

Dialectics with Romanticism in *Romantic Environmental Sensibility*

Ve-Yin Tee, ed., *Romantic Environmental Sensibility: Nature, Class and Empire*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2022. 296 pp. £24.99. ISBN 978-1-4744-5647-0.

*J. B. Klich**

Romantic Environmental Sensibility: Nature, Class and Empire is a collection of essays edited by Ve-Yin Tee, Assistant Professor in the Department of British and American Studies, Nanzan University, Japan. With great intellectual energy, interest in historical contexts, and genuine attention to philosophical concepts and their formations, the volume deals with a series of questions crucial for literature studies. What is the contemporary significance of Romanticism, whether perceived as an era, movement, turn, revolution or fashion? How can we attempt to build a critical discourse about it, or simply elaborate it philosophically in a way that would be fruitful to the human condition of our times? What lessons does Romanticism still hold for us that could potentially provide any new ways of living in our modern predicaments (assuming, of course, that real problems like impingement of gravity or climate have no solutions, but simply ways of making life with them firstly liveable and secondly worthwhile)?

The book is founded on the decision to read the Romantic tradition against the grain, and beyond the prevailing discourse of environmentalism and green consciousness that underpins it, as born out of the romantic critique of industrial development in the Anglo-American cultural circle. The editor identifies two emblematic, seemingly incompatible but actually complementary, components of this vision of environmentalism: perpetually unfolding “poetic green language” and the always objectifying “scientific language of conservation” (Tee, “Introduction” 2). It is important to inspect these two ways of organising language critically, and to attempt to understand the roots of their paradoxical kinship in the political, artistic and intellectual events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book takes on this task aware of the dangers of any simplistic strategies that would denounce

* J. B. Klich, doctoral candidate, International Doctoral Degree in Asia and Pacific Studies, National Chengchi University, Taiwan (j.klich88@gmail.com).

these attitudes and sensibilities as elitist, upper-class inventions of idealistic writers, stern academics, and wealthy landowners. Instead, the book quite efficaciously endeavours to explore the nexus of environmentalism and postcolonialism (although decolonialism would probably be a much more suitable term here, because of the authors' critical stance and insistence of the on-going presence of the effects of colonialism) by fusing a critical awareness of the unjustly severe impact of the climate crisis on formerly colonised nations with a consideration of class disparities and discrimination. Thus, we arrive at one of the most crucial characteristics of *Romantic Environmental Sensibility*—that of the polemical engagement with ecocriticism and ecosocialism. Further, the book successfully investigates the affinities of modernity, and our own contemporary late modernity, with Romanticism. This is an incredibly important movement as the standard academic consensus identifies modernity as an offshoot of the Age of Enlightenment as elaborated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Philippe Descola in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, and Tzvetan Todorov in *In Defence of the Enlightenment*. The contributors to *Romantic Environmental Sensibility* skilfully reveal and precisely analyse a parallel view of the matter. The project that the editor and contributors undertake is not exactly Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge (the author of *The History of Sexuality* is referred to directly only by Li-hsin Hsu in Chapter 4), but an endeavour that can definitely be seen as akin to it, and something we might dub philosophico-literary excavation of knowledge. Furthermore, the editor and the individual authors make a conscious decision to collectively focus on class rather than race, nationality, or ethnicity as their primary concern and context of analysis, claiming that it allows for a much better elaboration of networks of power, privilege, and difference within and between various societies. Additionally, the authors perform such analyses by employing certain investigative and interpretative strategies that may, for example, “consider the environmental implications of Romantic period land aesthetics and land management practices”; “recover an alternative, or marginal, or suppressed land ethics from the Romantic period”; or “engage with residual and emergent strands in environmental discourse of the present day” (Tee, Introduction 7).

