The Romantic Movement in England
Second Term 1959

In this lecture I want to deal with the romantic interpretation of nature in England. Artists like William Blake, Fuseli and Goya are sometimes called proto-romantics, because in their work the effects of the classical tradition is still felt strongly, and their work is still very much concerned with the image of man, which they use with new freedom as a vehicle of dramatic and emotional expression. These proto-romantics, as we have already seen in our two earlier lectures were greatly interested in the extreme states of emotional expression, the portrayal of terror, fear, madness, murder, dreams and nightmares.

Fuseli: Nightmare
   Fear
   Young Woman Imprisoned with a Skeleton

Blake  The House of Death
   Hecate
   Pity

All these works have the romantic quality of the sublime about them, ad all are concerned with the inner life of man. This interest in man’s condition is continued by the French romantics as Professor Burke has shown of the early 19th century. Gericault’s Raft of Medusa, Delacroix’s Medea. After 1790/1800, however, in England, the romantic interest gradually shifts from the human condition and becomes increasingly concerned with the interoperation of nature. To some extent political factors were responsible for the change of emphasis in England. During the Napoleonic period England was engaged in a vital national struggle with Napoleon, and a romantic humanism of the type championed by Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists fell from favour in England. Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Fuseli, all began life as young radicals and champions of the rights of man. The excesses of the French revolution turned all of them away from direct participation in social revolution. It is in this situation that the study of nature gained a new importance for the English romantics. The romantic saw himself alienated from nature.

In this lecture I want to deal with the romantic interpretation of nature in England. Professor Burke has already discussed with you the leading qualities of the romantic movement in general, and we have seen that the romantics were deeply interested in the more extreme states of human emotional expression: anger, madness, crime, and the twilight world of the dream. We have seen it, for example, in the work of Fuseli. And we have seen how in the art of William Blake, the private world of the artists imagination, as in his Ghost of a Flea, assumes quite a new importance. For such artists the romantic is not as other men are: he is an outsider, a lonely genius, a man of
destiny, who listens only to his own inner voice and is constantly in opposition to a society which resents him. He is also a prophet, ‘an unacknowledged legislator of mankind’ as Shelly put it, his are foreshadows the face of an ideal future, but it also years for an ideal past. Artists like Fuseli and Blake expressed such new attitudes mainly by making the human figure a new vehicle for the expression of intense emotions. In their preoccupation with the figure of man, however, they were to a considerable extent still bound to the classical tradition.

But the romantic artists brought a new approach not only to man but also to nature. He saw himself alienated from nature, but he did not oppose nature as he opposed society. He saw he rather as a mysterious and enigmatic force before which the artist must humble himself if he would learn her innermost secrets. The English romantic movement, in particular, devoted itself very largely to a new interpretation of nature. The publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798 is usually taken as the crucial date for the beginning of the Romantic Movement proper, or the High Romantic Movement as we may call it to distinguish it from the early romanticism of the last quarter of the 18th century. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge were nature poets, seeking to interpret nature in all her possible moods. In the ‘Ancient Mariner’ Coleridge dealt with what he called, in one place, the ‘tremendities’ of nature, nature in the sublime or moods akin to the supernatural: storms, whirlpools, shipwrecks, the strange phosphorescent light upon tropical waters and so on. Wordsworth, on the other hand, tended towards the quieter moods of nature: to him nature was a serene goddess. Only be means of a rapt and passive contemplation of the universe, or as he put it:

With an eye made quiet by the power
Of Harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Among the painters, the new romantic approach to nature, as distinct from the picturesque approach, reveals itself in a certain gothic wildness of feeling. We see an early expression of it in Richard Wilson’s *Destruction of the Children of Niobe* painted about 1760; a painting which Sir Joshua Reynolds criticised on the grounds that the landscape, wild as it was, was too naturalistic for the classical personages it contained. Yet, its wildness is still not very dissimilar from the wild scenes of Salvator Rosa and Gaspard Poussin, from whom the early romantic paintings of England gained a good deal of inspiration. Here romantic wildness is linked with a classical theme. Alexander Runciman’s *King Lear*, shows us a wild romantic landscape linked with an English literary theme. In these paintings classical and literary themes have been found to justify the new taste for wild landscapes. In William Hodges *Painting of Waterspouts* seen off Cape Stephens c. 1778 in Cook’s Straits in New Zealand, a natural phenomenon which was actually observed by Hodges when he travelled as an artis on Cook’s Second Voyages: a carefully observed natural wonder is used, in order to portray nature in a wild romantic mood. All these
paintings, Wilson’s, Runciman’s, and Hodges are studies of nature in the sublime. They are, too, essentially oil painters looking back in their paintings at any rate to artists like Salvator Rosa for their inspiration.

