

Extracted from Note on Romanticism

The term 'Romantic' and ideas about romanticism are fraught with over-expansion and misapplication. Historically the subject has been said to link ideas of inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual,¹ but all of these terms are awkward and at best outmoded.²

'Romantic poetry' was first defined by Friedrich Schlegel in 1798. The subject for the study of painting was considerably extended by the ideas of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel in his lectures on 'Aesthetics', 1818-29, in which he includes a substantial section 'Romantic Art'.³ Ideas of subjectivity and the individual are prevalent in the work and throughout the idea of inspiration is implicit. There is also the debate in Hegel and others regarding the idea that 'Romantic Art' displaces 'Classic Art'.⁴

In the late 1980s August Wiedmann, a philosopher and art historian wrote an analysis of the subject.⁵ He identified four important traits of Romantic Art and named them, 'Holistic', 'Expressive', 'Hierophanic Conception' and 'Organic'. It may prove viable to begin by making use of what lies beneath these terms when considering some of the landscape painting made in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The idea of the 'Holistic', of 'All' and 'everything' appears in the work of a number of poets. Novalis wrote, 'A great life-force everywhere / Blossoms forth and comes to bear / All must link in harmony / Each through the other flourish and fruitful be'.⁶ Wordsworth asserted, it is 'a spirit that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought ...'.⁷ Shelley proposed, 'Throughout this varied and eternal world / Soul is the only element ...', the 'active, living spirit ... in unity and part'.⁸

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'romanticism' as a movement in the arts and literature which originated in the late 18th century, emphasising inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual. Often contrasted with classicism. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/romanticism>

² There is a considerable and important body of work by Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, Mark Johnson, Jacques Lacan, Gillian Rose and others critical of the ideas of inspiration, subjectivity and the primacy of the individual. I have included a selected list of their work in the course bibliography.

³ An expansion on aspects of this are included in the fuller Note on Romanticism pdf on allenfisher.edublogs.org

⁴ In addition to Hegel, there are summary discussions of this in Isaiah Berlin, 1997, in Simon Schama, 1989, and in Kenneth Clark, 1973, all noted in the course bibliography.

⁵ August Wiedmann. *Romantic Art Theories*, Henley-on-Thames: Gresham Books, 1986.

⁶ Novalis, P. Kluckhohn and R. Samuel (eds.). *Schriften*, four volumes, Stuttgart, 1960-75, I, p. 319.

⁷ William Wordsworth. 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798'. Fiona Stafford (ed.). William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 89.

⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley. T. Hutchinson (ed.). *The Complete Poetical Works*, Oxford, 1960, *Queen Mab* IV, pp. 139-45.

Coleridge noted: 'There is one Mind, one omnipresent Mind' whose love diffused 'through all' made one glorious whole.⁹ In the last analysis all divisions for Wiedmann are 'led back to and absorbed by a common source, an original unity or "identity"'.¹⁰ These descriptions may sometimes appear to be over-determined. The use of a low horizon in many landscape paintings in the period 1750-1850 may involve the holistic idea, the cosmic whole, but often this phenomena in the painting could be attributed to a visual comprehension of the weather.

Wiedmann's idea of the 'Expressive', could involve a quest to heal humankind's alienation from the living spirit of creation. For Wiedmann the 'Expressive' made the Romantics fierce opponents of any system that explained the universe in terms of quantities and numbers or by way of mere sense impressions. Idealists to the extreme, they denied the existence of any reality seemingly independent of the spirit.¹¹ But this may be over simplified as the rejection of French materialism and English empiricism and many landscape paintings are structured using measured proportions.

Wiedmann's idea of 'Hierophanic Conception' involved Romantic artists' attack on what he called 'the meddling mechanical intellect, an intellect that frequently mirrored their misgivings about reason or the intellectual faculty itself. Reason, like science, tended to divide, and in so doing, to destroy the living whole, impose its narrow will upon humankind's glorious passions and feelings. Worse still, this seemingly godlike faculty in humankind curtly dismissed the truth of the imagination, of the heart and of the senses, as much inferior to the truth it claimed for itself. On the surface, and impelled by visions of wholeness, the Romantics strove to reconcile the rational with the tender feelings of the human heart. ... The senses and the soul at their most profound called for, indeed demanded, the closest of co-operation with the deepest thoughtfulness. Yet all these and similar ritual pieties professed on behalf of humankind's undivided wholeness concealed but these artists' unresolved relationship to reason; their tense, ambiguous and often outright negative attitude towards the rational.'¹² It was clearly negative in Novalis' notion of a 'petrified and petrifying Reason' or in his conception of thought as being 'only feeling's dream, feeling that has expired, a pallid and feeble life'.¹³ It was still more negative in Heinrich von Kleist's despair over a dissecting rationality which distorted and ultimately paralysed everything spontaneous and vital. — 'O Reason, miserable Reason'.¹⁴ In landscape paintings, these ideas are often tempered when we recognise the professional practice of painting in a studio with an elaborate set of notes, sketches and corresponding exchanges of letters discussing aspects of content in the paintings.

⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. K. Coburn (ed.) *The Collected Works*, 9 volumes, Princeton and London, 1971-81, *Religious Musings*, p.105.

¹⁰ Wiedmann. 1986, p. 3.

¹¹ Wiedmann. 1986, p. 5.

¹² Wiedmann. 1986, p. 10.

¹³ Novalis. 'Lehrlinge zu Sais', *Schriften I*, p.96 'The Apprentices of Sais', written in the late 1790s, considered the connection of mind and nature, or of self-knowledge and recognition of nature.

¹⁴ Heinrich von Kleist. To O.A.R. von Lilienstern, 31 August 1806 in *Werke und Briefe IV*, p. 355, V, p. 328.

It is ‘immense sensitivity to the non-rational and trans-rational that made the Romantics uncannily receptive to the claims and promptings of the unconscious.’¹⁵ Wiedmann names this idea ‘Organic’. ‘When Sigmund Freud declared that it was not he but the poets who discovered the unconscious, he should have mentioned the works of the Romantics, for to them belongs the credit of having recognised its profound significance in the affairs of humankind. In their own fashion the Romantics were indeed the first to explore and chart the mind’s “abyss”, the first to declare that the key to conscious life must be found in the concealed corridors of the unconscious. Their explorations of the latter, their analysis of myths and dreams, of hypnotism, somnambulism, animal magnetism and different forms of mental illness, advanced ideas which were to achieve great prominence in modern psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. According to Ellenberger, whose wealth of supporting evidence is truly overwhelming, “there is hardly a single concept of Freud or Jung” which was not “anticipated” by Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and by Romantic medicine.¹⁶ An example of this conception was summarised by G.H. Schubert’s division of each human being into body, soul and spirit, that points forward to Freud’s tripartite conception of the id, the ego and the superego. G.H. Schubert’s notions of “egotism” and *Todesehnsucht*, that is longing for death, can be found in Freud’s “narcissism” and “death instinct”.’ What becomes important for the viewer is the autonomy of the image of one’s own body, ‘the imaginary locus of reference for proprioceptive sensations,¹⁷ that can be found in all kinds of phenomena ...’¹⁸

¹⁵ Wiedmann. 1986, p. 15.

¹⁶ H.F. Ellenberger. *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, New York, 1970, p. 205.

¹⁷ Proprioception is crucial for viewing paintings on at least two levels; that of your physical presence as you stand in front of a work and in your perception of the materiality and scale of the work in front of you.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2006, p. 181. A further note from Lacan has been included in the fuller Note on Romanticism pdf on allenfisher.edublogs.org Appendix 2.