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Romanticism and Christianity

The Romantic Era, beginning in the late 18th century and flourishing in the early 1800s, made an unforgettable contribution to literature that intrigues scholars, students, and casual readers alike with its enchanting approach to the world. Reacting against the urbanization and modernization brought by the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism recognized defects in modern society and sought refuge from it in that which was simple and organic. Crafting literature that sparks the imagination and captivates the senses, the Romantics colored their poetry with themes of beauty, nature, youth, emotion, and escape. In each of these prominent Romantic features, the fervency of Romantic notions sometimes caused the Romantics to stray from Christianity; nonetheless, Romanticism offers many insights that can enhance Christian life and inspire worship of God.

One of the most appealing qualities distinctive of Romanticism is its appreciation of beauty. In “A Defence of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelley describes poetry’s effect on the reality it portrays: “Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed” (1176). The Romantics not only wrote about beauty but also created it; their works, which include what is arguably some of the most beautiful poetry ever written, focus on the stuff of daily life, drawing out the beauty in nature and in common things. A master at capturing beautiful scenes and settings, William Wordsworth exemplifies the Romantic inclination to find beauty and delight in nature. In his

poem “It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free,” Wordsworth describes the stillness of an evening, painting a picture of the scene with his simple but beautiful descriptions, such as the quiet time’s likeness to a nun “breathless with adoration” and the sun’s “sinking down in its tranquility” (3-4). He follows his description of the peaceful setting by expressing to his young companion that, through her participation in the serene moment, she is unknowingly brought closer to God. It is in its wonder at beauty that Romanticism perhaps best contributes to Christianity: the poets allow themselves to be filled with awe at the beauty of the world around them—a world that Christians know is the handiwork of a magnificent Creator. Beauty did not always lead the Romantics to worship the Creator God, yet Christians should seek to discover and delight in beauty like the Romantics did, but with even greater appreciation for its Creator.

In Romantic literature, beauty most frequently finds its expression in nature. Finding urban society wearisome and unappealing, the Romantics looked to nature for delight, comfort, and refreshment. Nature, both admired and deeply revered, provided inspiration for countless Romantic poems. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge embodies the Romantic mindset concerning nature powerfully. The poem is riddled with poetic language that vividly describes nature as it acts upon the mariner and his shipmates. At certain points in the poem, elements of nature are personified, such as the “storm-blast,” referred to as “he” and said to have “struck” and “chased” the ship (41-44). Wild and ominous, nature punishes the sailors for killing the albatross—a nigh-unforgivable transgression against nature. Romantics elevate unity and love between nature and all things as the ultimate aim; the mariner summarizes his tale with the aphorism, “He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small/ For the dear God who loveth us,/ He made and loveth all” (618-21). Romanticism glorifies nature and urges communion with it. Sometimes the Romantics esteem nature so highly that they nearly

worship it. Where it worships creation above the Creator, Romanticism errs, but Christians can learn from the Romantics' love for nature in order to cultivate an appreciation for nature perhaps even greater than that of the Romantics because they know the God Who governs it.

Romanticism embraces what is natural and simple and pure; thus, the Romantics prized youth for its innocence and childlike wonder. Often a child is held up as the model after which adults, care-ridden and world-weary, ought to model themselves, for children approached life from a perspective that the Romantics found enviable. Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven" provides a good example of the Romantic interest in the perspective of a child. In the poem, the speaker tells of an encounter with a young girl, described as a "simple" child who "feels its life in every limb" and is innocent, ignorant of death (3-4). The little girl had a "rustic, woodland air" and was "wildly clad"; she was closer to nature, less tainted by society than the adult speaker (9-10). Her insistence that she kept company with her deceased siblings shows that she has a strong imagination at work, or perhaps even that she is in touch with the supernatural—a quality that held great appeal for the Romantic poet. In their appreciation of youth, the Romantic sentiment toward children resembles that of Jesus in Scripture. He ascribed particular value to children, instructing His disciples to allow children to approach Him because "to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (*English Standard Version*, Matt. 19.14). Jesus prized childlike faith, and Christians can join with the Romantics in appreciating the qualities of youth that allow children to see the world through different eyes.

A commonality among Romantic poems of all subject matters and styles is the presence of deeply felt emotion. Wordsworth defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and indeed, powerful emotion drives most Romantic works (575). "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats is rife with it, displaying a spectrum of emotion ranging from the

delight of the bird to the despondency of the speaker. The poem eloquently describes the speaker's heartache as he reflects on "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" inflicted by the troubles and cares of the world (23). He reflects, "[T]o think is to be full of sorrow," a consequence of living in a world full of cares and troubles that contrasts the "happiness" and "ecstasy" of the nightingale (37). The Romantic emphasis on emotion neither perfectly converges with nor entirely contradicts Christian beliefs. The Bible clearly values emotion, as it contains psalms expressing sorrow and angst, hope and gratitude, joy and exultation. Yet Romantic sentiments may place too much value on emotion, to the neglect of truth, which is fundamental to Christianity. Truth must triumph over emotion for the Christian, for "the heart is deceitful above all things;" and while feelings and emotions can be unsteady and tempestuous, truth endures forever, unchanged by external circumstances (Jeremiah 17.9). The Romantic tendency to get lost in emotion fails to recognize the stability and security of building one's hopes on truth.

The Romantics' disillusionment with society and discouragement from the cares of the world led them to seek escape. Nature proved a perfect escape for the Romantics, who loved to lose themselves in the solitude and serenity of not only nature itself but also the memory of encounters with it. Several of Wordsworth's poems express this desire to escape into nature, one of the best examples of which is "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." The speaker in the poem, returning to a place he had been removed from for five years, exults not only in the beauty of the moment but also in the comfort that the memory of his past experience in that place has provided him in his absence, saying, "But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din/ Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,/ In hours of weariness, sensations sweet" (27-29). The Romantic speaker seeks to escape from the drudgery of life and find solace in nature and in solitude. The

speaker describes the charm of the spot and of “some hermit’s cave, where by his fire/ The hermit sits alone,” drawn to the hermit’s lifestyle of freedom and isolation. Escape from the world and the people in it, whether physically or simply in the recesses of the mind, brought “tranquil restoration” (31). On this point Christians may find the most significant conflict between Romanticism and Christianity; while the world is indeed full of trials and heartaches, God does not encourage man to escape from it but instead to engage it with the gospel. The gospel provides hope for humanity that makes life endurable and even victorious and fulfilling. The Romantic disillusionment with life and their mechanism for coping with it often does not model the attitude that the Apostle Paul advocates to believers in Philippians when he writes saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4.4). Paul faced disheartening circumstances more than most, yet he declares, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil. 4.11). The Romantics stumble upon truth when they recognize the imperfections of a sin-cursed world, but they stray from it when they look to escape rather than to Jesus to grant relief. While times of solitude and escape are beneficial in moderation, true joy in life comes from hoping in the Lord and engaging the world with the love of Christ.

Romantic literature affords insights and enjoyment that, while not inherently rooted in Christ, can certainly be used to inspire worship of Him. The inspiration behind Romanticism—the desire to return to the simple joys of life and remove oneself from a problematic society rather than be bogged down by its troubles—is admirable; in fact, the Romantic approach to life could aid a believer in avoiding worldliness by leading him instead to delight in the beauty of the world God created. While all Romantic ideas do not necessarily align with Christian belief, a discerning Christian can appreciate the works for their beauty and vitality, reading Romantic literature redemptively to the glory of God and seeing His handiwork on display in it.

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