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Feeling Nature: Emotions and Ecology

Ecology in the History of Emotions

During the last three decades, an increasing number of books, articles and conferences have proposed innovative perspectives in order to explore to what extent emotions such as anger, fear, boredom, jealousy or resentment are not merely universal feelings that are biologically based. These works have also attempted to explain how these emotions have evolved during different periods and in different cultures according to gender, class and race differences. Although we all feel emotions such as love, pain or hate, we cannot take their experience for granted and assume that they have been considered in the same way throughout history and in different social communities. This way of understanding the emotional life of the past, which has been supported by scholars such as Barbara H. Rosenwein, Peter Stearns and William Reddy, is typical of what has been called “the History of Emotions”, a burgeoning field of research that cannot be conceived as a specialized discipline, but rather as multidisciplinary research that integrates social, cultural, political and scientific aspects of the evolving conception of emotions.¹

Drawing on these considerations, this essay aims to explore the emergence of “ecology”, a term that was coined by the German biologist Ernst von Haeckel (1834-1919), not merely as a scientific discipline to describe the mutual relations of plants, animals, geography and the climate

¹ The History of Emotions is deeply inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of elaborating a history of passions, Johan Huizinga’s cultural history and Lucien Febvre’s history of sensibilities. The contributions, which have inaugurated the history of emotions as a contemporary field of research, are those of Carol and Peter Stearns (STEARNS, STEARNS, 1985), William Reddy (REDDY, 2001), Barbara Rosenwein (ROSENWEIN, 1998) and Thomas Dixon (DIXON, 2003). Other relevant works focused on examining particular affective states such as, fear, envy and pain are Joanna Bourke (BOURKE, 2006) Elena Pulcini (PULCINI, 2011) and Javier Moscoso (MOSCOSO, 2011).
to each other and to their environment, but rather as an emotional experience that has a history with multiple implications in the scientific domain such as, the assessment of the ecological model as we understood it today. Therefore, I will argue in this essay how Romantic ecology emerged in a concrete historical period, known as Romanticism, as a complex emotional response that was aimed at protecting the natural environment from its increasing exploitation at the hands of human technology. Even though the intimate connections between Romantic culture and ecology have been widely recognised in critical literature on Romanticism, in some works belonging to the history of science and, notably, in the tradition termed as “ecological criticism”, their relationship remains problematic, as ecological concerns were expressed at that time by means of a variety of terms and, even, poetical metaphors that need to be carefully analysed. With the aim of shedding light on the ways in which Romantic culture provided a fertile ground for the development of ecological concerns, I will analyse the origins of this sentiment of unity with nature from the point of view of the history of emotions, in order to demonstrate how this revolutionary way of feeling would only appear in relation to the early 19th century Romantic cult of sensibility by means of the exaltation of emotions such as pain, nostalgia, the sublime and love.

As I shall show, the history of ecology proposes an excellent example of how emotions were considered as not only individual, but also cultural phenomena, which are embedded in social communities that «define and assess as valuable or harmful to them, the evaluations that they make about others’ emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that

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2 In this study, I will use the term “Romantic ecology” in order to refer to the sentiment of unity with nature, which is different to the use of ecology as “ecological science” proposed by Ernst Haeckel’s Generelle Morphologie der Organismen (HAECKEL, 1866). However, my attempt here is to demonstrate that Romantic sensibility is at the roots of further scientific developments such as Haeckel’s ecology, and how it can be retraced from the point of view of the History of Emotions.

