

Romanticism

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Article Text:

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A profound and irreversible transformation in artistic styles, in cultural attitudes, and in the relations between artist and society is evident in Western literature and other arts in the first half of the 19th cent. In Britain, a stark contrast appears between representative works of the preceding Augustan age and those of leading figures in what became known as the Romantic movement or "Romantic Revival" in the period from about 1780 to about 1848 (the "Romantic period"): Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Carlyle, E. Brontë and C. Brontë. To define the general character or basic principle of this momentous shift, which later historians have called Romanticism, though, is notoriously difficult, partly because the Romantic temperament itself resisted the very impulse of definition, favouring the indefinite and the boundless.

In the most abstract terms, Romanticism may be regarded as the triumph of the values of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder, and emotional self-expression over the classical standards of balance, order, restraint, proportion, and objectivity. Its name derives from romance, the literary form in which desires and dreams prevail over everyday realities.

Romanticism arose from a period of wider turbulence, euphoria, and uncertainty. Political and intellectual movements of the late 18th cent. encouraged the assertion of individual and national rights, denying legitimacy (forcibly in the American and French Revolutions) to kings and courtiers. Nourished by Protestant conceptions of intellectual liberty, the Romantic writers tended to cast themselves as prophetic voices crying in the wilderness, dislocated from the social hierarchy. The Romantic author, unlike the more socially integrated Augustan writers, was a sort of modern hermit or exile, who usually granted a special moral value to similar outcast figures in his or her own writing: the pedlars and vagrants in Wordsworth's poems, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Mary Shelley's man-made monster, and the many tormented pariahs in the works of Byron and Shelley---who were themselves wandering outcasts from respectable English society.

From this marginal position, the Romantic author wrote no longer to or on behalf of a special caste but, in Wordsworth's phrase, as "a man speaking to men", his utterance grounded in the sincerity of his personal vision and experience. To most of the Romantics, the polished wit of the Augustans seemed shallow, heartless, and mechanically bound by artificial "rules" of neo-classical taste. Well above Horace or Juvenal they revered Shakespeare and Milton as their principal models of the sublime embodied in the poet's boundless imaginative genius. In this, the Romantics took the partly nationalistic direction followed by Romantic poets and composers in other countries, who likewise rediscovered and revalued their local vernacular traditions.

Although inheriting much of the humane and politically liberal spirit of the Enlightenment, the Romantics largely rejected its analytic rationalism, Wordsworth warning against the destructive tendency of the "meddling intellect" to intrude upon the sanctities of the human heart, and arguing that the opposite of poetry was not prose but science. The Romantic revolt against scientific empiricism is compatible with the prevailing trend of German philosophy, notably Kant's "transcendental" idealism, of which Coleridge and Carlyle were dedicated students. This new philosophical idealism endorsed the Romantics' view of the human mind as organically creative,

and encouraged most of them to regard the natural world as a living mirror to the soul, not as dead matter for scientific dissection.

In reaction against the spiritual emptiness of the modern calculating age, Romanticism cultivated various forms of nostalgia and of primitivism, following Rousseau in contrasting the "natural" man (or child) with the hypocrisies and corruptions of modern society. The imaginative sovereignty of the child, in the works of Blake and Wordsworth, implicitly shames the inauthenticity of adulthood, while the dignified simplicity of rural life is more generally invoked in condemnation of urban civilization. The superior nobility of the past tends also to be, as we now say, "romanticized", although less for its actual social forms than for its imaginative conceptions of the ideal and the heroic, as reflected in Shakespeare, in chivalric romance, and in balladry. Antiquaries of the 18th cent., notably Percy in his *Reliques* and Macpherson in his Ossianic poems, had won a new respect for the older forms of popular or "folk" poetry and legend, upon which Southey, Scott, and several other Romantic writers drew for materials and forms, notably the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

These kinds of change manifest themselves in the literary productions of the Romantic writers in widely varied ways, as may be expected in a movement that unleashed individualism and that privileged the particular experience over the general rule. In general, though, Romantic writing exhibits a new emotional intensity taken to unprecedented extremes of joy or dejection, rapture or horror, and an extravagance of apparently egotistic self-projection. As a whole, it is usually taken to represent a second renaissance of literature in Britain, especially in lyric and narrative poetry, which displaced the Augustan cultivation of satiric and didactic modes. The prose styles of Hazlitt, De Quincey, Charles Lamb, and Carlyle also show a marked renewal of vitality, flexibility, subjective tone, and what Hazlitt called "gusto". The arts of prose fiction were extended by Scott's historical novels, by the sensational effects of Gothic fiction, and by the emergence of the short-story form in the *Edinburgh* and *London* magazines. And despite the often vituperative and partisan conduct of reviewing in *Blackwood's Magazine* and other periodicals, this was a great age of literary criticism and theory, most notably in the writings of Coleridge and Hazlitt, and in major essays by Wordsworth and Shelley.

Simplified accounts of Romanticism in Britain date its arrival from the appearance in 1798 of *Lyrical Ballads* or in 1800 of Wordsworth's Preface (effectively a manifesto) to that collection. Several important tendencies in the latter part of the 18th cent., however, have been recognized as "pre-Romantic" currents, suggesting a more gradual evolution.

Among these should be mentioned "graveyard poetry", the novel of sentiment, the cult of the sublime, and the *Sturm und Drang* phase of German literature in the 1770s led by Schiller and the young Goethe; all of these influences encouraged a deeper emotional emphasis than Augustan or neoclassical convention allowed.

Romanticism flourished in the United States in the somewhat later period, between 1820 and 1860, with J. F. Cooper's historical romances, Emerson's essays, Melville's novels, Poe's tales, the poetry of Poe, Longfellow, and Whitman, and the nature writings of Thoreau.

As for the point at which Romanticism ends, it would be safer to say, especially after the largely neo-Romantic cultural ferment of the 1960s, that this end still shows little sign of arriving. The convenient and conventional divisions of literary history into distinct "periods" are particularly misleading if they obscure the extent to which the Romantic tradition remains unbroken in the later 19th cent. and through the 20th. The associated work of Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the Victorian advocates of the Gothic Revival, indeed, displays a hardening of Romantic attitudes in its nostalgia and its opposition to an unpoetical modern civilization; and the same might be said of W. B. Yeats and D. H. Lawrence in the early 20th cent. Late 20th-cent. culture displays a spectrum of latter-day Romantic features, ranging from the rebelliousness of rock lyrics and other forms of song-writing to the anti-Enlightenment themes of post-structuralist literary theory.