The Romantic Period

1789-1832

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, neoclassicists viewed with alarm a widespread reaction against their beliefs. It amounted to a revolution, not only in political ideals but also in philosophy, art, and human values. This wave of change was sweeping over both England and continental Europe.

From the time of Louis XIV (1643-1715), France had been the cultural center of Europe. She became to the Enlightenment what her southern neighbor Italy had been to the Renaissance: a model of civilization reasserting classical values against the ignorance of the intervening ages. In 1660 England imported French civilization with the return of Charles II and his court from France. For a century, neoclassicism dominated English culture. London became an English Paris: a modern version of Augustan Rome. Reason became the basis of society, the cause of human progress, and the glory of the arts.

To the embarrassment of many who trusted in the rule of reason, rationalism turned against the society it had supposedly upheld. In 1789 the attention of Europe was riveted on France not as a pattern of rational civilization but as a terrifying example of its collapse. Having pulled down the Bastille, Jacobin revolutionaries leveled the whole aristocratic structure of French society. Self-proclaimed apostles of reason, they discarded all powers and privileges based on birth and destroyed all who stood in their way.

The revolutionaries erected in place of the monarchy a government based on the social theory of atheistic philosophers. This new society was a republic in name only. Founded by force and sustained by fear, it was the forerunner of modern totalitarian "democracies" such as the Soviet Union—secular states modeled on theory and ruled by an elite class supposedly representing the interests of the masses. Revolutionary France gave the world a terrifying spectacle—repeated often since—of the tyranny of reason divorced from humane feelings and from the truth of God.

The tyranny of reason was becoming obvious elsewhere as well. Leading thinkers had begun to realize that not only is the physical world finally beyond human comprehension but also much that is related to the inner life of man. They recognized that much of what enriches and ennobles life is not physically observable. Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5:22-23) cannot be weighed and analyzed in a scientific laboratory. Conscience is not reducible to proposition and proof or to mathematical demonstration. These thinkers, though by no means Christian, understood that the feelings, the imagination, and the intuition are basic to human nature and often lead to profounder insights than do conclusions based on observation. The rationalistic view, they noticed, walls out large areas of human experience and denies much that directs and consoles man in his journey through life.

The weaknesses of empiricism therefore produced an opposite school of thought known technically as idealism, according to which all knowledge has its source in the self rather than in the outer world. Idealists taught that, since our observation of the world consists only of fallible perceptions, we can be sure only of the existence of our perceptions, not of what we supposedly perceive. All knowledge therefore
depends upon the individual mind. This skepticism is even more destructive of Christian belief than is empiricism, for it questions all truths external to the individual. All truths become subjective; all values, relative. We know only what we think we perceive and what we feel to be true. Consequently, we know nothing.

The rising emphasis on the feelings, imagination, and intuition amounted to a revolution in art as well as in philosophy. Neoclassical art—whether poetry, painting, sculpture, or music—came to be regarded as sterile mechanism, as spiritless formula, as a system of mathematical symmetries and logical cause and effect. To a new generation of artists and critics, eighteenth-century art lacked the dynamism, the emotional surge, of vital creative expression. It also lacked personality, suppressing individual experience for the sake of universality. Good art, they insisted, does indeed number the streaks on a tulip, notwithstanding the pronouncements of Samuel Johnson.

These objections to neoclassical art were obviously unfair exaggerations. Imaginative vitality and strong feeling abound in Swift and Pope and Johnson, but there is some truth to the charges. In form neoclassical poetry generally lacks lyricism. In subject matter it tends to avoid the mysterious, the marvelous, the transcendent. It often follows regularity and clarity at the expense of energy and scope. While achieving a satisfying arrangement of parts, it falls short of the sublime.

During the next period, the arts would emphasize power rather than order. They would also, like philosophy, become more subjective. The new poetry would present not formal public utterance but private mental experience. Poets would represent the world not as perceived generally by mankind but as filtered through a highly individual consciousness.

