

Noami Shihab Nye's Neo- and Post-Romanticism: The Mystique of Separate and Hybrid Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore two important dimensions of Naomi Shihab Nye's poetry, her "neo"- and "post"-romanticism. We see these two distinct but interconnected dimensions, which have received no serious critical attention, as among her most original contributions to postmodern poetic discourse and as key to understanding much of her thought. By "neo"-romanticism, we refer to Nye's both echo and recreation of the thoughts and structures of traditional, 19th-century British and American Romanticism, especially with respect to the impact of nature on the self and the role of the imagination. By "post"-romanticism, we refer to the impact of daily, domestic, and mundane urban objects on the self. The interesting outcome of these two dimensions – paradoxically, at once opposed and parallel – is not duality but hybridity, which is what Postmodernism is in great part about. The study also implicitly reveals that, while Postmodernism and Romanticism often radically differ, they can at times be quite compatible.

Keywords: American Literature; Modern Poetry; Postmodernism; Neo-Romanticism; Post-Romanticism.

INTRODUCTION

Naomi Shihab Nye was born in 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri and is now living in San Antonio, Texas. She is a contemporary American poet – Arab-American, to be precise. Nye has written and is writing highly-engaging poetry in a multiplicity of voices, a poetry characterized at once by its simplicity and depth. Her poems also encompass a wide range of subjects: personal, ethnic, national, and cosmopolitan. Nye follows in the footsteps of great American poets like Anne Bradstreet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and others (Gómez-Vega, 2001). Like them, she narrates immediate experiences at home and abroad, weaving intricate narratives or meditations on life, death, hope, fear, human relations, and human existence. Ultimately, she creates a highly complex world and a voice of her own.

Among her many themes, Nye has written extensively

on nature and the city, two locales traditionally seen as antithetically opposed from the eighteenth century onwards. A careful reading of her poetry shows that she freely employs elements from both the natural and urban scenes, as opposed to both previous and modern practices which largely subscribe to "the nature/city dualism" (Gunn and Owens, 2006). Furthermore, she skillfully and creatively incorporates them in the overall mosaic of her poetry – both separately and together – without privileging one over the other.

It is this aspect of her poetry that concerns us here. The aim of this study, therefore, is to shed light on Nye's 'postmodern' treatment of natural and urban elements. In particular, we seek to explore at length what we call Nye's 'neo'- and 'post'-romanticism. These two concepts are distinct but interrelated. In the first instance, we dwell on how Nye deals with nature as not just background but central subject, paying special attention to how she employs or builds on the Romantic thought of nineteenth-century Britain and America, including the concept of transcendence. In the second, we pinpoint how Nye is able to find in domestic and urban settings, both those that include natural elements and those that do not, ample opportunities for intellectual and affective stimulation derived from mundane or common objects. Out of such

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objects she creates what amounts to a mystique. The latter is perhaps the more interesting and innovative aspect in Nye's works and is essentially divergent from and counter to the major tenets of the Romantic tradition. These two pillars of Nye's poetry ultimately form, as we shall argue in what follows, not a binary opposition but a comfortable hybridity. In other words, Nye's precise contribution lies in her liberal incorporation in the body of her narrative of natural and urban scenes, both apart from each other and combined, for the purpose of evoking overall mystical experiences.

I

Before delving into Nye's 'neo'- and 'post'-romanticism, illustrating it through a close reading of a number of her works in comparison or contrast with a number of traditional Romantic texts, it is necessary first to put this study into its theoretical framework. With this end in mind, three points need to be briefly raised. The first has to do with the basis on which Nye is considered postmodernist. The second is the state of scholarship on the relationship between Romanticism and Postmodernism, the former being the movement which has influenced Nye and the latter the one to which she belongs. And the third is a theoretical explanation of what is precisely meant by the 'neo' and the 'post' in relation to Nye.

As is well-known, Romanticism in Britain and America – seen as highlighting the positive, formative, and transforming impact of the natural scene on the self – historically emerged, flourished, and then came to an end between 1798 and 1865 (Abrams, 1971, Ruland; Bradbury, 1991). 1798 is, of course, the year of the publication of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and 1865 is the end of the Civil War in America, before which the most important American Romantic texts were written. In a sense, the Civil War brought American Romanticism to an end and triggered the subsequent traditions of Realism, Naturalism, and then Modernism (Ruland; Bradbury, 1991). Postmodernism, a movement which both swerves away from and encompasses all previous movements, starts to emerge roughly as of the second half of the twentieth century (Hassan, 1982; Hutcheon, 1989, Jameson, 1998; Alsen, 1996).

