

A HISTORY OF ENGLISH ROMANTICISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

BY

HENRY A. BEERS

Author of "A Suburban Pastoral," "The Ways of Yale," etc.

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Muss im Leben untergehen."—SCHILLER



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PREFACE.

HISTORIANS of French and German literature are accustomed to set off a period, or a division of their subject, and entitle it "Romanticism" or "the Romantic School." Writers of English literary history, while recognizing the importance of England's share in this great movement in European letters, have not generally accorded it a place by itself in the arrangement of their subject-matter, but have treated it cursively, as a tendency present in the work of individual authors; and have maintained a simple chronological division of eras into the "Georgian," the "Victorian," etc. The reason of this is perhaps to be found in the fact that, although Romanticism began earlier in England than on the Continent and lent quite as much as it borrowed in the international exchange of literary commodities, the native movement was more gradual and scattered. It never reached so compact a shape, or came so definitely to a head, as in Germany and France. There never was precisely a "romantic school" or an all-pervading romantic fashion in England.

There is, therefore, nothing in English corresponding to Heine's fascinating sketch "*Die Romantische Schule*," or to Théophile Gautier's almost equally fascinating and far more sympathetic "*Histoire du*

Romantisme." If we can imagine a composite personality of Byron and De Quincey, putting on record his half affectionate and half satirical reminiscences of the contemporary literary movement, we might have something nearly equivalent. For Byron, like Heine, was a repentant romanticist, with "radical notions under his cap," and a critical theory at odds with his practice; while De Quincey was an early disciple of Wordsworth and Coleridge,—as Gautier was of Victor Hugo,—and at the same time a clever and slightly mischievous sketcher of personal traits.

The present volume consists, in substance, of a series of lectures given in elective courses in Yale College. In revising it for publication I have striven to rid it of the air of the lecture room, but a few repetitions and didacticisms of manner may have inadvertently been left in. Some of the methods and results of these studies have already been given to the public in "The Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement," by my present associate and former scholar, Professor William Lyon Phelps. Professor Phelps' little book (originally a doctorate thesis) follows, in the main, the selection and arrangement of topics in my lectures. *En revanche* I have had the advantage of availing myself of his independent researches on points which I have touched but slightly; and particularly of his very full treatment of the Spenserian imitations.

I had at first intended to entitle the book "Chapters toward a History of English Romanticism, etc."; for, though fairly complete in treatment, it makes no claim to being exhaustive. By no means every eighteenth-century writer whose work exhibits romantic motives

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is here passed in review. That very singular genius William Blake, *e. g.*, in whom the influence of "Ossian," among other things, is so strongly apparent, I leave untouched; because his writings—partly by reason of their strange manner of publication—were without effect upon their generation and do not form a link in the chain of literary tendency.

If this volume should be favorably received, I hope before very long to publish a companion study of English romanticism in the nineteenth century.

H. A. B.

October, 1898.

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A HISTORY OF ENGLISH ROMANTICISM.

CHAPTER I.

The Subject Defined.

To attempt at the outset a rigid definition of the word *romanticism* would be to anticipate the substance of this volume. To furnish an answer to the question—What is, or was, romanticism? or, at least, What is, or was, English romanticism?—is one of my main purposes herein, and the reader will be invited to examine a good many literary documents, and to do a certain amount of thinking, before he can form for himself any full and clear notion of the thing. Even then he will hardly find himself prepared to give a dictionary definition of romanticism. There are words which connote so much, which take up into themselves so much of the history of the human mind, that any compendious explanation of their meaning—any definition which is not, at the same time, a rather extended description—must serve little other end than to supply a convenient mark of identification. How can we define in a sentence words like renaissance, philistine, sentimentalism, transcendental, Bohemia, preraphaelite, impressionist, realistic? *Definitio est negatio.* It

may be possible to hit upon a form of words which will mark romanticism off from everything else—tell in a clause what it is *not*; but to add a positive content to the definition—to tell what romanticism *is*, will require a very different and more gradual process.*

