

Romanticism

If the Enlightenment was a movement which started among a tiny elite and slowly spread to make its influence felt throughout society, Romanticism was more widespread both in its origins and influence. No other intellectual/artistic movement has had comparable variety, reach, and staying power since the end of the Middle Ages.

Beginning in Germany and England in the 1770s, by the 1820s it had swept through Europe, conquering at last even its most stubborn foe, the French. It traveled quickly to the Western Hemisphere, and in its musical form has triumphed around the globe, so that from London to Boston to Mexico City to Tokyo to Vladivostok to Oslo, the most popular orchestral music in the world is that of the romantic era. After almost a century of being attacked by the academic and professional world of Western formal concert music, the style has reasserted itself as neoromanticism in the concert halls. When John Williams created the sound of the future in *Star Wars*, it was the sound of 19th-century Romanticism--still the most popular style for epic film soundtracks.

Beginning in the last decades of the 18th century, it transformed poetry, the novel, drama, painting, sculpture, all forms of concert music (especially opera), and ballet. It was deeply connected with the politics of the time, echoing people's fears, hopes, and aspirations. It was the voice of revolution at the beginning of the 19th century and the voice of the Establishment at the end of it.

This last shift was the result of the triumph of the class which invented, fostered, and adopted as its own the romantic movement: the bourgeoisie. To understand why this should have been so, we need to look more closely at the nature of the style and its origins.

Origins:

Folklore and Popular Art

Some of the earliest stirrings of the Romantic movement are conventionally traced back to the mid-18th-century interest in folklore which arose in Germany--with Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm collecting popular fairy tales and other scholars like Johann Gottfried von Herder studying folk songs--and in England with Joseph Addison and Richard Steele treating old ballads as if they were high poetry. These activities set the tone for one aspect of Romanticism: the belief that products of the uncultivated popular imagination could equal or even surpass those of the educated court poets and composers who had previously monopolized the attentions of scholars and connoisseurs.

Whereas during much of the 17th and 18th centuries learned allusions, complexity and grandiosity were prized, the new romantic taste favored simplicity and naturalness; and these were thought to flow most clearly and abundantly from the "spontaneous" outpourings of the untutored common people. In Germany in particular, the idea of a collective *Volk* (people) dominated a good deal of thinking about the arts. Rather than paying attention to the individual

authors of popular works, these scholars celebrated the anonymous masses who invented and transmuted these works as if from their very souls. All of this fantasizing about the creative folk process reflected precious little knowledge about the actual processes by which songs and stories are created and passed on and created as well an ideology of the essence of the German soul which was to be used to dire effect by the Nazis in the 20th century.

Nationalism

The natural consequence of dwelling on creative folk genius was a good deal of nationalism. French Romantic painting is full of themes relating to the tumultuous political events of the period and later Romantic music often draws its inspiration from national folk musics. Goethe deliberately places German folkloric themes and images on a par with Classical ones in *Faust*.

Shakespeare

But one of the early effects of this interest in the folk arts seems particularly strange to us moderns: the rise and spread of the reputation of William Shakespeare. Although he is regarded today as the epitome of the great writer, his reputation was at first very different. Shakespeare was a popular playwright who wrote for the commercial theater in London. He was not college-educated, and although his company had the sponsorship of King James, his work was not entirely "respectable."

Academic critics at first scorned his indiscipline, his rejection of their concepts of drama which were derived in part from ancient Roman and Greek patterns. A good play should not mix comedy with tragedy, not proliferate plots and subplots, not ramble through a wide variety of settings or drag out its story over months or years of dramatic time; but Shakespeare's plays did all these things. A proper serious drama should always be divided neatly into five acts, but Shakespeare's plays simply flowed from one scene to the next, with no attention paid to the academic rules of dramatic architecture (the act divisions we are familiar with today were imposed on his plays by editors after his death).

If the English romantics exalted Shakespeare's works as the greatest of their classics, his effect on the Germans was positively explosive. French classical theater had been the preeminent model for drama in much of Europe; but when the German Romantics began to explore and translate his works, they were overwhelmed. His disregard for the classical rules which they found so confining inspired them. Writers like Friedrich von Schiller and Goethe created their own dramas inspired by Shakespeare. *Faust* contains many Shakespearian allusions as well as imitating all of the nonclassical qualities enumerated above.

Because Shakespeare was a popular rather than a courtly writer, the Romantics exaggerated his simple origins. In fact he had received an excellent education which, although it fell short of what a university could offer, went far beyond what the typical college student learns today about the classics. In an age drunk on the printing and reading of books he had access to the Greek myths, Roman and English history, tales by Italian humanists and a wide variety of other materials. True, he used translations, digests, and popularizations; but he was no ignoramus.