This impatience with neoclassical restriction is understandable. The aesthetic pendulum was due to swing in an opposite, corrective direction. But at the root of the new attitude was a deep revolt against divine rule—in the political, moral, and intellectual life of Western man. He now considered himself right not only in his reasoning ability but also and principally in his emotional desires. To complete his happiness, he need only free himself from the beliefs and customs of the past. Social institutions, rooted in outdated notions of reasonableness and Christian duty, were enemies to his self-realization. Society must be reconstructed. In the meantime he would be happiest living alone in rural simplicity, sharing the existence of the lower forms of life. The good life, said Rousseau, requires imitating the spontaneous, impulsive behavior of children, or indeed of animals, rather than obeying the precepts taught in the church and the school.

The period beginning with 1789 we therefore distinguish from the preceding period politically, philosophically, and artistically. It has been given the name romantic. The term, which in earlier times meant something absurdly fanciful or full of feeling, came to mean something delightfully or sublimely so, often with associations of the long ago or far away. In many respects romanticism still dominates modern art and thought. Current ideas of art as unfettered self-expression, of morality as situational, of truth as relative, and of healthy behavior as untamed animal impulse are all part of the romantic outlook that displaced the neoclassical about the time of the political revolution in France.
Despite the continuing influence of romanticism, we may regard the romantic era—the period of high-romantic enthusiasm—as coming to an end in 1832 with the death of Sir Walter Scott and the passage of the First Reform Bill in England. About this time England, having survived the threat of political revolution, entered what may be called its age of reform.

**POLITICAL EVENTS**

Politically the period from 1789 to 1832 was the era of the French Revolution and its aftermath. In 1792 with the founding of the First Republic of France, the upper classes in England and all Europe saw a threatening ideology become a political reality. In 1793 with the beheading of Louis XVI and the French declaration of war against the surrounding nations, no monarchy, constitutional or otherwise, was safe. French republicanism had become a European military crusade.

The rise of a young Corsican artillery officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, to military commander in 1795 and eventually to emperor in 1804 gave the revolutionary forces a brilliant tactical and organizational genius. A series of allied coalitions, formed and financed by William Pitt the Younger, failed to stop Napoleon’s drive to annex all Europe to France. The tide gradually turned through the exploits of Lord Horatio Nelson at sea and the duke of Wellington on land. Nelson kept the French fleet penned up by naval victories in the eastern Mediterranean, in the Baltic, and off Cape Trafalgar near Gibraltar in 1805. Wellington drove north through Portugal and Spain into France in the peninsular campaign of 1813. These victories together with a disastrous French invasion of Russia in 1812 resulted in Napoleon’s abdication, surrender, and exile to the Mediterranean island of Elba.

Napoleon’s escape and reinstatement as emperor in 1815 astonished Europe and led to one of the most famous battles in history. On the plains of Waterloo near Brussels, Belgium, the furious charges of Napoleon’s crack regiments failed to breach the “thin red line” of Wellington. The stubborn courage of the Iron Duke and the arrival of fresh Prussian troops saved Europe a second time from the revolutionary scourge. Exiled to the barren Atlantic island of St. Helena, Napoleon spent his last six years in melancholy solitude while hereditary monarchy lived on in France.

The period from 1815 to 1832 was a time of conservative reaction throughout Europe. At the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), the foreign ministers of the victorious nations gathered to put the political pieces of Europe back into place—or, more accurately, to divide the loose pieces among themselves. England, by then sole ruler of the seas, used her influence to block the ambitions of the rival powers. With
Austria, Prussia, and Russia, she formed a Quadruple Alliance designed to freeze the political map of Europe for the next twenty years.

