

Introduction to the Romantic Era in English Poetry Ian Johnston (1994)

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A. Introduction: A Comment on the Enlightenment Project

In the past few weeks (and in last semester) we have been spending a great deal of time on what we call the Enlightenment, that period (from roughly the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth) which, generally speaking, we characterize as a widespread rational reform movement aimed at putting our understanding of nature, society, politics, justice, and human morality under the authoritative banner of reason.

In discussing the Enlightenment, we stressed that it arose, in large part, as a strong reaction against what had characterized the previous one hundred and fifty years--a series of inconclusive but extremely destructive religious quarrels and, often under the guise of religious issues, collisions between rival nations growing in power. From this perspective, the Enlightenment we can view as Western civilization's attempt to seek through reason a means of understanding human problems and discussing them without involving conflicting traditions, especially religious traditions, which, given the loss of unity in the Christian Church, provided no longer a continuing way of reaching a consensus.

We have also recognized that an important element in the Enlightenment was the growth of science as a means of taking control over nature and shaping human life and human society in ways which might address some of the prevalent evils--poverty, sickness, famine, civil injustice. Both Bacon and Descartes, for example, explicitly summoned us to the scientific endeavour for the relief from human suffering.

What I want to examine today is the extremely powerful, influential, and long lasting reaction to the Enlightenment, that is, the counter-pressures which built up into a challenge to this rising new orthodoxy of reason and science, a reaction which culminated in the latter years of the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth in what we call Romanticism, the Romantic Movement, or the Romantic Revolution.

Before looking in more detail at this reaction to the Enlightenment, however, I want to stress in the strongest possible terms that we are all still very much products of the Enlightenment project launched in the eighteenth century. I do

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not want my concentration on the challenge to that project to suggest that somehow all that material we have been studying became outdated or superseded. Far from it. For better or worse, all of us here are still firm believers, to a greater or lesser extent, in that Enlightenment reform project.

To illustrate this, let me by way of summing up list a few notions, absolutely central to the Enlightenment, which are still fundamental to the way in which most of us presently think:

We all subscribe to the idea that government should be by consent of the governed (without that, government is not justified, not legitimate), that government should have a respect for individual rights, minority rights, a certain measure of equality (especially equality under the law), and some international moral obligations. We expect our governments to conduct their decision making rationally, in accordance with law and, in many cases, bearing in mind a social-contract theory.

Most of us prize independence as one of the highest goals of life, see education as the appropriate road to achieving that, and, in the name of equality, fully support the idea of free public education for everyone and of universal free speech subject to limitations imposed by the rights of others to be treated as ends not as means. Furthermore, we see rational analysis and the power to use that to arrive at general rational principles as the fundamental component of critical thinking, so much so, that we organize a great deal of our education, especially in secondary and post-secondary education upon that principle.

We support religious tolerance and a separation of church and state. Moreover, we give obedience not to particular people but to official positions; we do not recognize any subservience to hereditary rank.

We rely upon science, the scientific method, and the scientific research establishment (the experts) to inform us about the world, to identify problems, and above all, to deal with them. Rational expertise in the service of society is, for most of us, still the basis for hopes in progress. We organize our education systems, our hospitals, our prisons, our executive branch of governments on the basis of this belief.

All of our political options, no matter what we call them (Liberal, Progressive Conservative, Christian Democrats, Social Credit, New Democratic Party, Republican, Democrat, or whatever) all adhere to this Enlightenment program. We have no significant electoral options outside of this tradition. The parties may quarrel about the extent of government control, about rates of taxation, about support programs, but underneath the apparent richness of choice there is a massive fundamental agreement about how society ought to be organized, what priorities society ought to pursue. This is particularly true of North America, since

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both America and Canada were founded as Enlightenment experiments and have no traditions from before this period, other than the Aboriginal cultures, which have been generally marginalized or exterminated in the service of this agenda.

In other words, the Enlightenment project is still flourishing. We may be somewhat less confident than our grandfathers and great-great-grandmothers about the benefits of the project, but it is still absolutely central to many many of the things basic to how we live and think and function and hope for.

B. Romanticism: The Problem of Agreement

That said, however, we have to recognize that not everyone in the eighteenth century found the Enlightenment project congenial. We have already seen how in *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift savagely mocks the pretensions of those who think that Yahoos can be made reasonable or that the scientific study of nature is going to yield productive and socially beneficial results. And this response was widely shared by orthodox Christians everywhere (and was, among other things, the source of much of the opposition to the growing materialistic emphasis in science).

In addition to such opposition from traditional Christian thinkers, however, there was a growing opposition to many of the cherished notions of the rational reformers. And this opposition culminated near the end of the century in what we call Romanticism or the Romantic Movement. It is vital to stress at the outset that no term in the history of ideas is more disputed than the term Romanticism. There are literally hundreds of conflicting definitions about what that label means and there are endless disputes about its causes and its effects.

In 1824 two French scholars, *Depuis* and *Cononet*, set out to define the term Romanticism, which had only recently (in the previous twenty years) come into vogue. After what they described as "twelve months of suffering," they abandoned the project as impossibly complicated. About 100 years later, an English scholar listed 11,396 different books discussing the concept, including the particularly helpful definition in the first history of the subject (by *F. R. de Toreius*, alias *Rontineux*) that Romanticism is "just that which cannot defined." So ambiguous has this term become that one prominent historian of ideas, *A. O. Lovejoy*, has suggested that we cease to use the term, since we have no shared agreement about what it means as an analytic or descriptive concept. And if you read the *Oxford History of English Literature*, you will notice that the writers never do use the word. Instead they refer throughout to writers of the Romantic Era.

Complicating this is the fact that the Romantic Movement had very different histories in different countries, and thus something like German Romanticism is

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in many essential aspects quite different from French Romanticism, which is again, in some respects, distinct from English Romanticism and American Romanticism. Moreover, the term tends to shift its meaning depending upon what field of study one is considering--Romanticism in music has in some ways significantly different components from Romanticism in poetry or science.

Many of those whom we most celebrate as Romantic artists, like Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and Keats expressly rejected the label (which they thought derogatory). The writer most immediately associated with European Romanticism, who did more initially to popularize the movement, and who produced the two most important Romantic heroes, Werther and Faust, condemned the literary trends he had, more than anyone, helped to create: "Romanticism is disease," Goethe remarked, "Classicism is health." And there are constant arguments about whether someone like Wordsworth or Keats or Goethe is primarily an Enlightenment figure rather than a Romantic poet.

As I say, it's a mine field. When I was a graduate student I briefly entertained the notion of doing a PhD thesis exploring the origins of Romanticism. The venerable professor I consulted shook his head slowly and advised me that that might not be a good idea: "The last ten students who tried that," he said, "were never heard from again."