If we turn, however, to the artistic interpretation of nature in her quieter moods, that is, as Wordsworth’s serene goddess, we will find that it owes not a little to the development of watercolour painting as an art form. As a technical method watercolour painting goes back to medieval illumination, but it had been used since the 16th century mainly to tint topographical drawings. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, it was emerging as an art form in its own right. The careful and sensitive topography of Paul Sandby, such as the Devil’s Tower from Aarrons Rod, Windsor Castle, is followed by the highly poetic views of mountainous scenes of John Robert Cozens, such as Florentine View(??). And these are followed by landscapes by Francis Towne (Scene of Arveninont(??)—new interest in the structure of rocks), John Sell Cotman, (whose work reflects the widespread interest of the time in medieval ruins) and of Thomas Girtin (Kirbohill(??) Abbey—in which a careful and highly accurate rendering of the place is combined with a genuinely receptive feeling for the atmosphere and mood of the place.

Now all the qualities which we have so far noticed in these landscapes maybe found in the oil of JMW Turner: wild nature, the interests in the classics and in literature, the interests in storms, in medieval architecture, in mountains, in atmospheric effects, in the dramatic portrayal of light, and in the truthful and yet poetic rendering of a locality. For Turner was undoubtedly he most representative of all the romantic landscape artists.

Turner learnt his art first from Thomas Malton, a topographical watercolour painter who was also a master of architectural perspective. That training enabled him in 1796, at the early age of 21, to exhibit this watercolour of Bishop Islip’s chapel, Westminster Abbey,* which is a little masterpiece bot of architectural draughtsmanship and the use of light for dramatic effect. And both the interest in medieval architecture and the dramatic effects of light are important features of romantic art. The following year, 1797, he exhibited his Moonlight, A Study at Millbank.* In the 1770s, the early romantic painters, Joseph Wright of Derby and William Hodges, had taken a special interest in the portrayal of moonlight effects; and the image of the moon and of moonlight became one of the great romantic images. For the romantic artist, who say himself as alienated from society the moon was often seen as an image of constancy and hope in a changing world, and it adequately that longing and yearning or an unattainable perfection which lies at the heart of romanticism.*

Turner lived at a time when the art of Rembrandt was beginning to be appreciated in England. Rembrandt’s landscapes such as the Mill* with its great dramatic tones
appealed deeply to the romantic sentiment. Something of this approach may be seen in Turner’s painting of *Buttermere Lake*, in the Lake District, a region which appealed as much to English painters as it did to English poets at this time. Here Turner employs chiaroscuro—the manipulation of light and shade for dramatic effects in the manner of Rembrandt. Here light is still being used artificially to induce a mood, rather than naturally.

Turner’s paintings reveal one of the qualities which becomes a leading characteristic of much of the architecture and painting of the nineteenth century. He is a great eclectic—that is, he seeks to absorb and assimilate influences from a very wide variety of sources—not always successfully. In 1798 he exhibited *Dunstanborough Castle* at the Royal Academy. It is now in our Gallery. It may be compared with Wilson’s *Dunstanborough Castle*. This is an essay in Wilson’s picturesque manner. But in his *Aeneas with Sybil*, 1800, Turner imitates rather closely Wilson’s classical manner. His *Dolbarrarn Castle* of 1800 is another essay in picturesque sublimity. The castle shows the ravages of time: the power of nature is contrasted to the pitiful weakness of man. I want you to note the care which Turner here brings to the painting of rocks. Romantic landscape paintings such as these reflect the new interest in rock structure being promoted at this time by the emergence of geology as a science. Ruskin the great champion of Turner’s work claimed that Turner was a geologist without knowing it, and said that it was a drawing by Turner of the Swiss Alps which directed him to his own researches in geology which were considerable, if at time eccentric.

The deep romantic love of mountains found fitting expression in such paintings as the *Great Fall of Reichenbach*. In such paintings Turner elevated his theme by exaggerating his heights and distances, shrouding his mountains in mist, and careful manipulating his lights and shades.