In England a similar mentality prevailed. From 1784 to 1834, Parliament was under Tory control. The summoning by George III of William Pitt the Younger to form a majority in Parliament brought into power at the age of twenty-four the youngest prime minister in British history. A high-principled public servant, astute politician, and financial genius, Pitt enjoyed the backing of the king, both houses of Parliament, and the people. His long and brilliant ministry (1784-1801, 1804-1806) was strengthened on the one side by his surprising devotion to Whig domestic policies and on the other by the conservative reaction to Napoleon. Pitt had ascended to office intent on reform after the debacle of the American war, but following 1789 the mood of Parliament was against change. He did secure the admission of Ireland to the United Kingdom in 1801 and the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 through the influence of his evangelical friends. The other reforms had to wait.

After workers’ uprisings at Spa Fields near London in 1816 and at St. Peter’s Fields near Manchester in 1819, both forcefully suppressed, Parliament clamped the lid tighter on popular protest. The repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824 legalized trade unions, but subsequent strikes resulted in further restrictions on concerted actions by workers. As anger rose among liberals toward the alleged mistreatment of popular dissent (the “Peterloo Massacre” at St. Peter’s Fields was particularly odious), anxiety rose among conservatives and the people generally. Parliament was divided over reform of the franchise, the main purpose of the discontent, though most members of the House of Commons recognized that something eventually would have to be done.

Getting the king and the House of Lords to cooperate was the problem. Neither was eager to share more rule with the populace. The transfer of the crown from the deceased George III to his debauched eldest son, George IV, in 1820 did not improve the climate for reform. In 1830 the accession of George III’s second son, William IV, helped slightly. By then the outcry for political reform could no longer be ignored.

The industrial revolution had shifted much of the population from farms and villages to the cities. Large industrial centers remained unrepresented in the House of Commons except through their counties whereas many towns that had disappeared still sent members. In 1832 the First Reform Bill, as it is called, eliminated most of these “rotten boroughs” and created new seats for the industrial cities and counties. It extended the vote to all males who owned or rented houses worth £10 rental per year. The result was an enfranchising of the upper middle class which broke the landed aristocracy’s control over the House of Commons. The year 1832, therefore, signaled England’s safe passage through a treacherous stage of her history and also her readiness to undertake reforms as needed.

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS**

English commerce during the early nineteenth century benefited from the economic principles of Adam Smith. His *Wealth of Nations* (1776) based economic activity on self-interest and recommended noninterference by government—a policy
known as *laissez faire* (Fr. ‘‘allow [them] to do’’). A healthy, growing economy, Smith argued, results from commercial competition. Both merchant and consumer would gain by the fewest encumbrances on trade and employment. Consequently, trade barriers fell; and workers, because of their great numbers, remained largely at the mercy of their employers.

The abundance of labor was due not only to the agricultural revolution with its enclosing and consolidating of fields. It was due also to an enormous population expansion: in England and Wales from 6,500,000 in 1750 to 13,800,000 in 1831. The plight of the workers, including women and small children, in the mines and sweatshops has been properly emphasized by historians. But it is often forgotten that many thousands might have died from starvation or disease had not the industrial revolution provided jobs and the agricultural revolution supplied food.

A third revolution, in communication, was made possible by the application of steam to transportation. In 1838 the first vessels crossed the Atlantic under steam power alone. Even more important was the advent of the railroad. The ‘‘iron horse’’ became superior to the stagecoach in load capacity and to the barge (where canals existed) in speed. It dramatically increased the distances by which raw materials could be practically transported to manufacturing districts and reduced the price of manufactured goods. As a result, cities not located near waterways could become industrial centers, and England could undersell other nations. The growth of a vast network of rail transportation also encouraged the social amalgamation of England’s population, reducing the cultural distinctions, formerly so striking, between England, Scotland, and Wales. The locomotive, in England as in America, became the supreme symbol of the industrial progress of man.
RELIGION

The eighteenth-century attack on Christian faith was considered decisive by intellectuals of the romantic period. The writings of the Frenchman Voltaire and the Scotsman Hume had discredited belief in miracles and in the deity of Christ. Critical scholarship in Germany was at work on the Biblical text itself, first assuming, then concluding the Scriptures to be only the fallible writing of men. Romantic thinkers who rejected rationalism in philosophy and art accepted its effect on religion and denied the miraculous in Scripture.

