

Tom Furniss, “A Romantic Geology: James Hutton's 1788 *Theory of the Earth*.” *Romanticism* 16.3 (2010): 305-21

In “A Romantic Geology,” Tom Furniss deftly analyses James Hutton’s *Theory of the Earth* and suggests its influence on Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. The author thus explores the fascinating “interplay between geological speculation and the aesthetic experience and theory of the sublime.” (305) More precisely, Furniss claims that Hutton’s theory could be considered as “Romantic” because, on the one hand, it provides a Wordsworthian representation of nature and of the Earth and, on the other, it reveals what Noah Heringman labelled as “geological sublime”, i.e. “ a geo-category that was common to the aesthetic geology and geological aesthetics of the period and that impacted on the first generation of Romantic poets.” (307) By connecting Hutton’s geological research with the philosophical notions of space, time and nature expressed by Romantic poets, Furniss specifically puts forward the mutual and fertile relationship between science and literature in “Romantic culture,” so as to reflect on the prominent and less-explored influence of scientific progress on Poetry: “what we call ‘Romantic science’ cannot be seen merely as the backdrop or foil to Romantic poetry but as *part of a much more extensive Romantic cultural formation* that has more continuities with the Enlightenment project than is usually recognised.” (307, my emphasis)

In the first section of the article, Furniss presents James Hutton as the founder of modern geology and provides a meticulous and remarkable description of the research that brought Hutton to the composition of his 1788 paper *Theory of the Earth*, which later became the starting point for a more ambitious two-volume work called *Theory of the Earth with Proofs and Illustrations*, published in 1795. The article proceeds through careful close readings of Hutton’s original text and explains all the crucial passages that shaped his then highly innovative study. According to this, the Earth was a complex living organism whose materials were not inert but set in continual vital motion, as in the instances of electricity and magnetism, two natural powers that significantly anticipate “Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s assumption that nature and/or matter has inward *powers*” (309, Furniss’s emphasis). Subsequently, Furniss underlines Hutton’s analysis of the circulatory systems of water and air. These create an eco-system that both sustains life on Earth and destroys it by means of the relentless process of erosion it activates. In this respect, Furniss pertinently quotes a passage from Hutton which prominently connects to Romantic Poetry and epistemological inquiry: “[T]hose travelling materials are still pursued by the moving water, and propelled along the inclined surface of the earth. These moveable materials [are] delivered into the sea . . . [and] carried farther and farther along the shelving bottom of the sea, towards the unfathomable regions of the ocean” (310). The adjective “unfathomable” appears here as the semantic vehicle that triggers Furniss’s main claim about a plausible comparison between Hutton’s theory and the romantic concept of the sublime.

In order to better elucidate such a relationship, Hutton’s analysis continues by thoroughly expounding Hutton’s geological theory, i.e. his ideas on the Earth’s capacity to restore and repair itself and, more poignantly, his then extra-ordinary discovery that “many of the earth rock materials, such as granite and basalt, were formed by subterranean heat and pressure” (311), a postulation that made “a

significant contribution to the development of modern geology” (311). In such an innovative view of geology, all the materials on Earth continuously flow and circulate, and the Earth itself is described as a complex body with “internal self-powered circulatory systems that allow to repair and renew itself” (312). In this light, Furniss underlines Hutton’s study on volcanoes by underling a relevant ambivalence. Firstly, Hutton claimed that volcanoes were “safety valves” for the Earth and part of those natural (geological) elements that provide “intellectual stimulation and aesthetic pleasure to human beings”: a “beautified” and benign representation of nature that relates, in Furniss’s view, to Wordsworth’s notion of Earth as an “unfallen paradise” in the opening lines of *The Prelude*. Secondly, Hutton asserts that, although beautiful and designed to sustain life, nature “maintains these conditions through the deployment of enormous subterranean power that is often destructive and terrifying and therefore always, in Burkean terms, potentially sublime” (314).

Furniss’s consequent argument revolves around Hutton’s depicting of a “geological sublime” achieved through a profound reflection on nature’s “dark abyss of time”. In Hutton’s theory, as Furniss argues, human beings appear “insignificant in comparison with the sheer power of the Earth’s internal forces and the inconceivably long duration of the Earth” (314). In this respect, Furniss quotes significant passages by Hutton which clearly explain the sublime and ineffable nature of geological processes, and he skilfully takes into account the “infinite, unthinkable time-scale needed for [the] infinitesimal natural events to produce and reproduce the Earth’s geomorphic features” (315). Although the article would have benefited from some more specific close-readings of Romantic poems (in order to better define and ground the comparison with Hutton), it undoubtedly represents a significant contribution to the study of the relationship between science and literature in the Romantic Age: Furniss proposes an original connection between geology and poetry, a connection that surely merits further investigation.

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