The interest in Italy and in Italian art so prominent in England during the eighteenth century continues and indeed in some ways develops in England until the 1830s. Turner’s interest in the Italianate landscape may be seen in Poussin. He echoes Poussin’s style in the *Tenth Plague of Egypt*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1802, who taught him to make greater use of horizontals and verticals in his composition and to give greater strength to his foregrounds. But such paintings are Poussin romanticised, the essence of Poussin’s fine sense of an abstract mathematical order was lost on Ruskin.

In the *Garden of Hesperides*, exhibited in 1806, Turner treats a classical subject in a highly romantic way, the classical story has become a peg on which to hang a study of nature in the sublime, and apart from the new interest in rock structure, it is still not far in style from Wilson’s *Destruction of the Children of Niobe* painted nearly 50 years before.
We must turn however from such classical compositions to his sea pieces in order to follow the peculiar trend of Turner’s romantic genius. The interpretation of the sea in all its achievements of romantic art and literature, and Turner celebrated, more than any other artist before of since his time, all phases of sea life: the life of the great ports, fishing, the navy, sea-battles, the shipwreck and so on.

*Calais Pier* painted in 1803 in one of the first of his important sea pieces. The sky is still much in the manner of Wilson, with an inky blackness in his storm-clouds which he discarded later. In the foreground we see all the local life of the fisher folk—a realistic and anecdotal portrayal of contemporary life that is to become a dominant feature of early Victorian painting. He continued his sea pieces with his *Shipwreck* of 1805 again we have the expression of romantic pathos: men caught in the grip of natural forces beyond their control. The shipwreck was the most typical, the most dramatic and the most common tragedy of the early nineteenth century. Turner, however, also painted the sea in its peaceful moods, as in his fine *Sun Rising through Vapour* of 1807, in which he interests himself in the portrayal of the subtle transitions of light through must, one of the great interests if his life. The portrayal of atmospheric effects at this time led to some very fine oil sketches painted direct from nature from a boat on the Thames. These were painted between 180 and 1809, and are unlike most of his other work in the directness of the painting. Turner did not develop this side of his painting. He depended instead upon an acute visual memory which he carefully trained throughout life. Most of his paintings are perceptions remembered re-visualised and then painted. Such was his fine *Frosty Morning* of 1813*, a masterpiece of naturalism in its way. Here, he is interested in painting the hardness of the ground under the winter frost, the slow dissolution of the must under the rising sun. Such works were the forerunners of great compositions of his later years in which his keen perception of atmosphere and light was combined with an intensely personal and intensely colourful vision that we might call expressionistic rather than naturalistic.

During the middle years of his life, however, he painted large pictures with a direct popular appeal to the British public. In 1808 he painted his Battle of Trafalgar. In it the traditions of the marine battle piece as developed by such painters as Van der Velde are combined with contemporary history painting. Here Turner presents Nelson as the traditional recumbent wounded hero surrounded by his men, that had become so well known through prints of West’s *Death of Wolfe*, bit he places the action, as we would expect a romantic painter to, deep in the middle distance, with the battle proceeding on all sides, whereas West makes no attempt to portray the battle, as befitted a man working at this time in a manner predominantly classical.

If we turn now to some of the finest works of his middle period, such as his Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus of 1829, we may see how much better Turner now succeeds in reducing the action and the narrative interests in his paintings to his overriding interest...
in the portrayal of light. Ruskin class this painting the central painting of Turner’s career, and it certainly reveals a wonderful synthesis of his classical and romantic interest. Notice the interest in gold and blue which is typical of his colour of his later works: and the superb treatment of the sunrise, perhaps the finest in the history of painting.

In his Ulysses there is as much of the visionary as there is of the close observer of nature. In Turner’s *Interior, Petworth*, painted in 1831 or somewhat later, the visionary element overrides the naturalistic. A free treatment of atmosphere and colour dominate all detail. It is a room decorated with mirrors and sculpture as seen through a must of early sunlight. A table is upset and the furniture is deranged, and little lap digs are running everywhere. There was a curious trace of sentimental vulgarity in Turner which led him to introduce such anecdotage into even his most sublime compositions.

In his *Fighting Temeraire Towed to Her Last Berth* of 1829, a kind of pictorial elegy to one of Nelson’s great fighting Ships, Turner produced one of his greatest works. It is first of all a great piece of naturalist colour. This is his great sunset, as the Polyphemus is his great sunrise. The old ship dies like the sun in a blaze of golden light. It is Turner’s *memento mori*: his acceptance, and celebration of the fact of death. It is also an allegory upon the passing of the sailing vessel and its age. The dirty little steam tugboat, symbol of the industrial age tows the Temeraire out to sea. This is undoubtedly one of the greatest of all romantic paintings for it draws together into a genuine pictorial unity so many of the images and attitudes typical of romanticism.

