

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

Foundations of Romanticism in Western European Literature. 300 AD—1850 AD

To this point, our concern with the productions of French Romanticism have taken multiple forms: dealing with a time area marked off by the early Enlightenment— from the first third of the eighteenth to the last third of the nineteenth century. There is obviously no single genre which qualifies a text as Romantic. But let us stop and reflect on the range of texts to which we might so far have been tempted to apply the terminology of Romanticism.

In the first place we return to a European world of literary texts we might call neoclassical, which have their originating energies in the tastes and works of the Romans and Greeks—particularly the former, whose own values of style and perspective derived largely from the politics and pedagogy of the mighty Roman Empire. That Empire was followed by the monastic and extended mediaeval period, the *studium generale* of Latin and monastic disciplines we know from such as Boethius, Alcuin, and Saint Augustine. Shall we then say that the work of early Christian literature--Chaucer, Gawain, straight through into *The Faerie Queen*-- notably reflects the language and thought of the early Christian centuries?

Any answer to such a broad hypothesis will require fine tuning of specific cases. Should we stress some features of the Elizabethan lyric or dramatic scene, in the interest of tracking the development of the classical tradition in British literature? Any such investigation will rapidly settle from one genius track onto another, as we watch the rapidity with which the iambic pentameter comes to the fore of the cultural means available for expression. The growing body of imaginative movements, by which western literature in English alone carries the potential of the pentameter from one genius to another—from Shakespeare to Milton, from Marvell to Donne—this movement is coercive for the shaping of western culture as a whole. The power of a distinctive poetic line flowed with contemporary energy in the flamboyant advancement of the work of the classically rooted masters of French theater-- Racine, Moliere, Corneille—whose comfortable masterpieces rested on the same foundation as the *Aeneid* or the *Odes* of Horace.

Mme. de Stael and Diderot

The eighteenth century conception of literary Romanticism begins taking us to uses of the poetic line which reek of the modernities that belong to Romanticism. The Neoclassicism we find in such sharp form masters as Pope, Addison, or, in France, in such as Marivaux, or in Germany Lessing, has begun loosening under the broad humane spirit of the Enlightenment, which has, in its strongest representatives like Diderot, or Voltaire, fought tirelessly for a new and fresh vision of the place of the arts in society. With the Enlightenment style masters in question we are not yet talking of a new poetic address to reality, but simply of a broad humane grasp of the human condition. German literature, with Goethe, was already a key word in Germany, as was Schiller. With Mme. de Stael, in the long eighteenth century, the broader foundations for a Romantic poetic begin to be laid. In *De l'Allemagne* de Stael urges her French counterparts, who are still busy with neoclassical prosody, to look Eastward to the richness of the German experience. It has already been argued by de Stael's predecessor Rene Chateaubriand, in *Le Genie du Christianisme*, that the Christian Tradition is the richest vein for language and expression available in the mid eighteenth century. The Germanic epic tradition, de Stael argues, embodies the observations, a sacrificial Christian power, which is at its deepest confessional. For de Stael, too, the power of the confessional is on the wings of a new soul-opening, in which prospects of new reality uncover themselves. So much of the evolutionary language work at stake here, in the development of the history of thought, is emerging from the simple brilliance of comedic persons. Almost concurrently with de Stael's groundbreaking text, which did a lot for the broad movement of freeing European prosody and imagination from what was limitingly neo classical in them, the Enlightenment gave birth to two eye-opening works by Denis Diderot, *Le Paradoxe sur le Comedien* and *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Who would have thought that the adroit imaginings of this tireless scientist encyclopedist would bash their ways forward into the first line of imaginative discovery for his century?

How did they do this? Rameau's Nephew should illustrate the generation of the Romantic mindset. It is habitual for various flaneurs to meet during the afternoon at a well known café, the Regency, where news of the Rialto circulates through clouds of Jamaican cigar smoke, retired admirals discuss the progress of Empire, and world class chess players gather at this flaneur venue, which frequently brings together certain young sophisticates of the boulevard and the real life nephew of one of Eighteenth century France's most renowned baroque composers. (To note: Rameau was consummately baroque elegant, shivering with order and directional movement, while his nephew's thought processes and bodily movements were jerky and spasmodic). There is that, in this piece by Diderot, which makes it exemplary for the transition from the classical into the Romantic, the by product of the free spirited soul. In practice the conversation of the two men at the center of this dialogue turns and circles over and inside itself, dazzlingly brilliant, conclusive, hypothetical, exhaustingly inconclusive, exact. geometrically precise. Nor are the topics it processes—gossip of the day, reflections on the nature of history, greed and loneliness, thoughts about time and its self obliteration in memory, the drivers to price rise in the market—nor are any of the stages of this conversation left behind in the wholistic wrap of Intelligibility. The Romantic has come through into a complete expression. Do we know exactly what has taken us by storm, overwhelmed us, and in the end given us an inexplicable sense of wholeness?

The strongest advances of the Romantic mind are virtually achieved, at the point we have currently reached, the curious essay *Le Paradoxe sur le comedien, An essay on the actor*. Again we go to Diderot, one of the direction showers toward Romanticism, and again a plougher of the fertile soil of daily life. The background of the essay is that allied with ancient Christian belief, that the actor's trade is allied with evil. (The underlying notion is that acting is deception, a conscious playing with actuality. The outlaw status of the actor, in early modern Christian times, resulted in the forbidding actors burial in a Christian graveyard.) Diderot builds, in his essay, on the inherent magic and mystificatory power of the actor, who can, onstage, become another person, transforming himself.) It is easy to see how this insight, into the inventiveness of the self, earns its place beside the view of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, that the individual contains the power of his own transformation. It is no accident, of this insight into the charismatic power of the individual, that a centuries long prosodical search was required, before the describing of this individual, Romantic Man, could emerge as a long sought account of what we are capable of.

The novela, the inner world, the poetic

In the freeing of cultural sensibility, that follows on loosening of language strictures, opening of cultural borders and movements, there appear also new forms of writing and expression. While fresh fictional directions, the novel, the novella, are opening to imagination by the end of the eighteenth century, the purviews of poetry itself are making themselves more vivid by the nineteenth century: the Romantic of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge's collaboration with his time, is seeing openings, of what is beginning to be called imagination, which go hand in hand with such sallies of language as those of the poet, Gerard de Nerval, on whose work we will open the following essay, on madness and the individual career in language. It is in company with Nerval's intense searches of the deranged self that we will understand the troubled conscience of Merimee's Carmen, Fromentin's Dominique, or Mme. de Stael's elegant Delphine, which shows us how 'far back' modernity reaches.

The point from which we are situated, to post these very perspectives, is one of a rapidly slipping present, in which even Postromanticism has become a term in search of a theme.