclassicism as a whole. In a portion of the first part of the autobiography, Franklin recounts an episode of his childhood where he began to doubt his faith in christianity (284). In an effort to restore his faith, Franklin read some books that contained arguments aimed against deism, however Franklin describes how they “. . .wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them: For the Arguments of the Deists which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much Stronger than the Refutations. In short I became a thorough Deist” (284). Franklin’s careful, methodical cross examination of the deists’ and the christians’ arguments shows a level of reason and logic that was one of the defining traits of the neoclassical era. Furthermore it is important to note that Franklin accepts neither christianity or deism at face value, instead only through additional research does he ultimately find an answer that satisfies him; in this case it was deism.

Franklin goes on to highlight more traits of neoclassicism in his autobiography, specifically in part two of his autobiography when he describes how when reading through “. . .various Enumeration of the moral Virtues” he discovered that “. . .catalog more or less numerous, as different Writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name” (300). In short, Franklin is here describing that varied authors are discussing the same values, only under different vocabulary (300). He then goes on to write his own list of morals “. . .for the sake of Clearness, to use rather few Names with more ideas; and I included after Thirteen Names of Virtues all that at that time occur’d to me as necessary or desirable. . .” (301). The fifth virtue of Franklin’s list, frugality, is of particular interest in regards to neoclassicism (301). Franklin’s explanation of frugality is as follows: “Make no Expense but to do good to others or yourself: i.e., Waste nothing” (301). This is of note because it not only embodies the neoclassical principle of placing society’s needs over the individual’s, but because it also reflects the social values of utilitarianism. Furthermore the construction of a list of virtues by Franklin, is in of itself a deed meant for the benefit of the public and therefore utilitarian in nature. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* illustrates the effects neoclassicism had on Franklin, with references to many neoclassical values, a direct reference to deism, and allusions to utilitarian ideas, resulting in a book that is neoclassical through and through.

Further still neoclassicism affected other famous american authors, such as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (although he was initially born in Normandy, Crevecoeur through a series of international relocations eventually came to settle in the colonies). In “letter III: What is an American” of Crevecour’s “Letters from an American Farmer” Crevecour attempts to describe the various differences in the people of the colonies making the analogy that “Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow” (312-313). This quote illustrates yet another neoclassical trait: emphasis on science. Even when trying to make the argument that the environment the colonists are born in shapes who they are, Crevecoeur still turns to a scientific example, specifically plants, for his arguement.

However neoclassicism’s logic and reason based system did not last forever, as they were soon replaced by their romantic opposites: imagination and emotion. Much like neoclassicism, romanticism found its origins in Europe, beginning in 1798, before ultimately moving overseas to the United States in 1820. Again, much like neoclassicism, romanticism not only influenced written works, but other branches of culture as well. A desire to reconnect with nature became popularized, as Americans trekked into the wilderness in order to be closer with the uncorrupted wilderness, and perhaps themselves become less corrupt as a result. Much like the deists, romantics turned to nature as a source of religious insight, however, whereas the deists saw the natural laws of the world as proof of God’s existence, romantics saw the wonderful splendor of nature itself as proof itself of God’s existence. Romantic interest in nature even found its way into the artwork of the period as a movement known as the Hudson River School of Painters. Not an actual school or organization, the Hudson River School was simply a group of painters who, inspired by the romantic love of nature, began to paint landscape pieces. However, the movement is of particular note for a few reasons, the first being that it was the first ever uniquely American art movement, found nowhere else in the world. The second being that it encouraged the view of nature as wonderful and pure, yet uncorrupted by civilization, which was viewed as particularly corrupt in this time. This encouragement of purity also incorporated a spiritual aspect to it in the form of what is known as luminism. Luminism, essentially was the use of lighting in paintings to convey a holy or spiritual presence in nature, thereby suggesting the influence of God. Many famous artists were part of the Hudson River School, such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church and John Kensett their numerous works include *View from mount holyoke, niagara,* and *Sunset sky* and remain famous even in the modern era.

Romanticism also had a profound impact on the music of the mid 19th century, with its most famous result being Hector Berlioz’s *Symphanie Fantastique*. The piece, divided into five parts or movements, is meant to convey the story of a young man who falls hopelessly in love only to be rejected, causing him to attempt to overdose himself, only to fail and experience a nightmarish trip. The first three movements, named “Daydreams, passions”, “A Ball” and “Scene in the countryside,” focus on the concept of imagined reality, whereas the later two movements known as “March to the scaffold” and “Dream of a witches’ sabbath”focus on imagined nightmare.

