II

Romanticism

The French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the progress of domestic reform enlarged the boundaries and enriched the content of English romanticism,[1] but these social and political events did not initiate the movement. For its origins search must be made deep into the past, perhaps into the very nature of the human spirit. Upon that quest we cannot embark here. The word *romans* meant originally a vernacular descended from the Latin; then the literature written in the vernacular; and then the prevailing kind of that literature. The adjective *romantic* (with variants) first appeared in English in the mid-seventeenth century as a word to describe the fabulous, the extravagant, the fictitious, and the unreal. From this disrepute it was rescued during the following hundred years by being used to describe pleasing scenes and situations of the sort appearing in "romantic" fiction and poetry.[2] Gradually the term *Romanticism* came to be applied to the resurgence of instinct and emotion which the prevalent rationalism of the eighteenth century never wholly suppressed. More or less timid and tentative manifestations of this revolt against "common sense" have been recognized in the previous section of this History. The choice of the word *Romanticism* was perhaps unfortunate, because it begs the question whether there is any such single cultural phenomenon in Europe; but it is too firmly fixed to be discarded. The confusion prevalent in recent discussions of the matter may be clarified in a measure if we remember that it springs from the use of the same term for different tendencies. Romantic phenomena vary in different countries, and even within the same country no two writers are necessarily romantic in the same way or to the same degree, nor is a writer necessarily romantic in all his work or throughout his life. The term some-

[1] H. N. Fairchild, *The Romantic Quest* (1931), to which this chapter is especially indebted; H. N. Fairchild, Elizabeth Nitchie, and others, "Romanticism: a Symposium," *PMLA,* LV (1940). 1-60; Paul Elmer More, *The Drift of Romanticism* (1913); Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919); Lascelles Abercrombie, *Romanticism* (1926); F. L. Lucas, *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (1936); B. I. Evans, *Tradition and Romanticism* (1940); Jacques Barzun, *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1944); Ernest Bernbaum, *Guide through the Romantic Movement* (1930), especially pp. 438-459; Sir H. J. C. Grierson, "Classical and Romantic," in *The Background of English Literature* (1925); W. P. Ker, "Romantic Fallacies," in *The Art of Poetry* (1921); Alfred North Whitehead, "The Romantic Reaction," in *Science and the Modern World* (1925); C. H. Herford, "Romanticism in the Modern World," *E&S,* VIII (1922). 109-134; A. O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," *PMLA,* XXXIX (1924). 229-253. — Annual bibliographies on the Romantic Movement have been published in *ELH* (1937-49), *PQ* (1950-64), and *ELN* (1965-).

[2] Logan P. Smith, *Four Words, S. P. E. Tract,* No. XVII (1924), pp. 3-17.

times implies a theory, a formulated code, a "school"; but in England romanticism was informal and almost wholly unattached to any doctrinaire program. Though often used of writers in rebellion against classical rules of composition, romanticism is not merely a matter of technique. It is true that many of these writers were deficient in critical control of their material, but the technical excellencies usually praised as classical may be found in association with elements of romanticism. As a recognition of the need to discriminate among many tendencies, it has been proposed that the plural *romanticisms* be employed; but other scholars, rejecting this counsel of despair, pursue the quest for some underlying principle or common denominator binding together the various phenomena of this movement of thought and emotion.

"Amorous of the Far"

The romanticist is "amorous of the far." He seeks to escape from familiar experience and from the limitations of "that shadow-show called reality" which is presented to him by his intelligence. He delights in the marvelous and abnormal. To be sure, loving realistic detail and associating the remote with the familiar, he is often "true to the kindred points of heaven and home." But he is urged on by an instinct to escape from actuality, and in this escape he may range from the most trivial literary fantasy to the most exalted mysticism. His effort is to live constantly in the world of the imagination above and beyond the sensuous, phenomenal world. For him the creations of the imagination are "forms more real than living man." He practises willingly that "suspension of disbelief" which "constitutes poetic faith." In its most uncompromising form this dominance of the intuitive and the irrational over sense experience becomes mysticism—"the life which professes direct intuition of the pure truth of being, wholly independent of the faculties by which it takes hold of the illusory contaminations of this present world." [3] Wordsworth described this experience as "that serene and blessed mood" in which, "the burden of the mystery" being lightened, he "sees into the life of things." Blake, who seems to have lived almost continuously in this visionary ecstasy, affirmed that the "vegetable universe" of phenomena is but a shadow of that real world which is the Imagination. To the romanticist not the thing perceived is important but the thing imagined. But it is difficult to sustain for long this vision of the archetypal reality. The attempt to find some correspondence between actuality and desire results in joy when for fleeting moments the vision is approximated, but in despondency or despair when the realization comes that such reconciliations are impossible. Thus, Byron's Lucifer tempts Cain to revolt by forcing upon him an awareness of "the inadequacy of his state to his conceptions." [4] A sense of this contrast is expressed by Shelley in those poems in which there is a sudden fall from ecstasy into disillusionment. The same sense adds a new poignancy to the melancholy strain inherited by the romantic poets