There seems to be considerable agreement that what happened in that period we call the Romantic Era (in England from 1798 to about 1840) was of almost unparalleled significance, not simply in the amazing resurgence of quality in English poetry but also in our very understanding of art. Isaiah Berlin, a very well known historian of ideas, called the Romantic Movement the single most important shift in the sensibility of Western thinking since the fifth century BC. While most commentators might not be that emphatic, they would certainly agree that something happened in that period which has exercised a decisive influence on how we live. But the agreement on precisely what that was, why it occurred, and what its long- and short-term consequences might be is lacking.

So in this lecture I'm treading on very disputed territory. I'm going to have to simplify and generalize in order not to hedge everything I say in a thicket of qualifications. In order to kick off my discussion of Romanticism I'm going to screw my courage to the sticking place and offer a short and simple definition. Having done this, I would like to examine some of the implications of this definition of Romanticism, exploring how this view of the world has led to certain important consequences, especially in the writing of poetry. If there is time, I would like to offer some speculations about the wider consequences and, finally, to raise some questions about why the Romantic Movement might have come to be.

Romanticism: Towards a Working Definition

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In a spirit of boldness I want to offer the following idea as central to what was truly revolutionary about the shift known as the Romantic Movement: it marked for many people (although not for all) the abandonment of the idea that there was a given order in nature; it posited the notion that order was something not discovered in nature but created by the human mind. In words of John Adams: Chaos is the law of nature; order the dream of man.

Now, virtually every writer we have read so far, no matter how much they may have differed on many points from others, shared one belief, that there was a given order to the natural world and the cosmos. The Earth and everything on it, including human beings, were part of that universal order. And the major purpose of human life was to recognize or learn something about that given order and to live one's life in accordance with it. Of course, there were competing visions of what that given order might be and about how we come to know enough about it in order to derive a sense of purpose about our lives. Some argued, as we know, that divine revelation in the Bible, as interpreted by the Roman Catholic Church, was the only true source of knowledge about the order of world; others argued that reasoned inquiry through deduction provided the only reliable sense of how the world was; still others argued for observation and experiment; and still others argued that tradition was the surest knowledge about the world and human purposes in it. Some stated that the order of the world was entirely mechanical, others that it was primarily spiritual. And so on.

The history of Western Civilization contains a long and frequently bloody and always intellectually and imaginatively very stimulating record of collisions between different versions of the world's order. But we need to recognize that fundamental to them all was a belief that there was an order to be discovered, at least in part.

One useful way to approach the Romantic Movement is to see it as the rejection of this long tradition. At this point I don't want to speculate about the reasons (we'll get to those later); I do want to clarify what this idea about the abandonment of the idea of a given established order means.

For the Romantic the concept of a given universal order was meaningless. In itself the world had no order to discover. Order was something imposed on the world. And such an imposition of order was a creative act. It was a product of the creative powers of the mind transforming the given chaos of the world into an emotionally coherent vision. It was, above all, an imaginative act.

One useful image to communicate this sense comes from George Eliot's reference (in *Middlemarch*) to the scratches on a table, which, if one inspects them at close quarters, have a haphazard, chance arrangement. However, if one places a candle on the table, the scratches now appear perfectly ordered in

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concentric circles (the same effect can be observed with the scratches on the horizontal surfaces of an automobile and the effect of the sun's reflection on that surface

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only our candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent. (Chapter 27, opening)]

Now for the Romantic this metaphor is particularly important (although not in George Eliot's sense of a "flattering illusion" but in a much more immediately creative and meaningful sense). Whereas, the function of anyone interpreting the world in the older tradition was to, in effect, offer a picture of it, to, in Hamlet's words "hold a mirror up to nature," or, as a scientist, to construct a rational model of the world which accurately reflected (at least by analogy) what was really out there, in the Romantic view, the interpreter should act as a lamp which, in the process of casting light out into the dark chaos of the incoherent given, ordered experience by the power of the illumination. The world itself had no illumination to offer. What fed the lamp was not something given by the external world but the fuel provided by the individual imagination.

This act of creatively interpreting the world as the only source of meaning is a radically individual act, carried out by the power of the individual imagination. It is our personal task to create an order in the world. To adopt anyone else's is to fail to fulfill one's imaginative potential, to be spiritually dead. One was only human to the extent that one could liberate one's imagination to create a structure of meaning for oneself. The universe, the German Romantic philosopher Fichte observed, is what you make it. To follow reason, or doctrine, or traditional ways of thought was to dehumanize oneself. I must create my own system, said Blake, or become enslaved to another man's. Other people's systems, especially inherited rational systems of thought, like those proposed by Enlightenment thinkers, were static, repetitive, imprisoning, rule bound, limiting, and dead. And the highest forms of knowledge are those which, rejecting all such limitations, we imaginatively create for ourselves.

What this Romantic credo does, it will be clear, is to shift our responsibility from aligning ourselves to the necessary given order of things (whether that is seen in a religious or rational or traditional social context) to the overwhelmingly

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important task of creating an order for our own lives. Our goal is not, as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, and Kant argued, to develop into independent rational moralists sharing a common insight into universal responsibilities but rather to affirm our own vision of ourselves, to turn ourselves into a poetic creation of our own imaginations. Or, to put it another way, we all have the primary responsibility of living as poets rather than as philosophers, for basing our lives on imaginative metaphors of our own devising rather than on universal rational systems.

Romanticism therefore values the particular insight, the visionary glimpse into imaginative union with the universe, the emotional certainty and joy that arises from a feeling of intimate association in a envisioned patterned order. It distrusts any systematic knowledge, any inherited systems of belief, anything not generated by one's own imagination. It rejects any sense of rational limits to what the human imagination might know. The power of the imagination is potentially infinite: "Less than all cannot satisfy man," cried Blake.

Wollstonecraft, you remember, saw as an essential ingredient in the education of women training in the ability to generalize, that is to reach an understanding of the world based upon reasonable inferences which could coordinate one's rational knowledge and prepare one for the highest development of one's humanity, the independence which comes from rational moral principles. In this emphasis, she is confirming what Rousseau and Kant also insist upon.

For Romantics this educational program is entirely wrong. What matters is not general truth rationally arrived at but the organizing imaginative insight, the sense of a visionary whole. For this, formal education of the sort Wollstonecraft or Rousseau recommends is detrimental. To generalize, proclaimed Blake, is to be an idiot. He did not want to place a grain of sand in its appropriate position in the rock cycle but to see a divine face in every grain.

I assert for My self that I do not behold the Outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. "What," it will be Questioned, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty." (Blake)

Some Immediate Consequence of the Romantic Attitude

Given this view of the world and the only way we can fully understand it, the Romantic spirit redefined what was most worthwhile in life and what was not. Let me here list a few of the attitudes and opinions which naturally arise from such a celebration of the imaginative creative power over Enlightenment reason (this is a partial list).

