

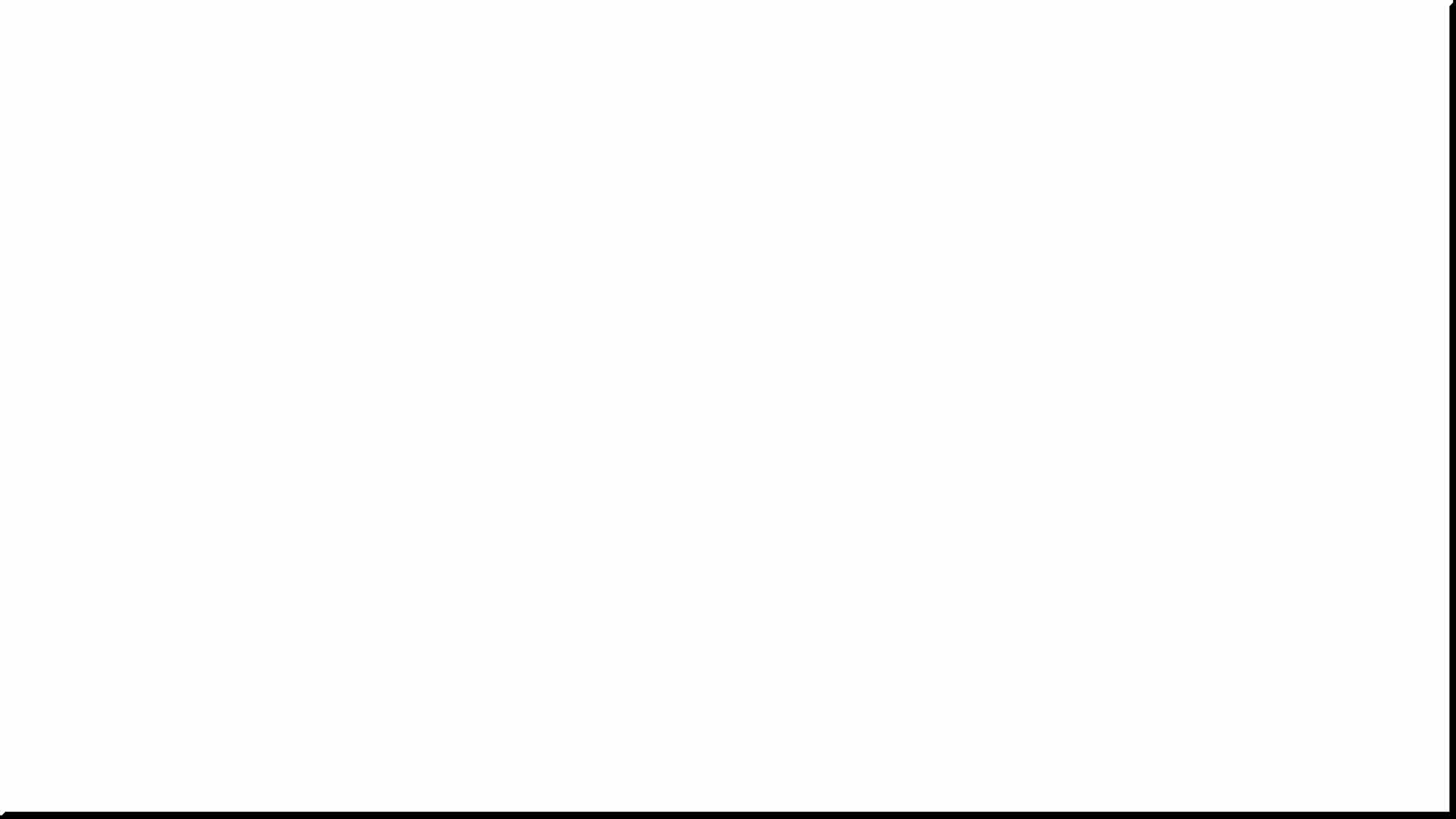
Romantic Aesthetics and Climate Change

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Main questions

- What can historical texts tell us about changing perceptions of nature in the past?
- How can a 200-year-old body of work like Hans Christian Andersen's be relevant to reread in the context of the current climate crisis?
- And in what ways can literature challenge our traditional understanding of the human relationship with nature?
- “ - What is Man, with all his vanity, his great ideas, and his earthly endeavors? A tiny shadow point, which comes and vanishes without leaving the slightest trace on a planet that is but an atom in the vast universe. — “
(H.C. Andersen: *Journey on Foot*, 1829)