By the time Nye begins to publish her works as of the early 1980s in the height of the Postmodern era, the Romantic movement in both Britain and America has been long out of vogue, almost dead in fact for well over

a century – aside from some sporadic but potent manifestations of it (Rothbard, 2007; Kaufman, 2001; Moulin, 2005; Bloom, 1997; Alsen, 1996). By contrast, Postmodernism has, by then, begun to climax. Nye is postmodernist for two main reasons. For one thing, she lives and writes in the era of Postmodernism, in the two senses asserted by Best and Kellner, both Postmodernism as a "new" era and as "the dynamics and experiences of the contemporary moment" (1997). For another, she tackles in her poetry prominent postmodernist themes. These include hyphenated and even multiple identities, bi-cultural and multicultural issues, liberty and equality matters, women's rights, children's rights, modern urban concerns, and many other universal and global themes. The theme we are tackling in this paper is, as will be shown, among her major postmodernist themes.

Critical studies of the relationship between Postmodernism and Romanticism are scarce. This is perhaps due to the fact that Postmodernism is a phenomenon that is still unfolding and evolving. Nevertheless, some literary critics have devoted some attention to Postmodernism's engagement with Romanticism, though almost exclusively in relation to *specific* works. For instance, Lou F. Caton, in "Romanticism and the Postmodern Novel: Three Scenes from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" (1997), attempts to argue for the presence of a kind of romanticism in DeLillo's novel. After admitting at the outset that a Postmodern novel like *White Noise* may be seen as unlikely to contain "values and topics commonly associated with popular notions of romanticism" and after reminding that some critics "portray DeLillo as uninterested in old-fashion romantic notions", he nonetheless goes on to locate the novel's romanticism as "emerging not from overarching themes but rather from the common thoughts and desires associated with the novel's viewpoint character, Jack Gladney" (Caton, 1997). More importantly, he asserts that "Gladney's romantic assumptions regarding family unity and sympathy must be analyzed on their own merits". The conclusion one draws from this study of a specific character in a specific postmodern novel is that Romanticism is still relevant in the age of Postmodernism. Some other critics have also done something at this scale (Stigen-Drangsholt, 2005; Fite, 1985).

The more important, book-length study of the impact of Romanticism on Postmodernism is Eberhad Alsen's

Romantic Postmodernism in American Fiction. In it, Alsen astutely and persuasively explores a number of Romantic manifestations in a number of American monumental Postmodernist works of fiction, such as Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*; John Barth's "Night Sea Journey;" Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*; Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; and Paul Aster's *Ghosts and Mr. Vertigo* (Alsen, 1996). Alsen, more importantly perhaps, refers to the Romantic bearing on these works explicitly as a form of "Neo-Romanticism" (Alsen, 1996). In this sense, Postmodernism – being an all-inclusive movement – is inevitably open to Romantic influences.

However, much of the attention given to the new – 'neo' and 'post' – relationship between nature and the city in the postmodern world comes from geographic, landscape, and environmental studies, by scholars like Gunn and Owens (2006); Matless (2000); Norris (2009), and others. Gunn and Owens both summarize and epitomize what these studies attempt to do, seeing them as having "been central to rethinking the society/nature dualism" (2006). They also assert that landscape studies demonstrate that "nature becomes inseparable from the city" and that "the production of urban spaces involved not so much the expulsion of the natural world as its radical reconstitution in the urban context" (Gunn and Owens, 2006). Ulf Strohmayer speaks of "urban nature," stressing that the days when cities "were defined by their metaphorical distance from all things natural" (2006) are over.

We are not claiming here that Nye has influenced such studies or that such studies have directly influenced her. What we are trying to stress, rather, is that it is such postmodern studies of the "new" or "reconstituted" relationship between nature and the city that enable a reader of Nye's poems to see and appreciate what these poems are attempting to do with nature and the city. Nye's thinking about nature and the city, in other words, parallels the thinking of postmodern geographic, landscape scholars on whose assertions our study is in part theoretically based.

What precisely does it mean then to speak of Nye's neo- or post-Romanticism? The former dimension – the 'neo'-romantic, a term for the use of which we are indebted in part to Alsen (1996) – has to do with the fact that the "romantic" experience as we know it in the classic British and American Romantic texts and as defined in a number of classic studies by Abrams (1971)

appears clearly in many of Nye's poems and, to a lesser extent, in those of some of her contemporaries (Stigen-Drangsholt, 2005; Fite, 1985; Alsen, 1996). As we will show in more detail below, many of the experiences of nature depicted in many of Nye's poems echo many of those depicted in the earlier Romantics. Nye's personae clearly engage in and respond to the natural scene precisely the way personae in Wordsworth or Emerson have. In other words, nature is not only an element in the landscape, a reference in the text, or a symbol of something she is trying to assert. Rather, it is a power or a force which exercises great influence on the self, bringing about excitement, joy, or *transforming* moments of meditation. It often, in fact, evokes the imagination and triggers the kind of transcendence that we find in the Romantics. Nye is being neo-romantic, then, in the sense that she is recreating, evoking, or restoring this very fundamental premise of the Romantic movement, one which has long been dead or absent.