Some who found themselves unable or unwilling to believe in the old Christian verities still felt the need of religion for consolation and moral restraint. Deism was a poor substitute for Christianity for those who valued feeling above reason. Furthermore, the mechanistic world view from which deism derived was becoming obsolete. What seemed necessary was a faith invulnerable to the attacks of reason and able, like Christianity, to comfort, to inspire, and to support social duty.

England, like most of Europe, turned to Germany for the answer. In Tubingen and other German university towns during the 1790s, a group of young philosophers and poets, disciples of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), were forming a set of religious concepts known later as transcendentalism. What emerged was, like deism, a secular faith. But whereas the God of deism is separate or even absent from creation, the God of transcendentalism is resident within, almost equivalent with, nature and mankind: a World Spirit. Knowledge of him comes not from revelation or reason but from intuition and feeling. The means is passive meditation.

Transcendentalists looked with special interest upon the French Revolution. In their radical reinterpretation of Scripture, the revolution of 1789 seemed the upheaval preceding the millennium and new heaven and earth foretold in Revelation. These prophetic events they combined and secularized. Just around the corner was the final age of lasting peace and perfect freedom.

According to the mystic William Blake (1757-1827) and the German romantics, man has fallen not into sin but into division—from nature, from his fellows, and from himself. History is a progression toward the restoration of his original harmony and self-unity. Whereas the cause of his fall was analytical reason, by which he is now dominated, the agent of his restoration will be creative imagination, especially as expressed in poetry. The poet-prophet will therefore have a principal role in the freeing and restoring of man.

It was as transcendentalist visionaries that many romantics became supporters of the French Revolution. For most the enthusiasm was, however, short-lived. Robespierre's Reign of Terror (1793-94) shocked Englishmen of all political persuasions and caused much soul searching among even the most liberal. Napoleon’s invasion of democratic Switzerland (1798), agreement with Catholic Rome (1801), and acceptance of the imperial crown from Pope Pius VII (1804) seemed a betrayal of revolutionary goals. As the millennial dream faded, the anticipated earthly paradise became internal rather than external, spiritual rather than physical, with its political realization only a distant goal. The long-awaited secular millennium would be born through gradual, peaceful transformation rather than sudden, violent change.
Transcendentalism like deism changes God into a deity who does not interfere with man's behavior. It goes beyond deism in deifying man's behavior, in making man a part of God. Transcendentalism is a form of pantheism, the belief that God is all, and all is God. In the "higher pantheism" of the romantics, the personal God of the Bible becomes a World Spirit indwelling all things, its fullest expression the mind of man. A fatal problem for such a religion is that, while freeing man of his accountability to God, it does not enforce morality. Transcendentalism has no real ethical value. Whatever is done is done by God; and therefore the behavior of all living creatures, including man, must be acceptable.

The need for a secular ethics gave rise to an ethical system known as utilitarianism. The goodness or badness of an action was said to consist in the happiness it produces. Whereas Christian ethics is based on self-sacrifice in imitation of the Redeemer, utilitarian ethics is based on self-interest—in getting rather than giving. Applied to politics, it translates into the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

The founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), believed that one can live happily with himself and with others by choosing behavior that produces the maximum of pleasure and the minimum of pain. (Pleasure and pain refer to the long-term consequences of an action rather than to the immediate effects.) Bentham discussed happiness in physically measurable terms and human relationships in coldly mechanistic fashion. His "moral arithmetic" was despised by the romantics as being of the head rather than the heart.