To the Romantics, however, he was the essence of folk poetry, the ultimate vindication of their faith in spontaneous creativity. Much of the drama of the European 19th century is influenced by him, painters illustrated scenes from his plays, and composers based orchestral tone poems and operas on his narratives.

The Gothic Romance

Another quite distinct contribution to the Romantic movement was the Gothic romance. The first was Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1765), set in a haunted castle and containing various mysterious apparitions such as a gigantic mailed fist. This sort of thing was popularized by writers like Ann Radcliffe and M. L. Lewis (*The Monk*) and eventually spread abroad to influence writers like Eugène Sue (France) and Edgar Allan Poe (the U.S.). Rejecting the Enlightenment ideal of balance and rationalism, readers eagerly sought out the hysterical, mystical, passionate adventures of terrified heroes and heroines in the clutches of frightening, mysterious forces. The modern horror novel and woman's romance are both descendants of the Gothic romance, as transmuted through such masterworks as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and her sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. Another classic Gothic work, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is often cited as a forerunner of modern science fiction.

Medievalism

The Gothic novel embraced the Medieval ("Gothic") culture so disdained by the early 18th century. Whereas classical art looked back constantly to the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Romantics celebrated for the first time since the Renaissance the wilder aspects of the creativity of Western Europeans from the 12th through the 14th centuries: stained glass in soaring cathedrals, tales of Robin Hood and his merry men, and--above all--the old tales of King Arthur and the knights of the round table. This influence was to spread far beyond the Gothic romance to all artistic forms in Europe, and lives on in the popular fantasy novels of today. Fairies, witches, angels--all the fantastic creatures of the Medieval popular imagination came flooding back into the European arts in the Romantic period (and all are present in *Faust*).

The longing for "simpler" eras not freighted with the weight of the Classical world gave rise to a new form: the historical novel. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was by far its most successful practitioner. Although credit for writing the first historical novel should probably go to Madame de Lafayette for her *La Princess de Clèves* (1678), Scott is generally considered to have developed the form as we know it today. Almost forgotten now, his novels like *The Bride of Lammermoor* and *Ivanhoe* nevertheless inspired writers, painters, and composers in Germany, France, Italy, Russia and many other lands.

Emotion

The other influential characteristic of the Gothic romance was its evocation of strong, irrational emotions--particularly horror. Whereas Voltaire and his comrades had abhorred "enthusiasm" and strove to dispel the mists of superstition; the Gothic writers evoked all manner of irrational scenes designed to horrify and amaze. Romantic writers generally also prized the more tender sentiments of affection, sorrow, and romantic longing. In this they were inspired by certain

currents contemporaneous with the Enlightenment, in particular the writings of Voltaire's arch-rival, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau

Rousseau was a moody, over-sensitive, even paranoid sort of fellow, much given to musing on his own feelings. Like the Englishman Samuel Richardson, he explored in his fiction the agonies of frustrated love--particularly in his sensationally successful novel *The New Heloise*--and celebrated the peculiar refinement of feeling the English called "sensibility" which we call "sensitivity." Of all aspects of Romantic fiction, the penchant for tearful sentimental wallowing in the longings and disappointments of frustrated protagonists is most alien to modern audiences. Only in opera and film where the power of music is summoned to reinforce the emotions being evoked can most modern audiences let themselves go entirely, and then only within limits.

The great minds of the 20th century have generally rejected sentimentalism, even defining its essence as false, exaggerated emotion; and we tend to find mawkish or even comical much that the Romantic age prized as moving and beautiful. Yet there was more than cheap self-indulgence and escapism in this fevered emotionalism. Its proponents argued that one could be morally and spiritually uplifted by cultivating a greater sensitivity to feelings. The cultivation of empathy for the sufferings of others could even be a vehicle for social change, as in the works of Charles Dickens. That this emotionalism was sometimes exaggerated or artificial should not obscure the fact that it also contained much that was genuine and inspiring. It is not clear that we have gained so much by prizing in our modern literature attitudes of cynicism, detachment, and ruthlessness.

Of all the emotions celebrated by the Romantics, the most popular was love. Although the great Romantic works often center on terror or rage, the motive force behind these passions is most often a relationship between a pair of lovers. In the classical world love had been more or less identical with sex, the Romans treating it in a particularly cynical manner. The Medieval troubadours had celebrated courtly adultery according to a highly artificial code that little reflected the lives of real men and women while agreeing with physicians that romantic passion was a potentially fatal disease. It was the romantics who first celebrated romantic love as the natural birthright of every human being, the most exalted of human sentiments, and the necessary foundation of a successful marriage. Whether or not one agrees that this change of attitude was a wise one, it must be admitted to have been one of the most influential in the history of the world.

