Romanticism

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INTRODUCTION

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If one term can be used to describe the forces that have shaped the modern world, it is Romanticism. So potent has Romanticism been since the late 18th century that one author has called it "the profoundest cultural transformation in human history since the invention of the city." Romanticism was not a movement; it was a series of movements that had dynamic impacts on art, literature, science, religion, economics, politics, and the individual's understanding of self. Not all streams of Romanticism were the same. Some, in fact, were almost completely the opposite in their results from others. Nor was the impact the same at all times. Romanticism progressed in stages, each of which had its own emphasis.

ATTEMPTING A DEFINITION

There is no single commonly accepted definition of Romanticism, but it has some features upon which there is general agreement. First of all, it was a rejection of the Enlightenment and the emphasis upon human reason. The Enlightenment thinkers asserted that the world of nature is rationally ordered and that human reason, therefore, can analyze, understand, and use it. On the basis of this understanding a rational society can be constructed.

Romanticism exalted intuition, feeling, inspiration, and the genius of human creativity. It took delight in the exotic—the sights, sounds, and stories of foreign lands, other cultures, and the fantasy world of the imagination. It looked on nature not as a world of objects to be manipulated and dissected but as something to be experienced. Romantics regarded nature, in an almost mystical way, as the opposite of the drabness of industrial civilization. One early Romantic, William Wordsworth, expressed this disenchantment with reason in his poem, *The Tables Turned* (1798):

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good
> Than all the sages can.
>
> Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
> Our meddling intellect
> Misshapes the beauteous forms of things—
> We murder to dissect.
>
> Enough of Science and of Art;
> Close up those barren leaves;
> Come forth, and bring with you a heart
> That watches and receives.

In exalting feelings and emotions over reason, Romanticism also exalted the self. Reason, if there is such a thing, deals in truths that are independent of private judgment—truths that can be understood and shared. Feelings, on the other hand, tend to be personal and to isolate the self from other selves.

The pushing aside of reason also challenged centuries-old accepted values and standards. It suggested that there are no objective values that need be accepted by everyone. The individual, in tune with his feelings, becomes the determiner of values and thus can attempt to reorder the environment according to a personal understanding. The mind, some Romantics urged, cannot know reality as such. It can only interpret it according to its own interests—but it is not always sure of what these are. Moral responsibility, too, is relegated to the decisions of the individual.

The supremacy of the individual is not the whole of Romanticism, but it is pivotal. Its centrality was given special force by the ferocity of the French Revolution, with its demand for individual rights. The Revolution was the first unfolding of the dynamism of Romanticism in Western civilization. The events of 1789 crystallized the hopes and fears of a whole nation. In so doing they threatened the existence of the old order. Europe's political, religious, and social foundations were shaken. That dynamism soon spread throughout the world as the revolution in human expectations became a permanent state of affairs.

MAJOR INGREDIENTS

Romanticism did not erupt suddenly. If a date were to be assigned, however, 1774 would be a useful one. It was the publication year of Johann von Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther*, a novel about a young man who is so disappointed in love that he kills himself. This fictional suicide brought on many real ones as the novel's vogue swept across Europe.

Beneath the love interest is hidden a subtler message about the failure to find absolutes on which to base one's life. (This type of fiction did not die with the character Werther. Goethe dealt with similar themes at greater length in his *Faust*, and there were excellent examples in the 20th century in Hermann Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf* and J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.)

The demand for absolutes was nowhere better illustrated than in the life and writings of a young man who was almost a living counterpart of Werther. Novalis was the pen name of poet-philosopher Friedrich Leopold, Baron von Hardenberg (1772–1801). His first love affair ended in 1797 with his fiancée's death from tuberculosis. Novalis himself died of the disease in 1801. His poetry had a powerful impact on his fellow Romantics, but his religious views were more interesting. He longed for a return to the stability of the Middle Ages, before Europe's cultural and religious unity had been fragmented by the Reformation.

This nostalgia for the past provides a clue to another permanent component of Romanticism—the search for a world that this is not. Sometimes this search was directed

toward the past, but more frequently it looked ahead. Along with this search was the conviction that it was possible to make the world over and even to change human nature for the better—by force if necessary.

This optimism frequently focused on the role of the great man or the hero. Napoleon was for a time the model of the hero who could shape history by his will. In the generation after Napoleon the English writer Thomas Carlyle promoted the great-man theory of history in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841). The supreme statement of this view came toward the end of the century in Friedrich Nietzsche's writings on the superman (*Übermensch*), whose role it is to rid society of conventional Christian morality and to create his own values. George Bernard Shaw carried the theme further in his play *Man and Superman* (1903).

No one saw more clearly than Nietzsche where Romanticism could lead. His perception of the loss of all traditional values—summed up in the statement "God is dead"—inspired him to call for a transformation of old values into new ones. But he could not envision what the new ones might be. He feared, correctly, that the final result might be an assertion of no values at all—a position called nihilism, the belief in nothing.

Nihilism, derived from the Latin word for "nothing," originated in Russia as an intellectual movement. The term was popularized by the writer Ivan Turgenev in his novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). It was a philosophy that rejected the social order of the time and its traditions. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin described nihilism as the struggle for individual freedom and against all authority, hypocrisy, and artificiality.

