

# The salient features of the artistic movement known as romanticism



Romanticism is, ultimately, a rather general and open term for various tendencies towards change observable in European literature, art and culture in the later 18th and early 19th centuries. Although it manifested itself everywhere in a pronounced shift in sensibility, Romanticism was not a unified movement with a clearly agreed agenda, and its emphases varied widely according to time, place and individual author.

Intellectually it pulled away from the philosophical rationalism and neoclassicism of the Enlightenment, developing an alternative aesthetic of freedom from formal rules and conventions, and advocating uninhibited self-expression from the artist. It disliked the adherence to strict fundamentals for clear, elegant writing, which the neoclassical movement advocated, and instead esteemed individual inspiration more highly than educated references or style.

The sense of strong feeling, original, fresh and, above all, authentic expression was more important, and the development of natural, unforced poetic diction was, to them, an essential qualification. Underlying the era as a whole is a pervasive sense of the collapse within the individual of the systems of moral, religious and psychic control, constraint and limitation which were being shaken apart at the public or institutional level by the American and French Revolutions. Whatever the personal politics of the author, the Romantic poet assumes the mantle of prophet, seer and legislator.

He is either a solitary dreamer, or an egocentric plagued by guilt and remorse but, in either case, a figure who has seen through the established

world to some deeper truth, more often than not through excesses of emotion, imagination or other irrational means such as drug use or occultism. In his world nature is a mirror for the subjective creative power of the mind and soul. In many cases, this disillusionment resulted in corresponding revolutionary or radical sentiment, clearly seen in the works of many of the English Romantics such as Coleridge, Wordsworth or Shelley at various stages in their lives.

In the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge, this fervour was later considered by the authors to have been a transgression of sorts against the proper truth of things, for which they were punished with a kind of existential vertigo and reaction in their later works. Either way, it provoked a profound personal involvement and fascination with events, whether explicitly political or internalised and interested in the value and creativity of personality and people.

As such, it led to a revival of interest in folklore and primitive verse as channels of experience and imagination, as seen in the Celtic bard verse of James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry and the collecting of folk ballads by Thomas Percy. However, this same duality of politicisation on the one hand and questing for internal experience through nature on the other meant that it was not, except in Germany, a self-conscious movement or school, aware of a cohesive identity for itself or its authors.

Schlegel's characterization of Romantic writing as medieval, Christian and transcendental, as opposed to classical, pagan and worldly, was part of a specifically German polemic, and one which hardly applies to Romantics

from other countries. The most general feature of the beliefs shared by the English romantics, and that which was adopted as central by Romanticism in other countries, was the idea of the artist's mission: the concept of a poet having a special faculty which set him apart from others and needed to be nurtured and expressed through the powers of his imagination.

Sincerity, spontaneity and originality were the tools of this expression. In France, the "classical" influences of the Revolution delayed the arrival of Romanticism somewhat, and an element of conservative nostalgia is more evident in the works of French Romantics in general. Just as the liberation of politics from old ideas and limitations provoked new idealism and self-questioning, however, it also to some extent hindered Romanticism on the continent by its revival of old debates and conservatism.

Nationalism and a high nationalistic awareness therefore represented an obstacle to the expression of Romanticism to the same extent outside England and Germany, since the retrospective glorification of the past became associated with more mundane political struggles far more easily and lost much of the sublime element present in true Romanticism. This can largely be said of Spanish Romanticism, which became an extension of the post-Fernando VII political reaction.

Writers exiled by the clerical censorship of his reign naturally adopted "Romanticism" as their cause since they saw it as the expression of the Liberal ideal in literature: a revolt against the unfeeling coldness of regulation in all its forms. Indeed, Victor Hugo described Romanticism in his preface to *Hernani* as simply "liberalism in literature". Under the oppressive

regime of Fernando VII, such liberalism was dangerous and worthy of exile, with the consequence that, upon the return of the exiles after his death, Romanticism was a political state of being rather than an artistic impulse.

It has been maintained by some that Romanticism was never noticeably influential in Spain because it was quintessentially Spanish in itself. It was in some ways an intensification and emphasis of certain central aspects of Spanish art rather than an innovation: its ideals of emancipation, the elevation of the individual, subjective lyricism as opposed to epic objectivity and an anarchical approach to procedure and motivation can be traced as literary currents in much of the nation's previous literary history.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, the war of independence and the spread of liberal ideas, Rivas' work helped to appropriate nationalism and national militarism as elements of the new Romantic liberalism. In the belief that ballads were spontaneously arising creations of the populace, the epitome of Spanish 'culture', he and other poets believed that their patriotism, deriving from Spain's traditions and heritage, expressed the essence of the country and was therefore Romantic. This was the novelty and significance of their works in terms of the development of Spanish literature.

Though the level and boldness of imagery in the ballads is noteworthy, it alone doesn't adequately explain the significance of his works in the larger context. The way in which Rivas achieved this relevance and significance was in incarnating the desire for models or leaders typical of Romanticism in his exposition of Spain's past. His choice of episodes and figures that represented the "national spirit" and thereby offered hope of its resurgence

was, in intent, exemplary and inspirational, even if his adherence to the traditionalised form was not in the spirit of its spontaneity and freedom.

He aimed to fulfil the role of prophet to some extent by representing the power of national pride and what it could lead to. One can see by the fact that not all the ballads are actually historical that the message, the evocation of glory and poeticization of Spanish attributes, is more important than the content. Furthermore, not all the central characters are traditional 'heroes'. Rather than simply being virtuous characters, they are chosen for what they represent: the essential characteristics that show their humanity such as peaceful acceptance of death or generosity.

Rivas the moralist is indeed aiming to emulate the role of the seer or legislator who would change the present order of things through this opus. Almost all of the ballads appear to have some contemporary element, such as a lament against the intervention of foreign powers in Spanish national affairs being presented and criticised through the intervention of Duguesclin in the affairs of don Enrique.

However, his aim in this moralising was simply to stir the emotions of the reader, evoking the past in order to elicit a passion for the present Spain and its interests. As such, their concern was not for extending the form of the verse they wrote, nor for embellishing the tradition of the ballad. They removed superfluous elements, such as formulaic repetition, in favour of digressory details, descriptions or didacticism, and concentrated on characterisation and descriptive effect almost to the extent of emulating drama.

In doing so they opened up the form and the history of Spain to new readers and later authors, stirring interest in both, without in fact adding anything to the variety and essential nature of the nation's literature. Though the content of their verse was original in focus and context, the style and themes were well established and before long were again overtaken by swings in emphasis in favour of other aspects of the literary legacy, with the result that Romanticism in Spain was supplanted by other trends before it had had the same profound impact it did in other European countries.