



Analysing European Romanticism

Romanticism in France

In the works of the Schlegel brothers, Novalis and Wackenroder, one finds the clearest, most explicit and systematic statement of the ideas which constitute the core of the aesthetics of Romanticism. The relation of this theory to the practice of Romantic artists, however, is anything but neat and straightforward. What I aim to do in this talk is to amplify this point about the complex relation of aesthetic theory to artistic practice. I will take two examples, looking at the way in which Romanticism manifested itself first in French literature, and then in Spanish literature, at the start of the 19th century. Before considering the case of Romanticism in France it is worth reminding ourselves of a few dates and other basic bits of information. If one were to try to say where Romanticism first manifested itself in the developed form, the laurels would have to be divided between England and Germany, though with different emphases. The Germans were the first to produce a detailed account of Romantic aesthetic theory, the English were the first to produce Romantic literature, notably Blake's *Songs of Innocence* first published in 1789, and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. In England and Germany, in different ways, Romanticism had manifested itself as a major force by the turn of the 19th century, either in theory or in practice. By 1820 in these countries Romanticism was, as it were, the dominant orthodoxy. Look at the literary history of France, however, and a very different picture emerges. The first work which deserves the name of Romantic in French literature did not appear until 1820. This was a short book of twenty-four lyric poems by Alphonse de Lamartine called simply, *Meditations*. The first point to grasp about the Romantic Movement in French literature is that it occurs roughly a quarter of a century after the comparable movements in England and Germany, and the obvious question to ask is why? Part of the answer lies in historical events you will be familiar with - the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era which followed it. It is not difficult to realise that during periods of upheaval as profound as the Revolution in France, matters of artistic theory are not at the forefront of attention. The same effect was felt to a lesser degree during the period of the Napoleonic Empire. The constant war made extensive conscription necessary, especially towards the end of the period, and many men who might in peaceful times have spent their lives in the world of letters, were otherwise engaged. As Standau(?) Reilley remarked, one of the justifications for the Empire is that it prevented many young men from dissipating their lives in frivolous careers, and he himself did not begin writing seriously until he was semi-retired from the Diplomatic Service. In addition to the pressure of events, however, it is important to appreciate the sheer depth of the hold which the 18th century view apart had in France. Napoleon himself was a Conservative in this respect. He regarded French letters of the 18th century as the crowning glory of his country's cultural achievements, and did nothing at all to encourage change in this area. This Conservatism at the top did not change with the restoration of Louis the XVIII to the French throne in 1815. Throughout the period of the debate about Romanticism in France, that is in the period up to 1830, there was continuous opposition from Conservative forces, and this was to have an effect on the way in which the Movement finally manifested itself in this country. How then did Romanticism finally achieve acceptance in France, and in what form did it do so? As I mentioned above, the first significant indication that change from strict adherence to neoclassical principles that was possible came with the publication of the short book of poems by Lamartine, the *Meditations*. Lamartine at the time was living the life of a provincial country gentleman, well away from such literary debates as there were in Paris. His education had been on classical principles. He read and admired the philosophes of the Enlightenment, especially Voltaire. Lamartine himself did not conceive of the book at all as striking a blow for freedom of expression against the rules of neoclassicism. Unexpectedly, however, this little book, the first edition of which appeared anonymously, had a considerable success. The subject matter of the book is a love affair prematurely terminated by the death of the beloved woman from illness, and the poet's attempt to reconcile this event with his religious faith. The lover revisits the scenes he had previously visited with the beloved and describes his feelings

