

Against the Present: Critical Romanticism in Mark Wright's *The Fireside and the Sanctuary*

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In their 2002 book, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre offer an alternative definition of the term romanticism.¹ Romanticism, they claim, is not limited to the early nineteenth-century romantic movement in art and literature. Nor has it been exhausted by the pejorative usages which inform the language of contemporary pragmatism. Rather, it describes a worldview and 'structure of feeling' that first emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century. Common to figures as diverse as Edmund Burke and Henri Lefebvre, its defining characteristic is a critique of industrial society in the name of certain pre-industrial values, be they conservative or progressive, real or imaginary. Something of this worldview can, to my mind, be found in Mark Wright's current project *The Fireside and the Sanctuary*. Initiated in 2015, the work addresses the Lancashire communities affected by the government's decision to lift the moratorium on 'fracking': the process of extracting shale gas from subterranean rocks by using high pressure jets of water, sand and chemicals. Fracking has been associated with various forms of environmental damage, from small-scale earthquakes to water pollution. Consequently, it has been banned in France and Germany and given rise to an international anti-fracking movement. Although Wright has openly voiced his support for this movement, his work marks a significant departure from the urgency and anger of much activist photography. By adopting an understated approach to landscape and portrait photography, his project seeks to explore 'a landscape and its inhabitants at a poignant time in their history'. In doing so, *The Fireside and the Sanctuary* not only explores a range of romantic themes. It also demonstrates their relevance to contemporary politics and ecology.

These romantic sensibilities are most immediately evident in Wright's landscape photographs. From its tender shots of cornfields to its quiet forest scenes, *The Fireside and the Sanctuary* is a radical departure from the closely-cropped natural forms, wildernesses and man-altered landscapes which defined twentieth-century photography. Instead, the viewer is presented with a near-pastoral image of the Lancashire countryside, enigmatic and untouched by modernity. It is this environment, and not simply the accompanying domestic interiors, which constitutes the 'sanctuary' of the project's title. If anything, Wright's photographs blur the distinction between the two. In the domestic images, people are portrayed gazing outside, in the garden or seated in a conservatory, thus bringing nature into contact with the home. The depicted natural world also evokes comparisons with the domestic sphere: forest canopies provide shelter, a carpet of grass covers an old tow path and woodland clearings become rooms. At times, Wright's compositions produce the feeling of being engulfed by the forest; a feeling which has become increasingly elusive in England's remaining woodlands. Yet any sense of menace is tempered by the inclusion of small elements, such as felled trees, that orientate the viewer within the space. Despite offering a departure from urban life, the environment appears open to human interaction and habitation. Indeed, Wright produced the work through a series of solitary walks, a means of engaging with the landscape adopted by romantic thinkers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Ruskin. Yet the shots also contain traces of human activity – farmland, paths and small-scale felling – which demonstrate how the local community work the land. This evocation of an organic, sustainable and restorative relation to nature completes the romantic vision. *The Fireside and the Sanctuary* is, perhaps above all else, a celebration of a way of life which pre-dates the current system yet continues to exist within its interstices.

¹ Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

Wright's depiction of the Lancashire countryside, however, is not a mere exercise in escapism or 'art for art's sake'. Situated twenty minutes away from two fracking sites, the landscape risks being radically transformed if an effective resistance to government policy cannot be sustained. In this sense, the attempt to document it is both a tragic mode of conservation and a desperate act of defiance. However, this gesture also provides a unique way of criticising the fracking phenomenon. Wright could have documented the environmental degradation produced by fracking or the preliminary infrastructures currently under construction in the UK. He could also have mapped out the complex web of companies, actors and political processes which have led to its legalisation. Instead the viewer is made to *imagine* the threat that fracking poses and debate its motivating logic. Nevertheless, by showing us the qualitative, human reality to which fracking is opposed, the project provides a litotic evocation of the underlying threat: the quantitative logic of capital accumulation. This sentiment is particularly visible in the quotation from Nick Papadimitriou that introduces the project: 'the world that confronts us through our immediate surroundings is alive and intrinsically valuable in ways not amenable to instrumental reason or economic reductionism'. The problem is, of course, that fracking ignores this incommensurability, utilising an inefficient and potentially damaging technology for the simple reason that it has become profitable to do so. This condemnation of a world in which impersonal laws take precedence over people and the environment was central to the romantic critique of industrial society. Wright's achievement is to show its continuing pertinence through celebrating the resistant materiality of the natural world.

Of course, this is not to suggest that these images are simplistically 'objective' or free from romantic fantasy. *The Fireside and the Sanctuary* largely evades the traditional division between 'subjective' and 'documentary' photography, drawing upon techniques which have been attributed to both sides. Like many famous documentary photographers, from Walker Evans to W. Eugene Smith, Wright spent an extended period within the community depicted, studying the local environment and listening to its inhabitants. In doing so, he hoped to cut through the claims which surround fracking within the media and mainstream politics, communicating a more palpable reality and set of risks to a broader audience. At the same time, however, the project is a highly idiosyncratic vision of its chosen subject. Its picture of rural life is clearly a selective – even idealised – one, fuelled by normative judgements about nature and the encroaching forces of modernity. Certain images are also imbued with a sense of anxiety or impending danger. In one shot of a lily pond, the water and flowers appear prematurely tainted with a fluorescent, chemical hue. In another, the darkened sky, electricity pylons and evidence of commercial farming allude to the further industrialisation of the countryside. These effects place the work on an ambiguous factual and temporal register: are we seeing the present, an imagined golden age or a feared future? Nevertheless, Wright's decision to combine the subjective with a range of documentary techniques never lapses into solipsism or loses its political immediacy.

This approach is particularly visible in one image: that of a painting hanging in a resident's house. On first encounter, the photograph appears to be an anomaly within the series. Yet on examining the depicted painting – a nineteenth-century scene of children playing in a woodland river – the reasons for its inclusion become clear. By depicting another romantic image of the countryside, the photograph reaches out to a shared set of values. In short, the romantic sensibility which informs *The Fireside and the Sanctuary* is presented as a possible basis for common action. This sense of communication is furthered by the portrait photographs taken after conversations between Wright and local anti-fracking campaigners. In certain images, the sitters appear to continue this discussion with the photographer and audience by confronting the camera directly. However, even those figures who evade the camera's gaze appear troubled by similar thoughts, staring towards the right-hand side of the image in nervous anticipation. Despite their individual differences, the sitters are

joined by a shared body of thoughts and emotions. It is left to the viewer to decide whether these ideals are realistic or progressive. Some, for example, may feel that they repeat a longstanding tension within romantic thought: between the desire to preserve an idealised past and the hope that older ways of life might serve as a basis for the future. However, as Wright notes, the dismissal of anti-fracking views as reactionary or fantastical is deeply ironic, particularly when the sentiments behind the process – namely, self-sufficiency and limitless fossil fuel extraction – are equally unrealistic. As a result, his project is embedded within a conflict of ideas which has real, material effects. By alternating between the medium's affective potentialities and a desire to be 'more than just photography', it shows us what political photography can be today.

Bibliography

Löwy, Michael and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).