

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. There is an extract from the work of Irigaray in Appendix 3.

³ See commentary in Appendix 1.

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

Appendix 1..

Hegel proposes the dissolution of classical art, and demands what he calls ‘a transition into a third and higher form’, [that is] the *Romantic* form of art.’¹⁹

For Hegel ‘The romantic form of art destroys the completed union of the Idea and its reality, and recurs, though in a higher phase, to that difference and antagonism of two aspects which was left

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 put in Appendix 2.

¹⁹ Hegel. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, translated by Bernard Bosanquet, London &c.: Penguin, 1993, p. 85.

unvanquished by symbolic art.²⁰ The classical type attained the highest excellence, of which the sensuous embodiment of art is capable; arid if it is in any way defective, the defect is in art as a whole, [that is] in the limitation of its sphere. This limitation consists in the fact that art as such takes for its object Mind — the conception of which is *infinite* concrete universality — in the shape of *sensuous* concreteness, and in the classical phase sets up the perfect amalgamation of spiritual and sensuous existence as a Conformity of the two. Now, as a matter of fact, in such an amalgamation Mind cannot be represented according to its true notion. For mind is the infinite subjectivity of the Idea, which, is as absolute inwardness,²¹ is not capable of finding free expansion in its true nature on condition of remaining transposed into a bodily medium as the existence appropriate to it.’²²

²⁰ The account, in this section [CVII], of romantic-Christian art differs from that given [by Hegel] in sections XCVI and XCVIII [of his *Lectures*]. There he argued that Christianity, unlike symbolic religions, determines a uniquely appropriate sensory expression of itself, even if this expression, unlike that of Greek religion, does not represent its whole content. Here he argues that any sensory material is just as adequate, and just as inadequate, for its expression as any other, so that the form-content relation in romantic art is the same as that in symbolic art. There are several reasons for this equivocation:

- (i) The notion of concreteness (lit. 'grown-togetherness') is sufficiently ambiguous to fit either view: to say that spirit or a content is: concrete may mean (as here) that it is concrete within itself, or it may mean (as in sections XCVI and XCVII [of his *Lectures*]) that it grows together with the sensory, and spans the gulf between the Idea and the sensory.
- (ii) Hegel's emphasis differs according to whether he is contrasting romantic art primarily with Greek art (as here and in section XVI or with symbolic art.
- (iii) In XCVI and XCVIII he is thinking mainly of explicitly religious, especially medieval art, while here he is thinking of secular modern art. The disparity between medieval, religious art and modern, secular art — as well as that between earlier and later Greek art — favours the cyclical account of the decline of art suggested by Hegel later in his *Lectures*, [which is] that periods of artistic creativity are regularly followed by periods of artistic decline: 'With the advance of civilisation a time generally comes when art points beyond itself' But this is plainly not what Hegel has in mind either here or elsewhere in his Introduction.
- (iv) Correspondingly, in XCVI and XCVII he has in mind Christian religion as such, while here he has in mind the philosophical meaning of Christianity. (The account of romanticism as mind becoming aware of its prior state fits the latter better than the former.) Michael Inwood, 'Commentary', Hegel 1993, pp. 183-84.

²¹ 'It is the essence of mind or thought not to have its parts outside one another. The so-called terms of a judgement are a good instance of parts in thought which are inward to each other'. Like Bernard Bosanquet, T.N. Knox [in his 1973 translation] argues that the 'inwardness' of spirit consists in the fact that thoughts (such as the terms of a judgement) or the parts of a mind are not outside one another in the way that the parts of a sensory object, such as a body, are, and hence spirit cannot be adequately expressed in a body. Hegel no doubt has this in mind, but it cannot be all that he means by 'inwardness', since this alone would not explain why inward thoughts etc. are inexpressible in art. A statue or painting *can* convey that a person is thinking, but not that he is thinking, for example that beauty is truth. But this cannot be because the thoughts of beauty and of truth are internally related in a judgement, in a way in which sensory items (for example arms and legs) are not, since the thought can be adequately expressed in the *words* 'Beauty is truth', which, as written marks or spoken sounds, are as externally related as arms and legs are. Hegel is more likely to mean that the deeper aspects of spirit, especially thoughts but also feelings, have no obvious bodily manifestation (apart from speech). Moreover, thoughts are often not, like ... perception, directed on externally present, sensorily portrayable objects, so that a person's thoughts cannot be conveyed by him in an external setting [such as a painting]: the 'inward mind ... coalesces with its object'. Inwood, 'Commentary', Hegel 1993, pp. 184-85.