This is not the place to trace the long and complex history of how the transcendent, irrational, self-destructive passion of a Romeo and Juliet came to be considered the birthright of every European citizen; but this conviction which continues to shape much of our thinking about relationships, marriage, and the family found its mature form during the Romantic age. So thoroughly has love become identified with romance that the two are now generally taken as synonyms, disregarding the earlier associations of "romance" with adventure, terror, and mysticism.

Exoticism

Another important aspect of Romanticism is the exotic. Just as Romantics responded to the longing of people for a distant past, so they provided images of distant places. The distances need not be terribly great: Spain was a favorite "exotic" setting for French Romantics, for instance. North Africa and the Middle East provided images of "Asia" to Europeans. Generally anywhere south of the country where one was resided was considered more relaxed, more colorful, more sensual.

Such exoticism consisted largely of simple stereotypes endlessly repeated, but the Romantic age was also a period in which Europeans traveled more than ever to examine at first hand the far-off lands of which they had read. Much of this tourism was heavily freighted with the attitudes fostered by European colonialism, which flourished during this period. Most "natives" were depicted as inevitably lazy, unable to govern themselves while those who aspired to European sophistication were often derided as "spoiled." Many male travelers viewed the women of almost any foreign land one could name as more sexually desirable and available than the women at home, and so they are depicted in fiction, drama, art, and opera.

Just as Scott was the most influential force in popularizing the romantic historical novel, exoticism in literature was inspired more by Lord Byron--especially his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818)--than by any other single writer. Whereas the Romantic lyric poetry of Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth had a negligible influence outside of their native tongue, the sweep of Byron's longer poems translated well into other languages and other artistic media.

Romantic exoticism is not always in tension with Romantic nationalism, for often the latter focussed on obscure folk traditions which were in themselves exotic to the audiences newly exposed to them. Goethe's witches were not more familiar to his audience because they were Germanic, unlike, say, the Scottish witches in *Macbeth*.

Religion

One of the most complex developments during this period is the transformation of religion into a subject for artistic treatment far removed from traditional religious art. The Enlightenment had weakened, but hardly uprooted, established religion in Europe. As time passed, sophisticated writers and artists were less and less likely to be conventionally pious; but during the Romantic era many of them were drawn to religious imagery in the same way they were drawn to Arthurian or other ancient traditions in which they no longer believed. Religion was estheticized, and writers felt free to draw on Biblical themes with the same freedom as their predecessors had drawn on classical mythology, and with as little reverence.

Faust begins and ends in Heaven, has God and the devil as major characters, angels and demons as supporting players, and draws on wide variety of Christian materials, but it is not a Christian play. The Enlightenment had weakened the hold of Christianity over society to the extent that some at least, like Goethe, no longer felt the need to engage in the sort of fierce battles with it Voltaire had fought, but felt instead free to *play* with it. A comparable attitude can be seen in much of the work of the English Pre-Raphaelite painters who began in mid-century to treat Christian subjects in the context of charmingly "naive" Medievalism.

The mixture of disbelief in and fascination with religion evident in such works illustrates a general principal of intellectual history: artistic and social movements almost never behave like rigid clock pendulums, swinging all the way from one direction to another. A better metaphor for social change is the movement of waves on a beach, in which an early wave is receding while another advances over it, and elements of both become mixed together. For all that many of its features were reactions against the rationalist Enlightenment, Romanticism also incorporated much from the earlier movement, or coexisted with the changes it had brought about.

Individualism

One of the most important developments of this period is the rise in the importance of individualism. Before the 18th Century, few Europeans concerned themselves with discovering their own individual identities. They were what they had been born: nobles, peasants, or merchants. As mercantalism and capitalism gradually transformed Europe, however, it destabilized the old patterns. The new industrialists naturally liked to credit themselves for having built their large fortunes and rejected the right of society to regulate and tax their enterprises. Sometimes they tried to fit into the traditional patterns by buying noble titles; but more and more often they developed their own tastes in the arts and created new social and artistic movements alien to the old aristocracy. This process can be seen operating as early as the Renaissance in the Netherlands.

The changing economy not only made individualism attractive to the newly rich, it made possible a free market in the arts in which entrepreneurial painters, composers, and writers could seek out sympathetic audiences to a pay them for their works, no longer confined to handful of Church and aristocratic patrons who largely shared the same values. They could now *afford* to pursue their individual tastes in a way not possible even in the Renaissance.

