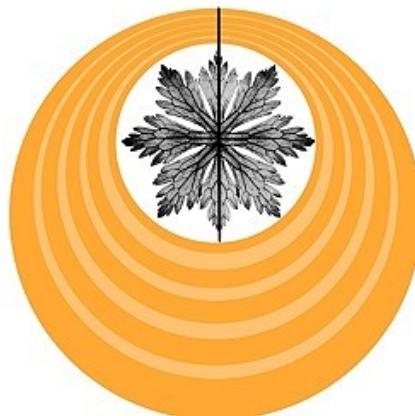


the
mirror
and the
lamp
romantic
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and the
critical
tradition

M. H. ABRAMS



The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition

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With this book, M.H. Abrams has given us a remarkable study, admirably conceived and executed, a book of quite exceptional and no doubt lasting significance for a number of fields - for the history of ideas and comparative literature as well as for English literary history, criticism and aesthetics.

The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition Details

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From Reader Review The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition for online ebook

Justin Evans says

A tough one to rate on the star system, unfortunately, since it's very uneven. The early chapters, up to his precis of Wordsworth and especially Coleridge are excellent- he explains how and why Romantic criticism came to be what it is, by putting it into the context of earlier critics. The second half, though, isn't nearly as impressive. It's good intellectual history, I guess, in the 'x thought y' mode. But there's much less convincing analysis of the 'x thought y because of z' mode, and really, that's much more important.

I was also hoping for something a bit less dense when I started, which might have biased me a bit, and there's nothing more fatuous than the psychology of art, from the earliest writers through to the neuro-aestheticians of our time. So that didn't help the middle two chapters. On the other hand, better this than the books that were being written twenty years later, since Abrams was still under the impression that you have to know about something before writing theory about that thing, so this book will help you learn about the Romantics and not about, say, a deconstructivist post-feminist anti-Marxist stance with some vague connection to Shelley. Thumbs up for that.

Aaron Haspel says

The best survey of romantic literary theory. Abrams is a scholar, not a critic, but he is a very great scholar.

Alicia says

Can you believe it, I eat this stuff up.

Charlotte Pence says

This past year I've been thinking and reading about how the "I" in contemporary poetry has evolved from the Greek lyric and Romantic poets--and Abrams lays it out in this book. Excellent so far.

Lorraine says

It's the first time I've had this reaction when reading an 'academic' book: awe and envy. I usually have 2 stock reactions: 1. interesting, but the author's argument was screwed in A and B manner and 2. how did this guy even get his phd?! in a cereal box!?

M.H. Abrams is too good to be anywhere near either 1 or 2. This is a work in which immense effort has been put in, together with an incredible amount of brain power -- and it shows. The differences between this and many other works of scholarship are, I think, 1. the scope of the reading 2. the tightness of the argument.

With respect to 1, I wonder how one man can process so much information. Abrams has it all down, from Plato right up to the latest books on aesthetics of his day. It is very impressive. This I'm talking in general -- not including the number of Romantic texts and (seemingly?) obscure Victorian essays (some of which don't even have the author's names!) that he has read. It is a very good summary of the critical trends up to the present (well, not so present) -- but good enough -- day. Anyone who wants to know about the history of aesthetics, especially with regard to poetry, would be well-advised to read this. Abrams has read most texts sensitively and with a good amount of thought. Somehow, he's managed to compare and contrast critical trends across countries and ages, getting over the barriers of both time and language in order to isolate trends of thought which are similar (or dissimilar) to each other and listing them in a very organized manner. One could quibble that the focus is mainly on Romantic literature but I feel that it would be unfair -- after all the moment in which the mirror turns lamp is -- the big break in the perception of art, in Abrams's view -- is when Romanticism came along.

