The Origins and Nature of Romanticism

This evening I want to say something about the origin and nature of romanticism. Generally speaking, it would be fair to conclude, it seems to me, that the neo-classical movement was official, conservative and in its later phases actively reactionary in the rigidity of its rules, though must qualify this by observing that early neo-classical architectural theory and practice gave birth to the modern theory of functionalism, so important for the twentieth century, and neo-classical painting in France under David gave birth to realism, so important for nineteenth century French painting.

There can be no doubt that after 1815 the Romantic movement expressed the tensions and mood of the new age more profoundly than Neo-classicism. ‘To say the word Romanticism is to say modern art—that is, intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by every means available to the arts’ wrote Baudelaire in his critical review of the Salon of 1846. ‘For me, Romanticism is the most recent, the latest expression of the beautiful’.

The sources of romanticism lie outside of art itself and I shall not discuss them in detail, for they are often discussed. The rise of popular democracy, of industrialism, and of capitalism, changed utterly the artist’s relation to society. He importance of his old patrons the church, the court, the nobility declined swiftly. In the new situation the artist became an individualist forced to rely upon himself. Romanticism was the consequence of the new situation. It was not a style like Gothic or Baroque (this is important to grasp at once) not a style but as Baudelaire says ‘a mode of feeling’. For the romantic art is feeling, emotion, expression. At the beginning of the 18th century art theory in France and England stressed the role of reason, symmetry, fitness, simplicity, proportion, clarity and control in artistic creation. ‘Reason’ wrote Reynolds in his VIIth discourse in 1776 ‘must ultimately determine our choice upon every occasion’. But by 1776 that was already a rather old fashioned view, and even Reynolds was shifting his ground. Ten years later in 1786 he wrote in the XIII Discourse ‘I observe as a fundamental ground common to all the arts… that they address themselves only to two faculties of the mind, its imagination and its sensibility’.

The new emphasis upon feeling owed an enormous amount to Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury who in 1711 published his Characteristics of Men, Manners and Opinions, in which he sought to create a new system of moral values in which the affections and passions were governed by reason rather than by divine grace. Shaftesbury was deist, and his natural morality placed great emphasis upon the affections. His book was read widely upon the Continent and influenced Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Goethe and Herder. In 1745 Diderot translated Shaftesbury’s Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit and presented a copy to Rousseau, and Rousseau’s enormously influential writings spread throughout Europe. For
Rousseau natural compassion was the primary moral force, the pure emotion of nature, existing prior to all forms of reflection. Rousseau, more than anybody else, fathered the romantic taste. The novel, poetry and painting began to explore the modes of feeling, compassion, pity, love and so forth. We have already seen it in Gruesse’s cloying sentiment,* and in Gainsborough’s fancy pictures of tender rustics.*

Compassion and pity are tricky emotions for any artist to handle, bit in the hands of a genius like Blake they were able to give a new dimension to the art of the time, as in his Songs of Innocence and Experience, or his magnificent panting called Pity, which illustrates precisely the line from Macbeth:

And pity, like a new born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

And Constable wrote ‘painting is for me but another form of feeling’.

The emotional scale was increased a both ends by the romantics. At the other end of the scale from charm, compassion, pity and love lay the awful, the terrifying aberrant behaviour. The cult of the sentimental is balanced by the cult of the sublime.

The discussion on the sublime was an important factor in the growth of romantic taste. It stemmed from a treatise by a Greek classical author, traditionally known as Longinus, who probably lived in the first century AD. The treatise which was called De Sublimata, was concerned with defining the elevated style of rhetoric adopted by classical orators. The treatise contained some lyrical and evocative passages which left their mark of 18th century philosophers. For example: ‘We are led by nature’ Longinus writes, ‘to admire, not our little rivers, for all their purity and homely uses, as much as the Nile, Rhine and Danube, and beyond all the sea. Nor do we revere that little fire of own burning, as we do the heavenly fires that are often veiled in darkness; nor is it so marvellous in our own eyes as the gulf of Etna, whose outbursts bring up from their depths rock and whole mountains and pour forth rivers of subterranean elemental fire. What is useful or needful is homely, but what is strange is a marvel.’