It was in the Romantic period--not coincidentally also the period of the industrial revolution--that such concern with individualism became much more widespread. Byron in literature and Beethoven in music are both examples of romantic individualism taken to extremes. But the most influential exemplar of individualism for the 19th century was not a creative artist at all, but a military man: Napoleon Bonaparte. The dramatic way in which he rose to the head of France in the chaotic wake of its bloody revolution, led his army to a series of triumphs in Europe to build a brief but influential Empire, and created new styles, tastes, and even laws with disregard for public opinion fascinated the people of the time. He was both loved and hated; and even fifty years after his death he was still stimulating authors like Dostoyevsky, who saw in him the ultimate corrosive force which celebrated individual striving and freedom at the expense of responsibility and tradition.

We call the reckless character who seeks to remold the world to his own desires with little regard for morality or tradition "Faustian," after Goethe's character, but he might as well be called "Napoleonic."

The modern fascination with self-definition and self-invention, the notion that adolescence is naturally a time of rebellion in which one "finds oneself," the idea that the best path to faith is through individual choice, the idea that government exists to serve the individuals who have

created it: all of these are products of the romantic celebration of the individual at the expense of society and tradition.

Nature

The subject of the relationship of Romanticism to nature is a vast one which can only be touched on here. There has hardly been a time since the earliest antiquity that Europeans did not celebrate nature in some form or other, but the attitudes toward nature common in the Western world today emerged mostly during the Romantic period. The Enlightenment had talked of "natural law" as the source of truth, but such law was manifest in human society and related principally to civic behavior. Unlike the Chinese and Japanese, Europeans had traditionally had little interest in natural landscapes for their own sake. Paintings of rural settings were usually extremely idealized: either well-tended gardens or tidy versions of the Arcadian myth of ancient Greece and Rome.

Here again, Rousseau is an important figure. He loved to go for long walks, climb mountains, and generally "commune with nature." His last work is called *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*). Europe had become more civilized, safer, and its citizens now felt freer to travel for the simple pleasure of it. Mountain passes and deep woods were no longer merely perilous hazards to be traversed, but awesome views to be enjoyed and pondered. The violence of ocean storms came to be appreciated as an esthetic object in any number of paintings, musical tone poems, and written descriptions, as in the opening of Goethe's *Faust*.

None of this had been true of earlier generations, who had tended to view the human and the natural as opposite poles, with the natural sometimes exercising an evil power to degrade and dehumanize those who were to drawn to it. The Romantics, just as they cultivated sensitivity to emotion generally, especially cultivated sensitivity to nature. It came to be felt that to muse by a stream, to view a thundering waterfall or even confront a rolling desert could be morally improving. Much of the nature writing of the 19th century has a religious quality to it absent in any other period. This shift in attitude was to prove extremely powerful and long-lasting, as we see today in the love of Germans, Britons and Americans for wilderness.

It may seem paradoxical that it was just at the moment when the industrial revolution was destroying large tracts of woods and fields and creating an unprecedentedly artificial environment in Europe that this taste arose; but in fact it could probably have arisen in no other time. It is precisely people in urban environments aware of the stark contrast between their daily lives and the existence of the inhabitants of the wild who romanticise nature. They are attracted to it precisely because they are no longer unselfconsciously part of it. Faust, for instance, is powerfully drawn to the moonlit landscape outside his study at the beginning of Goethe's play largely because he is so discontented with the artificial world of learning in which he has so far lived.

Victorianism

Scholars of English literature are prone to make much of the distinction between the Romantic and Victorian Ages, but for our purposes the latter is best viewed as merely a later stage of the former. The prudish attitudes popularly associated with Queen Victoria's reign are manifest in Germany and--to a lesser extent--in France as well. Victoria did not create Victorianism, she merely exemplified the temper of the time. But throughout the Victorian period the wild, passionate, erotic, even destructive aspects of Romanticism continue in evidence in all the arts.

Reactions

Like the Enlightenment, Romanticism calls forth numerous counter-movements, like Realism, Impressionism, Neo-classicism, etc.; but like the Enlightenment, it also keeps on going. None of these were entirely to replace the Romantic impulse. Hard-bitten naturalism in fiction and film coexists today with sweeping romanticism; there are large audiences for both. The contemporary vogue for "Victorian" designs is just one of many examples of the frequent revivals of Romantic tastes and styles that have recurred throughout the twentieth century.

Looking back over the list of characteristics discussed above one can readily see that despite the fact that Romanticism was not nearly as coherent a movement as the Enlightenment, and lacked the sort of programmatic aims the latter professed, it was even more successful in changing history--changing the definition of what it means to be human.