²² Hegel. 1993, pp. 85-86.

Hegel's proposals are fraught with contradiction. For example he proposes that 'the object [of art] is [a] *free*, concrete intellectual being, which has the function of revealing itself as spiritual existence for the inward world of spirit. In conformity with such an object-matter, art cannot work for sensuous perception. It must address itself to the inward mind, which coalesces with its object simply and as though this were itself,²³ to the subjective inwardness, to the heart, the feeling, which, being spiritual, aspires to freedom within itself, and seeks and finds its reconciliation only in the spirit within. It is this *inner* world that forms the content of the romantic, and must therefore find its representation as such inward feeling, and in the show or presentation of such feeling. The world of inwardness celebrates its triumph over the outer world, and actually in the sphere of the outer and in its medium manifests this its victory, owing to which the sensuous appearance sinks into worthlessness.'²⁴

Appendix 2.

'There is an 'incompleteness and "delay" in the development of the central nervous system during the first six months of life ... It is owing to this delay in development that the early maturation of visual perception takes on the role of functional anticipation. This results, on the one hand, in the marked prevalence of visual structure in recognition of the human form ... On the other hand, the odds of identifying with this form ... receive decisive support from this, which comes to constitute the absolutely essential imaginary knot in [humankind] that psychoanalysis ... has admirably designated as "narcissism".' (Lacan, p. 182.) 'The relation of the image to the suicidal tendency essentially expressed in the myth of Narcissus lies in this knot. This suicidal tendency — which represents ... what Freud sought to situate in his metapsychology with the terms "death instinct" and "primary masochism" — depends ... on the fact that [human] death, long before it is reflected ... in ... thinking, is experienced ... by the earliest phase of misery that goes through from *the traumas of birth* until the end of the first six months if *physiological prematurity*, and that echoes later in the *trauma of weaning*.'²⁵ Lacan later notices that 'this mirage of appearances ... requires the ungraspable consent of freedom, as can be seen in the fact that madness is found only in [humankind] and only after [humans] reach "the age of reason" ...'²⁶

Appendix 3.

'We have to rethink the model of subjectivity which has served us for centuries, not in order to add a little bit here or a little bit there, but so that we can abandon the model of a single and singular subject

²³ This does not keep up a distinction between percipient and object. Goodness, nobleness, and so forth, are not felt to be other than or outside the mind. Inwardness in this sense is plainly distinct from inwardness in the sense favoured by the translator, Bosanquet, in footnote 20. The rest of this sentence makes clear that feeling, as well as thought, may be 'inward'. Inwood, 'Commentary', Hegel 1993, p. 186.

²⁴ Hegel. 1993, p. 87.

²⁵ Lacan, p. 182.

²⁶ Lacan, p. 183.

altogether. This does not mean that the one of the subject can become many (plus one or minus one), but that the subject is at least two, man and woman, a two in relations that are not biunivocal.’²⁷

‘Only a society which guarantees civil relations between ma(e)n; and woma(e)n, and which leaves the other subjective choices to the individual, can be considered secular.’²⁸

‘What has not yet been imagined in thought is: how to remain together while still being two, how to be and become subjectively two, how to discover a way of coexisting as two beings, private and public, a way of living and thinking and loving as two beings without one being reduced to the other?’²⁹

‘Perhaps it is possible for me, thanks to the respect that I feel for the other, to articulate both attraction and restraint with respect to him. I go out from and return to myself in order to respect his alterity, and this respect for the other becomes respect for myself, my life and my growth.’³⁰

²⁷ Luce Irigaray. *Democracy Begins Between Two*, translated by Kirsteen Anderson, London: Athone Press, 2000, 6.

²⁸ Irigaray 2000, 10.

²⁹ Irigaray 2000, 112.

³⁰ Irigaray *Ibid.*