The most important power of the human mind is not reason but imagination (something, as we have seen, about which Rousseau and Wollstonecraft, among many others, entertain strong suspicions as a diversion from our rational freedom, and thus a source of psychological oppression and delusion). And the imagination requires a new kind of freedom--a freedom to contemplate, to wander, to experiment with one's life in a manner which matches one's own poetic conceptions of oneself, a freedom enjoyed by children and young people. Such imaginative freedom is ultimately more important than the rational freedom central to the Enlightenment--with its much more emphatic stress on political freedom, economic independence, and moral freedom to choose. Whatever threatens such imaginative freedom is dehumanizing.

What serves to generate imaginative passion is, in itself, valuable. Thus, the extraordinary, unique, thrilling, weird, mysterious, terrifying, dynamic become important sources of what life is all about. Traveling over the Alps, experimenting with narcotics, sampling the beauties of nature, exploring the limits of one's own emotions in all possible ways, legal and illegal--all these become in some way mandated. Chaucer, we know, made three or four trips over the Alps and never mentioned them in his poetry; to him they were an unwelcome obstacle in his journeys. Wordsworth traveled over the Alps once and never got over the experience as an imaginatively transforming wonder. For him and others experiencing nature alone and at length becomes a moral imperative, because nature, especially the grander and scarier parts of nature, is essential for imaginative energy. In celebrating such imaginative stimulants, the Romantics redefined the connotations of many words. Words like extraordinary, fond, imaginative, enthusiastic, which throughout mainstream eighteenth century thought are pejorative (as in Swift and Austen) become valuable commendations in the Romantic vocabulary.

Being true to a conception of oneself becomes more important than the traditionally social virtues. The person who sees his or her life as an active creation and recreation of meaning, who spares no effort to face the imaginative challenges of life, no matter what the cost, is far more heroic and admirable than the one who settles down in the security of the Aristotelian, Christian, or Enlightenment virtues. As one Romantic enthusiast puts it, What constitutes adultery is not the hour which a woman gives to her lover, but the night which she afterwards spends with her husband. The Romantic hero who dies in this pursuit is truly to be celebrated. From this period on we celebrate the phenomenon of the artist who dies too young. To burn out is better than to rust. And, as we shall see, defying traditional morality in the pursuit of one's personal vision, even if that defiance leads to crime, cruelty, and destruction, is the mark of the true Romantic spirit: the person who sets himself or herself above any rules not of his own imaginative devising. The death of Mozart has prompted many stories of intrigue and murder, but the deaths of Shelley, Keats, and Byron, like the death of Jim Morrison or Elvis Presley or James Dean, spawns a cult of

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worshippers, there to celebrate, not the artistic achievement in the work, but the Romantic achievement in the life and especially the death.

Given the Romantic ethos, originality becomes an important positive value in art and in life. Experimentation with new experiences, new forms of expression, newly invented systems of thought becomes the mark of the true genius. Whereas for Shakespeare and Mozart, originality lies in perfecting an existing artistic genre, for the Romantic artist originality stems from the development of something new, expressed in a new, often shocking manner. From the Romantic period on we inherit a vocabulary of artistic criticism that often sees novelty as important as quality, especially if the novelty leads, as it so often does, to poverty because there is no public market for the art.

Romanticism also redefines the notion of heroic conduct. Romantic heroes were not those ideal figures Chaucer or Swift or Rousseau celebrated for their public virtues: moderation, temperance, fortitude, communal service, charity, bravery in the face of tyranny. Nor were they sensible rational independent figures like George Washington or Emile. They were passionately individualistic, imposing their imaginative visions on the world no matter what the cost to themselves, their friends, or their fellow citizens: Prometheus, Satan, Young Napoleon, Cain, Heathcliff--figures of violent self-affirmation and often resistance, who insisted on imposing their self-generated vision upon the world, who saw life as a series of encounters with forces to be overcome, to be organized by the heroic act of imaginative will, valuable not because it served to promote some rational program of reform (on the contrary their efforts are frequently very destructive of others) but simply because it was a product of their imaginative wills.

Thus, Romanticism celebrated, above all, the figure of the heroic visionary artist, struggling over time against a hostile or uncaring world, never giving up until death, living life as an unending series of self-affirmations, moments of collision in which the power of the individual's mind and his or her faith in the imagination, imposed a sense of order and gave value to his or her life against insuperable odds.

Let me give you some examples to make this point more emphatically. It will be clear to you, I hope, from reading Rousseau that in many respects he stood for everything the Romantic hated. He distrusted the imagination, he wished in an ideal state that everyone live under the direction of rational morality, guided by majoritarian democratic decisions. He distrusted many forms of art and self-examination as psychologically oppressive and stressed a very carefully thought-out rational socialization of all citizens to a common ideal. And yet Rousseau had an immense influence upon the Romantic movement. For in his career he became one of the first artistic figures whose life exerted a profound influence upon young artists. Hounded from place to place, earning a notorious reputation, openly writing about all his actions (like the giving away of his

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children), and yet always defiant, always insisting upon the rightness of his often idiosyncratic views, Rousseau in his own person and life became one of great figures of the persecuted artist, the thinker-poet as refugee. Such a life had an enormous influence on, for example, the young German poet and playwright Schiller, who later was appalled when he actually read what Rousseau had written.

Napoleon, too, stirred the Romantic imagination. Here was a common man from an obscure part of Europe redefining the world by the sheer brilliance of his imagination, personality, and courage. The young Napoleon put it this way: "I feel myself driven towards a purpose which I do not know. As soon as I have reached it, as soon as I shall no longer be necessary, an atom will suffice to shatter me. Until then all human powers are capable of nothing against me" (1812). Napoleon, of course, became the great disappointment, too. For when he had himself crowned Emperor, Romantics everywhere were filled with bitter disillusionment at the way in which their hero had apparently become just another tyrant. Beethoven, for one, was so aggrieved he took to his bed for three days and then destroyed the title page of the symphony he had just written, which he was intending to dedicate to Napoleon, and eventually dedicated to the memory of a great man.

But the greatest artist as persecuted figure, artist as permanent refugee was Lord Byron, whose life was almost certainly the greatest single contribution in Europe to popularizing the notion of the Romantic hero (the Bronte heroes--Heathcliff and Rochester--are explicitly derived from popular conception of Byron). Vilified throughout the orthodox establishment, Byron, like Rousseau, turned the outrageous conduct of his personal life into the subject matter of his writing, and virtually dared the world to like it or lump it. His excessive and well publicized extravagant lifestyle, his numerous affairs, the incest with his sister, the mistreatment of his wife, and his delight in shocking his contemporaries for many people defined the essence of the Romantic artist. And when Byron died in the war to liberate Greece, his canonization was complete. (It's interesting, by the way, in contemplating Byron's influence, to notice that in Bertrand Russell's *History of Philosophy*, there is a chapter devoted to Byron, the only poet so singled out, a remarkable tribute to the pervasive influence of his life and reputation on European thinking, even though much of what Byron actually wrote is often more in the spirit of the great Augustan satirists).