Abrams's writing style is something to be admired. My favorite sort of academic writing: impassioned without being unclear, and with the merit of being very organized. I like it when academics can detail exactly what it is they're talking about, and Abrams has a happy habit of thought I think, which allows him to be able to organize his argument. He is not shy about declaring his preferences: he is a huge Coleridge fan, that much is obvious and a bit of a downer on Keble. Samuel Johnson, who's always been one of my favorite critics, Abrams isn't as kind to as he could be, but what do you expect from a guy who's a fan of the Romantics? Now, what's interesting, to me, about Abrams's book (though this is idiosyncratic and personal) is the fairly systematic detailing of poetry as religion. This to me seems intuitively true, and I'm of course MUCH younger than Abrams himself, so it just shows how much this view has diffused into the mainstream. I do think he could've spoken more about Plato -- everyone cites The Republic -- I think Plato was given rather short shift... I have read some reviews saying that Abrams's style is 'ostensibly academic', to which I have nothing to say but 'bollocks' and 'up yours'. This I do not understand, is being logical, clear and expressive academic? If so then it's a really sorry age, because it means that all 'non-academic' writing is incomprehensible. From experience this is not true. Something that is 'ostensibly academic' might be purposefully obfuscatory for no other purpose than vulgarly showing off one's learning. To me, THAT is 'ostensibly' (or should I say 'ostentatiously'?) academic. I shall not name culprits; those in the academic world... you know where you are (as the Radiohead song goes).

Abrams rescues Romanticism from those who have not a clue of what it's about. Part of the problem is the confusion between romantic (things like Twilight and overpriced chocolates) and Romantic (an emphasis on the power of emotion, the syncretic view of things, etc, all the things that Abrams talks about). To me, the interesting thing is what modern science says in relation to our understanding of literature: it seems that science and poetry might converge in some sort of way again. On JS Mill, near the end of the book, he details that [Mills's] psychological grounds are that "the capacity for strong feeling", which is supposed to disturb judgement, "is also the material out of which all motives are made"..." -- having read Pat Hogan's book on cognitive science and the humanities, this sounds vaguely familiar. I think that many of the sciences, when used in conjunction with the understanding of literature, still operate on the whole 'literature as mimesis' thing. But there's all this, and so much more -- as a cursory read of Abrams would show. The question is, if one is a critic right NOW, working on aesthetics, how would we incorporate this rich history of writing and criticism on poetry IF we were to 'enter' science? The danger is in allowing science to become a sort of metanarrative to the poetry which we read -- and the other side of it -- which is thinking science as mutually exclusive, or even as opposed to literature. I think that much of this, when you take into account academia-as-it-is-today, has to do with the mode of production of criticism. The elephant that's in the room is the status that literature has in society, a buffonish one -- worse than useless -- a parody of culture because it comes in the form of capital (cultural capital). I would think many academics would write apologetics as a reaction to this, but without naming it -- sort of like setting up fences without mentioning the huge elephant

that might try to blunder through. I do not think that poetry needs another apologia per se, but what it does need I think, is some honesty over how modern academic work is... parasitic and cannibalistic.

What Abrams did is difficult even for someone who is very capable. 'Publish or perish' would certainly get in the way of understanding texts, and what he did would be near impossible nowadays (even if someone were as capable). Something has to be done..... we need to show that poetry requires love -- I can see how this might branch off really -- although that's my own thesis business and none of Abrams's!

Alan says

Read parts as an undergrad and most all in grad school in the late sixties. Its fine, clear distinctions positively bask in an age when literary endeavor and discussion redounded through the halls of the academy, as economics and computers and medically-related programs do now. It was an age when distinctions between imitation and expression sufficed, before the onslaught of the French Disease, déconstruction. The French import stretched comprehension and discussion well beyond Classical versus Romantic. Then itself was displaced, in the American Academy, by Race and Gender studies. How old-fashioned Abrams' concern with writers and lit crit appear under the International Space Station of political and racial and gender studies. The Romantic poets, like the Classical poets, can be summarily combined: both are Old (and Young) White Males.

Yet Abrams begins with Socrates's three beds. I used to use a chair in my freshman comp: I'd place it on top of the desk and ask, "Is this a Real Chair?" I would puzzle my freshmen by, "Plato says the Chair in the Mind is the real chair, and it produces this chair, and all chairs we non-Platonists might call 'real.'" Abrams cites Socrates' Ideal bed in the mind, the carpenter's bed I lie in, and the painter's bed. In freshman comp, I never got to the third chair, the chair in the painting. That was sophomore level. I believed in curriculum, a sequence of learning. Math, Linguistics and Philosophy first, Aesthetics next.