During the late eighteenth century poets and artists sought avidly after such natural marvels, of which Longinus speaks. The ‘tremendities of nature’ Coleridge called them. Sir William Hamilton, the English Ambassador at Naples from 1764 to 1800 had his artist Pietro Fabris make many sketches of Vesuvius in eruption in 1767.* Hamilton, one of the great collectors of Greek vases, a member of the Society of Dilettanti, was also a pioneer geologist and vulcanologist, and here his interest also fed the new taste for the sublime. A few years later the English artist, Joseph Wright
of Derby painted Vesuvius in eruption. The portrayal of dramatic effects of light became one of the leading Romantic interests.* Fascination in the sublime aspects of nature fed scientific curiosity: art and science now came closer together than they had been since the 15th century. Joseph Wright, for example, painted moonlight scenes with scientific objectivity, and was a member of the Lunar Society, a group of scientists and literary men who were very interested in the relation between science and technology, and are of great importance for the early history of the industrial revolution.*

From the beginning the romantic taste drew much of its inspiration from literature. The word itself derives from the French roman, those medieval French epics, the _chanson de geste_ such as the Song of Roland, in which the deeds of an ancient national hero are glorified. During the later eighteenth century the epics of Northern mythology of Scandinavia and Iceland were being translated into the modern European languages. While many travellers like the Frenchman Le Roy and the Englishmen Stuart and Revett travelled to Greece to make accurate drawings of classical temples, others like Carl von Linne (Linnaeus) travelled into little known Lapland within the arctic circle, or to Iceland, like Sir Joseph Banks to climb the volcano Hecla, and to make the first detailed scientific description of Fingals cave in the Hebrides.* [personal, Toer to Scotland, 1774?] Neoclassicism was metropolitan and urban centred upon the interests of intellectuals and academicians in Rome, Paris and London. Romanticism was the literature and art of the mountain frontiers of the European society. Lapland, Iceland, the Highlands of Scotland and Wales, the Swiss Alps. The genuine and faked literature of these regions aroused romantic sensibility. The most famous of all was James Macpherson’s _Ossian_ published in 1763. Everyone in Europe who could read seems to have read it, even literate convicts like the young Scottish forger, Thomas Watling, sent to Botany Bay. Here is an example of its high flying rhetoric, from Book III:

Father of heroes! O Trenmoor! High dweller of eddying winds where the dark red thunder marks the troubled clouds! Open thou thy stormy halls. Let the bards of old be near. Let them draw nigh, with songs and their half viewless harps. Now dweller of misty valleys comes! No hunter unknown at his streams. It is the car borne Oscar from the fields of war. The blast folds thee in its skirt and rustles through the sky.

This was the sublime in ancient poetry, and critics found it in Milton, Shakespeare, Homer and Dante. The illustration of these writers became one of the great interests of the romantic painters. Girodet one of David’s followers, painted a great canvas showing Ossian Receiving Napoleons Generals.* Here neo-classicist technique joins with high romantic theme. John Runciman, and his brother Alexander, both Scots, be it noted, were among the first English artists to go directly to English poetry for their inspiration. John Runciman painted King Lear in the Storm, a fine essay in the pictorial sublime. For here the madness of the King is embodied in nature and to use
nature as an allegory of human emotion, what Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy, is one of the hallmarks of the romantic sensibility.

Developments in religion promoted romanticism, for religion, too, became more emotional, more enthusiastic. The teachings of John Wesley and Emanuel Swedenborg wrought a profound change in the texture of religious thought by no means confined to their own denominations. Religion became more emotional, emphasizing conversion, intuition, illumination. For the Swedenborgians the universe was a vast hieroglyph of a hidden spiritual world, with natural correspondences everywhere. Here is Phillip James de Loutherbourg’s painting of a Midsummer Afternoon with a Methodist Preacher.* During the religious ferment of these times men saw visions. William Blake saw visions, and so did the English watercolourist John Varley. In 1823 in New York State a young lad of 15, Joseph Smith was visited on a vision by an ancient prophet who told him where he could dig up the golden book of Mormon. This he did and discovered how, in ancient days, the lost ten tribes of Israel had migrated to America. It was natural I suppose that god’s chosen people should find their way to god’s own country. But William Blake had visions that England was the chosen land of god, and that the New Jerusalem would be built there. As religion became more emotional it also became more nationalistic.