3 The works of Jonathan Bate (BATE, 2000), Karl Kroeber (KROEBER, 1994), Jim McKusick (MCKUSICK, 2010), Timothy Morton (MORTON, 2007), Onno Oerlemans (OERLEMANS, 2002) and Kate Rigby (RIGBY, 2004) are some examples of this academic tradition that studies the relations between Romanticism and Ecology framed in the field of Ecocriticism. Other works that propose fresh perspectives to interpret the Romantic origins of ecology in the context of the History of Science are those of Robert J. Richards (RICHARDS, 2008) Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine (CUNNINGHAM, JARDINE, 1990) and Stefano Poggi and Maurizio Bossi (POGGI, BOSSI, 1994).
they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore»⁴. In this sense, ecology was a Romantic invention that should be regarded as the implementation of a collective project, which was conducted by a plethora of artists, scientists and philosophers belonging to European Romantic circles such as British Romanticism or German Naturphilosophie. In these late 18th and early 19th intellectual milieu, a new sensibility emerged that was inspired by the urgent necessity of developing a model to bring about reconciliation between man and nature, a model that would, furthermore, assure the well being of future generations on Earth.

Although the harmony of nature is a principle which has oriented scientific works since Ancient Greece, such as those of Theophastrus (372-286 B.D.) and Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.), this article states that ecology is as a relatively modern way of feeling, that can only be traced back to late 18th and early 19th century Western societies. Its emergence can be considered a reaction to the impact that the Industrial Revolution had on human life. According to James C. McKusick, ecological concerns only became urgent for people «who lived at the dawn of the Industrial era» and saw the green world as «a remote, mysterious and magical place that existed in sharp disjunction from the smoke, crowded streets and noisy machinery of the city, where they lived»⁵. This is why emotions such as melancholia and nostalgia toward the past times, which expressed a particular yearning for the “good old days”, were fundamental forces in constituting ecology as a common Romantic sensibility that marked the desire to repair the physical and moral injury that man had inflicted on nature by means of its demotion to a mere material resource⁶. Following this approach, the Romantic invention of nature should be understood as being intimately linked to the early 19th century process of industrialisation that had not only transformed the natural environment into an urbanised landscape, but one that was also threatening to turn human life into a new type of artificial existence by means of introducing technology in the most intimate areas of human experience⁷.

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⁵ MCKUSICK (2010, p. 70). See also BATE (BATE, 2000, p. 137) to explore how the word “pollution” took its modern sense during the Romantic period.
⁶ To explore the meanings of Romantic nostalgia and its implications in our contemporary societies, it is of special interest to consult Eva Illouz (ILLOUZ 1997, p. 94).
respect, the Industrial revolution represented not only a change of awareness towards environmental problems, but also a broader cultural transformation concerning the affective experience of one’s self in one’s relation to nature, a new awareness that was aroused by the painful separation of human being from its natural origins.

According to this Romantic mythology, the apparition of modern science was interpreted as the culmination of the modern analytic approach, which had its major exponents in René Descartes’ *Principia Philosophiae* (1677) and in Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1686). In this sense, the first ecological contributions were encouraged by the Romantic desire to restore the lost harmony between men and nature by means of creating an alternative scientific model to the mechanical understanding of the universe as an object, which was controlled and manipulated in order to achieve social and economic progress in Western countries. Therefore, Romantics understood that the Enlightenment project had destroyed nature by promoting values such as knowledge and power over all things, which had led to an increasingly industrialised world, one that endangered the survival of animal species, and even human existence itself in its overpopulated urban spaces. As William Blake wrote about the apocalyptic vision of modern city:

> And Building Arches high & Cities turrets & towers & domes
> Whose smoke destroyed the pleasant gardens & whose running Kennels
> Choked the bright rivers burdening with my Ships the angry Deep\(^8\).

It is for these reasons that the Romantic Movement has been considered as the origins of the “Green movement” in ecological criticism. It announced the arrival of a new sensibility towards nature that not only contributed to the creation of ecology in the second half of the 19\(^{th}\) century as the «whole science of relations of the organism to the surrounding environment, which includes in the broad sense all the conditions of existence», but rather to the development of other social and political contemporary movements, such as «environmental ethics and environmental activism»\(^9\). As I shall demonstrate, by means of the analysis of some selected writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich von

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\(^8\) BLAKE (2008, p. 390).
\(^9\) HÄECKEL (1886, p. 286) and HUTCHINGS (2007, p. 176).
Hardenberg, Johann Wilhelm Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt, Romantic concerns about nature’s vulnerability would lay the foundations of our modern attitude of care for the physical world by means of the celebration of emotions such as, nostalgia, love and the sublime, which would become ways of seeing and experiencing how everything is connected to everything else in the Universe.

