

ROMANTICISM

Nothing is more difficult to pin down than Romanticism. The term is usually applied to certain aspects of European intellectual life in late 18th and early 19th centuries, roughly between 1790-1850. Romanticism took different forms in different countries: Germany, England, France. The flowering of German Romanticism comes with the Schlegel brothers.



Friedrich Schlegel (1772 - 1829)



August Schlegel (1767 - 1845)

August Schlegel coined the term “Romanticism” in his Vienna lectures of 1809-11 he used it to distinguish “modern” poetry and art from the Classical in these lectures Schlegel describes Romantic poetry as a striving for the infinite this striving for the infinite is reflected in the art of Christianity for Schlegel this striving is an unsatisfied longing

Some main features of Romanticism

- 1) *in general, art has a preeminent role to play in human life and culture*
 There is a divinization of art—art has a religious significance and role in human society. Art has a healing role—it leads to a feeling of unity of the human being with nature. The discord between man and nature that is the result of the gap between *nature* and *freedom* is replaced by a notion of “organic or aesthetic unity.” Thus, an important motif of Romanticism is that of a “circuitous journey,” a move from alienation, through spiritual crisis, to a redemptive reintegration with the cosmos.
 There is a reevaluation of the relationship between philosophy and art, or art and truth. Philosophy becomes aesthetic—art becomes the “organ of philosophy.”
- 2) related to the first point—art becomes a source of truth
- 3) the faculty of the imagination becomes exalted
- 4) the notion of “aesthetic unity”
- 5) an exaltation of artistic “genius”
- 6) the notion of the aesthetic as an autonomous realm, independent of the realms of *nature* and *freedom*
- 7) artistic production conceived as self-expression—this leads to the development of expression theories of art

Precedents to Romanticism

A) Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790)

1. Kant maintained the autonomy of aesthetic judgment (as distinguished from the theoretical and the practical). Though Kant did not explicitly demarcate an independent realm of the aesthetic, he was read by later Romanticist thinkers to have indeed distinguished the aesthetic as an autonomous realm separated from the realms of nature and freedom. Later romanticist philosophers would develop the notion of the aesthetic as an independent, autonomous realm.

2. Though Kant explicitly denied that art has “truth value” some statements in the *Critique of Judgment* seemed to contradict this view. For Kant art is a matter of pleasure, not knowledge. He does hint, however, that art can put us into contact with something that cannot be grasped through concepts. Later romanticist philosophers would develop the notion that it is through art that man can reach truth.

3. Kant's notion of “genius” as the talent that generates “aesthetic ideas” that provide the soul that distinguishes “fine art” had a great influence on the development of Romanticism. This conception of “aesthetic genius” as distinguished from the scientific mind greatly influenced Romanticism. An “aesthetic idea” is an idea for which no adequate concept can be found, and thus cannot be made intelligible by language. The notion of an “aesthetic idea” thus pointed toward the view of art as expressing the inexpressible. This also suggested that art is something more than mere pleasure.

4. In general the whole Kantian “Copernican Revolution” which suggested the mind is not just a passive mirror of nature, but that the mind imposes form and order upon experience and thus truth is in some sense both discovered *and created*.

B) Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)

though not a Romanticist, Schiller is the bridge between Kant and Romanticism
 he develops and extends Kant's discussion of the aesthetic
 and is the first to take up Kant's suggestion of a higher role for art
 though Schiller did not see art as a source of truth
 his *Aesthetic Letters* were read by younger thinkers to suggest
 that art could be a source of truth
 this opens the door to Romanticism

C) Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854)

was a German Idealist philosopher whose thought is often associated with
 the system of Idealism put forth by his one time friend and classmate Hegel
 as Schelling was one of those younger thinkers influenced by Schiller's suggestion that
 art could be a source of truth, he is regarded as the most Romantic of the German
 Idealists