then and now. Lamartine describes a love which is deep and abiding, and the efforts of his will to battle with religious doubt. The poet speaks not in the language of neoclassical convention, but directly to us, sincerely and spontaneously. Lamartine's poems hit a nerve, and he found himself suddenly and unexpectedly a celebrity. The reading public in 1820 were ready to have their emotions directly touched in a way which, it seemed, the conventions of neoclassicism could not manage. Another important factor in shaping French Romanticism was the influence of works from England. A complete prose translation of Shakespeare was issued in 1821, the mere fact of its publication indicating that a change away from neoclassicism in the drama had at least begun. Far more important, though, was the influence of Scott and Byron. By 1829 one and a half million copies of Scott translations had been sold in France, a colossal figure if you consider the size of the reading audience at the time. This really was success of blockbuster proportions. Byron was first translated in 1819 and this work went through four editions by 1823. Like the other French Romantics, Lamartine read and was deeply impressed by Byron, so much so that after the English poet's death in 1824 Lamartine wrote a tribute in the form of *The Last Canto of Harold's Pilgrimage*, published in 1825. The real battle for Romanticism in France, however, was fought and finally won in the theatre, since it was in the theatre that French neoclassicism had its stronghold. The Romantics knew that if that citadel could be taken, the battle was won. Neoclassicism had dominated the French theatre since the 17th century, and had become codified in a set of tight rules, according to which all plays were to be constructed. For example, they had to obey the three unities of time, place and action, principles said to have been set out in the most famous work of ancient aesthetics, the poetics of Aristotle. According to these principles, the action of a play had to take place within a period of twenty-four hours, had to be set in a single place, and had to concern a single plot. Sub-plots were held to destroy the unity of the action. In addition, it was held to be artistically improper to mix the genre of tragedy and comedy, one of the reasons why Shakespeare was for so long regarded as barbarous by the French. Other conventions developed along with these. Tragedies had to employ a twelve-syllable line called the alexandrine and the sense of each line, except in very rare cases, had to be complete within itself. Running on the sense between lines, or employing incomplete lines was frowned on. Equally, tragedy employed a well known vocabulary of special words and phrases, a special diction held to be refined, and specially suited to the elevated subject matter involved. To take only one example: when a French tragic heroine was required to shed tears, she could not ask her companion for a 'mouchoir', the everyday French word for handkerchief; instead she had to ask for a 'tissu'. Even as late as the 1820's French actors refused to pronounce the word 'mouchoir' on stage, so deeply ingrained was the neoclassical way of doing things. Most of the credit for winning the battle against neoclassicism in the French theatre must go to Victor Hugo, the man who was to become the central figure in French Romanticism. Hugo was already known in literary circles as sympathetic to the Romantic cause when in 1827, at the age of 25, he published his play, *Cromwell*, with its now much more famous Preface, one of the key manifestos of Romanticism in France. This Preface sets out Hugo's arguments for disregarding all the neoclassical rules except the unity of action. The rules of neoclassicism, he says, are derived from the dramas of Ancient Greece and worked well at the time, but we are not Ancient Greeks and our lives do not resemble those of Ancient Greeks. Greek drama succeeded because it reflected the life of its times. Our drama will succeed only if it is allowed to do the same, and it cannot do that if it is made to follow conventions which are no longer authentic. Though this Preface was important, it did not win the battle. That battle was won three years later on the 25th of February, 1830, the first night of Hugo's next major dramatic work, *Hernani*, one of the most celebrated evenings in the history of the French theatre. Both sides of the Romantic debate filled the theatre with their partisans. The representatives of neoclassicism bought the expensive seats in the stalls and boxes, while the Romantic party led by Hugo and the poet Theophile Gautier, wearing a red waistcoat which has now become legendary, occupied the pit and the upper galleries. Each side was determined to shout the other down, and this contest started as soon as the first words were uttered. Hugo's admirers, largely young artists, writers and musicians in their twenties, out-shouted and out-clapped the opposition to such good effect that the success of the play, and its Romantic method and techniques, was assured. From this point on Romanticism was in the ascendant in French literature. However, what resulted after this twenty year debate was a form of Romanticism that was not like that manifested in Germany or England, it was specifically French. It involves no element of theory comparable to that formulated by the early

Romantics in Germany, nor did it lead to changes of artistic practice as radical as those in either Germany or England. The French Romantics freed themselves from the constrictions of neoclassicism, from a set of rules and practices that had taken a deeper hold in France than anywhere else. Compared to what the Germans had done already, however, this still looks conservative.