The latter dimension, that of 'post'-romanticism – and our coinage of the term is, in part, based upon the premise asserted by Best and Kellner that "we live in the time of the 'post,' ... in which a previous state of affairs is superseded and thus functions in the instance as a periodizing term" (1997) – is dominant in Nye's poetry. It refers to those moments where the self's imagination is evoked, and its meditation and transcendence happen, not due to the self's response to elements from the natural scene, but to the self's response to elements from either a domestic sphere, such as the bedroom, the kitchen, a family album, a TV program, the garden, etc., or an urban setting. Such domestic or urban elements work on the self, in the world Nye creates, the same way elements from nature work on the self in Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and others. What makes this dimension *post*-romantic, in addition to the fact that it comes long after the demise of Romanticism, is the dual fact that it parallels the structure of a typical Romantic experience and counters it at the same time. The Romantics saw domestic and urban settings as either *aromantic* or *anti-romantic*: hostile to the imagination and an obstacle to transcendence. Nye, by contrast, sees them as conducive to the imagination. In so doing, she reconciles a duality between the urban and natural scenes which the Romantics dichotomized so powerfully in so many of their works, as did the Realists, Naturalists, and Modernists. Ultimately, of course, this recognition and celebration of the importance of both the natural and

urban settings in Nye is, in our view, what makes Nye postmodernist, for one fundamental attribute of Postmodernism is its inclusion, recognition, and often merging of opposites (Jameson, 1998). Two points should be underscored here. The first is that by Nye's post-romanticism, we refer to Nye giving romantic attributes to unromantic elements, and by her romanticism we mean Nye's recreation of the traditional effect of natural elements on the self. The second is that the concept of transcendence is not incongruous with Postmodernism, for Postmodernism – unlike Modernism – does deal with and celebrate uplifting mystical experiences.

II

Nye's neo-romanticism appears in many of her poems. In "The Whole Self," a poem which takes note of several experiences that constitute the self's "journey to becoming the whole self" (2), i.e. some deep sense of fulfillment, the speaker describes a "dance in Bandera, Texas" (16) "under a sky so fat the full moon/was sitting right on top of us" (17-18).¹ Due to the double effect of the natural scene and the dance, the speaker "jumped inside the ring" (28) and danced "till the room blurred like water, like blood, *dance*, / and I was leaning headlong into the universe" (29/30).

This brief, though crucial and climactic moment in the poem, has all the elements of a traditional Romantic experience of nature. First of all, there is a vivid natural scene (the "fat" sky and the "full" moon) of which the speaker is fully aware. Secondly, the speaker starts responding to the natural scene, opening herself to it ("sitting right on top of us"). Third, and as a result of the interaction and immersion with the natural scene ("jumped inside the ring"), the speaker experiences a transforming, mystical and transcendental moment, under which the self is elevated to a higher sphere, becoming one with nature ("I was leaning headlong into the universe").

This is precisely what happens in a typical Romantic experience of nature, as M. H. Abrams has explained at length (1971). In William Bryant's "Thanatopsis," for example, a poem which embodies many of the traditional Romantic tenets, the speaker calls on the individual to leave society behind and "Go forth, under the open sky" (14), and then "list/To Nature's teachings, while from all around/ ... comes a still voice" (14-17)². As a result of this intense involvement with nature, primarily through

the sense of listening, the person experiencing nature loses "each human trace, surrendering up/ [his/her] individual being" (24-25) – i.e. transcends the physical body and physical nature – and begins to "mix forever with the elements," thus becoming one with nature. The same thing happens in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*. In a widely-quoted passage, which also focuses on the effect of stars, he says, "But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches" (23). A little later, and as a result of the impact of the natural scene on him, he says: "Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball..." (24). In Nye, as in Bryant and Emerson, an intense encounter with nature, or an element of it, brings about the self's elevation and transcendence.

