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ENGL 203-50

October 20, 2016

“Thus change the forms of being”:

Bryant’s “The Prairies” as a Corner Stone of the Revolution

In its rejection of neoclassical ideals, such as an emphasis on logic and reason, science, and society, and its embracement of the opposing views, such as an emphasis on emotion, imagination, and nature, William Cullen Bryant’s poem, “The Prairies,” became the corner stone of the romantic revolution.

Neoclassicism is the social philosophy that values logic and reason over emotion and was the preeminent movement in America from 1765 to 1820 after the Stamp Act shifted the focus in society from religion to politics. It influenced the writing and art of the era. The three traits of neoclassicism are an emphasis of logic and reason, a high interest in science, and society being more important than individual. Some of the neoclassical works were *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*, and Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*.

The emphasis on logic and reason was one of the main influences throughout the era. In Thomas Jefferson’s autobiography, he goes though the changes that occurred with the *Declaration of Independence* while it was being written. One of the changes was to replace the word “states” with the word “colonies” because, to England, America was a group of colonies and not states. Even though the American people thought of them as states, Jefferson logically knew if he wanted England to actually think the document was serious, he would have to make some concessions with the word choice. Logic dictated the founding fathers had to pander to English beliefs.

With the rise of logic and reason, the idea of divine right of king, which is the idea of God having a representative on Earth, begins to lose its importance, partially due to René Descartes skepticism in the church and a divine power which controlled everything. As opposed to the doctrine of divine right of king, the prominent religious notion was deism, which was the theory that God created the universe and set the natural laws before not intervening any further in the affairs of the universe. This lead to the view that if someone wanted to be close to God, they only had to look toward nature and the natural laws to see him. An examination of the natural laws followed, attempting to quantify them and reconcile theories with one another, which produced a massive influx of scientific idea and theorems to explain the natural laws, such as Newton’s Laws of Motion, which are used in numerous modern branches of science.

With logic and reason being the main focus of the era, the field of science grew exponentially. Francis Bacon created the scientific method, which is still used in modern day for all fields of study. René Descartes, a famous mathematician and philosopher, influenced what became to be known as the Cartesian Revolution. The Cartesian Revolution influenced mathematics and physics with the advent of the Cartesian coordinate system, which bridged the gap between theoretical and applied. Another element of the Cartesian Revolution was the Descartes famous statement, “I think, therefore I am,” which separated the mind from the body and made everything based on subjectivity.

While individual subjectivity was the main focus of the Cartesian Revolution, society was valued much greater over the individual throughout the era. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin tells of a time he and his friends use stones which are being used for houses to build a wharf to fish from and, when they are discovered, he gets punished by his father saying, “I pleaded the Usefulness of the Work, mine [my father] convinc’d me that nothing was useful which is not honest” (Franklin 252). Though the wharf is useful, the greatest use for the stones that helped the most people was to use them to build houses for people who needed them. In his book *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine argued that “Europe, and not England, is the parent of the country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe” (327). By stating this, Paine essentially says that it does not matter what country the people are from, the important trait is that they desire freedom from persecution and a sense of liberty; the individual traits do not matter as long as the group is free from persecution.

This general idea of helping the greatest number of people was paramount to the philosophical theory of utilitarian, which was one of the driving forces behind neoclassicism. Utilitarianism was created by John Stuart Mills and was the theory that the way to achieve individual happiness was to perform actions that most benefit society and attain the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. Within the *Declaration of Independence*, the founding document of American, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (340). American was founded on the principle that happiness was a right for everyone, which is distinctly utilitarian and neoclassic. While some of the principles of neoclassicism lasted onward, in 1820, the major philosophy shifted as a result of the beginning discourse that lead to the civil war forty years later.

Romanticism is the philosophy that formed as a reaction to neoclassicism and influenced art, literature, and society from 1820 until 1865. Where neoclassicism was driven by logic, science and the importance of society, romanticism was driven by emotion, imagination, and the importance of nature. Some important works of the era that demonstrate this shift in ideal include “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe, and “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman.

As romanticism is a response to the logic-driven neoclassicism, it follows that romanticism is driven heavily by emotion. “The Tell-Tale Heart” has a driving force to the climax, which occurs when the speaker reveals the location of where he hid the dead body of the old man, which is the guilt the speaker feels from murdering the old man (Poe). The propelling idea throughout the whole story is emotion, from the speaker’s hatred of the old man’s eye, “It was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye”; to the speaker’s happiness and arrogance at murdering the old man, “I smiled, – for what would I have to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome”; to the speaker’s guilt building until he breaks down and reveals that he is the murderer, “they knew! – they were making a mockery of my horror...But anything was more tolerable than this derision” (Poe). In the latter two quotes, the gentlemen and the “they” the speaker is referring to is the police. All the actions of the speaker were driven by powerful, though slightly delusional, emotions.

While the guilt the speaker feels in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is real, the sound that is making him feel the overwhelming guilt, is imagined, which is a significant trait of the era. Like many romantic works, imagination is an important part of Poe’s short story. The speaker begins by imagining the old man’s eye, “the eye of a vulture,” is staring at him and making the speaker’s “blood run cold” (Poe 715). Before completing the murder, the speaker imagines the sound of the heartbeat of the old man getting louder and louder until he fears “the sound would be heard by a neighbor” (Poe 717). After killing the old man and hiding the body under the floorboards, the speaker imagines the heartbeat of the old man again while speaking with the police, who came to investigate a scream a neighbor heard, and thought it was getting “louder! louder! louder! louder!” until he exposes the murder (Poe 718). Imagination is obviously a crucial component of the short story. Another short story, “Young Goodman Brown,” similarly relies heavily on imagination. Goodman Brown goes into the woods one morning and, while resting, falls asleep in a grove. While asleep, Goodman Brown dreamed that the supposedly holy townspeople, including his wife, Faith, engaged in a Witch’s Sabbath. Upon waking, Goodman Brown was wary of everyone in town, including his wife, and remained distrustful of everyone until he died (Hawthorne). The imaginations of Goodman Brown permanently changed how he view the other people in his village.