Hans Christian Andersen and Universal Romanticism

“And he grabbed hold of vines and roots, clambered up the slippery stones where the water snakes twisted and turned, where the toad seemed to bark at him; - but he nevertheless managed to get to the top before the sun had completely set, seen from this height; oh, what magnificence! The sea, the great marvellous sea that rolled long waves towards the shore, was stretched out before him, and the sun stood like a huge gleaming altar out there where the sea and sky met, everything merged and melted in glowing colours, the forest sang and the sea sang and his heart joined in their singing; all of nature was one great holy church in which trees and floating clouds were the columns, flowers and grass the cloth of woven velvet and the sky itself was the huge dome; up there the red colours were extinguished as the sun disappeared, but millions of stars were lit, millions of diamond lamps then gleamed, and the king’s son spread out his arms towards the sky, towards the sea and the forest, and at that moment, from the right aisle, came in his short sleeves and wooden clogs the poor confirmand; he had reached this place just as quickly, having followed his own path, and they ran towards each other and held hands in the great church of nature and poetry, and above them sounded the invisible holy bell, blessed spirits floated in an airy dance around it to a joyous hallelujah!”

H.C. Andersen: “The Bell,” 1845



Vilhelm Pedersen, illustration for “The Bell”, 1850

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Hans Christian Andersen and Romantic Irony

“So, the mighty plain around ancient Rome was now my home. The stranger from the other side of the mountains, who, enthralled by art and antiquity, approaches the city on the Tiber for the first time, sees a grand tableau in this desolate wasteland; the lonely ruins, the individual mounds, all become sacred ciphers to him, entire chapters of world history. The painter sketches the arch of a broken aqueduct standing alone, the shepherd sitting by the flock of sheep, and then adds the barren thistle to the foreground, and people say: it is a beautiful painting.”

“With very different emotions, my guide and I looked at the vast expanse. The scorched grass, the unhealthy summer air that always brings fever and malignant disease to the countryside residents, was the prevailing downside in his observations; for me, it was something new; nevertheless, I delighted in the beautiful mountains that, in various shades of purple, embraced one side of the plain, the wild buffaloes and the yellow Tiber, where the oxen with their long horns went under the yoke and pulled the boats against the current. We walked in the same direction.”

(H.C. Andersen: *The Improvisatore*, 1835)

The Pontine Marshes

“As I walked, the mist hovering over the green expanse dissipated, where the canals shone like canvas laid out to bleach; the sun burned with summer warmth, even though it was only late February. Herds of buffalo roamed through the tall grass. A group of horses ran freely, kicking up their hind legs, splashing water all around; their lively postures, playful leaps, and frolicking could be a study for an animal painter.”

“To the left, I saw a dark, immense column of smoke coming from the large fires the shepherds had lit to cleanse the air around their huts. I met a farmer whose pale, sickly appearance contradicted the fertility presented by the marshes. Like a corpse taken from the grave, he rode on his black horse, holding a sort of lance in his hand, driving the buffaloes together in the muddy swamp; some lay there, extending only their black, repulsive heads with wicked eyes. The individual post houses, three to four stories high, built close to the road, also showed at first glance the poisonous air rising from the marshes. The whitewashed walls were completely covered with a nauseating gray-green mold. Buildings, like people, bore the mark of decay, a strange contrast to all the rich luxuriance around, the fresh greenery, and the warm sunshine.”

(H.C. Andersen: *The Improvisatore*, 1835)

H.C. Andersen, "De Pontiske Sumpe", March 22., 1834. Written: "Landeveien over de Pontinske Sumpe; man seer Circes Ø; nu Circello.", Museum Odense

Venice

“The water was no longer blue, as out on the open sea or near the coast of Naples; it was a dirty green. We passed an island where the houses seemed to rise out of the water or be glued to a wreck; high on the wall stood Madonna with Child, gazing out over this desolation. In some places, the water surface was a moving, green plain, a kind of duckweed between the deep water and the black islets of soft mud. The sun shone on Venice, all the bells rang, but it still looked dead and lonely. Only one ship lay in the shipyards, not a single person could I see yet. (...)

The water had left its greenish slime on the walls; the grand marble palaces seemed to sink; in the wide windows, raw planks were nailed against the gilded, semi-rotten beams. Piece by piece, the proud giant body seemed to decay; it all had something anxious about it. The bells were silent, and only the sound of oars splashing in the water could be heard, I still saw no one, and a dead swan lay on the magnificent Venice wave.”

(H.C. Andersen: *The Improvisatore*, 1835)

Hans Christian Andersen:
Industrialization, Science and
Modernity

The Poet of Modernity

“We would take an ordinary road, it can run straight, it can bend, it doesn't matter, but it must be smooth, smooth like a living room floor, and therefore we blast any mountain that stands in its way, we build strong arches to bridge swamps and deep valleys, and when the smooth road is before us, we lay down iron rails where the wagon wheels can grip. The steam engine is harnessed at the front with its master who knows how to steer and stop it, wagons are linked with wagons carrying people or cattle, and then we drive.”