The Effects of Romanticism on Art

Clearly the Romantic ethos, as briefly sketched out above, had a dramatic effect on artists--changing their vision of their role and the styles most appropriate to carrying it out. Given the central importance of the creative imagination as the only true source of order in the world, the poet, rather than the philosopher or the theologian, becomes the chief interpreter of reality. And human beings are only

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fully human to the extent that they themselves are poets, can take imaginative charge of their own lives in a continuous act of self creation in a world that, without such personal interpretation, is without meaning. Poets, Shelley affirmed, are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Thus, one characteristic form for Romantic art, especially poetry, is a celebration of imaginative liberation by the abandonment of reason, social restrictions, any limitations of tradition--a release of the energetic, joyful, creative individual into a world of infinite potential. The following well known poem by William Wordsworth captures this spirit.

The Tables Turned

Up! up! my friend, and quit your books,
Or surely you'll grow double.
Up! up! my friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble. . . .

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it. . . .

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.

Now, there's something immensely appealing about this basic Romantic ethic--the freedom to be whatever we want to be, to create our own lives for ourselves, casting aside all that difficult need to learn and to discipline ourselves, to go out into the world with no sense of any limit to our own creative desires, insisting that the world answer to us, rather than the other way around. And it's not surprising that whenever there's an upsurge of the Romantic spirit, the cutting edge is often a call of the sort well defined by Wordsworth's sentiments.

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Listen to a great deal of rock 'n' roll music and you see the point. Life is great when we can rock around the clock with the leader of the pack and Peggy Sue, with good vibrations as we twist and shout, rocking the night away at the hop, twisting by the pool with Johnny B. Good and his Great Balls of Fire, because we're born to be wild, and Rhonda is going to help me have fun, fun, fun, 'til daddy takes the T-Bird away. This is the land where in the field of opportunity it's always ploughing time again. Life's an eternal beach party with Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon, and we can just keep riding the waves until we sooner or later land on the beach. If I can get my rear end moving to the self-generated beat, then my heart and mind will follow. And so on.

Now, at this level the Romantic spirit is a relatively uncomplicated celebration of the anarchic, optimistic, youthful spirit of sheer potentiality, an unfocussed affirmation of energy, motion, and good feelings. And if this were all there was to the Romantic ethic, it would never be much more than a pleasant but ultimately rather adolescent yearning for a spirit of total freedom (a good deal of popular Romanticism is little more than that).

But there's a problem--the great issue of Romanticism--namely, what happens to this youthful creative spirit when it encounters the real world, especially what happens over time as that happy enthusiasm has to deal with the problems of getting older, of a world which often resists our desires for imaginative order, a world which brings pain, disappointment, and, worst of all, boredom. What is the Romantic spirit then to do? And so a good deal of the most interesting and moving Romantic art focuses upon a characteristic tension--that between, on the one hand, the poetic spirit in the individual seeking self-creating joy and affirmation as the only source of meaning in life and, on the other hand, a world which does not immediately answer to his or her conceptions of it, a world which resists the creative powers of the mind.

For it should be clear that the Romantic ethos places a huge responsibility on the poetic powers of the individual. And what am I to do if my imagination gets tired, if the dreary sameness and oppressiveness of the world become so burdensome that I can find no sufficient transforming power within, if I, in a word, get tired or, what is often worse, bored? What if I find myself in a repetitive unsatisfying rut? To what can I then turn? Since I betray my Romantic spirit if I embrace some systematic belief (i.e., define myself by some inherited system or traditional authority), I am faced with a cruel sense of despair. If I'm only as good as my last gig, what happens when I don't have the energy to go into the next one?

In order to illuminate this point, let us consider a short poem by Wordsworth, for no English Romantic poet was more attuned to this central tension within the Romantic spirit or indicated more clearly how we can deal with it. Here is one of his best known early poems.

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I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed--and gazed--but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Notice first how this poem moves in time. Most of the poem is exploring a memory. In the last stanza we move into the present time and discover the importance of that memory years after the event (and in very different circumstances). This poem alerts us to a particular form of Romantic questioning: the speaker is in present distress--questioning his ability to make life joyful and meaningful. What is available, by way of cure for this distress, is the memory of a time when the speaker did possess a vital creative spirit, usually a time when he or she was very much younger. The ability of the mind imaginatively to recall such visionary moments, becomes in Wordsworth's best poetry, an energizing source enabling the dispirited individual to cope with later distress.

You notice, too, how in this poem the tone is overwhelmingly meditative, the solitary musings of a reflective "I." The voice of such a poem, John Stuart Mill observed, is not so much heard as overheard. This meditative lyrical style is in

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many respects quite different from the traditionally most admired forms of poetry, which tended to be public verse: satire, epic, heroic odes and so. The Romantic style in poetry, especially in English poetry, suddenly transforms what was generally considered an often less worthy genre, the short meditative lyric, into the characteristic expression of the truly poetic spirit. And from the Romantic period to this day, the meditative lyric has been a dominant form, considered much more central to what the spirit of poetry is all about than, say, satire or dramatic verse or epic. Wordsworth's poems, here and elsewhere, insist that the memories of youthful inspiration are the healthiest curative powers for adult distress. The best cure for the mental anguish of adult life is a more energetic imaginative commitment to the restorative powers of memory, especially childhood and adolescent memories when life was joyous. The greatness of Wordsworth's best poems emerge not from this idea, but from the energy and emotional conviction the poem expresses about that idea.

Incidentally, Wordsworth is, more than anyone else, responsible for the notion that the best gift we can give to our children is a host of joyous young memories--especially memories of nature--which will guide them throughout life, and this idea has exerted a powerful influence on education, the establishment of natural preserves (parks), and the importance of prolonging youth as a key to a satisfying adult life. This emphasis was in marked contrast to the older tradition of seeing the purpose of education as instilling adult characteristics in children as rapidly as possible. Those of you interested in the history of art can follow the development of this change in the portrayal of children in family portraits, which demonstrates a marked shift from depicting children as young adults (in adult clothes and poses) to depicting children as children.