Though “Young Goodman Brown” contains some of the descriptions of nature, which bring his imagination to life and make it seem real, it can hardly compare to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in terms of shear amount of flowy description of nature. In the second part of his poem, Whitman refers to “The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn” (*l.* 24). These descriptions of nature are presented all the way through the poem. Likewise, in William Cullen Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl,” nature is used to present the lesson the speaker learned. The speaker is observing a bird, who seems to be flying aimlessly, and through the observation the speaker realizes there is a higher power that is guiding the bird along the path to the place it needs to be; “There is a Power whose care/ Teaches thy way along that pathless coast” (*l.* 13-14). Bryant’s work, “To a Waterfowl,” demonstrated a shift in his work from neoclassical to romantic, which can be seen further when his other poem, “The Prairies” is analyzed.

William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies” is a romantic poem that is divided into four distinct parts, which can be somewhat equated to paragraphs if this was piece of prose. The poem is a key component in the romantic revolution and the development of Bryant’s writing, as it shows the distinctive shift from the neoclassical traits of the previous era to the romantic trait of that era.

“The Prairies” opens with the narrator (who will be identified by the male pronouns in this essay, though the gender is never stated) overlooking “The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful/ And fresh as the young earth, ere man had sinned –/The Prairies” (*l.* 2-4).

The narrator looks out over the prairies and the clouds, initially thinking they are motionless, before coming to the realization that they are actually unchained and uncontrolled. He asks a prairie-hawk if it had ever seen “a nobler or lovelier scene,” even though the it had been:

Among the palms of Mexico and vines

Of Texas, and have crisped the limpid brooks

That from the fountains of Sonora glide

Into the Pacific. (*l.* 19-23)

The narrator then states that “Man hath no part in all this glorious work” and that the one who did it, God, made everything that could be seen (*l.* 24). He finds an apparent connection with nature due to the fresh and untouched appearance of it.

Within the second part of the poem, the narrator guides his horse through the grass and find “The hollow beating of his footstep seems/ A sacrilegious sound” (*l.* 37-38). He reflects on the past and on those people who died long ago in that area, who built “mighty mounds” (*l.* 42). The field through which the narrator is riding “Nourished their harvests, here their [the people who did long ago herds fed” (*l.* 51). The people lived there until “The red man came –/ The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce,/ And the mound-builders vanished from the earth (*l.* 58-60). After the mound-digging people left, nature reclaimed the area with different animals hunting or digging in what used to be the city of the mound-digging people. The narrator then describes that the only thing remaining of the civilization is the mounds with the bones of people. He also describes a man watching his people being slaughtered from a marsh by chance and when he wanted to die, “Man’s better nature triumphs. Kindly words/ welcomed and soothed him” (*l.* 79-80). The man then was brought to the chiefs of the conquering people and allowed to choose a maiden to marry, though he “seemed to forget – yet ne’er forgot, – the wife/ of his first love” (*l.* 83-84). This entire section embodies the romantic tenet of having a sympathetic interest in the past. The narrator is, in essence, thinking about what occurred in the past and how it has been reclaimed by nature since.

The third part of the poem can really be summed up by the first line of the section, “Thus change the forms of being” (*l.* 86). This section explains that the red man, the beavers, and the herds of buffalo have all moved west to more untamed parts of the country as the people have moved westward as well. The narrator is but standing in the footsteps of the buffalo’s “ancient footprints stamped beside the pool” (*l.* 103). This part gives the lesson the narrator learns in the poem. Specifically, that nature is constantly changing, with settlers and pioneers being one of the driving forces behind that change.

The final portion of the poem describes the prairies as they were then, full of life with insects, birds, and deer, and what they will soon become, settled by people. As the narrator listens to a bee’s hum, a bee he describes as “a more adventurous colonist than man,” he begins to imagine “that advancing multitude/ which soon shall fill these deserts” (*l.* 111-117). He imagines the sound of children and church goers, until “a fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks [his] dream,/ and [he] am in the wilderness alone” (*l.* 123-124). This final section shows the tenet of American romanticism, in the form of faith in imagination being a form of truth. The narrator believes the people will move in and settle the area so much, he can hear the sounds of the children already.

“The Prairies” was a romantic work. It discarded the ideals of neoclassicism and embraced the ideals of romanticism. In a biography for Bryant, if referred to a time Bryant’s father brought home a book called *Lyrical Ballards,* which while reading “he claimed he heard Nature for the first time speak with a dynamic authenticity: Wordsworth’s language suddenly gushed like ‘a thousand springs’” (William Cullen). Nature had obviously been apart of Bryant’s life since he was young and with the shift in societal focus, it only follows that Bryant would follow suit, especially with a topic that had been apart of his life. Similarly to how romanticism replaced neoclassicism, realism replaced romanticism in 1865 until it too was inevitably replaced by a new set of ideals. The cycle of changing ideals, typically divided by wars in America, can be embodied by the line of the poem, “Thus change the forms of being,” because that is what is happening; nothing is being created or destroyed, it is just changing form.

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