The Swiss artist Henry Fuseli reveals for us the sensibility and many of the interests of early romanticists. He is sometimes called a proto-romantic because his interests are divided between romanticism and classicism. Born in Zurich he began life as a poet and writer with the Stürm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement. This early phase of continental romanticism began in Switzerland and spread to Germany. Fuseli read widely in German, English and Italian, and in Youth copied Swiss Mannerist and Baroque drawings. They already begin to reveal Fuseli’s interest in violence: murders, battles, shootings, and his eroticism. Here is an early drawing after Ringli, a Swiss Mannerist,* of Mars and Venus, which combines the erotic and the violent and on the other side a drawing by Rudolf Meyer from Meyers Book of Fools. The grotesque, the violent, the obscene, fascinated Fuseli throughout life. These early drawings from Swiss Mannerists lead to Fuseli’s own illustrations of the Deeds of Til Eulenspiegel, the Flemish folk-hero, which are reminiscent of early 16th century German woodcuts. Our next slide portrays a fashionable family at breakfast and appears to be Fuseli’s version of Hogarth’s Levee of the Countess from Marriage a la Mode.* But here there is a nervous attenuation of line quite different from Hogarth’s satirical rococo. Under pressure from his father Fuseli became for some years a Zwinglian clergyman in Zurich, but had to leave the city after being associated with a pamphlet attacking corruption in the city government. In Germany he lived for a time with the provost Spalding, an exponent of emotional theology, who has one of the first German translators of Shaftesbury. From Germany he visited England, living there from 1764 until 177. Here he was associated with the radical publisher Johnson, the centre of the English Jacobin circle, produced pamphlets on Rousseau and defended him. In
London he was deeply impressed by Garrick’s Shakespeare performances and became his friend. Fuseli’s designs after Shakespeare, a favourite subject of his, combine the dramatic, the violent, the erotic. As we see in his *The Ghost of Hamlet’s Father*, and his *Titania* and *Bottom.*

Fuseli was not a complete romantic by any means. He did not enjoy the gothic nor the primitive barbarism of Ossian. It was the later, the chivalric middle ages which appealed to him, the Age of Spencer, the Dream of Ghyon and Dante, and Elizabethan England. The linear emphasis in his art is derived from classical principles, and he was one of the agents whereby neo-classical standards penetrated Britain for in 1765, three years before Reynolds’s first Discourse, he translated Winckelmann’s first book, his *Reflections on the Paintings and Sculpture of the Greeks*, first published in 1756.

Having decided definitely to become a painter instead of a writer, Fuseli went to Italy and lived there, mainly in Rome, for eight years, from 1770 until 1778. Here it was the great genius of Michelangelo which overpowered him, not Raphael and the Bolognese, whom the classicists favoured. Apart from Michelangelo [The Libyan Sybil,* Young Girl**], Mannerist artists like Bandinelli, Rosso and Parmigenianino influenced him. Here is Rosso’s Madonna with St John and St Bartholemew.* Bandinellis Judith with Attendants, and Parmigianinio’s Conversion of St Paul.

From such mannerist influences Fuseli developed a highly personal and highly expressive style. We may take a drawing done in Zurich on his way back to England in 1779 as an example of it, his Oath on the Rutli,* a famous scene in Swiss history in which representatives of the three original cantons swear to literate themselves from Austrian subjection. It was completed three years before David’s Oath of the Horatii*. By contrast with David’s, Fuseli’s figures are nervous, elongated, tense and ecstatic, though it is linked with David at least in its simplicity and in its concentration of action upon a few figures.

Fuseli is typically early romantic in his interest in the extremes of human behaviour, in what Coleridge called the ‘night life of the soul’. He drew a vision of the madhouse.* This interest was probably promoted by his personal friendship with Johann Lavater, the Swiss scientist and man of letters famous for his work on physiognomy and personality. Fuseli’s drawing of *Fear* looks forwards to the expressionists (Munch*). And he also made drawings of *Nightmares*. His painting the *Nightmare* created an enormous sensation when exhibited in the Royal Academy of 1783 and made his fame through Europe when engraved. [The Madhouse, 1784; The Insane, 1821].