And, given this characteristic concern of much Romantic poetry about the tensions between a past when one's imagination was alive and a present filled with distress, by way of a piece of advice about reading Romantic poetry, especially "Tintern Abbey" or the "Immortality Ode," let me stress that you have to keep very close track of the verb tenses, in order to follow the transitions from the present into the past, back to the present, and often into the future. For time is the great enemy of the Romantic spirit. We all understand the attractions and powers of youth, but how do we sustain that spirit? And so typically a Romantic lyric poem on the Wordsworthian style will move back and forth between a present in which I am unhappy and unfulfilled, back to a past when I can recall the spontaneous joys of a life full of imaginative energy, and then back to the present, with the memory either (as in the above Wordsworth poem) providing enough faith to cope with present distress and even hope for the future or--in the more tragic Romantic poems--the failure of the memory to rejuvenate the imagination and thus a failure to cope with the deepening despair. Many of the very greatest Romantic poems in English explore specifically this source of Romantic despair: "The Immortality Ode," Coleridge's "Dejection Ode," Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," and soon.

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It's also interesting to observe that this theme is also characteristic of many of the greatest rock 'n' roll songs--especially the territory ruled by early Springsteen, Dylan, Waits, the Eagles, Jackson Brown, and some others: Racing in the Streets, The Pretender, Jersey Girl, Tambourine Man, Brownsville Girl, Against the Wind, Hotel California, and so on. How do I keep on rocking when I'm getting old and tired and repeating myself? Why can't I remain ignorant and carefree: "I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then." Life goes on long after the dream of living is gone.

And when we look at the novel, we find there too a common Romantic story, especially in American fiction, which traces what happens to the youthful Romantic spirit who bravely sets forth to create a life for himself according to his own best conception. How does such a spirit, whether a cowboy, a lawman, an athlete, an explorer, or whatever, cope when time starts to catch up. Typically there are two resolutions: in the optimistic version, the spirit does succeed in transforming the world to fit his or her conception of it; the courage, energy, and faith in the self do not flag, and the world eventually shapes itself to answer the hero or heroine's conception of it and his or her place in it. Even if, in some cases, the hero is finally defeated, this version of the story will often suggest that the success achieved was overwhelmingly valuable. In the tragic version of the story, the hero is defeated by a world which proves too powerful, too resistant to the hero's transforming powers. And thus the main character becomes a pathetic victim to the meaningless cruelty and indifference of the world which this time has proved impervious to his or her attempts to create joy and meaning. The hero or heroine may have experienced such joy and meaning as a child, but the attempt to recreate such youthful order is defeated.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that this structure or this story is the only literary form (even if it becomes a dominant concern). Romanticism's interest in originality gave a premium to the unusual--strange stories often cast in a completely new form. Given its interest in attacking received ideas of uniformity, standardization, and universality, Romanticism put a very high value on the unique, the peculiar, the local; what Schlegel called "the abnormal species of literature . . . even the eccentric and monstrous." (qu McGann 31). So literature about the fabulous, the cruel, the mysterious, the horrible became of central interest. Evoking powerfully moving symbols without any easy rational explanation attested to the mysterious untapped powers of the imagination. That quality has helped to make Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn" and "The Ancient Mariner" among the most famous and popular of all Romantic poems.

One gets a sense of the variety in Romanticism's interests by a short list of some of its most popular heroic figures:

The Man of Feeling, the Sensitive Soul, the Suffering Artist (suffering because the world is too crude or intractable for his imaginative mind: e.g. Hamlet, Werther)

The Historical Rebel (the overthrower of ancient authority, not for a rational reform program but as an affirmation of personal greatness: e.g., Napoleon, Satan, Cain, Che),

The Outsider-Criminal-Social Outcast (the person who will not compromise his sense of self for any social standard: e.g., hero as rebel, criminal, drug addict, the Marquis de Sade, Heathcliff, Billy the Kid, Underground Man)

The Fatal Woman (the source of mystery and power, secretly in tune with magic of nature: e.g., La Belle Dame Sans Merci, the Blue Angel, Morgan Le Fay)

The Isolato-Quester (the hero in search who defines his life as a series of collisions in an eternal search for cosmic union or self fulfilment on his or her own terms, the hero who defines his life by eternal motion: Faust, Don Juan, Shane, the Ancient Mariner, Easy Rider, Hans Solo, Ishmael, the Medieval Knight)

The Northern Barbarian-Noble Savage (Geronimo, Haiawatha, various Germanic Conan types)

The Weird Keeper of the Haunted Castle (Frankenstein, Dracula, Medieval Legends of Various Kinds)

All of these figures are very far removed from the standards of Enlightenment moral sensibility, where rational independence and sober moral reflection in society define the standard for human achievement.

Some Reflections on the Trends which Produced Romanticism

I'd now like to turn to one of the most disputatious questions in this whole question of the Romantic movement, namely, the question of origins. What was it that led to this dramatic and radical shift in sensibility? What were the factors most decisive in producing such a powerful rejection of the Enlightenment project and at this particular time?

Here, as I mentioned, we enter on very contested territory. Who created or contributed significantly to the development of Romanticism or whom we might name as the first Romantic is a question which probably admits of no simple answer. Some have identified the first Romantic as the Serpent in the Garden of Eden because that beast was the first rebel against authority. Others have argued that the Romantic spirit is a permanent feature in human sensibility--the

affirmation of imaginative vision against rational or traditional authority and have thus dismissed the question of origins as impossible to resolve.

Nevertheless, there are some important trends in the eighteenth century that we can identify as formative influences. So I'd like tentatively to sketch four possibilities: one stressing the trends in aesthetic sensibility (developments in the high and popular culture), one exploring the influence of daily social realities, one looking at the influence of the academic philosophy, and finally a conspiracy theory which argues that the Romantic movement was largely an invention after the fact designed to neutralize the disturbing political implications of Enlightenment reforms and revolution. These, I should stress, are not mutually exclusive, nor do they by any means exhaust the list of possible influences, but they are, each of them, quite popular.

To turn to the first trend, the development of what we might call a Romantic aesthetic in the popular culture, we might note that throughout the eighteenth century there was a growing interest in various forms of disorder. Some have traced this to the invention of the English garden, which developed in opposition to the rational formality of the French garden (as in Versailles). Stressing the wildness of nature (as opposed to the formal symmetry of geometric design) grew in popularity. People constructed such apparently "wild" gardens and even at times created mysterious grottos and hired poor students to live in them as hermits. Artistic depictions of nature followed this trend throughout the century.

Complementing this trend was a growing interest in abnormal behaviour--in madness, crime, rebellion for its own sake. The cult of the criminal became so powerful that the authorities had to abandon public executions, since they were more a celebration of the heroic qualities of the condemned than a reminder of the deterrent qualities of punishment. Highwaymen became celebrated in song and drama. Well born ladies and gentlemen lined up to interview condemned men. Even a notorious eccentric like the pathological Marquis de Sade, famous for his destructive erotic fantasies, became and has remained something of a cult figure (and a formative influence in modern art). Artists like Goya and others found in portraits of the insane an appropriate subject for art. Excessively passionate and sentimental fiction with violated and now pathetically suicidal heroines, excessive suffering, destructive storms at sea, and suicidal images became the rage. Pornography began to flourish (the author of Fanny Hill was offered a pension on the condition that he never write another novel).

