The Middle Ages as Subject and Object Romantic Attitudes and Academic Medievalism


the rise of a “scientific” medieval studies coincided with the disappearance of agrarian life with the Industrial Revolution in Europe to what extent has this led to a romantization and mythification of the period?

“The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries knew radically different versions of the medieval past, and only with the growth of industrialization did it finally cease to function as a mythical substratum operating from below.” 537 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

“With the Enlightenment, the antiquarian, who studied the Middle Ages without necessarily imposing a pattern on it, yielded to the ideologist, who taking as his primary concern his own place in history, sought in the past a justification and an assurance. And thus the Middle Ages was reborn as a social myth.” 538

“To the Enlightenment, the Middle Ages was primarily a period; for the Romantics writing roughly a century later, it was also a state of mind...The Enlighteners, highly conscious of themselves as subjects, made of all past periods mere objects which could be used as measuring sticks for the present. The Romantics, who wished to escape from themselves and from the present, began to identify themselves with the past, to reduce the present, through reminiscence, to cumulative experience, and in doing so to idealize what the Enlightenment had despise” 538

“As industrialization gradually affected larger and larger groups of people, whole segments of medieval utopian thinking were rudely revived and pressed into service. The Middle Ages began to be associated with a lost state of innocence: for the moralists, it was paradise without sin, for the socialists, without private property.” 540

“Even in that phase of romantic activity that followed the Napoleonic Wars, when so much English and French medievalism was a thinly disguised veil against political radicalism...” 541

Middle Ages = emotional commitment to the past for Romantics

Middle Ages ripe for myths because it's construction was used as a definer of the modern

“The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In its widest ramifications “the Middle Ages” thus constitutes one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world.” 543 AMAZING QUOTE