Fuseli gained the support of a small, aristocratic and refined circle in England, centred upon Thomas Coutts the Banker and his daughter the Countess of Guilford. He became a member of the Royal Academy in 1790 and a Professor of Painting and
Keeper of the Academy for over 20 years. Through his personal contacts and his lectures he exercised a considerable influence over a small group of intellectuals and artists who usually had strong literary interests. One of them was William Blake, another was Thomas Griffiths Wainwright,* later transported to Tasmania. Wainwright’s elegant pencil portraits owe a great deal to Fuseli’s proto-romantic mannerism. He also influenced the English sculptor Thomas Banks, who was one of the first English sculptors to reject baroque traditions in sculpture and adopt neoclassical ideals, as we may see in his death of Germanicus* at Holkham. Fuseli also influenced George Romney who was the most fashionable portrait painter in London after Reynolds and Gainsborough, prior to the rise of Sir Thomas Lawrence. Romney, touched by the Rousseauean sentiment of his time painted a more sentimental type of portrait than Reynolds, and became famous for his many portraits of Lady Hamilton.* In 1773 Romney went to Rome and remained until 1775 where he succumbed to the fashion for large history pieces in the neo-classic manner. On his return he made history pieces in the neo-classic manner. On his return he had many drawings in which the influence of Fuseli is apparent. The Print Room of the National Gallery has a good selection of these drawings. That Fuseli also influenced Blake is apparent simply by comparing the Vision of Queen Katherine* engraved by Bartolozzi after Fuseli in 1788 with Blake’s drawing of the same theme in 1807. And it was Blake who wrote:

The only man I ever knew
Who did not make me almost spew,
Was Fuseli, he was both Turk and Jew,
And so god Christian friends how do you do.

Which was not, of course, Blake at his poetic best.

The romantic movement being a mode of feeling naturally affected all the traditional categories of painting, history painting, portraiture and landscape above all. If we compare for a moment David’s Death of Marat with Turner’s Death of Nelson, we can see how much the contemporary history piece had changed under the influence of romantic sensibility. Or if we compare a typical Reynolds* with a typical portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence who succeeded Reynolds as the most fashionable painter in England, we can see how the romantic sensibility favoured a fluent and febrile touch, an informality of presentation, and a more dramatic use of light and shade than the neo-classics: and all this is often accompanied by a desire to paint not the public face of a man, as David would, but the inner directed man, seeking communion not so much with the world as with their own poetic nature, as in Delacroix’s portrait of Chopin.*

Romanticism, indeed, gradually eroded away the significance of the hierarchy of categories of painting which the neo-classics assumed: history painting, portraiture,
landscape, and mere topography at the bottom. As Antal point out in his important articles on classicism and romanticism in the Burlington magazine, as romanticism came to favour, so the lower and more despised categories, landscape and even topographical landscape, gradually rose to favour and in the end became the most favoured category and was to remain so throughout the nineteenth century.

The development of the new interest in landscape is the result of the combination of three distinct influences from the continent. First, the influence of the Dutch naturalistic landscape, as in the work of Ruisdael. Here is his Watermill* from our own Gallery, with its obvious delight in the portrayal of light upon water, the play of cloud across the sky, old millworks and so forth, together seeking to evoke a unified mood. Romantic melancholy, sweet sorrow at the transience of life is even more apparent in such paintings as his Jewish cemetery.*

Secondly, there is the great influence of the ideal landscape of Claude. Both in his portrayal of light, usually evening light and in his evocation of the Golden Age,* Claude appealed to romantic taste. Likewise, Salvator Rosea [Homer and Odysseus]>* appealed to what the romantics chose to call the sublime in landscape.