“I remember only a few times in my life when I have felt so deeply moved as here, as if I have gazed face to face with God with all my thoughts. I felt a devotion that I have only felt as a child in church and as an adult in the sunlit forest or on the calm sea on a starry night. In the realm of poetry, Feeling and Imagination are not the only rulers; they have a brother who is equally powerful, he is called Reason, he proclaims the eternal truth, and in this lies greatness and poetry.”

(H.C. Andersen: *A Poet's Bazar*, 1842)

C. Wolzedialeck: Postcard of Dammtor, Hamburg, 1909

Science and Art

“What a world of fairy tales can unfold under the microscope when we transfer our human world into it; electromagnetism can become a life thread in new comedies and novels, and how much humorous poetry will emerge as we look out into the infinite universe from our dust-speck-sized Earth with its small, arrogant humans, from Milky Way to Milky Way.”

“And beyond the Earth itself, the voice of science resounded, as if the era of miracles had returned; thin iron bands were laid across the Earth, and on these, laden wagons flew with the swiftness of swallows on the wings of steam; mountains had to open up for the cleverness of the age, plains had to rise.”

(H.C. Andersen: “The California of Poetry” from *In Sweden*, 1851)

Vilhelm Pedersen: illustration for “A Drop of Water”, 1848

Ingemann's reaction

Letter to Andersen, May 25, 1851:

“You seem to me overly influenced by the empiricists and the naturalist H.C. Ørsted and his purely dynamic ‘Spirit in Nature’—this especially applies to Poetry's ‘California,’ in which ‘Science,’ particularly Natural Science (this hobby-horse of Ørsted), is supposed to unfold a new world for the new Aladdin, who closes his eyes to the human spirit and its history as an exhausted source that now stands still like a puddle with the same eternal repeated image—while he only sees spirit and life in steam engines, electromagnet telegraphs, and the Copernican system, which he believes to be brand new and never seen before by any poet. No, believe me, dear friend! The divine and eternal truth in human nature, in the human spirit, in its life and history, is poetry's eternally fresh and inexhaustible source—the rest of nature with all its beauty and glory is mere decoration and frame for the human being and the divine-human being—and for God, as we can see Him here.”

Hans Christian Andersen and Naturalism

“Niels (...) was to teach her (Bodil) about plants, the nature’s kitchen, about oxygen and nitrogen, carbon dioxide and water vapor, the whole cycle of things.”

“Our animal body is formed by small cells; one emerges from the other, all life comes from here.”

“Remember the flight of the swallow, and then think that the storm moves even faster than it, and that the sound of our voice travels twenty times faster than the storm, and what, then, is this motion compared to that of our Earth, which revolves around the Sun ninety-two times faster! But sunlight reaches us thousands of times faster. A cannonball, always at a constant speed, would take twenty-five years from the Sun to the Earth, and a sunbeam reaches us in eight minutes!’

‘How do we know that?’ Bodil asked, instinctively folding her hands. ‘Who has been able to measure the distance, count the minutes?’

‘The human mind!’ her brother replied.”

(H.C. Andersen: *"To Be or Not to Be"*, 1857)

The Dark Side of Modernity

“The Heath, yes, one can hardly believe it,
but come, see it for yourself:
heather forms a magnificent carpet,
flowers swarm for miles around.
Hurry, come! In a few years’ time,
the Heath will be like a cornfield—
like a cornfield it will stand.

Between prosperous farms,
soon the steam dragon will fly,
where now Loki drives his herds,
forests will grow.
The Briton flies over the sea,
visits here Prince Hamlet’s—
here Prince Hamlet’s grave.“
(H.C. Andersen: "Jutland" 1859)

“The dead, uprooted tree, killed by the gas-filled air, the
kitchen-fire air and all the plant-stifling air of the city, was
placed on the wagon and driven away. The crowd of people
watched this, children and old folk sat on the bench in the
open air and looked up through the leaves of the tree. And we
who are relating all this stood on the balcony, looked down at
the young spring foliage still full of fresh country air, and
said as the old priest would have done: ‘Poor Dryad!’”

(H.C. Andersen: "The Dryad", 1868)

Oskar Klever: illustrations for "The Dryad", 1915-1964

Summary:

Hans Christian Andersen wrote during a time when Western industrialization was booming. He wrote within a romantic movement that idealized and romanticized natural surroundings, greatly influencing our understanding of nature. However, Andersen wrote with a special sensitivity to the world around him, displaying an ironic awareness of humanity's tendency to elevate nature to an ideal while simultaneously exploiting its resources. At the same time, his body of work unfolded in a period that gradually moved away from romanticism towards a modern, scientifically informed understanding of nature. He continuously engaged with and commented on this shift in his texts. These texts are therefore characterized by a pervasive ambivalence and irony that encourage critical self-reflection regarding humanity's understanding of itself, its surroundings, and its cultural and technological creations.

But how is this relevant today?....