Both romantic artwork and music are designed to elicit an emotional response, whether it be from Berlioz’s imagined nightmare, or Cole’s artwork, the listener or viewer is supposed to feel a certain way afterwards, that the cold reason and logic of neoclassicism could never provide. Logically examining a luminist piece, one would likely not be able to detect or feel a spiritual presence, yet through a romantic approach of imagination and being in touch with one’s emotions, one might be able to feel the presence of a divine hand at work. Attempting to reason out what way a song is supposed to make one feel is unlikely to yield results, but the simple act of just listening to the song, may, on its own, produce an emotional response that reasonable thinking is incapable of doing. In essence, neoclassicism relies on logically deducing things in a reasonable manner, or thinking things through, while romanticism depends on going with the flow, and letting your emotions and imagination take over, simply just feeling things without thinking.

Romantic writing goes even further, rejecting more principles that neoclassicism holds central to its beliefs. “To a Waterfowl,” another poem by Bryant, is narrated by a lone traveler, who can’t help but notice the parallels between himself and a bird flying by itself above him (495). Already, from the premise of the poem alone, an emphasis on individuals can be seen to form, which is the exact opposite of the emphasis on the greater good and society that comes with neoclassical works. As the narrator begins to openly wonder about where the bird is headed, he suddenly envisions the bird’s future, claiming that “Soon shalt thou find a summer home, And rest,/and scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend/Soon o’er they shelter nest” (495). The speaker accepts at face value, without any further questioning or thinking, that since he imagined that the bird was migrating, and that it arrived safely at its “summer home” that both must be true. His belief, his faith, are all he needs to know the “truth.” This blind acceptance is yet another additional trait found in romanticism, and likewise goes against neoclassical values of being inquisitive and questioning of everything.

With neoclassicism and romanticism existing as contradictory outlooks, an acceptance of one also is a rejection of the other. A Rejection of neoclassicism is an acceptance of romanticism, likewise an acceptance of neoclassicism would be a rejection of romanticism, therefore if “The Prairies” is a romantic revolution it is additionally a neoclassical revolt. However for Bryant’s “The Prairies” to be a romantic revolution, it must display a wide variety of typical romantic traits. Fortunately Bryant’s poem does just that. Divided into four distinct sections through paragraphical splits, “The prairies” displays a multitude of romantic traits throughout all the portions, resulting in a wide spectrum of different romantic attributes contained within the piece as a whole.

In the first section, readers follow the narrator as he travels across the great prairies of the west, only to be swept up in his admiration of the beauty of all the nature that surrounds him: “The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,/And fresh as the young earth” (L2-3). As the speaker reflects on the wonders of nature, his mind takes him far away from his current position as he imagines the glorious scenes of nature found all over America: “Breezes of the South!/Who toss the golden and the flame-like flowers,/and pass the prairies-hawk that, poised on high,/Flaps his broad wings, yet moves not-ye have played/Among the palms of Mexico and vines/ Of Texas, and have crisped the limpid brooks/that from the fountains of Sonora glide/Into the calm Pacific. . . .With herbage, planted them with island groves,/and hedged them round with forests. Fitting floor/For this magnificent temple of the sky-/With flowers whose glory and whose multitude/Rival the constellations!” (L15-22) & (L27-31). The narrator here expresses a strong appreciation for all aspects of nature contained within the prairies and beyond, clearly demonstrating how the organic environment surrounding him is remarkably inspirational to him, which is one of, if not the defining trait of the romantic time period.