[3] L. Abercrombie, *Romanticism*, p. 107.
[4] Byron, *Letters and Journals*, ed. Prothero, v. 470.

from their predecessors.[5] If the vision embraces the concept of perfection in this present life ("perfectibilitarianism"), the poet, becoming aware of the unattainability of this ideal here and now, tends to escape from actuality into "the innermost stronghold of his own spirit." There is a "withdrawal from outer experience in order to concentrate upon inner experience." [6] A reliance upon the life within carries with it the belief that in that life there is liberty to realize some perfection inherent in the nature of man. There is a trust in the validity of natural impulses, in "the holiness of the heart's affections." [7] At its boldest (as in Blake) the self-sufficient imagination is utterly confident. "The classical writer," it has been said,[8] "feels himself to be a member of an organized society; the romantic is in rebellion against external law. He asserts the rights of his individuality *contra mundum*."

Extremes of Sensibility

With this confidence in intuition goes an expanding imaginative sensibility which in extreme instances may take exotic and disquieting forms, as in the Byronic concepts of the daemonic male and the *femme fatale*. Emphasizing the abnormal element, some scholars have singled out the morbidly erotic and deranged as distinguishing marks of romanticism, interpreting this as evidence of the part played by the less conscious impulses of the mind and noting that a larger number of English writers of the period approached the borders of insanity or went beyond, than can be accounted for on the ground of mere coincidence. That several were attracted to the theme of incest is sometimes thought to be significant.[9] Yet when all is said, there is little exploitation of perversity in English literature between 1789 and 1832 and, on the higher literary levels, little of the grotesque and bizarre. In line with this reticence is the almost unanimous refusal of the English romanticists to attract attention in vulgar fashion by outlandish pose. William Beckford, who exhibits the romantic mood in an unqualified form, says of the incestuous loves of the brother and sister in one of his tales, that there had entered into them "the ardent elixir of a too exquisite sensibility and the poison of an insatiable desire." [10] This is a memorable formula for the extremes of the romantic attitude; but to select, with Paul Elmer More,[11] as "the essential type and image of the romantic life and literature" Beckford's vision of the damned moving ever round the throne of Eblis with hands upon flaming hearts, is to generalize extravagantly, for the English genius, with its instinct to compromise, seldom pursued the primrose path the entire way to the everlasting bonfire. Is not the hunger

[5] See E. M. Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Gray to Keats* (1932); Oswald Doughty, "The English Malady of the Eighteenth Century," *RES*, II (1926). 257-269.

[6] L. Abercrombie, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[7] Keats, *Letters*, ed. M. B. Forman (1931), I. 72.

[8] J. Middleton Murry, *The Problem of Style* (1922), p. 146.

[9] On the abnormal extremes of the romantic temperament see Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (1933), and for an argument based upon psychoanalytic theories of the Ego, Super-Ego, and "Reality Principle" see F. L. Lucas, *op. cit.*, chs. I and II.

[10] Beckford, "The Story of Zulkäis," *The Episodes of Vathek*, trans. by Sir F. T. Marzials (ed. 1922), p. 197.

[11] P. E. More, *op. cit.*, p. 36, referring to the final episode in *Vathek*.

for illusion balanced in the English mind by the steadying influence of common sense? Only seldom are the poet's flights of fancy taken with metaphysical seriousness; rarely is he lost in "an *O Altitudo.*" The romanticist's attempts to find a rational justification for the pleasures of the imagination were misleading; but modern opponents of romanticism fall into the opposite error when they repudiate these pleasures because they belong to the realm of desire and dream.

Anti-intellectualism

In the romantic mood there has been detected the influence of the Oriental mind which had flowed into the West through the channels of Neo-Platonic speculation. Whereas the classical mind of Greece had sought for the Divine in the qualities of order, restraint, and proportion, the East associated the Divine with the vast and vague. In Gnosticism and other ancient heresies there are elements of what many centuries later came to be called romanticism—the identification of the intellect with desire; the dominance of emotion over reason; the assertion of the Ego above the claims of society.[12] As the eighteenth century moved on, the instinctive side of personality asserted itself ever more strongly and in more individuals. The check provided by tradition, morality, and religion upon human potentialities was relaxed. Rousseau's doctrine that man, by nature good but corrupted by bad laws and customs, should be freed from these and left to the guidance of his own personality, was an impelling force.[13] The Calvinistic conviction of predestination to salvation modulated into "a sense of goodness and freedom" in the individual "which must somehow find corroboration in the nature of the universe"; and even Hume's self-destructive psychology, discrediting the very rationalism by which it worked, "gave encouragement to those who desired to believe in the truth of the unaccountable and the uncriticized." [14] This anti-intellectualism is expressed by Wordsworth when he denounces "that false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions" [15] and by Blake when he pictures Urizen at his sad and evil task of breaking up the primal unity into rational categories.[16] Again, when Keats declares that "Philosophy will clip an angel's wings," [17] we are reminded of one of Blake's emblems where purblind Reason is clipping the wings of Love.[18]

This anti-intellectualism was no sudden manifestation of a spirit of revolt; it had been swelling in volume for many years. In the thought of the predecessors of the great romantic poets there had been a tendency to view learning with suspicion as allied to vice and to commend ignorance as concomitant with virtue. The idealization of the "noble savage," the peasant, and the child had come about in greater or less degree long before Coleridge

[12] P. E. More, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-31.

