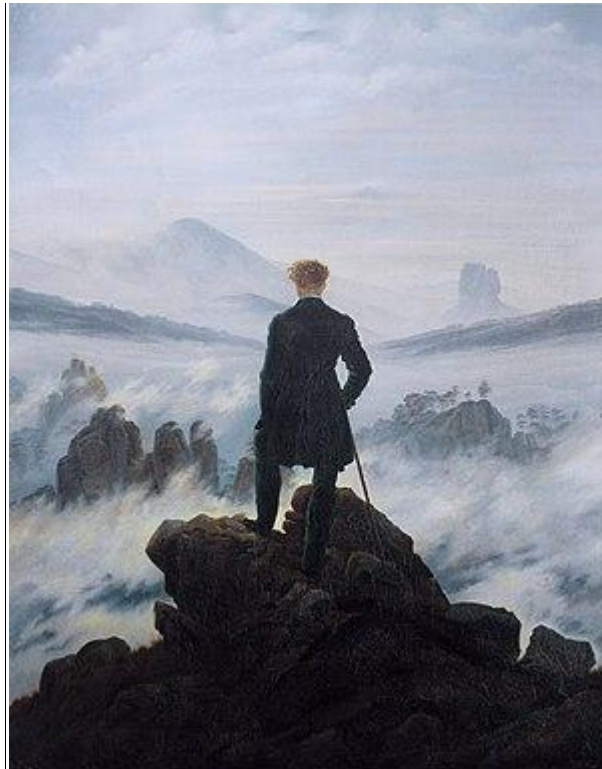


ROMANTICISM

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Romanticism was a broad movement in the history of European and American consciousness which rebelled against the triumph of the European Enlightenment; it is also a comprehensive term for the larger number of tendencies towards change observable in European literature in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As an ageless phenomenon Romanticism cannot be defined.

The Romantic Movement is traditionally seen as starting roughly around 1780. However, the term Romantic period more exactly denotes the span between the year 1798, the year in which William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge published the collection of poems entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, and 1832, the year in which the novelist Sir Walter Scott died, and the other main writers of the earlier century were either dead or no longer productive, and the first Reform Bill passed in Parliament. As a historical phase of literature, English Romanticism extends from Blake's earliest poems up to the beginning of the 1830's, though these dates are arbitrary. According to other critics Romanticism as a literary period in England, from the American Rebellion through the First Reform Bill of 1832, has to be defined as a High Romantic Age. Romanticism manifested at some-what varied times in Britain, America, France, Germany and Italy.

Romanticism affected arts and culture in general. Its main feature was a reaction against the eighteenth century and the Age of Reason. In fact, "Romanticism", or the "Romantic Movement", was a reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century, the view of the physical world increasingly dominated by science, and the mental world by the theories of

Locke, and the neoclassicism of the Enlightenment. During the Romantic period changes in various fields took place: in philosophy, politics, religion, literature, painting and music. All these changes were represented, articulated and symbolized by the English Romantic poets.

In literature reason was attacked because it was non longer considered wholly satisfying by the Romantic poets, and, before them, even by the Augustan satirists themselves.

The Romantic period coincided with the French Revolution, which was to some extent seen as a political enactment of the ideas of Romanticism, which, at the beginning, involved breaking out of the restrictive patterns and models of the past.

This period saw the end of the dominance of the Renaissance tradition and the fragmentation of consciousness away from the cultural authority of classical Rome. Local cultures were rediscovered in Europe, and a flowering of vernacular literatures took place. In Britain Thomas Gray had explored Celtic and Norse literature, other than the classical, which had influenced English. The classical inheritance had had little influence in ballads, folk-songs, and folk literature.

The term "Romantic"

The term "Romantic" derives from old French "romans" which denoted a vernacular language derived from Latin, and that gives us the expression "the Romance languages", but it came to mean more than a language. It meant an imaginative story and a "courtly romance", but also the quality and preoccupations of literature written in "the Romance languages", especially romances and stories. However, it came to mean so many things. By the seventeenth century in English and French the word "romantic" had come to mean anything from imaginative or fictitious, to fabulous or extravagant, fanciful, bizarre, exaggerated, chimerical. The "adjective" "roman-tic" was also used with the connotation of disapproval. In the eighteenth century it was increasingly used with connotations of approval, especially in the descriptions of pleasing qualities in landscape. To describe the poetry of the Romantic period (about 1780-1830) the term "romantic" has all these and other meanings and connotations behind, which reflect the complexity and multiplicity of European Romanticism.

In France a distinction was made between "romanesque" (with implications of disapproval), and "romantique", which meant "tender", "gentle", "sentimental", and "sad". In this latter form it was used in English in the eighteenth century.