In a poem by Nye entitled "Biography of an Armenian Schoolgirl," which echoes Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" and several passages from *The Prelude*, the speaker complains about education which focuses on scientific facts and which curbs the imagination and imprisons the mind. She asserts that "they," by whom she means those in charge of the school she goes to, "teach algebra" (20). They also "pull [her] hair back and examine [her] nails" (21). She says that she is interested in something entirely different: "what happens to the gray body when it is laid in the earth" (19) and other philosophical matters. Instead, the teachers teach her, as part of the school curriculum, in addition to algebra, "physics, chemistry" (25). Expressing her rejection of such pedagogies and declaring her independence, she says that she throws her "book out the window/ watch[ing] the pages scatter like wings" (25-26), and then "stitch[ing] the professor's jacket to the back of his chair" (27). "I would fly out of here. Travel, I say" (23), she declares, for "There is something else we were born for" (28). To "fly out of here" and to "travel" mean, in part, to go into nature, a setting extremely conducive to liberating thinking and the imagination.

Wordsworth affirms this very idea in several of his poems. In "The Tables Turned," the persona calls on the addressee to "quit ... books" (1) because they constitute no more than a "dull and endless strife" (9).³ He also condemns the study "of science" and "of art" (29) because they foster a "meddling intellect" (26) which "Misshapes the beauteous forms of things" and

"murder[s] to dissect" (26-28). Instead, he calls on the addressee to go into a liberating space: "Come forth into the light of things" (15), i.e. into nature.

In "For Mohammed on the Mountain," Nye's persona celebrates an uncle of hers who has decided to "travel across the ocean" (2) and dwell on a mountain, alone. "All I knew was you packed up, you moved to the mountain, / you would not come down" (10-11). She finds this both admirable and moving: "This fascinated me: How does he get food? Whom does he talk to? / What does he do all day?" (12-13). The speaker then tells us that her "friends had uncles who rode motorcycles, / who cooked steaks outdoors or paid for movies" (14-15) – things that urban persons her age appreciate highly. She, however, thinks differently. Addressing her uncle, she says: "I preferred you, in all your silence./ In my mind you were like a god, living close to clouds,/ fearless and strong with no one to sing you to sleep" (16-18). What attracts her most to him is his romanticism: the facts that he abandons human society, that he lives "close to clouds," and that he is alone. He is like the Gypsy in Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar Gypsy," who "left Oxford to dwell in nature alone "and returned no more" (51). The speaker, however, not only admires him but wants to join and unite with him. There is a lot of yearning, on her part throughout the poem, to pack up and leave, just as he did, and live alone and freely in nature. Stressing this notion at the end of the poem, she says: "Will you be there? / Gazing out over valleys and olive orchards,/ telling us sit, sit,/ you expected us all along" (65-68).

A compelling and highly revealing romantic moment appears in, and prevails throughout, a poem entitled "Lights from Other Windows." It begins with the speaker, as in traditional Romantic poems, leaving the city and going to nature: "Driving west tonight, the city dissolves behind us./ I keep feeling we're going farther than we're going,/ a journey that started in the deep inkwell ..." (1-3). The use of the word "dissolves" here is significant. In any traditional Romantic poem, the city has to be left behind. In Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson and Thoreau, departure from the city is a must for any deep experience of nature to be possible. Once in nature and after focusing on and enjoying the scenery, the speaker in Nye's poem – like traditional Romantics – is able to see beyond the physical setting: "The hills could crack open and a pointed beam,/ like the beams on miners' hats, could pick us off this road" (7-8). The expression "picks

us off" signifies her Romantic elevation and transcendence. The elevation and transcendence in the poem continue to take place: "I feel myself floating off alone into that night we just left/ that cool black bag of darkness, where black deer/ nibbled invisible grasses and black fences ..." (11-13). Nature is often a destination for speakers in many of Nye's poems, as in here. But the elevation does not stop at this point. Not only is its momentum prolonged, but its direction changes. "A voice in ... [her] earliest ears" (14) carries her into childhood: "... the lit windows of childhood rise up" (14). The ending of the poem affirms a fundamental Romantic premise: the speaker's ability to transcend every time she feels restless:

Like having someplace to go when your glowing
restlessness
lifts you out of rooms, becomes a wing,
takes you farther than you will have traveled
when your own life ends (22-25)

She is "lifted" out of rooms by the imagination, precisely as the speaker in Wordsworth, who lies in a couch in a room, is lifted by the "spots" of time. In "Lines," Wordsworth asserts this very idea thus: "But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din/ Of towns and cities, I have owed to them/ ... sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; / And passing even into my purer mind" (25-29).