We should not, however, be misled by the major literature of this period into thinking that all England had forsaken Christian belief for transcendentalism. Evangelical Christianity largely held its gains. The London Missionary Society was founded in 1795 to spread the gospel throughout the empire. Splendid hymns appeared by Reginald Heber, Anglican bishop of Calcutta ("From Greenland's Icy Mountains," "Holy, Holy, Holy"); by the Irish pastor Thomas Kelly ("Look, Ye Saints! The Sight Is Glorious"); and by the Scotsman Henry Lyte ("Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken," "Abide with Me," "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven"). Evangelical strictness prevailed in most middle-class households, where the principal reading was the Bible, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and Foxe's Acts and Monuments. In Parliament the evangelical viewpoint was well entrenched and had to be consulted on controversial issues. The prevalence of orthodox belief may be sensed in the aggressiveness with which romantic writers state their opposing views.

CULTURE

Christians would agree with nineteenth-century romantics that human reason has its limitations. We would also allow with the romantics some validity to intuition. In a sense romanticism therefore may be viewed as a natural corrective to rationalism in philosophy and art. Spiritually and morally, however, the movement was dangerously anti-Christian. The common denominator of almost all manifestations of romanticism—political, philosophical, and artistic—is freedom, the escape from limits. Romantics glorified the quest for the unattainable—in Shelley's words,
"the desire of the moth for a star." The word *ambition*, which formerly connoted rebellion, took on positive associations of nobility of mind and greatness of soul.

The romantic hero is a rebel, unwilling to accept his finiteness. He will not be assigned an identity or a duty by anyone other than himself. He flaunts his independence and individuality. His libertarian outlook affects not only his politics but also his personal and artistic values. Feeling, he decides, is more democratic than thinking. Everyone feels; some think. And so he lives by feeling and grants his emotional impulses the fullest possible scope. Romanticism is the attitude most influential among young persons of all times and among all persons in our youth-oriented society. It is the way of life fatal to the Biblical moral fool (Prov. 10:8; 10; 18:7; 26:10).

**Language**

Grammar and spelling were well standardized by the early nineteenth century. The familiar differences between British and American spelling (cf. British *centre*, *honour*, and *levelled* with American *center*, *honor*, and *levelled*) we owe to the zeal for simplified spelling of the American lexicographer Noah Webster (1758-1843). Technological advances appear in the new meanings given to *train*, *car*, and *coach*, originally referring to horse-drawn vehicles. In vocabulary at least, the language was more tolerant of individuality than in the conservative era preceding. Writers invented or adapted freely from other languages to keep pace with the rapid expansion of knowledge and trade.

**Learning and Thought**

During the romantic period, England like the rest of Europe felt the impact of new ideas from Germany and France. From Kant's disciples came the notion that the imagination is a creator rather than just a combiner of sensory images and that art is a new creation rather than merely a reflection of the divinely created world. From the French social thinker Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) came a powerful impetus toward *primitivism*—the preference for an uncivilized life. The cause of human misery, according to Rousseau, is not sin but society. Man has unfortunately abandoned his original happy state in nature. To regain this primal happiness, man must shed all artificial hindrances to a free and natural life—the customs, institutions, and habits of thought acquired through centuries of civilization—and listen to the voice of nature speaking through his feelings and intuitions. Education should draw out the natural good in the child rather than direct or repress it.

The ideas of Rousseau encouraged permissivism in morality and education and fostered the millennial dream of anarchic bliss. *Primitivism* and *progressivism* are twin errors of the romantic imagination. In preferring the past or the future to the present, they are part of the romantic rebellion against the status quo. In pointing backward toward a mythical age of simple goodness or forward toward a secular millennium, they are part of the romantic reinterpretation of the Biblical fall and restoration of man.

England was being influenced by English as well as continental thought. Important English writings in addition to those of Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham include *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) by Thomas Malthus (1766-
1834) and Principles of Geology (1830-33) by Charles Lyell (1797-1875), both influential upon Charles Darwin. Malthus expounded the grim thesis that population increases geometrically (2:4:8:16:32) while food supplies increase only arithmetically (2:4:6:8:10). The result is a fierce struggle for existence ending in widespread starvation, unless population growth is checked by war and disease.

