

JOHN CLAIBORNE ISBELL



AN OUTLINE OF
ROMANTICISM
IN THE WEST



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Introduction

It seems pretty clear—indeed, it is likely uncontested—that Romanticism was an international movement. It crossed borders. Over the two centuries since its appearance, work on the phenomenon has, perhaps regrettably, tended to silo into uniquely national studies, but there has also been a significant comparatist tradition to which this present outline is indebted. We open, therefore, with an overview of the field.

Let us begin with three precursors. Paul Van Tieghem's *Le Romantisme dans la littérature européenne* (1948) is a 538-page volume in four books: "Le Prérromantisme," "La Révolution romantique," "Les Sentiments, les idées, l'art," and "Les Œuvres." In keeping with the study's age, it starts with Preromanticism and ends with Realism, two choices to trouble a modern scholar. But it is quite complete, covering Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Slavic world, and Greece. One has the impression that Van Tieghem read much of this in the original. Sadly, the book does not stretch to the Americas. Seven years later came René Wellek's *A History of Modern Criticism, The Romantic Age* (1955), with twelve chapters: on the Germans, the British, the French, the Italians, the younger Germans, and the German philosophers. In short, four national traditions are covered, specifically as to their criticism, though the book is thorough within those parameters from a mid-century perspective. Marshall Brown's *Preromanticism* (1991) covers early French, German, and British Romanticisms. The book is thorough, and has an overarching thesis, built around a term Brown later questions in the *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, edited by Stuart Curran (2010). It has thirteen chapters, including five on British eighteenth-century texts and two others on specific authors. These three monographs, from Van Tieghem, Wellek, and Brown, separate from the comparatist field in not being anthologies: they are instead each the work of one person, which allows

them to have a coherent and overriding thesis. All are very good at what they do, though time has marked all three, and only Van Tieghem attempts a comprehensive overview, though without the Americas. The remaining studies here cited are anthologies, building their thesis—to the extent that they do so—in mosaic fashion.

A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages (1988–2008) devotes five thick volumes of articles to European Romanticism. Let's review them in turn. *Romantic Irony*, edited by Frederick Garber (1988), contains twenty articles by authoritative Romanticists, covering irony in Germany, France, Portugal, Britain, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe, and the United States. It thus lacks Spain, Italy, and Latin America. *Romantic Irony* is a somewhat narrow topic, but this is a remarkably thorough mosaic treatment, i.e., this is not a monograph, but a collection of shorter studies by authorities with local expertise.

Romantic Poetry, edited by Angela Esterhammer (2002), contains twenty-seven articles in four sections: "The Evolution of Sensibility and Representation," "The Evolution of Genre," "Romantic Poetry and National Projects," and "Interpretations, Re-creations, and Performances of Romantic Poetry." These sections offer different approaches to the Romantic project: in terms of sensibility, in terms of genre or formally, in terms of subject matter and nationhood, and finally in terms of public performance. The third title is close to that of this outline, but contains just one comparatist article: others concern, say, specifically Greek or Romanian or Irish Romantic verse. Spain and Latin America appear along with, say, Hungary, and one comparatist article does mention Leopardi.

Nonfictional Romantic Prose: Expanding Borders, edited by Steven P. Sondrup and Virgil Nemoianu (2004), contains twenty-five articles, including an early version of a chapter published here. It has nine sections, on "Romantic Theoretical and Critical Writing," "Expansions in Time," "Expansions in Space," "Expansions of the Self," "Generic Expansions," "Intersections: Scientific and Artistic Discourses in the Romantic Age," and "Intimations of Transcendence." The trope of "Expansions" provides a certain coherence to the global vision presented; regions covered include Germany, Britain, France, the United States, Scandinavia, Latin America, and Spain. In short, Spain and Latin America feature, but Italy

remains absent. Some articles cover multiple nations, while others cover psychology, music, and the visual arts: the volume is thus comparatist and interdisciplinary, with a focus on non-fiction.

Romantic Drama, edited by Gerald Gillespie (2007), contains twenty-six articles in four sections: "Renewal and Innovation," "Themes, Styles, Structures," "Affinity, Dissemination, Reception," and "The Romantic Legacy." Articles cover the reception of Shakespeare and of Calderón, as well as Italy, Spain, Latin America, Poland, Russia, Bohemia, Hungary, Scandinavia, Canada, and the United States. Other articles cover opera and *Faust*, for a quite comprehensive overview.

Romantic Prose Fiction, edited by Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel, and Bernard Dieterle (2008), contains thirty-seven articles in three sections: "Characteristic Themes," "Paradigms of Romantic Fiction," and "Contributions of Romanticism to 19th and 20th century writing and thought." The volume is perhaps more comparatist than others, with few articles on a single national tradition and several international or interdisciplinary texts. It appears less generic than topical. An early version of my chapter on novel and verse romance also features.

In sum, these five volumes represent a comprehensive approach to the Romantic phenomenon, undertaken in mosaic form: they are anthologies and lack an overarching thesis. The Western world is represented sometimes incompletely (Italy's or America's absence) and, in keeping with the lack of thesis, there is not much focus on Romanticism as a national art: just one section in the *Romantic Poetry* volume covers that topic.