Romantic Environmental Sensibility: Nature, Class and Empire is a clearly structured book with fifteen chapters: an introduction, two logically

delineated parts (I: Green Imperialism, II: Land and Creatures Ethics) that contain thirteen essays, and an afterword. In the broadly scoped and intensely critical introductory essay “Environmentalism, Class and Nature” Ve-Yin Tee sets out the thesis of the book as an examination of the interconnectedness of Romanticism and current trends in ecocriticism, ecosocialism, and postcolonialism. Part I: Green Imperialism, which is named after Richard Grove’s crucial work, contains six chapters that attempt to bring to light a network of connections between Romanticism and Imperialism. Chapter 1 probes the social and political influences impacting axiology using the example of authentic descriptions of Han and Qing imperial gardens penned by employees (recruited from all social classes) of the British embassy to China in the late eighteenth century. Chapter 2 elaborates the class-bound transformations of understandings of China and its cultures as represented by the handful of Britons who actually travelled to Asia and experienced the realities of the place and the majority of British society for whom “Chineseness” was just an aesthetic concept generated with and through local debates about class, taste, and early forms of consumption of cultural goods. Chapter 3 uses Robert Louis Stevenson’s descriptions of the Chinese quarter of San Francisco from a travelogue of 1879 to build a wonderfully multifaceted and authentically immersive analytical elaboration of the paradoxes of a place marked with otherness, which creates openings not only to objectification, orientalisation, and violence, but also agency, transformation and liberation. Chapter 4 explores the birth and operations of discourses of apocalypticism, techno-utopianism, and denialism in the works of Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron in the concept of the Anthropocene and in the context of potential global disasters. Chapter 5 contains a complex class analysis of representations of the colonial country house in India as a locus of power over land and people, and as a means for elite self-fashioning and maintaining links with the metropole. Chapter 6 reports richly and brilliantly on the human (tea planters in Assam) and non-human (Bengal tigers) encounters and experiences on the frontiers of the British Empire in rural India, where plantations and biosphere reserves are carved out in the forest, suggesting that conservation and conquest are surreptitiously related. Part II: Land and Creature Ethics, which is inspired by Aldo Leopold’s plea for “a land ethic”, contains seven chapters drawing mainly on critical analysis of environmental aesthetics that engender ways of

designating, delineating, subjugating and exploiting nature, spaces, and people. Chapter 7 reflects upon the processes of organising a picturesque, quasi-theological language of description of suburban spaces in the works of William Cowper. Chapter 8 brings us a telling comparison of the Romantic aesthetic of enclosure and contemporary treatment of areas of recreation and protection that in the context of economic developments and demographic changes bring about a meaningful reflection on the dispossession of enormous numbers of people from the land. Chapter 9 provides readers with a history of the shoemaker-poet James Woodhouse and his literary reflections on the human responsibility for stewardship of the land without any naïve idealisations and detrimental fantasies of nature characteristic of the wealthy landowners. Chapter 10 cleverly critiques discourses about agriculture in general and dairy farming in particular, concluding that both bourgeois exaltations of labouring writers and Marxist fantasies of the proletariat epitomising real wisdom are painfully misguided, because “there are no noble savages: they are just us under different circumstances” (Otagaki 206). Chapter 11 contains an analysis of William Blake’s writings that distils his religious views of nature and notes his use of Lucretius to propose the creation of a non-anthropocentric Christian universe in which human beings are not only not essential but might be proven to be actually dispensable. Chapter 12 examines the writers William Wordsworth and John Clare, and observes their affinity to the tumultuous but wonderful and fascinating untidiness of nature, which can still be rescued and/or recovered if humans allow non-human living beings to use the space that is increasingly colonised by the workings of modern development and economic expansion. Chapter 13 offers a deconstruction of Thomas Robert Malthus’s prominent “Theory of Population” (1798) and the repressive ideologies that underpin his views, which postulated strict control of the working class people, especially their procreation and consumption practices, that echoes with today’s call on the developing countries to diminish their birth-rates and natural resources extraction. The book ends with a surprisingly short afterword, “‘A Tear to Nature’s Tawny Sons is Due’: Alexander Wilson’s *The Foresters* and Romantic Period Uprootings,” where the author reflects on all key issues of the book: environment, class, race and gender in the Romantic period and adds one more—that of migrations. This leads to a conclusion that the “essays illustrate the manifold opportunities, risks and ravages of mobility, for

humans and the environment, that come into focus during this period. Collectively, the essays suggest how the diverse cultural and environmental interactions and interventions continue to shape current conversations about humanity's responsibility for that environment" (Keegan 273).

