The Challenge of Romanticism: Literature and Music

The New Sentimentalism in Literature. The sensationalist psychology encouraged an intense subjectivism among many writers. Thus, in the literature of the second half of the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth century, a common theme in literature is the assertion of personal identity and a sense of the uniqueness of each individual. Often, this theme is cast in a confessional mold, in which authors seek to reveal in their characters (or in themselves) a transparent perception of the characters' inner feelings and thoughts. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) launched this movement with his immensely influential and widely read *Confessions* (1781–1788), written mostly between 1766 and 1770. Rousseau described his most personal and private feelings and experiences, portraying himself as radically different from others and misunderstood. In describing his *Confessions,* Rousseau wrote, "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display...a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself... I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different." In literature this emphasis on intimacy and subjectivism resulted in a concentration on characterization rather than plot. The Englishman Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) was among the most commercially successful sentimentalist writers. The new reading public and the expanding market for printed matter transformed literary works such as Richardson's into commodities. One reason for this was the subject matter. In Richardson's novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–1748), he was the first novelist to focus on ordinary, middle-class men and women, and—true to the sentimentalist and subjectivist trend—he exposed their most intimate private lives and loves. Written as a series of letters, Richardson's epistolary novels had hardly any plot at all. The purpose of his novels was to analyze emotions and examine the conscience. Like Rousseau's *Confessions,* Richardson's novels struck a responsive chord among his readers and helped to lay the groundwork for Romanticism. Madame Germaine de Stael (1766–1817), a French Romantic novelist, historian, literary critic, and political commentator, followed directly in Rousseau's footsteps, writing that "the soul's elevation is born of self-consciousness." Madame de Stael's recognition of the primacy of individual subjectivity, moreover, meant for her that a woman's vision was just as important as a man's. Her British contemporary Jane Austen (1775–1817) suggested much the same thing in her novels.

The Romantic Hero. The emphasis on character rather than plot in Romantic literature arose from the primacy of sentimentalism, and as a result it created the idea of the Romantic hero. This sort of main character in a novel or a poem always had a distinct, or even unique, personality, which could be expressed in melancholy introspection or in extroverted confidence. Characters of the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) fall into either category, while those of the Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) are melancholy introverts, and the British poet George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824), created confident extroverts, including the title character of his poem *Don Juan* (1819–1824). Introspection and intense examination of the conscience could set a character on a lifelong search for understanding, with no guarantee it would be found. In fact, in Goethe's *Die Leiden desjungen Werthers* (The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1774) the main character becomes obsessed with the primacy of his own, individual feelings and experience. In scrutinizing them he finds only pointlessness and absurdity and ends his life by suicide. Pushkin's novel in verse *Evegeny Onegin* (*Eugene Onegin,* 1833–1837), written in 1823–1831, sounds the same note, as the bored title character wanders through a pointless and

meaningless existence, yet is moved by an indescribable longing for the unattainable. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was extremely popular among the reading public. It went through sixteen editions between 1776 and 1799 in France alone. It even spawned a fashion fad, as many restless young men sported a yellow waistcoat like the one Werther wore in the novel. Even extroverted and self-confident literary heroes experience a longing for the unattainable, a search that is often expressed in a rootless homelessness. Again, Goethe was an extremely influential force. In his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship,* 1795, 1796) and its continuation, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Wanderings,* 1821), he introduced and developed the , or the novel of character building, where the hero gains a growing self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the world in which he moves. Even more clearly expressive of the over-confident Romantic hero is Goethe's title character in *Faust* (1808). Faust barters his soul to the Devil in return for ultimate knowledge of himself and the world. The story is a spiritual journey permeated by the sense of longing for the unattainable, even the infinite. Even though Faust loses the bargain, readers grasped the message that the point of life should be a boundless searching for self-knowledge and self-realization, regardless of the consequences.