[13] The influence of Rousseau upon romanticism was stressed by Irving Babbitt, *op. cit.* and by T. E. Hulme in "Romanticism and Classicism," *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read (1924), pp. 113-140, especially p. 116.

[14] H. N. Fairchild, in his contribution to the symposium, *PMLA*, LV. 21.

[15] *The Prelude*, II. 216-217.

[16] *The First Book of Urizen.*

[17] *Lamia*, II. 234.

[18] "Aged Ignorance," *The Gates of Paradise*, Emblem XI; *Writings*, Nonesuch Edition, III. 344.

and Southey conceived their plan to emigrate to America, and Wordsworth chose his dalesmen as fit characters for poetry, and Blake sang his *Songs of Innocence*. The confidence in the intuitive wisdom of childhood runs parallel with the exaltation of the primitive life of rustics and savages; and both are aspects of the romantic "escape" from actuality. This primitivistic tendency was one of the powerful impulses upon the revolutionary movement in France; and conversely, the same tendency received a powerful new impulse from the democratic forces let loose by the French Revolution. But obviously, sympathy with the Revolution cannot be considered an infallible "touchstone" of English romanticism since many of its elements had appeared before 1789.[19]

The attraction of the remote from social sophistication—the simple, the rustic, the democratic—found various forms of expression. It is a "return to nature." It is behind the cult of mountains and desert islands and the virgin lands of the New World, unstained by the slow contagion of civilization. This primitivism explains the taste for the "reliques" of ancient poetry; it is behind the romantic conception of genius and of poetry as a gift of nature, not an acquired art. With such currents of thought and feeling flowing, it was natural that the Middle Ages were regarded with a fresh sympathy, though not, be it said, with accurate understanding. It is true that there were those who, like Shelley, seeking to reshape the present in accordance with desire, did not revert to the past but pursued their ideal into a utopian future. But to others the Middle Ages offered a spiritual home, remote and vague and mysterious. The typical romanticist does not "reconstruct" the past from the substantial evidence provided by research, but fashions it anew, not as it was but as it ought to have been. The more the writer insists upon the historical accuracy of his reconstruction the less romantic is he. Under the stimulus of the Napoleonic Wars this love of the past tended to become nationalistic, with a special emphasis upon antiquarian and regionalist elements in English history. But this nationalism is an accidental characteristic of some phases of romanticism rather than a component part of the movement as a whole. The tremendous public events of the time brought out the patriotism of the older generation of romantic poets, but the younger generation remained cosmopolitan in outlook.

The Middle Ages

The remote in place offered an appeal similar to that of the remote in time, and in innumerable cases the two attractions are combined. From castles in "the wind-grieved Apennines" the romantic imagination passed easily to those haunted castles whose magic casements opened upon the perilous seas of fairyland. The archetypal romantic poet "lures his fancy to its utmost scope." In the company of Coleridge we visit the enchanted palace of Kubla Khan, the vampire-haunted castle of Christabel, the demon-

The Supernatural

[19] The direct influence of the French revolutionary philosophers upon the English romantic poets was formerly somewhat overestimated; but through Godwin and other radicals the new ideas were assimilated into English poetry. See Edward Dowden, *The French Revolution and English Literature* (1897); A. E. Hancock, *The French Revolution and the English Poets* (1899); Charles Cestre, *La révolution française et les poètes anglais* (Paris, 1906).

infested seas of the Ancient Mariner. With Keats we stand in the church-portal on Saint Mark's Eve or attend the wedding-banquet of Lycius and the lamia in the palace at Corinth. Upon the lower levels of romanticism the revolt from intellectualism and "common sense" produced mere spectre-ballads and "Gothicism," but upon the higher levels we have the true "Renaissance of Wonder" of Watts-Dunton's famous definition.[20]

The typical romanticist is a dreamer, though no single writer conforms wholly, consistently, and uninterruptedly to the type. In dreams a great significance attaches to symbolism. A wealth of symbols enriches romantic literature.[21] There is a persistent resort to suggestiveness in language, to overtones of meaning, and to the dreamy associations that attach to words.

[20] "The Renascence of Wonder in English Poetry," originally the introduction to *Chambers' Cyclopaedia of English Literature* (1903), Vol. III; reprinted with additional material in *Poetry and the Renascence of Wonder*, ed. Thomas Hake (1916).

[21] The interpretation of romantic symbolism is carried to extremes of complexity in G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome* (1941).