Main Features of Romanticism which had significant influence on later aesthetics

1) *artistic production conceived as self-expression*

some basic change in aesthetic values—eyes opened to new aesthetic vistas
new impulse to the enjoyment of feeling and emotion

the scope of great art is widened

a loosening of form offset by more individualized, poignant, presentation of personal emotions
artistic production becomes conceived as essentially an act of self-expression
the critic becomes more concerned with the artist—his sincerity, details of biography, inner
spiritual life

Victor Hugo: “What indeed is a poet? A man who feels strongly and expresses his feelings in a
more expressive language”

this notion we find already in Voltaire: “Poetry is almost nothing but feeling”

thus the imitation theory is set aside, or relegated to a subordinate position

a form of expression theory develops

focus is not on the object, but on the artist’s state of mind

the spontaneity and intensity of the artists emotions

Wordsworth: “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”

contrast this emotionalist theory with Aristotle’s theory of *catharsis*

the Romantic view focuses on the artist or poet, only secondarily on the audience

in writing the poem the poet gets rid of the overflow of emotion

the parallel of poetry and painting that dominated aesthetic thought since the Renaissance
gives way to a new parallel between poetry and music

for music is the pure expression of feeling

in an essay on Beethoven, E.T.A. Hoffman said of music:

“It is the most romantic of all the arts—one might say the only genuinely romantic art—for its
own sole subject is the infinite”

issue of language, distinction between descriptive and emotive language

poetry defined as “the language of emotion”

the focus shifts from the work of art to the artist

Carlyle’s statement on Shakespeare works which “are so many windows, through which we see a
glimpse of the world that was in him”

what follows from the reduction of poetry to feeling?

is rational criticism possible if the point is to feel along with the poet

“An eternal hostile gulf is fixed between the feeling heart and the investigations of research.

Feeling can only be grasped and understood by feeling”

focuses attention on the relation between the poet's real and professed emotions
the adequacy and sincerity of the expression
sincerity becomes key notion in critical analysis

2) *Art is a source of knowledge, it has a cognitive status*

art is seen as a manifestation, even a source, of truth
one that rivaled and even surpassed that of the analytical reason of the Enlightenment
this led to a higher value placed on art and artistic creation—a glorification of art

a romanticist epistemology—a kind of emotional intuitionism superseding the previous
domination of rationalism and empiricism
has its origins in 18th century, the “inner sense” of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson
the “sentiment” of Hume

A. Schlegel finds in the poet “those deep intuitions in which the dark riddle of our existence
seems to solve itself”

3) *a new theory of the imagination*

this claim to knowledge gave rise to a new theory of the imagination
now it was not only a faculty of inventing and reassembling materials
but a faculty of seizing directly upon important truths
influence of the Kantian revolution which gave a sense of creation to the mind
the mind no longer viewed as passive discoverer of truth but somehow active, creative
truth is both discovered and created

on the Continent, Joubert and then

Baudelaire: “Imagination is, as it were, a divine faculty, which perceives directly, without the use
of philosophical methods, the secret and intimate relationships of things...”

4) *the notion of organic, or aesthetic unity*

also important is the concept of *organism*, the notion of *organic unity* or *aesthetic unity*
one of Coleridge's greatest contributions to romanticist aesthetics
Plato and Aristotle compared a literary work to a living animal
the notion of the world of nature as a living thing (Gaia hypothesis) goes back to Plato

Goethe:

a deep sense of the organic unity of all nature
and of man as a part of nature
works of art grow out of, and express man's unity with nature

again, here the important thing is the notion of art as revealing of nature
and of thus having a higher truth than science

Shelley: “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth”

5) *The celebration of artistic genius*

art has a religious dimension

two tendencies in thinking about the artist:

1) the artist as divinely inspired (in a positive way Plato couldn't imagine)

Novalis: "The genuine poet is always a priest"

Goethe calls the artist "God's anointed"

Hugo: "Nature is God's immediate creation, and art is what God creates through the mind of man"

2) the artist as Promethean figure, rival of both Nature and God, cursed with a tragic but glorious doom

culmination of these tendencies in French Symbolist movement 1880s— 1890s

art as a "symbol"

"Poetry is but a series of symbols presented to the mind to make it conceive the invisible"