Bryant then moves from the first paragraph’s focus of appreciation of nature, to the beginning of the narrator’s wandering daydream of the past of the prairies before him: “Are they here-/The dead of the other days!-and did the dust/Of these fair solitudes once stir with life/And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds/That overlook the rivers, or that rise/In the dim forest crowded with old oaks,/Answer. A race, that long has passed away,/Built them;-a disciplined and populous race” (lines 39-46). Here the narrator describes an ancient, successful people who once lived in these lands, but who are long since gone. He then goes to describe how the former inhabitants of this land met their downfall, claiming that “The red man came-/The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce,/And the mound-builders vanished from the earth./The solitude of centuries untold/Has settled where they dwelt” (L58-62). The “red man” as bryant refers to them, were the native Americans that then inhabited the very prairies that the narrator speaks of, while the “mound-builders” were the people that supposedly inhabited the lands before the native Americans (L58-68?). In the narrator's imagining of the past, the “red man” killed the “mound-builders” and took their place as the inhabitants of the prairies (L58-68). Yet they were unsuccessful in their extermination, as a survivor of the “mound-builders” hid from the “red man” until, no longer able to stand it, “yielded himself to die” and turned himself in (L75-78). Yet instead of killing him, “the rude conquerors/Seated the captive with their chiefs” and incorporated him into their tribe, allowing him to marry and become one of them, but despite all of this, he never forgot “the wife/Of his first love, and her sweet little ones/Butchered, amid their shrieks, with all his race” (L78-85). The speakers daydream of the past exhibits two traits of romanticism. The first, and more obvious of the two being the narrator’s interest in the past of the land he is traveling through. The second, less clear one, being the emphasis placed on the individual in this flashback. Instead of spending the majority of this section focusing on the tragedy of the death of the “mound-builders”as a people, the narrator spends roughly half the paragraph recounting the personal story of the last surviving member of the “mound-builders.” The placement of the individual above the society, further pushes “The Prairies” into deeply romantic territory.

The narrator’s journey to the past then miranders into present day times as bryant not only leads readers into the third section of the piece, but also attempts to showcase the changes the world has gone through: “Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise/Races of living things, glorious in strength,/And perish, as the quickening breath of God/Fills them, or is withdrawn” (L86-89). The speaker here is claiming that through the grace of God, the world is changing, not just in appearances, but in who is in control. He goes on to talk about the arrival of European settlers, the migration of the native Americans to “a wilder hunting ground” and the disappearance of beavers from the prairies (L89-97). All of this is to emphasise what has been lost, with the main example being the near extinction of the buffalo: “In these plains/The bison feeds no more. Twice twenty leagues/Beyond remotest smoke of hunter’s camp,/Roams the majestic brute, in herds that shake/The earth with thundering steps-yet here I meet/His ancient footprints stamped beside the pool” (L97-102). The implications of this third section is that while the native Americans, who were in touch with nature, lived in the prairies, nature remained intact, in homeostasis. Yet when the colonists and later the Americans laid claim to the land, it soon began to fall into a state of disarray, presumably due to their not being tuned in with nature. This promotes the idea of the natural goodness of man, that if man were simply removed from civilization, they would be pure and incorrupt.

    The fourth and final paragraph of “The Prairies” begins with the narrator once more appreciating the wonders of nature, specifically the incredible variety of lifeforms that live out in the prairies: “sliding reptiles of the ground,/Startlingly beautiful, The graceful deer/Bounds to the wood at my approach. The bee,/A more adventurous colonist than man” (L108-111). Following the pattern from the previous two sections, the narrator then follows the bee into the future, describing “The sound of that advancing multitude/Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground/ Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice/Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn/Of sabbath worshippers” (L111-121). However, the speakers clairvoyant daydream suddenly comes to an end when “A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,/And I am in the wilderness alone” (L124-125). The ending of the poem is of particular note, because the daydream that the narrator experiences is a sort of connection with nature that allowed for him to see the past, present and future of the land around him. Furthermore, since romantics highly valued forming a connection with nature, the melancholy tone of the ending would be explained by the loss of the narrator’s connection, or in this case, his daydream.

Through “The prairies” acceptance of a multitude of romantic traits, such as an appreciation of nature, a interest in the past, an emphasis on individuals, the natural goodness of man and finding a connection with nature, Bryant rejects the opposing period style of neoclassicism and solidifies his poem as a romantic revolution.

Works Cited

Bryant, William Cullen. “The Prairies.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Shorter

8th edition. Nina Baym et al. New York: Norton, 2013. 495-498. Print.

Bryant, William Cullen. “To A Waterfowl.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

Shorter 8th edition. Nina Baym et al. New York: Norton, 2013. 495. Print.

Crevecoeur, J. Hector St. John De. “Letters from an American Farmer, Letter III: What is

an American.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Shorter 8th edition. Nina

Baym et al. New York: Norton, 2013. 309-319. Print.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.* Shorter

8th edition. Nina Baym et al. New York: Norton, 2013. 248-308. Print.