Analysing European Romanticism

Breaking the Enlightenment mould

The early German Romantics developed a world view, common aesthetic and a body of literature which differed radically from those of their predecessors in the Age of Enlightenment. The received view of the world as a kind of a machine is superseded by the notion of a world that is inhabited by spirit, a world that lives, grows and indeed is still growing in an unending organic process. Knowledge of this world and of ourselves is obtained not through the intrinsically limited abstract cogitations of reason and understanding so typical of the Enlightenment, but by inspiring works of the artistic imagination. So the imagination of the Romantic artist discloses new, alternative, higher worlds, rather than imitating what is. Moreover, the Romantics thought that the artist, in producing those powerful intuitions which transcend everyday earthly experience, was exercising nothing less than the principle of divine creativity. As for them, aesthetic experience comes close to what was traditionally assumed to be religious experience and the artist, despite his human limitations, assumes a priestly role as the mediator of higher truths to those whose minds still have to be opened. The early German Romantics defined themselves largely from a sense of confident negation of the standpoint adopted by their elders. This confidence was fed by a number of sources. Paradoxically, one of the most important was the very success of the Enlightenment movement most of their elders subscribed to. From one important sense at least Enlightenment had been seen to work in its philosophical project to emancipate and to educate humankind in the name of universal reason. The French Revolution of 1789, and to a lesser extent the American Revolution of 1776, had replaced traditional feudal monarchy by an early form of representative democracy. This seemed to be an irreversible step towards establishing in everyday practice the rational precepts of Enlightenment theory. Irrespective of their social background the early German Romantics affirmed the legitimacy of the French Revolution. Take the case of the young Novalis, perhaps the leading spirit of the first Romantic circle. He was an aristocrat whose real name was Friedrich von Hardenberg. Edmund Burke had famously denied the legitimacy of the Revolution through an appeal to the conservative principle of gradualist historical development. Strikingly, the young Novalis, despite his aristocratic prominence, proclaimed that Burke was wrong. The notorious social violence and injustice of the early revolutionary phase ……..Novalis really only transitional disharmonies in the process of growth of the body politic, like a puberty in human development. In Novalis clearly we see a man who thinks of himself as standing at the very apex of the process of world history. He may not share the mindset of Enlightenment, and indeed he condemns an Enlightenment figure like Burke for strategic blindness, but as his central metaphor of growth reveals, he participates in the euphoric Enlightenment confidence that ‘things can only get better’ and that history has passed a major turning point in his own generation. If the French Revolution was one source of the early Romantics inextinguishable self belief another was, of course, the general philosophical revolution in Germany. It is no coincidence that Immanuel Kant at the end of the 18th century also used the analogy of revolution to present his radical review of the philosophical project of Enlightenment in the Critique of Pure Reason. This time, however, the analogy was with the Copernican Revolution in the understanding of the planetary system. But where Copernicus had revealed the solar system to revolve around a central sun, rather than the Earth, Kant showed that the laws of nature were constituted less by disparate natural phenomena themselves, than by the centrally determining instance of human intelligence. This contrasted sharply with the traditional view of Enlightenment empiricists, that knowledge was merely a passive reception of the ideas of things imprinted on the tablet of the mind. With this reversal of cognitive polarity Kant vastly promoted the idea of the productivity, dignity and autonomy of the human mind. He was finally sceptical in his theoretical philosophy that the human mind would ever penetrate to knowledge of the essence of things. But he nevertheless argued in this ethics, on this basis, and with euphoric assurance, that humans could in moral action at least determine their behaviour with absolute freedom. This would enable them to realise their

spiritual perfection in the imperfect phenomenal world. Kant had, of course, insisted in keeping with his theoretical portion that there could be no final knowledge of the self, by the self. But Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the primal source of all early Romantic philosophy, disagreed with Kant. In his foundation of the Theory of All Knowledge Fichte wrote that introspection could indeed yield valuable self knowledge, an intuition of the self as active imagination, as the very stuff of which the Universe was ultimately made. It seemed as if not only in the outer world of the political and social order, but also in the inner world of the self, revolutionary shifts of perspective had occurred which promised ultimate solutions to age-long problems. All the chief thinkers amongst the early German Romantics read Kant first, and finally subscribed to Fichte's authority. Friedrich Schlegel went so far as to call Fichte one of the three great tendencies of the age, along with the French Revolution and Goethe.