

Wilson, Eric G.:

The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003 (2009 paperback edition). 278 pp.

Reviewed by: Klaus Benesch
(LMU München, Germany)

Eric G. Wilson, a professor of English and American literature at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, is what many of his colleagues in the English Department would call a prolific writer: Previous to the recently published second edition of *The Spiritual History of Ice* he had already published two studies on American Romanticism, in particular its relationship with the sciences (*Emerson's Sublime Science*, 1999) and its prominent role in shaping a specifically American notion of natural spaces (*Romantic Turbulences: Chaos, Ecology, and American Space*, 2000). More recently, Wilson has authored two books on American film (*Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*, 2006, and *The Strange World of David Lynch: Transcendental Irony from Eraserhead to Mulholland Dr.*, 2007); a psychological biography of Coleridge (*Coleridge's Melancholia: An Anatomy of Limbo*, 2004); and a book that combines his perennial interest in all three topics, British and American Romanticism, melancholia, and film: *The Melancholy Android: On the Psychology of Sacred Machines* (2006). In 2008, Wilson finally reached beyond the limited audiences of literary and cultural studies to publish a personal diatribe against the so-called "happiness" industry in the U.S. and to remind his fellow Americans that to embrace melancholia and sadness maybe a prerequisite to a wholesome, creative life. *Against Happiness: In praise of Melancholy*, which discusses personalities prone to melancholia from Melville to John Lennon, garnered national attention as an important piece of cultural analysis, but has also been criticized for its author's distractive and "somewhat affected" writing style (*Publisher's Weekly*).

If the latter criticism holds true for his latest book, the earlier study of American and British romantics' obsession with ice, *The Spiritual History of Ice*, suffers equally from Wilson's frequently convoluted, repetitive style. What is more, Wilson falls prey to the critical fallacy of investing the ice itself with almost mythical, "Gnostic" qualities. Rather than limiting his scope to the history of human representations of ice and its diverging cultural meanings, Wilson – both in his new 2009 preface to the second edition and in the short (original) conclusion – attempts to read the Romantic fascination with frozen landscapes and the poles as part of a more far-reaching human tragedy, namely, the apocalyptic vision of the eventual extinction of the entire species. Against the backdrop of the imminent melting of the polar ice caps, and informed by the ice's paradoxical signification as a substance of at once great solidity and utmost fragility, Wilson invokes a "secret imperative" of global warming, its

capacity to “shock us into a new awareness of ice, of its place in the living whole, an awareness that might translate into new modes of being: less ego-centric, more ecological” (p. 220). After confessing to his being steeped in “deep ecology” the author wallows in the possibility of “the removal from the planet of the most destructive species ever to exist” – to Wilson a not so pessimistic prospect after all and perhaps the “truest and most tragic ecology,” one that spells out “an end of wasteful death in the name of new life” (p. 220).

Luckily, in spite of this blatant manifestation of postmodern ecological melancholy, the bulk of *The Spiritual History of Ice* remains centered in the history of Anglo-American Romantic thought and ideas. Following a detailed discussion of Western “representations of frozen shapes from ancient times to the early nineteenth century” (p. 2) Wilson’s rich and erudite study investigates a number of major Romantic writers and their respective ecological and philosophical inflections of this “spiritual” history of ice. What conjoins Emerson, Thoreau, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, and Poe in their ongoing interest in crystals and frozen landscapes appears to be less, however, an inkling of imminent apocalypse and ecological disaster. Rather, as Wilson convincingly shows, they were intrigued by the illusiveness and opacity of icy substances. Regardless of its various manifestations – as crystals, glaciers, or the poles – the significations of ice are at once revelatory and obfuscating. Just consider, say, the crystalline shape of an icicle: if used as a prism it either enlarges your vision by providing new, unexpected perspectives on the world outside; yet it can also serve as a means to blur and ultimately confuse our perception of the real. It is this double signification of ice as a magnifier and, simultaneously, a mystifier that fascinates Romantics on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether they philosophize the icy covering of a New England pond (Thoreau), the sublime topography of alpine glaciers (Byron/Shelley), or the frozen *terra incognita* of the South Pole (Coleridge/Poe) what these authors experience as the enchanting, seductive character of ice is precisely its utter illusiveness. As a duplicitous site of “order and fantasy, invention and necessity, law and exception” (p. 9) the morning frost to Thoreau becomes a source of both wonderment and spiritual renewal. It thus lends itself nicely to the Romantic project of instilling new meaning into the material world, meaning that questions and ultimately transcends the limitations of the rampant rationalism of the enlightenment.

If the epistemological flaws of a purely rational, positivist worldview are of paramount concern to Romantic authors both in Europe and the US there are, however, also considerable differences. Given their embeddedness in a cultural environment enthused by the challenge of building a new nation, American Romantics frequently occupied a kind of middle ground: Their scathing cultural criticism notwithstanding they embraced, by and large, westward expansion, American capitalism, and even its concomitant technological change (Emerson actually invested much of his income in railroad stock).

Though Wilson offers excellent readings of individual texts (his account of Thoreau's "screaming" of icy landscapes in *Walden* strikes me as being on a par with the best in recent ecocriticism), the almost complete lack of historical and cultural contextualization clearly impairs the analytical strength of this otherwise groundbreaking study of the Romantic obsession with ice. As it stands, much of what Wilson has to say about Coleridge's and Poe's shared interest in the aesthetic exploration of the South Pole amounts to nothing more than an interesting footnote in transatlantic literary history. One certainly wonders whether their respective versions of a "polar sublime" – as well as the spiritual history of ice at large – may not have taken on a quite different meaning if read in conjunction with the well-documented, continuing struggle of both writers to carve out a niche for artistic imagination within an overwhelmingly rationalist modern environment.