**Feeling Nature in Romantic Culture**

We are still today very much in debt to the Romantic Era, when we deal with emotions in the Western tradition. For instance, our contemporary belief that life should be lived with intensity, with heart and with style, almost as if every human life were a unique work of art, comes from the Romantic period, a decisive moment in the History of Emotions in which feelings were valued as the best way to express our subjectivity becoming, furthermore, the source of creation in poetry, literature, painting and, even, in science. As Robert Solomon, David Vallins and Keith Oatley have pointed out, Romanticism should be interpreted as a crucial period in Western cultural life, when passions became the most powerful force of human behaviour and, moreover, the guarantee of our authenticity\(^\text{10}\). As a culmination in the European cult of sensibility that can be traced back to 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century sentimentalism, the Romantic understanding of emotions emphasized their status as natural and spontaneous experiences, which are not easily separable from rational thinking and, furthermore, that connected us with nature as the place where one’s real identity is revealed\(^\text{11}\).

Nature was imagined in Romantic literature and art as the ultimate force that gave free rein to our sentiments and feelings in the greatness of mountains, glaciers or the ocean as is shown through paintings portraying

\(^{10}\text{OATLEY, KELTNER, JENKINS (1996), SOLOMON (1993) and VALLINS (1999).}\)

\(^{11}\text{VALLINS (1999, p. 6). Thus, rational arguments were conceived as dependent on sensation, emotion and intuition and, therefore, the process of articulating concepts and arguments itself influenced these non-rational elements in the thinker resulting a continuum of feelings and ideas. To understand the emergence of the category of sensibility in the late 17\(^{\text{th}}\) century as well as its relations with the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century “brain nervous revolution” is necessary to consult, Georges S. Rousseau (G. S. ROUSSEAU 1963).}\)
landscapes such as Caspar Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). This Romantic conception of nature as the place in which a human being revealed his most intimate feelings was in stark contrast to the artificial culture that was considered as a product of corrupted civilisation. This view was first expressed by the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau’s famous claim of “return to the state of nature” was pointing out the relevance of creating a vision of humanity in connection to physical nature by means of the definition of the body as the medium, which connected the human mind and the environment through the experience of emotions.

Furthermore, Rousseau suggested that our sensibility towards other living creatures was the key to justify the belief that man must never harm another man or even another sensitive being, as he is only a part of a higher system, the natural realm, which should be respected in order to preserve life as a whole. In his *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1775), he expressed the need for humans to reconsider their environmental thinking, as follows:

> As they (sensitive beings) partake, however, in some measure of our nature in consequence of the sensibility with which they are endowed, they ought to partake of natural right, so that mankind is subjected to a kind of obligation even toward the brutes. It appears in fact, that if I am bound to do no injury to my fellow creatures, this is less because they are rational than because they are sentient beings; and this quality, being common to men and beasts, ought to entitle the latter at least to the privilege of not being wantonly ill treated by the former.

Rousseau’s affective attachment towards other living beings appeared justified by means of the notion of sensibility, a concept, which had been used in 18th century British moral philosophy as particular capacity that revealed “a moral sense and a sense of beauty” that could be understood as

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12 As the English definition of this term establishes “landscape is the appearance of a land as we perceive it”, “the section of earth surface and sky that lies in our field of vision as seen in perspective from a particular point”. In this way, Romantic landscapes included the subjective experience as an active element in the construction of nature. For further reading, see Claudia Mattos (Mattos 2004, pp. 141-155).