Many other poems by Nye embody similar experiences. The point to stress, in discussing Nye's neo-romanticism, however, is that she does not always see the city as being antithetical to nature, and this is what distinguishes her, in addition to the Romantics, from the Realists, Naturalists, and Modernists. Ultimately, Nye is not a dualist. This notion is seen at work in a number of poems where several elements from nature exist even in cities – and this is an evidence of the strong parallel Nye has with geographic, landscape scholars referred to above. Such notion is best embodied in her poem entitled "The Rose on Magnolia Street," a poem which expresses a kind of hybridity, a merger of nature and city elements that can be found primarily in postmodernists like Nye. The speaker in the poem says:

The first place I visited you,
A tree grew out of your bedroom,
Hole cut in the ceiling.

Today there are plants in your bathtub.
Their leaves are thick and damp. (11-15)

The fact that a tree "grew" into and out of the bedroom, cutting a hole in the ceiling, and that there are "plants" in the bathtub, shows that nature can be incorporated into the city: the natural and the urban scenes exist simultaneously in one place. While one has, at times, to leave the city and go to nature in order to have a romantic experience; at other times, the natural scene is seen to exist in the city, the comforts of one's bedroom and bathroom. The emphasis on this novel Postmodernist premise – i.e. nature's presence in an urban setting – is a great contribution by Nye.

Hybridity appears in several other poems. In "Office 337, Wheeler Hall, Berkeley," the speaker describes a "room" in which she lives, and in which there are many elements from the urban world: "I live in a room of abandoned things, / typewriters with jammed ribbons, / clocks that won't wind" (1-3). She says that she loves this room very much. In the third stanza, however, she tells us that she "fling[s] the window high/ to let the sky in" (17-18): "join me, I say" (19). Later in the poem, she picks up a bird nest that fell from a "very tall" tree (35) and brings it into her office: "I brought the nest to my office, / circled it with eucalyptus leaves/ that had also fallen" (36-38). Generally, the speakers in Nye are happy with natural surroundings alone; and this is neo-romanticism. They are also happy with urban surroundings alone as well, as we will show, and this is post-romanticism. But they are also happy, as these lines clearly illustrate, with surroundings that mix or mingle both natural and urban elements.

III

As prefaced, Nye's post-romanticism has to do with deriving stimulation from domestic and urban elements, objects, or devices – including those found in "kitchens, gardens, grocery stores, and other domestic spaces", as Mercer and Strom (2007) have pointed out – which function in ways precisely similar to those of natural scenes or objects. As Townsend also states, in commenting on Nye and two other female poets, daily "objects, situations, or events ... serve as both the containers for and the conveyers of emotion" creating what amounts to "spirituality in the *commonplace*" (1995; our emphasis). More recently, Najmi has highlighted Nye's "emphasis on the small and ordinary, insisting on

the mundane and the everyday ..." (2010). This, clearly, is part of Nye's poetic enterprise, where mundane experiences and objects can work on the imagination yielding deep, revealing thoughts as well as moments of the self's uplifting or elevation.

The key to such moments in Nye's works is, perhaps, the prose piece entitled "Loose Leaf," a kind of preface to her poems similar in a way to Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. In it she looks at a "childhood picture album" of "old black and white photographs" (xi), remembering, thinking, and imagining. As she turns the leaves of the album one by one, she recollects those moments from her childhood some "forty springs" (xi) ago and comments briefly on them:

Here I am wearing a polka-dotted headscarf, soberly pushing a stuffed rabbit in a baby carriage. Preparing to blow out two candles on a cake. Holding and being held. With neighbors who disappeared into the world With baby brother freshly home from the hospital. With grandparents who died.... (xi)

The picture album, which contains a series of photos attached neatly to separate leaves, is parallel in Romanticism to what Wordsworth calls "spots of time" or images of childhood, in both structure and function. In Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and other Romantics, to whom the camera was not available, immediate images or glimpses of nature and of childhood are stored for future reference via the mind. When the self recalls and relives them, they enable it to elevate and transcend to a state of joy, ecstasy, or intense contemplation. This, of course, is seen as the self's salvation in Romanticism (Abrams 1971). In Nye, the glimpses are stored through a camera. Thus the camera in Nye functions in the same way as memory or the mind does in the Romantics.

The echo of the Romanticism of Wordsworth, namely in "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," becomes even stronger in the concluding paragraph of "Loose Leaf." Nye says: "The mystery of remembering has *added its own light* to the garden. Whatever existed then has deepened, been forgotten or *restored* in some other form" (xii; emphases ours). What makes the garden and other recollected objects and scenes beautiful, according to Nye here, is the fact that the act of "remembering," evoked by the snapshots, adds a new "light" or dimension to them. Memory, in other words, reshapes past events and incidents, endowing them with a halo of some sort. This is precisely what happens in Wordsworth's "Preface." The objective behind his lyrical ballads is to "choose

incidents and situations from common life ... [and then] to *throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination*, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect" (102; our emphasis). He also, as in Nye here, speaks of a scene, incident, or "emotion *recollected* in tranquility" (our emphasis; 110). The "recollection" is crucial. It, aided by the imagination, "colors" the incidents, objects, and experiences.