Clearly throughout the so called Age of Reason, for all the emphasis on the need for rational morality, there was growing evidence that human beings were in some fundamental way deeply interested and moved by things marked off limits by rational moralists.

In addition to this trend in popular art, there was a strong reaction against the mechanistic metaphors fundamental to Newtonian and Baconian science. Then, as now, many people were unwilling to accept that there was not, at the very centre of nature, something non-mechanical, some ultimately mysterious vital force, operating by irrational principles not analyzable by the cool experimental method or the deductive models of the natural scientists (the line in the first Wordsworth poem above, "We murder to dissect," has always been a powerful slogan against mechanical science).

What this all adds up to is hard to assess, except perhaps to note that for many people the core of life must be an irreducible irrational vital component and that if that is not at the centre of their understanding of nature, then they remain unsatisfied. Hence a more mystical anti-Newtonian approach to science developed throughout the eighteenth century, especially in biology in Germany. Fueling this, of course, was the traditional Christian Protestant emphasis, that the most essential quality of being human is the individual's consciousness of God, that radically free and irrational act of faith that embraces the divinity of Jesus as the central organizing principle of life.

Given the importance of this strong trend, a number of analysts of the Romantic movement have seen in this traditional spirituality a direct link to the development of the Romantic movement. And it is clearly true, that as Romanticism developed, the interest in traditional spirituality and the ritualistic and mystical forms of worship (especially those connected with the Middle Ages) associated with it, grew. In fact, the Romantic movement was accompanied then and in modern times in many places by a marked revival in the older forms of ritualistic Christianity or strange new religions, belief systems marked by mystery, ritual, devotion to irrational symbols and liturgies, often with a strong musical component. It is, in the eyes of some commentators, impossible to overestimate the influence of Medieval Christianity (or, rather, a Romanticized view of it) on the Romantic movement. Some have even argued that European Romanticism is to be defined in terms of that trend--the interest in the Gothic, in mysterious liturgies and complex symbols, and a yearning for union with the infinite through overtly religious means (but without the appeal to traditional systematic authority).

According to this popular culture thesis, then, a shaping influence on the development of the Romantic movement was essentially an emotional response against the increasing regularity of life in Enlightenment science and morality. The Romantic movement is thus, in large part, a reassertion of the human desire to acknowledge as its most basic principle the irrationality of experience.

A second theory argues that Romanticism was essentially a response to the social realities of an exploding population. People stopped believing in the existence of a natural order because, in fact, a meaningful social order had ceased to exist for them at the level of daily life. Increasing number of citizens

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who, one hundred years before, would have lived their lives in small permanent communities in which each of them had a recognized place, were being displaced, forced by the pressures of the population explosion to move from the small stable agricultural community (which was becoming increasingly rare) to become permanent transients or dwellers in a huge, impersonal, and largely unordered (at least in the old communitarian sense) modern city.

In this view, the development of Romanticism is closely linked to the fact that the growing population of Europe, the reforms in land ownership, and the growing industrialization were producing a huge population of dispossessed people, those with no particular communal roots, who had no traditional sense of social order to fall back upon. Unlike earlier generations, their families and their communities had no secure place for them. Quite literally they were social refugees, forced to move around from place to place. In such a situation, many intelligent and creative spirits found themselves with no secure economic or social basis for their lives or with no external confirmation of who they were--in a word, with no identity, no sense of self.

Out of this experience, it is argued, they fashioned an ethic which rendered such social and economic definition false and, in its place, elevated the notion of the imaginative wanderer, the self-defining spirit as the highest form of life. Denied a stake in anything recognizable as conventional community, the Romantic spirit, according to this view, arose out of the social realities of an increasing number of dispossessed rootless artists and intellectuals, especially those living in the city. The interest in nature, and in England the cult of Wordsworth, are thus in large part a product of the fact that many people were cut off from nature, especially from the wildness and beauty of country life. They created a cult of what they could not find in their daily lives, and thus imaginative reconstruction, which can provide such material, becomes affirmed as the real source of truth.

Now, it is an interesting fact that many of the leading Romantic figures, especially in Germany, fit this scenario quite well. Young sons of middle-class urban families with no inheritance or secured place, they took their chances with minor academic posts, as obscure journalists, or peripatetic artists eking out a subsistence living and sustaining themselves with the faith that they were the spiritually elect amid an increasingly bourgeois, dead society. The middle classes who had the money and the power were, in this view, not fully human. And the artistic avant garde, no matter how poor or numerically small, were the true leaders of the human enterprise.

The Romantic ethic, in this view, is a reassertion of the credo of the dispossessed, the elevation of the virtues of the inner fortress, the imaginative powers of the human mind, over the traditional virtues, which required a certain social recognition and stability in order to manifest themselves. Thus, from this perspective, Romanticism was powerfully fuelled by the dispossessed as the

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appropriate response of an would-be intellectual and artistic elite denied recognition and fame in a world made up of Philistines. Since the power to resist and persevere with one's life project in the face of disappointment and neglect was an important mark of Romantic integrity, the Romantic ethic was and remains tailor made for the ambitious, imaginative, and original spirit faced with a world which ignores him or her and has no interest in what he or she has to offer.

Pushed to its limit, of course, this view asserts that the lack of any social recognition, poverty, and an uncaring public are the marks of the true genius. To succeed with the public, to become rich, famous, and respected is to sell out.

There is, however, the high cultural road to a explanation of the Romantic movement. We have heard, in Anne's and Norman's excellent account of the crisis posed in philosophy by Hume's skepticism and in Kant's reply to it, one of the important formative causes of Romanticism. You will recall that the crisis had to do with Hume's contention that from experience alone we could derive no certain knowledge, nothing we could logically count on, unless we were to simply trust to habit and custom. Furthermore, you will recall that Kant's response to that skeptical challenge, very simply put, was to give the mind an innate, pre-experiential power of organizing sensory experience into meaning. Now, Kant was no Romantic. He was concerned with rescuing science from the skepticism of Hume. And he constantly insisted that any knowledge divorced from experience, that is, understanding which relied upon the organizing powers of the mind alone, was without content. Experience was an essential component, a necessary if not sufficient condition of understanding.

However, the arguments for the powers which Kant gave to the mind, the concepts of the understanding and the imagination, were to many of his successors sufficiently persuasive for them to assign to the mind the major or the sole power of establishing meaning. What the power of the imagination could construct, that was the reliable source of order. What was not so self-generated from within was somehow less real, less true. And so those who sought to validate the inner visionary power, to argue that the imaginative energy to create meaning had more essential truth than any inherited system of meaning or than any rational system found a powerful source from which to develop their theories, which rested on the supremacy of the creative powers of the mind to dominate and order experience.