One of the strongest suits of *Romantic Environmental Sensibility* is the large scope of data and a myriad of perspectives. Meanwhile, the publication maintains a clear structure, coherent style, and consistent argument throughout all fifteen segments. Almost all of the chapters use elaborate analytical methodologies that juxtapose reflections on the Romantic period with their modern impacts and common consequences to academic and socio-political discourses. Such attempts to create authentically original, rhetorically powerful, and culturally significant interpretations deserve wider attention.

The decision to make class the focal issue is definitely admirable, although I would like to challenge the notion, which positions it as a competitive unit of analysis vis-à-vis race, ethnicity or nationality. It is worth risking the claim that a much more fruitful method, which in addition might also prove to be more intellectually provocative, would be one that treats them as inherently linked and mutually complementary approaches. This could, in my opinion, potentially benefit literary studies, critical theory, ecology, and decolonial studies. Furthermore, as a book so deeply focused on embracing critical stances and keen on encouraging diversity and presenting plurality, *Romantic Environmental Sensibility* would benefit from including voices of scholars from regions outside of the global centre, because the book's authors include only academics from the Anglo-American cultural circle and also from Japan and Taiwan. It is feasible to imagine the immense value that might be added to the book by arguments and discussions of the Romantic representations of nature, land, life and being by specialists from places such as post-colonial Brazil or Ivory Coast, post-socialist Poland or Kazakhstan, and even better, both post-colonial and post-socialist (although still nominally communist) Vietnam.

It is also necessary to point out that the introduction and conclusion unfortunately do not knit the chapters together in a fully satisfying way. It is especially palpable when we look at Part II, which seems slightly disjointed, leaving the reader with a feeling that the themes of land and ethics lack interconnections delivered in a clear-cut manner.

The scope of the research projects, the true richness of data, the sophisticated character of analysis, and the overall quality of the chapters make *Romantic Environmental Sensibility: Nature, Class and Empire* a very valuable volume. The book will be very useful for scholars and students, and it will provide inspiration for research in the fields of literary studies, philosophy, history, anthropology, development studies, and environmental studies. It can also provide useful information for academics working in migration, minority, subaltern and globalisation studies. That will definitely become a subject of future research projects. A valuable collection of case studies, this volume edited by Ve-Yin Tee will definitely be an inspiring source of approaches for Romantic investigation, which can be drawn on for future comparative studies.

Finally, on a more general level, we can surely notice that an enormous part of our current intellectual and social predicament is not lack of knowledges or the diminished abilities to understand the severity of the climate emergency or global inequalities, but the lack of capacity to make our knowledges operational. In a Hegelian intervention, I would risk the claim that we must not depend on the binary oppositions between knowledge and action or theory and practice, but if what we know cannot be transformed into efficacious acts, we should go back to rethink the history, representations, and ideas behind our knowledges. *Romantic Environmental Sensibility* is a conscientious attempt to do just that.

Works Cited

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CONTRIBUTOR

J. B. Klich is a doctoral candidate in the International Doctoral Program in Asia-Pacific Studies at National Chengchi University, Taiwan. He studies language ideologies and identity transformations materialising in the lives of LGBT+ immigrants in Taiwan. He received a BA in Asian studies, BA and MA in cultural studies from Jagiellonian University, Poland and a MA in journalism and media studies from Chinese Culture University, Taiwan. His academic interests include contemporary philosophy, experimental anthropology, cross-cultural communication, and transcultural movements of people and concepts.