"Long Distance," a revealing poem which narrates experiences that occur during the speaker's childhood, mirrors both the structure and ideology of a traditional Romantic poem, with one *radical* difference: its incidents and thoughts take place within either an urban setting or a setting which is a mixture of both the urban and the natural. The speaker's experience, as a child, begins thus:

I remember, as a child, "The World's Highest
Suspension Bridge,"
and our timid steps, walking out a little way,
clinging to the rail.
Since then I have met a man who fell from a high
building,
because he wanted to, because he dreamed of
falling
till it was the only thing he could do.
He lived to tell reporters it didn't hurt as much ...
I have followed him, Mother, and I found out
he doesn't know more than I do, or you, or any of
us. (17-28)

The fact that the adult speaker is celebrating "remembrance" of incidents from childhood is clearly a Romantic notion. Much of Romanticism, in fact, is about celebrating experiences recollected from childhood. Romantic adults, also, invoke experiences from nature. But they never invoke experiences from an *urban* setting. In this citation, the speaker is describing an experience with a suspension bridge, a symbol of both sophisticated technology and heightened urbanization, two post-romantic developments. But this suspension bridge, which functions perhaps the way tall trees or mountains function in Romanticism, provides the child with an opportunity to experience, observe, learn, and then recollect. The second incident in the citation is that of a "man who fell from a high building." High and high-rise buildings are also symbols of urbanization. But in Nye's highly urbanized world, high buildings also provide the child with the ability to experience, reflect, and learn: she

"found out" that the man "doesn't know more than" she or anyone else does. Thus while in Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, and other Romantics nature is a "teacher," in Nye the city can also be a teacher.

The climax of the poem is a "vision of infinity" (29) the speaker had as a child:

I was ten, on our trip to the farm – a sow was in
labor.
You were all keeping vigil in the barn.
But myself I walked back to the house. A
Television was on,
no one watching it, just on.
I sat on the couch. For a moment between
programs
the screen swirled an outer-space landscape,
stars and galaxies, dazzling miracles of light.
Suddenly something dropped—
it was the first moment I knew I would die.

...

And then I fell farther, I lost my name, the month,
I travelled deeper than I had ever gone,
back behind the point where I began
before I become someone knowing herself as
someone.
I became that endless black beyond the stars,
knowing nothing, not knowing what it had not
known,

....

For seconds, Mother, or maybe minutes,
I was no longer your child or anything human
and then the screen changed and Walt Disney took
over
and I switched off and wandered out into the dark.
(30-52)

It is important to note, first of all, that even though this transforming experience takes place on a farm, the impact on the speaker comes not from the natural objects or the pastoral elements in the farm, but from a technological, man-made device. The beginning of the passage gives the impression – a false one, it turns out – that it is the "trip to the farm" or the incident of "the sow ... in labor" that could be the object of focus or the stimulant that brings about the intense romantic, mystical experience that follows. In the third line, however, we discover that this is not the case: the "But" at the beginning of the line is significant, as it clearly indicates

the irrelevance of the farm and the sow in labor to the speaker's experience.

What evokes or causes the self's stimulation, meditation, and then elevation, rather, is television, another symbol of urbanization or modernity. Once in the farm, the speaker turns her back to farm objects and to the sow in labor and then walks "back to the house," finds the TV on, and sits on the couch watching. While she is viewing a number of TV programs, the screen swirls, and suddenly a "dazzling" image of "outer space," which includes "stars," "galaxies," and "miracles of light," suddenly appears. Such dazzling images cause the speaker to think and ponder deeply: "it was the first moment I knew I would die." The experience then heightens, and the speaker begins to elevate until she reaches the climax of a mystical, transcendental moment. She tells us that she "fell farther," "lost" her "name" and the "month," and then "travelled deeper" than she has ever travelled (mentally, that is) until she became one with that "endless black behind the stars," "knowing nothing" and becoming no longer a child or anything human. She transcends her physical body and surroundings and elevates both to a higher sphere and a sphere prior to human existence, such as Chaos in mythology or void in Genesis, one which is more sublime than beautiful. At the end of the poem, when the screen changes to Walt Disney programs, the mystical experience comes to an end and the speaker is back to reality. She then switches off the TV and goes out "into the dark."