Two recent comparative studies are sizeable and have special interest. *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Prickett (2010), offers sixteen short essays (two pages apiece) on a range of national Romanticisms, followed by about nine hundred pages of bilingual extracts from a broad and thorough range of texts. Mácha's important long Czech poem "May," for instance—not an easy text to find—is here in bilingual entirety. This is a splendid sourcebook for European Romanticism (the Americas are missing), but the commentary is generic and very brief. There is no overarching thesis. *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, edited by Paul Hamilton (2016), covers a variety of European literatures from a mostly literary angle. It contains forty-one sections in two parts: "Languages" and "Discourses."

Nations include France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Russia, Poland, Scandinavia, and Greece. Absent nations include Britain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Southern Slavs, and the Baltic nations. Within these parameters, the volume is incisive, like most of these studies, with articles by authorities in the field. The Americas are naturally missing.

To conclude, there may be a new push for comparatism in Romantic studies. The new edition of the *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, for instance, has a chapter on German idealism. It is welcome to see these two heavy new volumes, one of unfindable texts, the other of articles by authorities in the field. Yet, as with the *Comparative History*, both lack an overarching thesis: they are constructed in mosaic style, which also does something to explain the blind spots both volumes present. Croatian, Ukrainian, Estonian, or Flemish Romanticism might welcome a mention. Or in fact Cuban, Brazilian, or Argentinian Romanticism, all of which emerge before 1848. And I believe those blind spots have consequences, contributing to hide from participants what I describe as the national underpinnings to the Romantic enterprise.

One quite recent monograph is that rare thing, both comparatist and single-authored. It is by Paul Hamilton, the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*. His *Realpoetik: European Romanticism and Literary Politics* (2013) is focused on three countries: France, Italy, and Germany. It has an overarching thesis, anchored in sociopolitical context: namely that, in the new nations of the nineteenth century, there was a necessity to imagine the kind of nation which would be desirable. Hamilton examines this thesis in the writings of Germaine de Staël, Friedrich Schlegel, Giacomo Leopardi, and others.

Three additional texts tangential to comparative Romanticism seem to offer useful models for the present outline. First, Jerome J. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (1983) is a slim volume, offering a sociopolitical reading of British Romanticism, which went a long way to overturning the traditional focus on the Romantic individual, at least for Britain and for me. Second, Anne K. Mellor's *Romanticism & Gender* (1993) returns women authors to the discussion of British Romanticism, thereby exposing a missing half to the British Romantic universe and doing so with a thesis as to what distinguishes the two. This work clearly remains to be done for the other female Romanticisms waiting to be discovered, of which there are many. And third, Paul Johnson's *The*

Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815–1830 (1991) covers precisely what it says. It is extensive and universal, and that was an inspiration as the initial work began on this comparatist project some decades ago.

The present outline, then, proposes an argument for the global coherence of Western cultural production between 1776 and 1848. Furthermore, the Romantic enterprise here presented bleeds back into the 1760s in France and the United Kingdom—in Rousseau or Ossian, for instance—and on into the 1850s in the Americas, as in Eastern and Northern Europe. This proposed continuity to Romanticism in the West can be located in the concept of *nationality* and, specifically, *national credit*, marking a watershed in Western thought that continues to shape the modern world. Here is that dialectic: from the nation's rich soil arises a genius speaking the nation's voice. The nation, which sits within a patchwork of nations—rather as the UN or the EU imagine themselves—is subsumed and literally embodied in that unique national individual, an elect and alien figure who represents it and to whom it gives credit. This Romantic concept still elects our national representatives; it determines the incomes of our celebrities; it has led nations from Russia to Argentina to erect monuments to Romantic authors; it is why Percy Bysshe Shelley, who sold poorly, writes that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”¹ Focus on the Romantic individual may then have it precisely backwards: ‘Romantic’ and ‘national’ are two sides of the same coin, I argue, and to speak about the Romantic individual without speaking about the represented nation is to study a circuit's anode without its cathode.

The present outline aims to restore the Romantic era as it was lived by its creators and citizens, in a global overview that bypasses some common divisions. For instance, the Classic-Romantic-Realist distinction. Neoclassical and Romantic art coexist in the painter David as in the writers Foscolo or Hölderlin, while talk of ‘subsequent’ Realism, a term passing from the near-forgotten Champfleury to Soviet work on Gogol, or to Lukács on Balzac, deletes major creators—Balzac, Gogol, Dickens—from the Romantic universe. This survey also avoids the term ‘Preromantic,’ which historically has served to silo national Romantic movements from international chronologies, and subdivisions such

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. by Albert S. Cook (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1890), p. 46.

as *Trivial*, *Schauer*, or *Afterromantik*, which tend to narrow 'German Romantic' production to the decade or so from 1798–1808. German lands remained strongly regional, and that may matter more. On the other hand, the book notes Romantic elements in the plastic arts throughout this period—in Géricault, Blake, Goya, and Friedrich for instance—and even in music, where musicologists label Mozart and Beethoven Classical, though the two composers have clear debts to Romantic thought. Romantic elements can be traced across a variety of disciplines—in architecture, in fashion, in landscaping where the term appears early. They can also be traced in the era's politics. Sidestepping a series of received divisions may offer a fresh and holistic view of the period, one that includes Dickens and Rousseau; Lermontov, Andersen, and E.T.A. Hoffmann; Bishop Percy and Leopardi; Poe, Berlioz, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. It may help return the West's diverse Romantic-era creators to a lived continuum.