In Germany the word "romantisch" was used in the seventeenth century in the French sense of "romanesque", and then, increasingly from the middle of the eighteenth century in the English sense of "gentle", "melancholy". Friedrich Schlegel first established the term "romantisch" in literary context; he characterized Roman-tic writings as medieval, Christian and transcendental as opposed to classical, pagan and worldly. This German polemic was taken up by Madame de Staël who was responsible for popularizing the term "romantique" in literary contexts in France in her work *De L'Allemagne*, published in England in 1813. She made a distinction between the literature of the north and the south. The northern literature was medieval, Christian and romantic; the southern was classical and pagan.

According to many others it was in Britain that the Romantic movement really started. At any rate, as we have pointed out in this work, quite early in the eighteenth century it is possible to discern a definite shift in sensibility and feeling, particularly in relation to the natural order and Nature. Many of the Romantic poets' sentiments and responses had been foreshadowed by what has been described as a "pre-romantic sensibility". However, it should be pointed out that, "the use of the term was used by German critics at the very end of the eighteenth century to describe features which they found in their own literature, it was not at the time used in Britain in that way. The term "Romantic", to describe the poets' writings roughly between 1780 and 1830, did not come into currency until the second half of the nineteenth century. It may be a useful term, so long as it does not imply more in common among the writers than there is, or more with literary trends on the Continent." No writer thought of himself as a "Romantic" in Wordsworth's and Coleridge's time; they were dealt with as independent writers, or grouped into a number of separate schools. The English Romantic poets Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron were not, themselves, self-consciously "romantic", and differed sharply in their theory and practice.

Romanticism developed an alternative aesthetic of freedom from the formal rules of neoclassicism. The main aspects of Romanticism in the eighteenth century were:

Nature

- an increasing interest in Nature, and in the natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life;
- a growing interest in scenery, especially its more untamed and disorderly manifestations;
- an association of human moods with the "moods" of Nature, and so a subjective feeling for it and interpretation of it;
- Romantic Nature poems are meditative poems on whose scenes the poet raises an emotional problem or personal crisis;

Spontaneity and Natural Genius

- emphasis on the need for spontaneity in thought and action and in the expression of thought;
- increasing importance attached to natural genius and the power of the imagination;
- a tendency to exalt the individual and his needs and emphasis on the need for a freer and more personal expression;

The Poet-Prophet

- the poet emerged as a person endowed with a special kind of faculty which set him apart from his fellow men;
- the Romantic poet assumes the mantle of a prophet, seer and legislator;
- poets present themselves as "chosen" sons or "bards"; they assume the persona and voice of a poet-prophet, modelled on Milton and the prophets in the Bible, and put themselves forward as spokesmen for traditional Western civilization at a time of deep crisis;
- the new bards, or visionary poets, wanted to reconstruct the grounds of hope announcing the coming of a time when a renewed humanity will inhabit a renewed earth;
- unusual modes of experience were tried, and visionary states of consciousness were explored;

Imagination

- the imagination in the Romantic period was raised from being simply the faculty for creating fictions, pleasing perhaps, but not necessarily true, to a method of apprehending and communicating truth.
- the imagination became the peculiar gift of the poet and man's most important endeavour;
- the poet became an artist and a prophet;

Emotions

- instincts, emotions and the heart, rather than reason, intellect and head are trusted;
- the Romantics expose their own souls, directing the light of analysis and comment internally; they present their own crisis, their self, in a radical metaphor of an interior journey in quest of their true identity;

The Individual, the Outcast and the Romantic Hero.

- the Romantic believed only in themselves;
- human beings refused to submit to limitations and persist in setting infinite and inaccessible goals; the proper human aim was ceaseless activity, a striving for the infinite, according to Goethe's Faust, a "Streben nach dem Unendlichen";

- the invasion of the inner recesses of the personality was continued in the analysis of dreams and the irrational, in drug-taking and interest in the occult;
- some Romantics deliberately isolated themselves from society in order to give scope to their individual vision;
- there was a fascination for the private lives of individuals which reflected autobiographical works;

Romantic Hero

- the figure of the Romantic hero, a compound of guilt and superhuman greatness, who could not be defeated by death, and like a Satanic hero successfully defied the demons was variously dealt with in poems and literary works;
- the Romantic hero was either a solitary dreamer-hero, or an egocentric plagued with guilt and remorse, separated from society because he has rejected it, or because it has rejected him;
- it was also introduced the theme of exile, of the disinherited mind that could not find a spiritual home in its native land and society or anywhere in the modern world;

Children

- children were seen as holier and purer objects than adult people because they were unspoiled by civilisation and uncorrupted;
- children had a state to be envied, cultivated, enhanced, and admired.