It is important to underline here that even though it is the image of the stars, galaxies, and the miracles of light – all elements of a natural scene – that bring about the self's elevation in this passage, the image is conveyed via a TV program, and not directly. This clearly illustrates, first, that not only is Nye comfortable with technology, but that she is open to all experiences via all means. Secondly, it shows that Nye's neo- or post-romanticism is hybrid: nature and technology collaborate to bring about a mystical, transcendental, and transforming moment. In Nye, the whole wide "world around her" (Gómez-Vega, 2001) is a teacher.

It is also obvious, from the citation above and the comment on it, that the structure of the experience in Nye and traditional Romanticism is one and the same. In both, there is, in the first stage, a stimulant (in Nye's case the image of outer space on television); in the second stage, a response to the stimulant (observing intensely, thinking,

meditating, and then elevating); in the third, an intense moment of transcendence (travelling deeper and becoming one with the endless black); and then, in the fourth, a fall into reality (switching off the TV and going out into the dark). This is exactly what happens in Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, Keats, Shelley and others. Compare, for example, the structure of the experience in Nye's poem to Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "Ode to a Nightingale," where the speakers, in both poems, pass through the four stages just mentioned (Abrams, 1971). The difference here is that while the fall back into reality in Romantic poems is either disappointing or tragic, the fall in Nye's poems is not.

Romantic texts, written in both verse and prose, are often referred to as descriptive-meditative, in which the speaker is walking in a natural scene observing, enjoying, and describing the scenery, but also thinking, commenting, and meditating (Abrams, 1971; Marks, 2007). This walk into nature is referred to in Romantic literature as an "excursion." Many Romantic poems are based on excursions in nature, actual and imagined. In Wordsworth, there is a whole poem called *The Excursion*. The various parts of *The Recluse* contain many widely-known excursions. The following passage, the opening of *The Prelude*, is a classic example of a walk in nature in which the speaker is describing and meditating at the same time, hence the term "descriptive-meditative":

Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
To none more grateful than to me; escaped
From the vast city, where I long had pined
A discontented sojourner: now free
Free as a bird to settle where I will.
(1-9)

For Romantics, there is a great joy in walking, observing, taking the scene in, describing, and thinking. But as Abrams has aptly pointed out, the "outer" breeze which the speaker encounters in nature, evokes an "inner" breeze of feelings and thoughts (1971). The descriptive-meditative technique is the backbone of most, if not all, Romantic poems.

In Nye's poem "The Brick," we see the exact same

technique at work, the descriptive-meditative, but – again – with a radical difference: the excursion is into an *urban*, not a natural, setting. The poem, as in the case of the Romantic texts just mentioned, begins by describing what the speaker sees:

Each morning in the gray margin
between sleep and rising, I find myself
on Pershing avenue, St. Louis, examining bricks
in buildings, looking for the one I brushed
with my mitten in 1956. How will I know it
when I find it? A shade goes up in one window.
This is where the man in the undershirt lived.
Someone shakes a coffee can and turns a faucet;
water gushes out, ice-cold.
Why do I want this brick? What does a brick,
red or otherwise, have to tell anyone
about how to live a life?

...

And why would one brick that I brushed
while on a *walk* with my mother and father
become a shrine? Later we rode a bus.
My father carried a sack from a drugstore.
I stared hard at the faces of shops
to see what they looked like in the dark.(1-24)

It is obvious in these lines, in which the speaker is taking a "walk" with her parents, that "Pershing Avenue" in St. Louis is the locale in which the excursion is happening. The speaker is carefully observing the elements that make it up: looking for a certain brick that she "brushed" with her mitten "in 1956" and staring "hard at the faces of shops." As a matter of fact, there is both description and remembrance. But it is clear that the description leads to meditation as well. This is obvious as of the beginning of the tenth line: "Why do I want this brick? What does a brick/ ... have to tell anyone/ about how to live a life." In line 21, the brick, in the speaker's imagination, becomes a "shrine." At the end of the poem, she says that Pershing Avenue becomes "the snagged edge, the center of memory,/ the place where I get on and off."