Nevertheless a rough, working definition may be useful to start with. Romanticism, then, in the sense in which I shall commonly employ the word, means the reproduction in modern art or literature of the life and thought of the Middle Ages. Some other elements will have to be added to this definition, and some modifications of it will suggest themselves from time to time. It is provisional, tentative, elastic, but will serve our turn till we are ready to substitute a better. It is the definition which Heine gives in his brilliant little book on the Romantic School in Germany.† “All the poetry of the Middle Ages,” he adds, “has a certain definite character, through which it differs from the poetry of the Greeks and Romans. In reference to this difference, the former is called Romantic, the latter Classic. These names, however, are mis-

* Les définitions ne se posent pas *a priori*, si ce n'est peut-être en mathématiques. En histoire, c'est de l'étude patiente de la réalité qu'elles se dégagent insensiblement. Si M. Deschanel ne nous a pas donné du *romantisme* la définition que nous réclamions tout à l'heure, c'est, à vrai dire, que son enseignement a pour objet de préparer cette définition même. Nous la trouverons où elle doit être, à la fin du cours et non pas à début.—F. Brunetière: “*Classiques et Romantiques, Études Critiques*,” Tome III. p. 296.

† Was war aber die romantische Schule in Deutschland? Sie war nichts anders als die Wiedererweckung der Poesie des Mittelalters, wie sie sich in dessen Liedern, Bild- und Bauwerken, in Kunst und Leben, manifestiert hatte.—*Die romantische Schule* (Cotta edition), p. 158.

leading, and have hitherto caused the most vexatious confusion." *

Some of the sources of this confusion will be considered presently. Meanwhile the passage recalls the fact that *romantic*, when used as a term in literary nomenclature, is not an independent, but a referential word. It implies its opposite, the classic; and the ingenuity of critics has been taxed to its uttermost to explain and develop the numerous points of contrast. To form a thorough conception of the romantic, therefore, we must also form some conception of the classic. Now there is an obvious unlikeness between the thought and art of the nations of pagan antiquity and the thought and art of the peoples of Christian, feudal Europe. Everyone will agree to call the Parthenon, the "Diana" of the Louvre, the "Œdipus" of Sophocles, the orations of Demosthenes classical; and to call the cathedral of Chartres, the walls of Nuremberg—*die Perle des Mittelalters*—the "Legenda Aurea" of Jacobus de Voragine, the "Tristan und Isolde" of Gottfried of Strasburg, and the illuminations in a Catholic missal of the thirteenth century romantic.

The same unlikeness is found between modern works conceived in the spirit, or executed in direct imitation, of ancient and mediæval art respectively. It is easy to decide that Flaxman's outline drawings in illustration of Homer are classic; that Alfieri's tragedies, Goethe's "Iphigenie auf Tauris" Landor's "Hellenics," Gibson's statues, David's paintings, and the church of the Madeleine in Paris are classical, at least in intention and in the models which they follow; while Victor Hugo's "Notre Dame de Paris," Scott's

* "The Romantic School" (Fleishman's translation), p. 13.

"Ivanhoe," Fouqué's "Der Zauberring," and Rossetti's painting, "The Girlhood of Mary," are no less certainly romantic in their inspiration.

But critics have given a wider extension than this to the terms classic and romantic. They have discerned, or imagined, certain qualities, attitudes of mind, ways of thinking and feeling, traits of style which distinguish classic from romantic art; and they have applied the words accordingly to work which is not necessarily either antique or mediæval in subject. Thus it is assumed, for example, that the productions of Greek and Roman genius were characterized by clearness, simplicity, restraint, unity of design, subordination of the part to the whole; and therefore modern works which make this impression of noble plainness and severity, of harmony in construction, economy of means and clear, definite outline, are often spoken of as classical, quite irrespective of the historical period which they have to do with. In this sense, it is usual to say that Wordsworth's "Michael" is classical, or that Goethe's "Hermann und Dorothea" is classical; though Wordsworth may be celebrating the virtues of a Westmoreland shepherd, and Goethe telling the story of two rustic lovers on the German border at the time of the Napoleonic wars.

On the other hand, it is asserted that the work of mediæval poets and artists is marked by an excess of sentiment, by over-lavish decoration, a strong sense of color and a feeble sense of form, an attention to detail, at the cost of the main impression, and a consequent tendency to run into the exaggerated, the fantastic, and the grotesque. It is not uncommon,

therefore, to find poets like Byron and Shelley classified as romanticists, by virtue of their possession of these, or similar, characteristics, although no one could be more remote from mediæval habits of thought than the author of "Don Juan" or the author of "The Revolt of Islam."