Romanticism, Freedom, and the Spirit of Revolt. The Romantic hero and the Romantic artist were most often social outsiders. A preoccupation with subjectivism, difference, and uniqueness bred this sense of isolation, which was often expressed in a renunciation of the prevailing values in the world. Furthermore, Romantic artists' commitment to the primacy of feelings over rule-bound classical rationalism also contributed to an artistic vision that prized creativity spawned by the spontaneous imagination. These ideas were all encompassed in a belief in the supremacy of human freedom. Romantics longed for change that would unshackle human creativity. For some, including British poets William Wordsworth (1770–1850) or Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), the French Revolution with its promise of freedom, equality, and brotherhood initially seemed to deliver what they sought. Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)—which includes Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—offered a radical challenge to the accepted, Classical style of poetry. In his preface Wordsworth called for a new kind of poetry that would represent the everyday lives and passions of ordinary people in plain, but beautiful, language. He also made the influential statement that poetry should be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling." Perhaps no other Romantic artist exemplified the iconoclastic outsider with a commitment to revolutionary change better than Byron. His advocacy of personal liberty and political revolution led him to fight for the freedom of Greece in its rebellion against its Turkish overlords, the war that ended the poet's short life. The critical spirit of Romanticism was also turned against the new industrial world for its denial of freedom for the toiling masses, as in the poem *Jerusalem* (1804–1820) by British poet William Blake (1757–1827). This pessimistic and demonic vision portrays factories and mills as sites of terror and subjugation, where "furnaces howl loud, living, and self-moving." For Blake the new factories were inhuman places where the machines were alive and the workers a living dead who were forced to sur-render their dignity and liberty to the hellish "loud sounding hammer of destruction."

Popular Literature, Theater, and Melodrama. Romanticism was a Europe-wide movement, the ideas of which traveled through the established networks of an increasingly integrated market society. Writers lived by their pens, and success reflected shared values between artist and audience. Walter Scott (1771–1832) earned a fortune selling his novels. (He wrote twenty-nine between 1814 and 1831.) In novels such as *Waverley* (1814) and *Ivanhoe* (1819),

Scott appealed to the popular mood of national revival that was evident in all the arts of his era. Set in a blend of mythical and historical past, Scott's fiction displayed before his readers the imagined roots of their folk culture in the distant feudal era of the Middle Ages. Scott's novels emphasized plot more than characterization. In this sense they departed from earlier Romantic novels but paralleled contemporary popular theater. The playgoing public in European cities was large and growing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and many people, especially in the new middle class, liked melodrama. French playwrights Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais (1732–1799) and Guilbert Pixerecourt (1773–1844), for example, turned out scores of plays that were performed thousands of times before melodrama lost its appeal around 1830. Each play had a clearly defined plot (initial antagonism among characters ultimately overcome in the triumph of virtue over evil) and formulaic characters (such as heroes, villains, and comics). Pixerecourt wrote 120 plays between 1798 and 1814. Judging from the popularity of such plays, the public welcomed stories in which characters are victims of cruel fate and reward and punishment are finally delivered.

Romantic Music. Unlike the Romantic movement in the other arts, which lasted only through the first third of the nineteenth century, Romanticism dominated music for the entire century. The main themes of Romanticism can be found in nineteenth-century music: emotion, the beauty and power of nature, the brotherhood of man, the value of human freedom, the creative genius, and nationalism. It also was a music of the marketplace rather than of the aristocratic court. As patronage gave way to the market as the source of a living for composers and musicians, the music written and performed changed dramatically.

Orchestral Music and Commerce. Concert halls replaced courtly salons as the main venue for nineteenth-century music, and to accommodate the increasing numbers of concertgoers, these halls had to grow in size. Larger spaces, in turn, required more musical instruments to fill them with sound. Composers wrote scores for more, and new, instruments. As the size of orchestras grew, the music became more complex and, in some instances, difficult to play. When the already legendary Beethoven had his Ninth Symphony performed for the first time in 1824, a young Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was in the audience. The future great composer of German Romantic opera came away baffled by Beethoven's symphony because it seemed a chaos of uncoordinated sound. Wagner's reaction in part can be attributed to the newness and "strangeness" of Beethoven's score, but it also points to a growing problem with performances that were becoming unwieldy. As a result, the conductor began increasingly to exert greater discipline on the orchestra, demanding more and more rehearsals before public performances and a strict adherence to his tempo during them. The increased visibility and authority of the conductor were new developments. Discipline was marked on the business side of musical performances as well, as music directors came to the fore. A good example of this change may be seen in the career of Sir Charles Halle (1819–1895), born Karl Halle in Germany. He was appointed conductor and director of the Manchester Philharmonic in 1848. During Halle's tenure he exerted a ruthless discipline over his orchestra, hiring and firing musicians until he had an efficient "workforce," as he called it. He rehearsed them tirelessly through the works of Beethoven, Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), and Wagner, seeking perfection but demanding in any case that his orchestra play as well as it possibly could. The precision and professionalism that still marks classical music performances had arrived. While Halle's orchestra resembled a well-oiled industrial machine with as many as ninety skilled workers contributing to its smooth running, the commercial side of the operation reflected the march of capitalism and the market economy. As music director, Halle was in charge of marketing tickets, and he insisted that a

block of them be made available to the working class. The fact that these tickets inevitably sold out suggests that the taste for this kind of music spanned all classes of society.