a response to the suffering of the others\textsuperscript{15}. By appealing for sensibility towards the natural environment, Rousseau was laying the roots of ecology as an affective experience, which was based on the capacity of sympathy toward the suffering of others. Indeed, this painful dimension of the ecological experience would be further developed by early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Romantic poets such as Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801), alias Novalis, who interpreted this contemporary period in biblical terms likening it to the Fall of Man from the Golden Age. This primordial state was described as a time in which humankind and nature were as one, a period of innocence where men lived in total harmony with other creatures as they formed one physical body. Novalis wrote about this idyllic period in the history of man and nature in the following way: «Still earlier, instead of scientific explanations, we find fairy tales and poems full of amazing picturesque traits in which men, gods and animals are described as co-workers, and we hear the Origin of the world in the most natural manner\textsuperscript{16}. Therefore, in Novalis’ poetical work, the observation of the complexity and diversity of the natural environment also implied understanding ourselves, because man as a microcosm, reflects through his body, the correspondences of the whole universe, i.e. the macrocosm. Inspired by this analogy between nature and human being, Novalis stated that knowledge of nature and man’s self-knowledge were intimately interdependent as both were connected by means of a common sensibility:

\begin{quote}
Unknown and mysterious relations within our body cause us to surmise unknown and mysterious states in nature; nature is a community of the marvellous into which we are imitated by our body, and which we learn to know in the measure of our body’s faculties and abilities […]. We touch Heaven when we touch the human body\textsuperscript{17}.
\end{quote}

Romantic ecology was deeply rooted in the experience of the unity of nature through the observation of the various mutual interactions that

\textsuperscript{15} See Wickberg (2007) and Moscoso (2011, p. 85). Sensibility was not only the matter of inquiry of moral philosophers such as Adam Smith and Hume, but also of Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Earl of Shaftesbury, who proposed to understand the universe by means of its interrelations in an Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit (Shaftesbury, 1699).

\textsuperscript{16} Novalis (1903, p. 105).

\textsuperscript{17} Novalis (1903, p. 79).
linked geography, the climate, plants and animals and natural effects. These interactions produced a sentiment close to wonder, melancholy and beauty that Romantics usually called “the sublime”. Indeed, the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) thought that to convey a certain feeling towards nature such as the sublime was a prerequisite to the development of his scientific research. In his writings, he introduced the term *Wechselwirkung* to express a vivid description of the marvellous interconnections of the flora and fauna that he had observed which influenced his own moods and feelings\(^\text{18}\).

Thus, he explained in *Ansichten der Natur* (1807), in which he compiled the experiences he acquired during his voyage to the American Continent, how nature should be perceived as a type of painting in which the human being was included as an active agent, because he is responsible for giving a moral dimension to the landscape through his emotions\(^\text{19}\). Prior to the invention of term “ecology” in the second half of the 19\(^{th}\) century, Humboldt was able to prefigure this moral attitude by describing the mysterious communion between man and nature as follows:

> The impression left on our minds by the aspect of nature is frequently determined, less even by the peculiar character of the strictly terrestrial portion of the scene than by the light thrown on mountain or plane, either by a sky of azure purity or by one veiled by lowering clouds; and in the same manner descriptions of nature act upon us more powerfully or more feebly according as they are more or less in harmony with the requirements of our feelings. For it is the inward mirror of the sensitive mind which reflects the true and living image of the natural world. All that determines the character of a landscape […] is in antecedent, mysterious communion with the inner feelings and life of man\(^\text{20}\).

Humboldt believed that it was necessary to create a general natural science, what he called *physique générale*, which would focus on nature as the partner of mind and on science as an expression of culture. Following this idea, he observed in his work *Kosmos* (1847), how the physical

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\(^\text{19}\) It is interesting to note how Humboldt’s approach provides an excellent example of Romantic objectivity as defined by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (*DASTON, GALLISON* 2007), an approach true-to-Nature.