Society

- the cult of the Noble Savage (a specific romantic concept):
- for the Romantics society had become an evil force cruelly moulding and dwarfing its citizens;
- the Romantic poets on the whole fled from the city and turned to Nature. For them it was Nature, rather than society, that's was man's proper setting. Man needed the help of nature to fulfil himself;
- the belief that society and civilisation corrupt humanity's natural innocence and instinct for good;
- poetry sees man in communion with the natural world, rather than with other men;

Religion

- there was a shift in religious ideas. Many writers failed to find Christianity satisfying. There was a search for a spiritual reality, which orthodox Christianity did not appear to supply. In this search, the more visionary writers of the romantic period drew on Platonism and Neoplatonism and various forms of dissenting Christianity. Many of their poems were built around this search;
- a considerable emphasis on natural religion was given;

History

- personal experience was emphasized and accompanied by a deepening sense of history, which found expression in the historical novels;

The Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution

- industrialisation was perceived as a threat and an evil against people and society;
- the French Revolution (1789) affected the older Romantic generation of poets with its ideas of democracy and its action of breaking with the past; in fact, humble life was seriously presented in a language really spoken by rustic people.

The new Romantic Period and the Classical Age

The contrast and distinction between the new Romantic Period and the Classical Age can be stressed with some examples to be juxtaposed with the above Romantic features. As regards children to classicist like A. Pope, they were only important in as much as they would be adult; a savage would be merely sad and negative. In the Augustan Age they believed in reason and that the passion should be controlled. Basic instincts had to be conquered. In this way mankind could reach perfection. Classicists considered the Industrial Revolution from a positive point of view, as an event creating wealth and modernization. It was also believed that civilization, as accomplished in Greek and Roman times, was also within the grasp of their Neoclassical Age.

CONTINENTAL INFLUENCES: JEAN-JAQUES ROUSSEAU

As regards the main Romantic features the major figure in the eighteenth century whose influence was immense and pervasive in the so called pre-romantic period was Jean-Jaques Rousseau, especially through the following works:

- Discours sur l'origine the l'inégalité parmi les hommes (1755);
- Rêveries du promeneur solitaire (1778);

- Les Confessions (published after his death in 1781 and 1788);
- La Nouvelle Héloïse (1761).

In his Discours Rousseau advocated a virtuous simplicity in place of a civilization of art and science. He ridiculed the idea of scientific progress and speculative philosophy and appealed to the human heart and voice of conscience. The essay on the origin of the inequality among men described man in a state of nature, like a noble animal, free of disease, naked, and without all superfluities. According to Rousseau's view man was unaggressive, indeed compassionate. He set the idea of savage man with "natural compassion" which was the pure emotion of nature, prior to all kinds of reflection, against Hobbes's view of man as naturally wicked. It was the development of human society that led to inequality and slavery. In The Social Contract (1762) Rousseau took up the argument again with the celebrated sentence: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." He recognized that there had to be some form of government, but it had to represent the interests of society, and of the individual within that society. In La Nouvelle Héloïse the virtues the author advocated were a dislike of ostentation, a fair treatment of workers and domestic staff, charity towards the poor, and liberal ideas on education, which recognized that a child should be allowed to develop at its own pace and not be forced as an adult (Émile). Rousseau's idea and belief in the original goodness of man and the corruption of modern society was carried over to an idea of the child as naturally able to use freedom to good effect. The method of introspection, enquiry into the whole nature of human behaviour, and the way in which Rousseau could express emotion (Les Confessions and Rêveries du promeneur solitaire) influenced the Romantics, particularly G. G., Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley.

Other important works on the continent were:

The French novelist Abbé Antoine-François Prevost's Manon Lescaut (1731);

In Germany the movement of the 1770's Sturm und Drang, which included the early writings of Herder, Schiller, and the great novelist and poet Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, especially the novel Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774), was an important precursor.

I. POETRY

1. THE FIRST AND SECOND ROMANTIC GENERATION OF ROMANTIC POETS:

1) BLAKE, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE;

William Wordsworth

2) BYRON, SHELLEY, KEATS.

At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries we distinguish two generations of Romantic poets. In the first group we include the poets of the older generation: William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who, in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, were young and affected by the influence of the French revolutionary ideals of democracy. The period of the French terror and the rise of Napoleon definitely disappointed them, and therefore retreated into reaction.

The second group, or younger generation of Romantic poets includes George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), John Keats (1795-1821), who were less lucky than the older poets. Their society was dominated by the repression of the Tory governments at home, apprehensive that every request for freedom might become a cause of revolution. The eighteenth century society, regarded as a great work of man, ideally holding all social classes together in mutually supporting harmony, became a repressive, dark organized body, limiting and crushing human souls.