Many Romantics, like Wordsworth, derived little direct inspiration from Kant, who was largely unread at first. But when Romanticism required a theoretical justification, a rational aesthetic, then writers like Coleridge and Schiller, among others, found in Kant someone from whose theories they could develop a new emphasis on the essential creative powers of the imagination. Thus, stemming from Kant's notion of the organizing powers of the mind, Romantic philosophers

developed a coherent defense of the imagination as the only source of a sense of order.

We shall be exploring this in greater detail when we have, at the end of this semester, to deal with the greatest inheritor of Romantic philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche. The point here is that the Romantic ethic could take Kant's insistence on the importance of both sense experience and the organizing powers of the mind and upset the balance in favour of the inner powers of the mind. In doing so, of course, they were violating Kant's strong insistence on the importance of experience, which provided our understanding with its content. Those who wished to validate the total importance of the inner life abandoned that Kantian stricture.

Finally, I would like briefly to refer to the Revisionist Theory of Romanticism. According to this notion there was no such thing as a marked Romantic Movement, at least not in England in the time known as the Romantic Era, as current orthodoxy often states it. Instead, the notion of a Romantic Era, it is argued, was a later Victorian invention designed to neutralize the strong Enlightenment sympathies of England's greatest nineteenth century poets: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats.

This theory maintains, for example, that the chief motivating aesthetic behind these six poets was primarily derived from Enlightenment reform. They were seeking the major goals of that project and their writing, for all its apparent innovations, preeminently reflects this concern. However, to take the more radical political implications out of this work, the Victorians later reinterpreted it, emphasizing out of all proportion the Romantic stress on personal creative urges and de-emphasizing the writings and the interpretations which rested on notions of social reform.

I don't want to go into this in any more detail. Those who are interested may consult a paper I wrote on this thesis. It's in the library, under the title "Oh No, It's Snowing on Those Revolting Romantics." I mention the point here as a very fine example of how difficult it is to sort out the precise meanings of historical movements, especially when we may still be prisoners of revisionist interpretations of those movements, interpretations which, like the Norton Anthology of English Literature, one of the most influential textbooks in North America for at least two generations, still maintains that writers like Shelley and Wordsworth and Keats and Byron were not primarily motivated in their art by political reformist urges totally in sympathy with mainline Enlightenment thought.

Let me add here that I'm not trying to sell you on this idea. But I do want to point out that there is a widespread theory that the Romantic movement has been exaggerated out of all proportions in order to neutralize modern art of its political responsibilities (more on that later). And it might be useful to add, that if there's

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any truth in this thesis, then to find out the most important causes of what we call the Romantic Movement and the Romantic ethic, we need to consider, not eighteenth century society but rather the late nineteenth century forces out of which developed the orthodox interpretation of this period.

Reflections on Some Consequences

I don't want here to offer anything like a comprehensive assessment of this Romantic Movement. But we should note that since that time we in the West, particularly in Western North America, have a divided inheritance: on the one hand we subscribe to those Enlightenment ideals I mentioned at the start of this lecture. On the other, influenced by the Romantic ethos, we also subscribe to the notion that we have a major responsibility to create our own lives, to define who we are in accordance with a set of values generated from inside. Most of us (or our immediate ancestors) came to West Coast specifically to achieve that freedom to turn our lives into our own poem, and we work to attain that freedom. So this raises some important issues about the appropriate limits or the line between our personal commitment to self-creation and our continuing commitment to social justice, equality, rational morality and reform.

In practice, we have encouraged the belief that we can be Romantics in our private lives and committed Enlightenment followers in public policy. This, however, creates problems because it is not immediately clear how we can reconcile a divided life. How do we blend into a coherent whole Marx or Kant and Blake--the commitment to a universal reason which shapes our understanding by the discovery of general truth and a gradual but inexorable progress to full understanding--how do we reconcile the personal, social, and political implications of that with the radical individualism of Romanticism, with the commitment to life as a series of encounters with the world in which what matters most is not the success of some long term reform program but rather our irrational imaginative power to shape the circumstances to meet our most passionate visions of ourselves.

The problem may be restated another way. Northrup Frye has observed that "Romanticism has brought into modern consciousness the feeling that society can develop or progress only by individualizing itself, by being sufficiently tolerant and flexible to allow an individual to find his own identity within it, even though in doing so he comes to repudiate most of the conventional values of that society" (48). Politically this has been a powerful argument for liberalism along Hobbesian lines: for drawing a firm line between state control and private freedom, so that we protect a private space in which we can do whatever we want, live according to whatever self-conception we think best for us (whether reasonable or not). And those who place a high value on the Romantic experience will be committed politically, to the extent they are committed politically at all, to enlarging this private space. The public sphere, as Hobbes urges, is still governed by the

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Sovereign's laws backed up by Sovereign power. The arguments are over the appropriate lines between public and private. What makes Hobbes' vision so attractive, of course, is that unlike Rousseau or Kant, he has nothing particular to recommend about what we do with our private space ("commodious living" can be easily reinterpreted to fit the Romantic ethic).

But, and this is an important point to consider, this vision has in many cases potentially disastrous political and moral consequences. For the radical individualism of the Romantic emphasis on self-creation involves no necessary commitment to politics or to other people; indeed, it encourages the belief that traditional political concerns of the sort so dear to Enlightenment thinkers detract from one's chief purpose, the imaginative creation of a life.

Thus, while the Romantic ethos has been powerfully beneficial in developing an almost ceaseless stream of innovation, experimentation in art--with amazing consequences for our culture--and in enormously widening and deepening our understanding of human life, especially human mentality, it has also seriously eroded our sympathy with many aspects of that old traditional notion that our primary responsibilities are to our fellow citizens, are, in other words, political.

One important consequence of the Romantic ethos in art is to drive a wedge between the modern artist and politics. The pursuit of the avant garde styles means that in the constant search for originality in thought and expression, artists develop more and more esoteric languages and styles, which can alienate them further and further from the general public, so that the size of the population on whom their art has any impact gets smaller and smaller. And one can make the case (and it has been made many times) that this logic of Romanticism eventually makes the work of the artist politically ineffectual, and thus plays into the hands of oppressive forces which need to be directly challenged. It's a very unsophisticated government that cannot easily neutralize an artistic style virtually incomprehensible to the majority of the people. As one modern commentator put it, referring to one of the giants of modern avant garde music: "Stockhausen serves imperialism."