\(^\text{20}\) *HUMBOLDT* (1849, p. 170).
description of the universe, which was understood as general natural science, «does not constitute a distinct branch of physical science, it rather embraces the whole domain of nature, the phenomena of both, the celestial and terrestrial spheres, but embraces it only under the single point of view of efforts made toward the knowledge of the universe as a whole»21.

From this holistic point of view, the place of man was understood within the most complex natural order of the universe as an insignificant spectator, who can by no means control the processes that take place in it. Thus, nature cannot be interpreted as a clockwork mechanism as René Descartes and Isaac Newton’s vision had proposed, but rather as an overwhelming force, which is in constant transformation and that we can conceive by analogy to our bodies.

Moreover, according to Romantic cultural belief, biological bodies were perceived as having many similarities to works of art. As Immanuel Kant had pointed out in his Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790) both, biological bodies and works of art could be regarded in teleological terms as a self-organised whole in which all parts were so united that each becomes mutually cause and effect of the other22. Indeed, Kant’s reflections on aesthetic judgement were just the philosophical foundations of the Romantic experience of the sublime, «the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling» - as Edmund Burke observed - which connected the individual with nature by means of the contemplation of the immensity of the universe giving us the impression that we are one with the world23.

The organic image of nature would become a popular Romantic metaphor, notably in the German circle of Friedrich W. J. Schelling’s Naturphilosophie, for understanding not only the transformation of different electric, magnetic and chemical forces, but also to represent the moral injury exerted by modern man against nature, a suffering that should be repaired by means of developing a veritable ecological project. As I will conclude, Romantic ecology was delineated as a revolutionary programme through the writings of personalities linked to Schelling’s philosophy of nature, such as the physicists Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776-1810), and the poet Novalis. This new belief exalted love as the emotional force that

21 HUMBOLDT (1858, p. 105). See also WALLS (2009).
22 See also LENOIR (1982).
23 BURKE (1764, p. 59).
would finally crystallise the reconciliation between man and nature. 

**Romantic love as the way of reconciliation**

In 1810, the bizarre physician Johann Wilhelm Ritter, a personality associated during his youth with the University of Jena, the centre of Romantic ideas during the last decades of the 18th century, died, and his autobiography the *Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers. Ein Taschenbuch für Freunde der Natur* (1810) was published posthumously. In this work, which was a chaotic compilation of aphorisms, results of his experimental research in chemistry, galvanism and magnetism, were also included some notes concerning the ecological project that German Romantics demanded.

As Ritter wrote at the beginning of his autobiography, paraphrasing St. Paul, only faith, hope and love could encourage the historical process oriented towards the reconciliation between man and nature. In particular, love was interpreted not only as the driving force of Ritter’s own scientific project, but also a methodological tool that could unify what apparently seemed disintegrated in nature, by establishing analogies among different types of plants, animals and geographical formations.

Thus, Romantic love was not merely considered as an intimate feeling experienced by the individual, which was symbolised in cultural terms through the heart, but furthermore as the theoretical lens that served to unite separated elements through the creation of union - a “we” - , which becomes a new entity in the world. However, to reach the utopian reconciliation of man and nature was also a matter of hope, a revolutionary emotion, which projected our memories of a past unity with nature in a future (re)union. Thus, Novalis imagined this absolute reintegration of man and nature in terms of physical attraction, as the sexual encounter of two lovers, who desired to be fused together in one body, entwined in

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24 **BARSANTI** (1993, p. 75). The German Romantic circle known as *Naturphilosophie* understood the unity of nature by means of the interaction of diverse chemical, biological and physical processes.

25 Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1810). Here I have used the recent English edition published by Jocelyne Holland (**HOLLAND**, 2010, p. 23) in which we can find his allusion to emotions such as love, hope and faith. «Now however remain faith, hope and love - these three - but love is the greatest amongst them».