You can blame me for the ugliness of modern America--the malls, the vast screeching highways, the treeless wastes of parking lots, the random-built cities with beautiful buildings next to heat traps and vacant lots. I should have taught Aesthetics first.

Brian Willis says

This book is one of the critical books to read on literary but primarily poetic theory. The great Romantic movement accomplished perhaps the most important revolution in literary history. Through the public essays and prefaces of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, as well as the constant theorizing in the private letters of Blake and Keats, as well as the other important theorists of the day, such as Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, poetry turned from demanding strict reality and truth in verse and made it truly democratic. After Wordsworth and Coleridge, it began to be accessible to anybody with a pen and paper.

The central metaphor lies in the mirror and the lamp. To oversimplify the book, poets prior to the Romantics held the "mirror up to nature", reflecting truths they identified in the real world. The Romantics added a lamp to that metaphor, asserting it was the moral and aesthetic imperative of the poet to not only instruct through access to empirical evidence, but also to infuse those observations with the imaginative interaction of the poet's mind in particular to illuminate the universal truths embedded invisibly within the poetic subject.

If you find literary theory a tough slog, this is a 335 page book on literary theory. Although I certainly highly

recommend it to those researching literary history, unless that theory can genuinely carry your reading, this could be a hard read. I personally enjoyed it because I have a deep interest in the subject matter. Essential to students of Romanticism and literary theory.

Christopher McQuain says

Recommended to me and my classmates last year by the great Professor Borsch-Jacobsen (who teaches Intro to Theory and Criticism at University of Washington), Abrams' book purports to be on "the ROMANTIC" theory of poetry, and it does use that relatively recent strain of criticism as its jumping-off point and frame of reference. However, you could do a lot worse than this book for an introduction to a vast range of evolving lit-critical modes through history, starting with Greece and ending in 19th-century England, with Wordsworth and Coleridge--whom Abrams venerated as the most valuable and interesting practitioners and theorists of romantic poetry--our principal touchstones.

In addition, Abrams's categories of theories of art--mimetic, pragmatic, objective, expressive--are fairly comprehensive and useful, and offer a good overview of critical attitudes toward art (meaning, here, poetry), at least up through Abrams' post-WWII/American cultural moment. *THE MIRROR AND THE LAMP* is written in an unmistakably scholarly style, so it will probably be more enjoyable for those who have studied the topic or have a more than casual interest.

Lobo says

Re-read celem doczytania o recepcji Younga w Prusach. Doktorat in progress.

Philip Lane says

Interesting and very thorough history of literary criticism as pertaining to poetry. It was published in the 1950s so does not include any of the more modern theories or stances but gives a very good idea of the foundations on which attitudes to art and poetry are based. It is quite technical at times and so perhaps not very useful as an introduction to the subject as even after getting a degree in literature I found myself struggling at times. I suppose some of the beliefs about what poetry should be seem to ignore the reader which for me is paramount so they appear quite bizarre. It is remarkable that the importance of the reader has only been considered seriously in fairly modern times.

Thom Dunn says

An essential text for the study of Romantic poetry, built upon a brilliant metaphor.

Charlie Ericson says

what a dude

Utopia says

this short and precise novel opened my integrity to the ramifications to today's society. It has somewhat elevated me to a non Neolithically citizen, in a way to adjust to the darkness of musical dormitory. Outstandingly vocal, I would suggest to any one that needs a reinvention to a literacy on a downfall to a delegative domain.

Rike Jokanan says

A compulsory reading for me, an English student back to 13 years ago.

Reading it, I made doodles, notes, folding, highlight, comments. The book is now dog-eared, wrinkle, dirty, old but still CHARMING.

I still read it sometimes.

Jere says

Having read this twice (with a 20 year gap between readings), I now understand much more, but know much less. Which is to say: this time I enjoyed the intellectual history, but felt less compelled to take sides.