The Commercialization of Opera. During the second half of the eighteenth century, opera had an even greater appeal among musicgoers than orchestral concerts. Most operas, even those performed in German-speaking regions, were Italianized in form and libretto. Running with the tide of cultural nationalism, however, operas increasingly adapted to national forms and languages. Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), written at the encouragement of the Austrian emperor Joseph II (ruled 1765-1790) and performed in 1791, was a landmark in this transition. Opera also adapted itself to the commercialization of music that occurred during the nineteenth century. As audiences expanded, more large opera houses were built and run by commercial-minded managers. Louis Veron (1798–1867), for example, who became the first director of the Paris Opera in 1831, sought to make his operation profitable and to earn himself a fortune. He did both. To accomplish his goals, he knew he must exploit the tastes of the new middle-class audiences by giving them elaborate stage effects, complete with the new gaslighting. He also offered them a new operatic style, the best examples of which are the operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864). These operas—including *Les Huguenots* (1836) and *Le Prophète* (1849)—were structured to feature gifted tenors and sopranos showcasing appealing melodies. The results were filled houses, virtuoso vocal performers, and new operas written for the ever-more-popular singers.

Romantic Themes in Music. In its various expressions, music in the nineteenth century embodied the main characteristics of the Romantic movement, many of which may be found in the works of Beethoven. Sentimentalist psychology is at the root of the emotional and intense music in the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (1808), the beauty of nature expressed in his Sixth Symphony, the "Pastoral" (1808), and the Faustian soaring toward the infinite in his heaven-storming Ninth Symphony (1824). The Romantic values of individual freedom and the brotherhood of man are central to his opera *Fidelio* (1805, revised 1806 and 1814). Richard Wagner assumed Beethoven's emotionalist mantle, and later in the nineteenth century he adopted the slogan "Drama in Music" to describe what he was trying to accomplish. By the end of the century Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) completed the intensely emotionalist trajectory, creating the last great expression of Romanticism before Modernism took hold. Political radicalism marked much of Romanticism, and some composers joined the other artists in the demand for change. Hector Berlioz (1803–1869), a socialist, wrote in a letter to a friend: "I believe that there is nothing to prevent my uniting my voice and my efforts with those of others for the amelioration of the conditions of the largest and poorest class of people." Wagner supported the radical Revolutions of 1848 but became disillusioned by their failure. He came to the conclusion that music was the supreme unifying force in an age when politics (even revolutionary politics) had become devoid of high principle and had descended to crass expediency. Finally, the concept of the creative genius was just as much a part of Romantic music as any other artistic form, and, as in the other arts, it blended into market society. Franz Liszt (1811–1886), for example, was better known in his time as a pianist than a composer. He expanded technique to the point of wizardry, thrilling audiences (many of whom were women) with his grandiose sold-out performances to packed houses. Ever the showman, Liszt walked through the audience between pieces, greeting guests and engaging them in conversation. He became rich in the process.

Romantic Music and Nationalism. Romanticism often embraced nationalism, and music was no exception. Like the French painter Eugene Delacroix (1798–1863) or the British

poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), the Italian opera composer Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) chose subjects from the distant past, and, like the novelist Walter Scott (1771–1832), he blended myth with the actual history of his nation into operas such as *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833). Donizetti's compatriot Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) composed operas that made him even more the mouthpiece of Italian nationalism. Before the unification of Italy into a nation-state in 1860, northern Italians (including Verdi) were subjects of the Austrian, German-speaking emperor. Several of Verdi's operas were only thinly veiled calls for freedom and independence. Italian audiences immediately identified with the Hebrew slaves in *Nabucco* (1842), and the haunting melody of their chorus became almost an anthem for Italian independence. Moreover, in *Rigoletto* (1851) and *Un Eallo in Maschera* (A Masked Ball, 1859) Verdi was boldly antimonarchical, writing scenes in which the assassination of a king was laudable. Wagner was no less the voice of nationalism in Germany than Verdi was for Italy. In all Wagner's operas—but above all in the operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelungen, 1848-1876)—Wagner invoked Germanic history, myth, and gods as the symbols of a national, organic unity, proclaiming that cultural nationalism was deeper than the simple political unification of Germany (which occurred in 1871). In his music he claimed that he was recapturing lost German folk melodies. In fact, many composers in Europe were doing the same thing, also in the name of nationalism. The Czech composer Bedrich Smetana (1824–1884), for example, consciously drew on Bohemian folk tunes, idioms, rhythms, stories, and history for his orchestral music and operas.

Sources

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