*Rain, Steam and Speed*, painted in 1844 and one of his last paintings is also an image of the new industrial age. Here is another highly personal vision of light and colour which he had recreated from what he had seen of a passing storm from a train window. Once again symbol of the industrial age is incorporated in a highly personal vision of light and colour. It is a type of art which we do not meet with again until the expressionism of the present century.

Let us turn now to John Constable. Turner’s romantic genius expressed itself best in such personal renderings of nature in the sublime. Constable’s art was romantic, too, but it was, to a far greater extent than Turner’s, the direct recreation if his visual sensations.

Like Turner, Constable began his training with a landscape painter trained in the picturesque tradition. His master, John Thomas Smith, painted homely cottage and village scenes, gothic ruins and churches, in the usual manner of his time. And the subject matter of Constable’s art never departed from the normal repertoire of the picturesque painters of his day. But he transformed this subject matter because he possessed a far deeper sensitivity than the picturesque painters of his time. He
possessed the capacity to identify himself with his subjects, possessed what the poet Keats called negative capability. When a sparrow lights on my garden path, Keats wrote in one of his letters, I peck with it about the gravel’. It was this capacity for empathy or identification with his subjects that made it possible for Constable to transform the most homely of his subjects. ‘The sound of water escaping from mill dams, willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts and brickworks, I love such things’ he wrote in one of his letters. But this deep sense of identification sprang very often from the fact that he made paintings, as Wordsworth made poems, from the scenes of his boyhood. ‘I associate’ he wrote on another occasion ‘my careless boyhood with all that lies on the banks of the Stour. These scenes made me a painter, and I am grateful.’

That is a purely romantic reflection. And yet in some respects Constable I anti-romantic. For one thing Gothic ruins held no satisfaction for him. ‘A new Gothic ruin’ he wrote in 1836’ is little less absurd than a new ruin. It is to be regretted that the tendency of taste is at present too much towards this kind of imitation, which as long as it lasts, can only act as a blight on art, by engaging talents that might have stamped the age with a character of its own’. When Constable does draw and paint churches he does not surround them with the romantic aura of medieval ruins. Rather they are part of the contemporary life of his own countryside, as when he paints his own East Bergholt Church*, or even his great Salisbury Cathedral*. Even his one truly great ruin piece, his Hadleigh Castle of 1829 one of the finest paintings of his later years) is not surrounded with an aura of literary medievalism: it is rather his own personal celebration of the transience of all things, both human and natural as they are seen under the continually changing playoff light and weather. It is for Constable what the fighting Temeraire is for Turner.

Constable’s art begins, as one might expect, in the picturesque manner of his teacher. His watercolour of Borrowdale,* in the Lake District, painted in 1807, is Picturesque both in subject matter and treatment. The tree is little more than a piece of picturesque machinery, but he has used broad washes, and built up massive effects of light and shade characteristic of the picturesque travellers of the time like William Gilpin. In places he has used a knife to scrape out highlights. But picturesque mountain subjects such as these held no great appeal for Constable. He preferred a countryside rich in human associations. He was not much interested in the sublime. Of Salvator Rosa he said, somewhat disparagingly, ‘a great favourite with novel writers, particularly with the ladies’.

His Malvern Hall, Warickshire of 1809 is a subject closer to nature. Although it conforms to a convention of country house landscape which had rots in England going back to the seventeenth century, he has achieved a bold simplicity of light and shade, and a unity of texture, which shows the great influence at this time of the
watercolourist Thomas Girtin. There is now in this painting no attempt to frame the picture with a coulisse, or side wing trees.

In his early works Constable is still under the influence of his masters. But in 1810 he began to forge a new technical method for himself. He began to paint oil sketches, distinct both from drawings and from finished paintings. In these he sought to record as accurately as he could small changes in weather and lighting, or the superficial differences between one tree and another. Among the first were a series of Dedham Vale.* Here is a finished academy version of the subject painted in 1811* and here is an oil sketch of the same subject painted a year later. Note that in both cases the picture is composed of parallel slanting lines which flatten out towards the horizon, and that the vertical accents tend to be suppressed and kept to the edge of the picture. Here we still have the influence of Girtin. Similar qualities may be noted in his Upland Park Scene of July 1812. Constable is here concerned with a single effect and fugitive light effects. Or take Barges on the Stour*, painted probably in 1812. Again the horizontal drag of the pint. In such paintings he is attempting direct visual impressions. This is equally true of his Landscape with Double Rainbow* of July 1812, in which the effect rendered is an especially transient one.