At its extreme, nihilism rejected church, state, and family and embraced science as the cure-all for society's problems. Rebellion against the family resulted in a generation gap, the problem in Turgenev's novel and a persistent issue for all modern Romantics. The logical outcome of nihilism is the conviction that nothing matters but the self and its desires.

The response to nihilism was equally a facet of Romanticism. It was the insistence that the old values of family, church, and state could be revived and somehow imposed on a society that found little use for them. Those who saw the authority of religion slipping tried to turn the tide. In Great Britain and the United States revivalism sought to establish the norms of 1st-century Christianity.

In Germany the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher tried to save Christianity by reinterpreting it as a religion of feeling and intuition or, as he put it, "the sense of the Infinite in the finite." In the 20th century religious fundamentalism—in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and other religions—sought forcibly to re-create societies in terms of the values of the past.

SOME CONSEQUENCES

Throughout more than two centuries since its emergence, Romanticism has taken a number of twists and turns. Some of its phases were complete contradictions of others. Yet its dynamism has not diminished.

NATIONALISM

An extension of the exaltation of the self, nationalism is a type of tribalism that pits "us against them." In the 18th century the idea of cultural nationalism came to the fore in Europe. It held that from their earliest foundations the nations had each created a distinctive culture in language and the arts. It was a small step from this to the emergence of true nationalism as expressed in the patriotism that burst forth from the people of France after the Revolution. Citizens were attached to their native soil and had an understanding of what it means to be French. The same sentiment emerged in Italy and Germany as those nations were unified.

ETHNICITY

Ethnicity has its focus on the cohesiveness of a people with common tribal roots. During the 19th century there was a strong cultural movement called Slavophilism among the peoples of eastern Europe. It promoted the cultural unity of Slavic peoples. In Nazi Germany during the 1930s the slogan was "One nation, one people, one leader." Later in the 20th century the United States had a civil rights movement that bred such slogans as "black power," "black is beautiful," "brown power," "red power," and—as a reaction—"white power."

POLITICS

In politics the results of Romanticism have been in part highly beneficial and in other ways enormously destructive. The slogan of the French Revolution could well have been "Power to the people," because the goal was full participation of the population in running their government. In the United States the scope of democracy broadened rather quickly after the adoption of the Constitution in 1789. In Europe this did not prove true. A conservative reaction set in that tried to restore the powers of kings, nobility, and church (*see* Vienna, Congress of).

Two writers whose views influenced the course of events were Edmund Burke in Britain and Joseph de Maistre in France. Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, calling for a conservative movement that allowed for the rights of man. De Maistre represented the reactionary conservative tradition, calling for a rigidly ordered society with the pope ruling in the religious realm and the emperor in the political.

The forces of liberalism attempted to reverse the conservative trend without success. The Revolution of 1848 in France failed, in spite of the demands of socialists, anarchists, Communists, and others. The aftermath of 1848 was terrible disillusionment for liberal Romantics, but it was a time of renewed hope for their conservative and reactionary counterparts.

As it turned out, the battle was indecisive. Liberal democracy made gains in Italy and Switzerland, but it was set back in Germany, Austria, and France. In Britain the demand for wider voting power was stifled only temporarily.

Europe moved into an era of uneasy peace that was broken only briefly by the Franco-Prussian War. Then, in August 1914, the battle was engaged once more in a war of unprecedented ferocity. American leaders, not grasping the total import of the conflict, declared that it was a "war to end all wars" and a "war to make the world safe for democracy." Both notions were equally Romantic and equally naive. Meanwhile other conflicts were brewing that would shape the geopolitical map of the 20th century. These conflicts, though political, were rooted in another aspect of Romanticism—the utopian search for a better world.

UTOPIANISM

The philosophy of utopianism appeared long before the 19th century, but in the period after 1830 it made its greatest gains (*see* utopian literature). New programs for the complete reconstruction of society emerged from anarchists, socialists, Communists, and liberals in both Europe and North America. Most of the programs had an optimistic appeal. But it was their willingness to use force to gain their goals that ultimately made them so destructive. The year 1848 dampened utopian plans for decades. But in Russia they took hold and erupted into revolution briefly in 1905. The final revolution occurred in 1917 and created the Soviet Union. This emphasis on achieving the desired end at any cost has marked totalitarian regimes of both the extreme right—the fascists that held sway in Germany and Italy during World War II—and the extreme left—Communist dictatorships under such leaders as Joseph Stalin and Fidel Castro.

THE ARTS

Beginning in the late 18th century, the arts were completely encompassed by Romanticism. The English poets William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth typified the Romantic preoccupation with individualism, with nature, and with the supernatural. Another emphasis was realism—the attempt to portray the past or present as faithfully as possible. Such writers as Sir Walter Scott in his *Waverley* novels were careful to present detailed factual information about their settings. Charles Dickens was one of the most successful writers to do this, beginning with *Hard Times* (1854). The best of the realistic novels was *Madame Bovary* (1857) by Gustave Flaubert (*see* novel). French Romantic writers, including Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were also noted for the emotionalism of their writing.

The new freedom seen in the other arts also prevailed in music—a new individualism, relaxation of the restraints of the classical age, and a marked tendency toward nationalism. The same themes are also found in the work of painters, sculptors, and other artists from the late 18th century to the present. Although the impressionists, postimpressionists, cubists, and other stylists in the arts reacted against the earlier realism, their connection with Romanticism is apparent in the intensely individualistic nature of their work.