But the extension of these opposing terms to the work of writers who have so little in common with either the antique or the mediæval as Wordsworth, on the one hand, and Byron, on the other, does not stop here. It is one of the embarrassments of the literary historian that nearly every word which he uses has two meanings, a critical and a popular meaning. In common speech, classic has come to signify almost anything that is good. If we look in our dictionaries we find it defined somewhat in this way: "Conforming to the best authority in literature and art; pure; chaste; refined; originally and chiefly used of the best Greek and Roman writers, but also applied to the best modern authors, or their works." "Classic, *n.* A work of acknowledged excellence and authority." In this sense of the word, "Robinson Crusoe" is a classic; the "Pilgrim's Progress" is a classic; every piece of literature which is customarily recommended as a safe pattern for young writers to form their style upon is a classic.*

Contrariwise the word *romantic*, as popularly employed, expresses a shade of disapprobation. The

* Un classique est tout artiste à l'école de qui nous pouvons nous mettre sans craindre que ses leçons ou ses exemples nous fourvoient. Ou encore, c'est celui qui possède . . . des qualités dont l'imitation, si elle ne peut pas faire de bien, ne peut pas non plus faire de mal. —F. Brunetière, "*Études Critiques*," Tome III. p. 300.

dictionaries make it a synonym for *sentimental*, *fanciful*, *wild*, *extravagant*, *chimerical*, all evident derivatives from their more critical definition, "pertaining or appropriate to the style of the Christian and popular literature of the Middle Ages, as opposed to the classical antique." The etymology of *romance* is familiar. The various dialects which sprang from the corruption of the Latin were called by the common name of *romans*. The name was then applied to any piece of literature composed in this vernacular instead of in the ancient classical Latin. And as the favorite kind of writing in Provençal, Old French, and Spanish was the tale of chivalrous adventure, that was called *par excellence*, a *roman*, *romans*, or *romance*. The adjective *romantic* is much later, implying, as it does, a certain degree of critical attention to the species of fiction which it describes in order to a generalizing of its peculiarities. It first came into general use in the latter half of the seventeenth century and the early years of the eighteenth; and naturally, in a period which considered itself classical, was marked from birth with that shade of disapproval which has been noticed in popular usage.

The feature that struck the critics most in the romances of the Middle Ages, and in that very different variety of romance which was cultivated during the seventeenth century—the prolix, sentimental fictions of La Calprenède, Scudéri, Gomberville, and d'Urfé—was the fantastic improbability of their adventures. Hence the common acceptance of the word *romantic* in such phrases as "a romantic notion," "a romantic elopement," "an act of romantic generosity." The application of the adjective to scenery was somewhat

later;* and the abstract *romanticism* was, of course, very much later; as the literary movement, or the revolution in taste, which it entitles, was not enough developed to call for a name until the opening of the nineteenth century. Indeed it was never so compact, conscious, and definite a movement in England as in Germany and France; and its baptism doubtless came from abroad, from the polemical literature which attended the career of the German *romanticismus* and the French *romantisme*.

While accepting provisionally Heine's definition, it will be useful to examine some of the wider meanings that have been attached to the words *classic* and *romantic*, and some of the analyses that have been attempted of the qualities that make one work of art classical and another romantic. Walter Pater took them to indicate opposite tendencies or elements which are present in varying proportions in all good art. It is the essential function of classical art and literature, he thought, to take care of the qualities of measure, purity, temperance. "What is classical comes to us out of the cool and quiet of other times, as a measure of what a long experience has shown us will, at least, never displease us. And in the classical literature of Greece and Rome, as in the classics of the last century, the essentially classical element is that quality of order in beauty which they possess, indeed, in a pre-eminent degree."† "The charm, then, of what is

* Mr. Perry thinks that one of the first instances of the use of the word *romantic* is by the diarist Evelyn in 1654: "There is also, on the side of this horrid alp, a very romantic seat."—*English Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, by Thomas Sergeant Perry, p. 148, note.

† "Romanticism," *Macmillan's Magazine*, Vol. XXXV.

classical in art or literature is that of the well-known tale, to which we can nevertheless listen over and over again, because it is told so well. To the absolute beauty of its form is added the accidental, tranquil charm of familiarity."