The descriptive-meditative technique is the backbone of many other poems by Nye about elements from urban life. In "Yellow Glove," in which the speaker compares "months" to towels rolling "out of a machine" (20) – an urban metaphor – the whole argument in the poem revolves around a "glove" which the speaker lost and then

found. In "The Shopper," in which the speaker "visit[s] the grocery store/ like an Indian woman of Cuzco/ attends the cathedral" (1-3), the speaker describes and meditates on several elements and acts that take place in the supermarket. She tells us that grandmothers' carts "tell stories" (6-8) and that "We must bless ourselves with peaches./ Pray to the eggplant, silent among her sisters/ ... Confess our fears to the flesh of tomato" (15-18). In "New Year," she describes and meditates on a "street" which is "tired of being a street" (1): "They tell how it used to be called Bois d'Arc./ now called Main, how boys in short pants/ caught crawdads for supper.../ Sometimes the street's sweeper stops his machine/ and covers his eyes" (2-7). A little later she tells us to "Think of the jobs people have./ The girl weighing citron in the basement/ of H. L. Green's" (8-10), and to "Think of the streams of headlights/ on the Houston freeway all headed somewhere" (16-18). The repetition of the word "Think" is significant here.

In Nye's poems, all objects – including domestic objects, no matter how mundane – not only evoke feelings and thoughts but point "to larger truths" (Mercer and Strom, 2007). In "The Traveling Onion," even an onion, and the meditation on it, can be the subject of a whole poem and can "enlarge understanding and compassion for a world beyond the boundaries of the individual": "When I think how far the onion has traveled/ just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise/ all small forgotten miracles" (1-3). In "The Flying Cat," a cat in the luggage compartment of the airplane makes the speaker think and meditate long about how it feels and what such an experience means. In "Daily," Nye ponders on and celebrates a number of mundane, ordinary objects and experiences. The poem opens with the speaker planting "shriveled seeds" (1), "corn kernel," and "dried bean" (2) into "loosened soil" (a pastoral experience close to the romantic); then it moves to describing the "T-shirts we fold into/ perfect white squares" (5-6), the "tortillas we slice and fry to crisp strips" (7), the "rich egg scrambled in a gray clay bowl" (8), the "bed whose covers I straighten" (8), the "envelope I address" (12), the "page I type and retype" (15), the "table I dust till the scarred wood shines" (13), the "bundle of clothes I wash and hang" (14), the "flags we share ..." (15), etc. All of these objects (the T-shirts, the tortillas, the rich egg, the gray clay, the bed) and the experiences stemming from them are recognized by Nye as worthy of attention, as much as the natural objects

which the Romantics recognize and celebrate.

To be sure, there are many other poems by Nye which further illustrate her neo-romanticism, post-romanticism, and the hybridity of both. We hope in what we have delineated above, however, to have given a clear idea about how Nye revives Romanticism and keeps it alive well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We hope also to have highlighted, through focusing on what Nye does to domestic or urban objects, how she has turned the urban landscape in the modern world into what the natural was in Romanticism, a landscape which

evokes uplifting, transforming mystical experiences. We have, furthermore, shown how she often mingles or reconstitutes the natural and the urban elements to produce a new, much-valued hybrid effect. In doing all of this – i.e. in being influenced by the Romantics on the one hand and in countering and adding to Romantic thinking on the other, thus epitomizing the Bloomian “anxiety of influence” in its most elegant forms (Bloom, 1997) Nye’s engagement with tradition proves to be worthy of much attention and appreciation. It also makes her one of the best Postmodern American poets.

Notes

- (1) All citations from Nye's works are taken from Words under the Words.
 (2) All citations from American Romantic texts are taken

- from Nina Baym's The Norton Anthology of American Literature.
 (3) All citations from British Romantic texts are taken from Greenblatt's The Norton Anthology of English Literature.

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الأبعاد الرومانسية الجديدة وأبعاد ما بعد الرومانسية في شعر نعومي شهاب ناي: وقع المشاهد منفردةً ومدمجة

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى سبر غور بُعدين أساسيين من أبعاد قصائد نعومي شهاب ناي، بعد متصل بالرومانسية "الجديدة" وآخر بما "بعد" الرومانسية. ونعدّ هذين البعدين، واللذين لم يتطرق لهما النقاد، من أهم إسهامات الشاعرة في خطاب ما بعد الحداثة ومن أهم مفاتيح فكرها. يُشير البعد الأول إلى أصداء وانعكاسات الأفكار والبنى الرومانسية التقليدية في أعمال ناي، وخصوصاً أثر الطبيعة على الذات والدور المحوري للمُخيلة. أما البعد الثاني فيُقصد به أثر عناصر بيئة المدينة على الذات. وتُمزج ناي هذين البعدين على نحو متنسق ينسجم مع فكرها الذي هو جزء من فكر ما بعد الحداثة. وتُبرز الدراسة كذلك الشبه بين الحركتين الرومانسية وما بعد الحداثة واللتين ينظر إليهما على أنهما مختلفتان.

الكلمات الدالة: الأدب الأمريكي، الشعر الحديث، مابعد الرومانسية.

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