Thirdly, there was the Venetian veduta, the view of an actual place. Canaletto, by the wonderful way in which he portrayed the buildings of Venice through a beautiful atmospheric envelope, also appealed to the romantic love of light. This is equally notable in the work of Francesco Guardi, as in his “Gates of Venice”,* in our Gallery. Guardi has a more painterly and fluent stroke than Caneletto,* and through such painters the painterly tradition of the Rococo, spurned by the neo-classical theorists, was transmitted to romantic landscape painters like Constable,* Turner,* and later still to the Barbizon school. Canaletto came to England during the 1750s and exercised a considerable influence upon English landscape painting. Topography, the lowest category of art, is here being used or the analysis of light. And it could be used to evoke the sensations of the pictorial sublime, as in the architectural drawings of the great Italian draughtsman, Piranesi, whose drawings of ruin evokes sublime memories of the passing of time and the falling of Empires. As we may see in his drawings o the Temples of Paestum,* or his more fantastic and much less topographical drawings of Prisons from his famous Carceri* series. Architectural draughtsmanship could even be used to evoke nightmarish fantasies after the manner of Fuseli. It became increasingly difficult to assume that a certain category of art would evoke distant types of emotion. We may see something of Piranesi’s fantastic sense of scale in the architectural drawings of Turner.*

In England romantic sensibility promoted the popularity of watercolour painting. Watercolour, with its translucent colour washes, its speed of execution and the fact that the best watercolours preserve something of the immediacy of a sketch, appealed
to the new taste. For it is a mark of romantic taste to prefer the sketch to the finished work.

In this field Paul Sandby was a pioneer. Paul and Thomas Sandby were topographical draughtsmen to George III and were employed on survey work in the Scottish Highlands. That fact is important, for the romantic enjoyment of mountains is closely related to the building of safe and efficient roads through mountains, such as the Scottish and Welsh highlands and the Swiss Alps. Sandby, in his fine wash drawings, sought to put down just what he saw, without arranging his trees and roads to suit picturesque and sublime conventions. He is one of the first truly naturalistic landscape painters.

Richard Wilson was, by contrast, more traditional. His Dolbardarn Castle in our Gallery, is Claudean in conception, with its coulisse, its light painted *au contre jour*, and its idyllic peace.* But in many of his paintings of the Welsh Highlands, as in his important paintings The Summit of Cader Idris* and his View of Snowdon,* he combines a fine treatment of atmosphere and light with the natural vision that Constable was later to strive for.

Two painters of great importance for the development of the romantic landscape in England were Alexander Cozens and his son John Robert Cozens.* Alexander worked in pen and wash and reveals the romantic curiosity in nature by his careful studies of rocks, trees and clouds. Here is a study which scrutinises the structure of rocks and branches.* He made a careful analysis of tree forms in a book entitled *Shape, Skeleton and Foliage of Trees for the use of Painting and Drawing.* He also made careful drawings of clouds.* We must not assume that the romantic landscapists were only interested in the appearance of the landscape, they paid greater attention that ever before to the structure of things, of rocks, plants, and clouds. They go on where Leonardo de Vinci and his generation left off: and we must remember that in this regard the landscape painters are closely related to the new sciences of geology, botany, and meteorology which were at this time beginning to perfect their systematics.

Alexander Cozens recalls Leonardo in another fashion. For Leonardo had encouraged artists to invent compositions from looking at the stains upon walls. And Cozens invented a method of inventing landscapes by means of blots, he was an eighteenth century *tachist.* Such blots assisted invention.

Alexander’s son John was an extremely talented watercolour painting. One of the finest of all. His Chasm at Delphi is typical of the delight he found in mountain subjects. He worked within blue grey and green tonality and produced exquisite effects of light and air. Cozen travelled in Italy as the topographical draughtsman of Richard Payne Knight who designed Downton Castle, and later travelled with
William Beckford, who is linked with the romantic taste both for his strange novel *Vathek* and his great picturesque gothic castle Fonthill Abbey. In later life Cozens became a sad mental case and came under the care of Dr Thomas Munro who was an amateur watercolour painter in the picturesque manner himself. Munro kept a little private Salon of his own and employed the young Thomas Girtin and Turner to copy Cozens’s landscapes, so that Cozens’s work through Munro came to exercise an influence second to none in the subsequent development of English landscape painting.
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