On the other hand, he defines the romantic character in art as consisting in "the addition of strangeness to beauty"—a definition which recalls Bacon's saying, "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." "The desire of beauty," continues Pater, "being a fixed element in every artistic organization, it is the addition of curiosity to this desire of beauty that constitutes the romantic temper." This critic, then, would not confine the terms *classic* and *classicism* to the literature of Greece and Rome and to modern works conceived in the same spirit, although he acknowledges that there are certain ages of the world in which the classical tradition predominates, *i. e.*, in which the respect for authority, the love of order and decorum, the disposition to follow rules and models, the acceptance of academic and conventional standards overbalance the desire for strangeness and novelty. Such epochs are, *e. g.*, the Augustan age of Rome, the *Siècle de Louis XIV.* in France, the times of Pope and Johnson in England—indeed, the whole of the eighteenth century in all parts of Europe.

Neither would he limit the word *romantic* to work conceived in the spirit of the Middle Ages. "The essential elements," he says, "of the romantic spirit are curiosity and the love of beauty; and it is as the accidental effect of these qualities only, that it seeks the Middle Age; because in the overcharged atmos-

phere of the Middle Age there are unworked sources of romantic effect, of a strange beauty to be won by strong imagination out of things unlikely or remote."

"The sense in which Scott is to be called a romantic writer is chiefly that, in opposition to the literary tradition of the last century, he loved strange adventure and sought it in the Middle Age."

Here again the essayist is careful to explain that there are certain epochs which are predominantly romantic. "Outbreaks of this spirit come naturally with particular periods: times when . . . men come to art and poetry with a deep thirst for intellectual excitement, after a long *ennui*." He instances, as periods naturally romantic, the time of the early Provençal troubadour poetry: the years following the Bourbon Restoration in France (say 1815-30); and "the later Middle Age; so that the mediæval poetry, centering in Dante, is often opposed to Greek or Roman poetry, as romantic to classical poetry."

In Pater's use of the terms, then, classic and romantic do not describe particular literatures, or particular periods in literary history, so much as certain counterbalancing qualities and tendencies which run through the literatures of all times and countries. There were romantic writings among the Greeks and Romans; there were classical writings in the Middle Ages; nay, there are classical and romantic traits in the same author. If there is any poet who may safely be described as a classic, it is Sophocles; and yet Pater declares that the "Philoctetes" of Sophocles, if issued to-day, would be called romantic. And he points out—what indeed has been often pointed out—that the

"Odyssey"* is more romantic than the "Iliad:" is, in fact, rather a romance than a hero-epic. The adventures of the wandering Ulysses, the visit to the land of the lotus-eaters, the encounter with the Læstrygonians, the experiences in the cave of Polyphemus, if allowance be made for the difference in sentiments and manners, remind the reader constantly of the mediæval *romans d'aventure*. Pater quotes De Stendhal's saying that all good art was romantic in its day.

○ "Romanticism," says De Stendhal, "is the art of presenting to the nations the literary works which, in the actual state of their habits and beliefs, are capable of giving them the greatest possible pleasure: classicism, on the contrary, presents them with what gave the greatest possible pleasure to their great grandfathers"—a definition which is epigrammatic, if not convincing.† De Stendhal (Henri Beyle) was a pioneer and a special pleader in the cause of French romanticism, and, in his use of the terms, romanticism

* The Odyssey has been explained throughout in an allegorical sense. The episode of Circe, at least, lends itself obviously to such interpretation. Circe's cup has become a metaphor for sensual intoxication, transforming men into beasts; Milton, in "Comus," regards himself as Homer's continuator, enforcing a lesson of temperance in Puritan times hardly more consciously than the old Ionian Greek in times which have no other record than his poem.

† "Racine et Shakespeare, Études en Romantisme" (1823), p. 32, ed. of Michel Lévy Frères, 1854. Such would also seem to be the view maintained by M. Émile Deschanel, whose book "*Le Romantisme des Classiques*" (Paris, 1883) is reviewed by M. Brunetière in an article already several times quoted. "Tous les classiques," according to M. Deschanel—at least, so says his reviewer—"ont jadis commencé par être des romantiques." And again: "Un romantique serait tout simplement un classique en route pour parvenir; et, réciproquement, un classique ne serait de plus qu'un romantique arrivé."