It's true that Romanticism is often associated with social rebellion, but there's an important difference between Romantic rebellion and the sort of thing Marx is writing about. Marx and other Enlightenment reformers and radicals were pursuing a long-term plan for the rational reconstruction of society in accordance with certain universal principles. Romantic rebellion, on the other hand, is more often based on a personal attitude, an ad hoc imaginative decision to cast oneself for the moment into the role of a revolutionary, based on the imaginative energies of the moment rather than on anything that might pass muster as a coherent social program. Hence a great deal of Romantic rebelliousness is strong on passion, attitude, and often poetically heroic acts but very short on ideas and staying power. The last great Romantic upheaval, in the 1960's,

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produced no shortage of slogans, music, violent confrontations, heroic figures, and wonderfully poetic moments (e.g., putting flowers in the gun barrels outside the Pentagon). But apart from the largely meaningless phrase "participatory democracy" or Abbie Hoffman's "Revolution for the Hell of It" it was remarkably short on ideas, and it's hard to see how, with Nixon, Reagan, Bush quickly dominating the White House and the Gaullists in control of the Elysee Palace, it had any significant long-term political effects. In fact, 1968 goes down as one of the great years for the defeat of the last great Romantic Revival. The Civil Rights Movement, by contrast, was anything but Romantically inspired. It drew its creed from the greatest document produced in the Enlightenment--the American Constitution--and through reason, restraint, argument, law, enormous moral courage, and free speech achieved major political victories.

I'm not trying to offer any final evaluation, as I say, but in assessing the enormously enriching contributions of Romanticism to our personal lives, we need to alert ourselves to the cost that might be exacted in the public social sphere.

Just one final thought on this point. If we agree that the obsession with a sentimental Romanticized Christian past has inherently conservative tendencies, one wonders about the effects on Canadian culture of the decision to build our Houses of Parliament and many of our universities on recognizably Romantic-Gothic principles (as opposed to say, the sturdy republican Greek style of American institutional architecture). How has that, one wonders, influenced over many generations the inherently law-and-order Conservatism of Canada. I don't know, but I offer it here as something to think about.

This problem of the political implications of Romanticism and the view of it as a cop out of the Enlightenment reform project or, in a more paranoid vein, an organized reinterpretation of the immediate past so as to take out the political implications of major literary figures we shall explore later in, among others, Marx. But there are other concerns. For example, to focus on the most important, how can one ever continue to maintain a firm commitment to Romantic principles and grow old? If life is a series of encounters with an indifferent world and it is my task imaginatively to transform it, as I was able to in a spontaneous spirit when I was younger, then how do I deal with this growing feeling that my imagination is failing. If, to be a complete artist or human being, I have to be original, then where do I find the inspiration for continuous self-creation? Wordsworth, as we have seen, held in his best poems that the best cure for the diseases of the imagination was a more energetic commitment to imaginative recollection. But even for Wordsworth a time came when his imaginative energies were not able to do what they had done for him in "Tintern Abbey" or the "Immortality Ode."

And, in fact, the history of Romantic artists since 1800 often offers depressing but unequivocal illustrations that the Romantic ethic can be a cruel faith, reducing

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those who once celebrated it to despair, drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicide. Faced with the common reality of the loss of youthful imaginative powers, the Romantic artist has few options: he can, like Wordsworth and Coleridge take refuge in conventional church and state, or, like Blake, he can continue to develop an increasingly complex and idiosyncratic visionary expression, until no one, except scholars generously paid to spend their lives deciphering the stuff, can understand him. He or she can, like Keats, Shelley, and Byron die young and achieve heroic status. Or, in what is so depressingly familiar these days, he or she can just keep repeating the form that made them famous, frozen as mature adults into a youthful pose that becomes increasingly bizarre and unsatisfying (like so many Jurassic rock 'n' roll stars from Chuck Berry to Jerry Lee Lewis to the Beach Boys, who to stay in the spotlight must constantly return to the first efforts that made them famous). Many have turned to drink (virtually all the American Nobel prize winners this century have been notorious alcoholics, many of America's finest writers from Hemingway to John Berryman have committed suicide). As William Carlos Williams observed, in reference to the powerful Romantic spirit dominating American arts, "The pure products of America go crazy."

It may not be insignificant that the more powerful the Romantic urge becomes, the more attractive various forms of personal therapy look. For Romanticism encourages us to see the disappointments of life as a personal failure. If you don't make it, you haven't got it. For orthodox Enlightenment thinkers, especially the followers of Marx, the answer to such disappointment may well be civil reform, a rational commitment to your fellow citizens, rather than attempts to repair one's own inner strength, to construct a more suitable metaphor for your life.

For, if you think about it, the full logical consequences of the Romantic spirit lead inevitably to madness. If I have constantly to redefine myself, to avoid the imprisonment in any system of thought, then I cannot ever rest on what I have achieved, and I cannot enter as a disciple into another person's achievement. Ultimately, of course, that is impossible, because I require a public medium to communicate. How am I to escape the tyranny of inherited systems of expression, like language? The only sure way is never to express myself, to keep everything imaginatively alive inside: Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. So the logical end point of Romantic art is something like John Cage's musical compositions which consist of nothing but silence or modern paintings which consist of a blank canvas.

Similarly, the concept of a shared rational morality disappears if we pursue Romanticism to the limit. If we believe, as Wordsworth did, that human beings are basically good, then I suppose we can hope that the fully emancipated Romantic imagination will not harm our desires to live socially at peace together. But there's no inherent guarantee that people's dreams for themselves might not

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include behaviour which by any common standard of conventional morality is unjust.

Romanticism, in itself, does not provide a firm moral basis for dealing with such traditional questions; in fact, traditional moral concerns become a source of oppression for the imaginative spirit (and this is something we are going to face squarely in reading Nietzsche very soon). So we are left, as modern North Americans, with a double legacy: the Enlightenment project with its strong social reform priorities and its insistence on a personal morality based on the pursuit of rational independence and the Romantic ethos with its central concern for personal self-creation. Where do we best channel our life's effort? Can we somehow reconcile the two into a workable version of modern Liberalism? Or are we inevitably condemned to having two selves to deal with: our private Romantic self and our public Enlightenment self? How do I adjudicate between the conflicting demands of my fellow citizens and my deepest inner vision of myself.

Historically, the importance of the Romantic ethos has waxed and waned. The period I have been talking about--the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth is the first Great Romantic Period. Since that time, the importance of the Romantic spirit has risen and fallen, although its influence in North America, and especially in the United States, has always been strong in a great deal of popular culture. The last great Romantic eruption came in the 1960's and we are still living in the aftermath of that phenomenon, even witnessing in the popular culture, at least, its evident decline from what it used to be.

Meanwhile the Enlightenment project continues at full speed--and the scientific understanding and manipulation of nature for human benefit or human powers becomes increasingly monolithic. We may all love the purest expression of rock 'n' roll and yearn to be cowboy heroes or solitary bikers, but we are working with computers in the marketplace, now organized globally on increasingly rational principles..

Where that leaves us, I'm not sure. But for better or worse, what the Romantic movement introduced into European culture in the Romantic Era still has a vital shaping influence on how we think of ourselves, enriching and complicating our lives in ways that we simply cannot ignore.