26 **ALBERTI** (2010, p.121).
eternal ecstasy:

One day all bodies shall be one Body, then the holy pair will float heavenly blood. Oh! That the ocean were already reddening; that the rocks were softening into fragrant flesh! The sweet repast never ends; love is never satisfied. Never can it have the beloved near enough, close enough to its inmost self […] More fiercely burns the passion of the soul; thirstier, ever thirstier grows the heart, and so the feast of Love endures from everlasting.

Through Romantic writings, an ecological project can be retraced; a complex emotional experience that was born out of suffering, but one which is definitely oriented toward hope and love. Therefore, Romantic ecology should be understood as the dynamic relationship established between man and nature, a relationship that was manifested throughout history. Furthermore, history was understood as a kind of mythology, which went back to the innocence of the Golden Age, to describe the aftermath of the painful separation of man from nature, and how finally this suffering was turned into a positive affective mood that transformed our past memories into a magical present, one in which man would be able to rediscover the sublime in nature, in its diversity and complexity. At the final point, only love and hope remained in order to achieve the Romantic Utopia on the final reconciliation between man and nature.

As Novalis pointed out, only our feelings could help us to transform the world into a magic place, in which we would be able to see «the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, and the finite as infinite» . This new sensibility based on a common sympathy between man and other natural beings was aimed at restoring the man-nature relationship by means of (re)enchanting reality. This means that emotions, which I have considered here not as psychological, but rather as cultural objects, have evolved throughout history. They can be also

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27 NOVALIS (1903, p. 127).

28 See also the following assertion of Ritter (see HOLLAND 2010, p. 531): «Man himself begins to be the ideal, which may become his final one for all time […]. Nature only permits him to linger by this ideal for a fleeting instant, however; she leads him away even as he ceases to be it. And henceforth, the dawn of a unique life breaks for man, and he awakens. Remembrance is his awakener, self-separation is his first pain, and its removal his first hope».

analysed as ways of observing and experiencing nature because they are the veritable relationship that guide the connections between the biosphere and humanity. Indeed, Romantic ecology could be understood as a kind of healing art, which like poetry and medicine, attempted to alleviate the suffering of damaged bodies by means of expressions of care such as love.

As I shall show throughout this essay, ecology provides an exciting subject to be explored from the point of view of the history of emotions, as this affective experience was based on a particular sensibility, which emerged in a concrete historical period related to the social and cultural transformations of the Western world resulting from the Industrial Revolution. The relevance of this Romantic sensibility towards the natural environment is not only that it encouraged the production of new scientific models that studied the mutual relations among all organisms, processes and objects in a given environment such as Haeckel’s ecology, but also that it lays nature’s fragility at the heart of our contemporary way of feeling. It is no wonder that recent ecological studies such as Kay Milton’s Loving Nature claimed one’s caring for the physical world as an expression of emotions and in particular, of love, revealing to what extent the Romantic invention of nature is still present in our manner of approaching the environmental problems derived from the ever increasing industrialisation of our world30.

Abstract

This article seeks to explore the historical ways in which emotions have shaped our modern concerns about nature by examining the emergence of a new sensibility inspired by the urgent necessity of protecting the natural environment from the increasing industrialisation that took place in late 18th and early 19th century Western societies. Even though Ernst von Haeckel coined the term “ecology” in 1866, following on from Charles Darwin’s evolutionism as a new science, which focuses on the study of the mutual relations of plants, animals, geography and the climate to each other and to their environment; we need to go back to Romantic culture in order to trace the origins of this new way of appreciating the complexity and diversity of nature. Drawing on these considerations, this article examines the constitution

of a modern way of loving nature through the writings of some Romantic poets and scientists such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Joseph Schelling, Johann Wilhelm von Ritter, Friedrich von Hardenberg and Alexander von Humboldt, who demonstrated a common desire to restore the lost harmony between man and the environment. In a broader sense, this article aims at demonstrating how ecology is a complex human experience that also has a history, which is intimately linked to the Romantic cult of emotions such as nostalgia, love and hope.

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