Lyell, noting what seemed to be the increasing complexity of fossils from the lowest to the highest geographical levels, concluded that the earth's appearance is the result of present processes working gradually over long periods of time. His concept, known as uniformitarianism, rules out divine catastrophic intervention. It conflicts with the Biblical accounts of creation and the Flood. It also conflicts with an honest, careful study of the fossil record. Nevertheless, it became a cornerstone of nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking.

Rationalistic writings by the radical deist Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and the atheist William Godwin (1756-1836) infamed many young intellectuals with social radicalism. Godwin's anarchistic Inquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793) stated that evil will eventually perish of its own corruption and foretold a happy era of peace, brotherhood, and unrestrained individualism. The Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) by Godwin's wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, is the first feminist treatise in English. A fervent radical in thought and life, she is the mother of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of the gothic novel Frankenstein (1818).

**Literature**

Philosophy and literature were closely linked during the romantic period. The major romantic poets were preeminently poets of ideas—crusaders for a new moral, philosophical, and religious viewpoint and prophets of a new social order. These ideas and attitudes give romantic writing its distinctive quality.

Romantic philosophy bound all individuals into the one World Spirit so that a person seeking wisdom need consult only himself. He need not look to parents, church, or school since "the everlasting universe of things/Flows through the mind" (Shelley, "Mont Blanc," ll. 1-2). Accordingly romantic poetry is introverted. It presents personal rather than public expression and individual rather than collective human experience. Whereas earlier poetry had tended to be a rhetorical performance directed toward an audience, romantic poetry tends to be soliloquy—self-revelation overheard. Its setting invites withdrawal; its fictional regions are typically solitary, rural, remote in distance or time. Its coherence is concealed rather than obvious, organic rather than schematic. Its form gives the appearance of unpremeditated thought rather than of deliberate design.

It follows that the primary subject of the poem—its hero and speaker—is the poet himself. The poet is on stage, whether a parading rebel like Byron in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage or a prophet sage like Wordsworth in his many poems. He claims originality, spontaneity, and visionary power. The perspective is highly individual, even idiosyncratic. The atmosphere, whether turbulent or tranquil, is productive of awe. Even common realities, because personally perceived, appear in an uncommon light.

The emphasis so far has fallen on poetry; for poetry, chiefly lyric, is the great glory of romantic literature. Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798 formally inaugu-
rated the second great era of song in English literature with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. The very title of their collection of poems suggests its revolutionary intent. The poems were meant to contrast with neoclassical poetry as lyrical rather than stiffly didactic and as spontaneous popular utterance (ballads) rather than artificial composition taught by rules. Byron and especially Shelley and Keats broke out of the neoclassical mode with *sonnets*, *odes*, and *blank verse* compositions expressing, often symbolically, their romantic ideas.

The period is, however, notable also for its prose, including the *familiar essays* of the great master of the conversational style, Charles Lamb, and the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen. Scott and Austen are decidedly less romantic than the poets and Lamb; both remained devoted to the existing social order. Romantic radicalism appears most militantly in William Blake and Percy Shelley, whose poems were little known during their lifetimes. Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, published in 1789, heralded a literary revolution.

The writings of the great romantics are of interest to Christians for at least three reasons. First, reading them reminds us that, while *reason has an important place* in moral judgment, *God speaks to us through emotional impressions and conscience* as well. A man without well-developed feelings and imagination is incomplete. Second, reading them helps us to understand how our culture has gone astray. In raising itself against God, the eighteenth-century *mind sank first to the level of logical mechanism* and then to that of brute *impulse*. It lost freedom and dignity in its flight from God (Romans 1:18-25). Rousseau, it has been said, almost persuaded Europe to go on all fours, and modern behaviorism and the sexual revolution have followed suit. Third, we can appreciate the occasional genuine insights, powerfully stated, in romantic writing and welcome the return of lyricism to English poetry and prose.