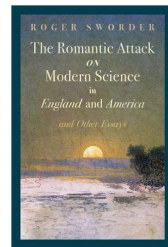


The Romantic Attack on Modern Science in England and America, and Other Essays

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Reviewed by Harry Oldmeadow



The adulation of “Science” and the deprecation of “Romanticism” are two persistent refrains in modern discourse, the former term bristling with authority, the latter acquiring a penumbra of sentimentality, nostalgia and fanciful thinking. Here are two capsule statements about science and romanticism to which many people would nowadays accede: “[Romanticism] is a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals” (Isaiah Berlin);¹ “Science extends and enriches our lives, expands our imagination and liberates us from the bonds of ignorance and superstition” (National Science Foundation).²

In 1936 W.B. Yeats wrote, “The mischief began at the end of the 17th century when man became passive before a mechanized nature ...”.³ Since the Scientific Revolution to which Yeats alludes and the so-called Enlightenment which came in its wake, the prevailing worldview

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 97-98.

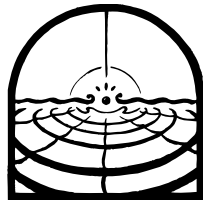
² National Science Foundation (USA) cited in David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*, New York: Basic Books, 2009, p. 15.

³ W.B. Yeats, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, 1936.

amongst the Western intelligentsia (and alas, increasingly elsewhere) has been constructed on the foundations of *scientism*—an *ideology*, albeit one camouflaged in the sterilized vestments of “scientific objectivity”. Modern science, which is to say since the Renaissance, is flanked on one side by philosophical empiricism which provides its rationale and method, and by technology and industry on the other, a field for its applications. It is rational, analytical and empirical in its procedures, material and quantitative in its object, utilitarian in application. Thus by its very nature modern science is unable to apprehend or accommodate any realities of a supra-sensorial order. It has nothing to tell us about Truth, Beauty or Goodness. Science (a field and method of inquiry) becomes scientism (ideology) when it refuses to acknowledge the limits of its own competence, denies the authority of any sources which lie outside its ambit, and lays claim to a comprehensive validity as if it could explain no matter what, and as if it were not contradictory to lay claim to totality on an empirical basis.

One of the few groups to stand steadfast against the depredations of the new outlook were the English and American Romantic philosopher-poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. German Romantics such as Friedrich Schelling, Schiller and Novalis also had much to say on this subject but they do not come within the purview of the book at hand which explores only English and American Romantic repudiations. These writers were not opposed to science *per se*—indeed many of them were natural philosophers of some distinction—but rather to *scientism*, the new ideology of science. Our author pursues his subject through a close consideration of several passages from six poets: Blake (*Milton, Jerusalem*), Wordsworth (*Intimations Ode, Tintern Abbey*), Coleridge (*Fears in Solitude, Frost at Midnight*), Melville (*Clarel*), Emerson (*Blight*) and Edwin Arlington Robinson (*The Man Against the Sky*). The controlling theme: “The Romantics met the Enlightenment and faced it down” (p. 3). They often did so through their affirmation of the Intellect—that receptive faculty, known by many names, which realizes the Divine, neither through cerebration nor observation, but by direct apprehension, a faculty obscured or denied by the rampant new sciences. In this respect the Romantic philosopher-poets were the last true *intellect*-uals in the western European tradition.

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