As we look at these oil sketches we can, I think, note an important difference between Constable’s naturalism and the early forms of topographical and picturesque naturalism and the early forms of topographical and picturesque naturalism which preceded him, even Girtin’s. Whilst we are aware that we are in the presence of a truthful and natural vision, we are equally aware of Constable’s own personal excitement or emotion in the presence of his subjects. He was quite well aware of this himself. ‘Painting for me’ he once said ‘is another kind of feeling’. He might well have said, as William Blake did say, ‘Everything that lives is holy’. Actually, he said something very much like that when he remarked ‘I never saw an ugly thing in my life’. There is, in short, a controlled passion for the minute, the homely, as well as the drama of wind and sky in Constable. This heightened emotional awareness in the presence of nature is the romantic side of Constable.

Constable’s work was not of course confined to broadly painted alla prima renderings of his sense perceptions. His large paintings are always more finished than his sketches. Boat Building near Flatford Mill of 1814*, for example, represents a new attempt which he made at this time to give a close finish to his work. It was painted from nature but in some respects is regressive, being closer in spirit to the 18th century, and falls back on what he called the white sheet sky of his earlier works. But the colour, which unfortunately we cannot see, marked an important advance: for he here made use of a great range of greens to correspond with the greens of nature. In such paintings he sought to prove that he could achieve a warm effect of colour without the brown-greens invariably used at that time.
His *Mill Stream* is another painting of 1814 painted from nature. By using a close-up form of composition he here endows quite humble and homely motifs with a monumental scale. And the painting is less highly finished.

Indeed, from 1814 something of the immediacy of the oil sketches begins to inform the finished paintings, while often the oil sketches grow closer in detail to the finished works. In the 1814 Dedham Sketch, for instance, an all prima technique is united with a closer rendering of foreground detail. A particularly broad sketch, on the other hand, of 1814 is his fine *Shipping on the Orwell.* But a sketch of markedly different type is his *Bole of an Elm Tree, East Bergholt, Spring.* It will serve to remind us that Constable was interested in particularising botanical detail as well as generalising atmospheric effects. The particularisation of botanical detail is prominent too in his Flatford Mill of 1817, which we know owed a good deal to Rubens *Chateau de Steen,* which Constable admired greatly. In *Flatford Mill,* Constable portrayed not only oaks and elms and poplars, but the flowers and weeds of the hedges and the ditches with respect for botanical accuracy. If an interest in nature as close as that seems a little banal to our twentieth century eyes, we should remind ourselves that the romantics at any rate were passionately responsive to the common flowers of the roadside. Constable might well have said, as Wordsworth did say:

> To me the meanest flower that blows can give,  
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

We must not conclude from all this, however, that Constable’s art was the product only of passive receptivity, that is, an innocent eye and a romantic passion for nature. The new advance in naturalistic painting which we witness in his work was assisted quite considerably because a new mode of apprehending nature was taking place in science as well as in art during Constable’s lifetime. In science it is marked by a shirt in emphasis from physics and mathematics to such empirical sciences as botany, geology and meteorology. We know that Constable was greatly interested in plants. Towards the end of his life he mentioned how the arts of music and poetry had less hold over him than the sciences, especially, he said, the study of geology. And we know too that after 1820 he greatly interested himself in the classification of clouds as developed by the new science of meteorology. He read, it would seem the first book that classified clouds into cumulus, nimbus, stratus, cirrus and so on. This was Luke Howard’s book on the climate of London. In 1820 he made a number of studies of cloud structures based on these meteorological interests.*

These new sciences provided new and more exacting systems of classification or rocks, plants and trees, and they thus provided a new theoretical framework within which a deeper scrutiny of nature was made possible. It also made artists more visually curious. Nature was looked upon no longer as a vehicle for the expression of a belief in universal harmony or as a vehicle for the expression of some human
sentiment, such as melancholy. It became an enigma to be solved. ‘The art of seeing nature is a thing almost as much to be acquired as the art of reading the Egyptian hieroglyphics wrote Constable on one occasion. And on another he said ‘Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an enquiry into the laws of nature. Why then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are the experiments?’ In such remarks and in his practice, Constable had moved far from the position of the early romantics, and is the true forerunner of the naturalistic landscape of the later nineteenth century.
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