An ancillary point. 'Realism' makes for a constricting uniform into which to try to shoehorn authors of the Romantic era. As Albert Béguin argues in *L'Âme romantique et le rêve*, it is characteristic of Romanticism to open a window onto dream, with its floating affect, its weight of meaning, and its aleatory structures. Dream, the fantastic, and the arabesque routinely determine the Romantic horizon, from Novalis to Poe. Thus, the Romantics value fairy tale and ballad. Thus, Gogol's narrator meets his own nose in Kazan cathedral. Thus, Balzac's shagreen skin shrinks with every wish it grants. Thus, also, Stendhal's Julien Sorel finds a newspaper clipping recounting his own death. Thus, indeed, Dickens's Pip and Magwitch are bound in a bizarre web of coincidence—an arabesque, a pattern shaped not by lived reality but by abstract principles, rather like an algebraic formula. At such moments, 'Realism' simply does not apply, and such moments—such indeterminacy—are not tangential to these texts, they lie at their heart. That is why the present study returns to fantastic elements found in allegedly 'Realist' Romantic-era texts—to heuristic conflict, to night, dream, and the arabesque.

Philosophy is not foregrounded here. Outside of Coleridge or Villers, Kant and the post-Kantians had their contemporary impact mostly in German lands; meanwhile, Rousseau, an overwhelming influence in the West, gets less credit for that influence than he merits. British empiricists

had been shaping European thought for a good century, but Romantics had cause to dislike Bentham, and Godwin was an anarchist. In general, the Romantics' philosophical treatises, which exist, are not the primary reason we read Romantic authors. We read the Romantics for plots and speakers, to meet people, like Wordsworth's Idiot Boy or Balzac's Eugène de Rastignac, and watch them interact with the world. There is good philosophical prose in the period—Kant writes better prose than often credited, and Rousseau's prose is splendid—but that story has been told.

This outline instead proposes a unified political and historical framework. Authors can choose whether or not to open a given book, but they cannot choose their system of government. If their nation is occupied by French, Russian, Turkish, or Austrian troops—or liberated by Washington, Bolívar, or Louverture, by Spanish *guerilleros* or Garibaldi—that will have an impact which deserves review. This was a revolutionary age: deemphasizing the revolutions that played out across the region will falsify the texts we read. Here, too, one may witness that watershed in thought which defines our extended Romantic period. There is a reason all continental America bar Canada won independence in the half-century 1776–1826, and that the many nations of Eastern Europe—Poland, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Ukraine, Estonia, Finland—now produced foundational Romantic epics. There is a reason Italian Romantics were rounded up in 1821 by the Austrian police, and that so many Romantic authors wrote in exile. This is not the solipsistic glorification of a Romantic individual, but its opposite: a popular or *national* ideology at its birth.

In short, this outline aims to retrace a unified field, replacing some of the divides that still shape the Romantic enterprise. How could that totality have hidden away so long? Various factors suggest themselves. First, the Romantic choice to write in the vernacular—the people's voice—and not, say, in French, conceals key texts in various languages: Frederick the Great of Prussia wrote in French, while a generation later German authors elected to write in German. Second, the world's nation-states pursue national agendas, which impacts specialists living within them: comparative Romanticism remains a minority occupation alongside a sea of national Romantic studies, and even we comparatists draw frontiers inside the map to define what we will treat. Third, a

century divide bisects the Romantic period, while many scholars spend entire careers working within one century's borders. Fourth, the political context is complex: there are scholars with libraries devoted to the French Revolution alone. Fifth, credit theory and economics are unusual topics in literary scholarship: discipline boundaries in general conceal the totality here outlined. Sixth, scholars have over the years endorsed various agendas that partition the Romantic continuum—for instance, focusing on Realism and the search for its roots in the European novel, 1750–1850. All these seem understandable choices, and Romanticism had its hand in their launching. This does not, however, mean we must remain their prisoners.

My 1996 Lilly Library exhibition catalogue, *The People's Voice: A Romantic Civilization, 1776–1848*, shows a draft constitution for Bolivia with President Sucre's handwritten corrections: presidential elections will be held "popularmente conforme a la ley de junio" [popularly in accordance with the June law]. This is the Romantic age of the nations of the West, with states discovering nationhood, like France after 1789, or defining nationhood for themselves, like the United Kingdom. In addition, nation-states began emerging, as throughout the Americas, along with nations absent from the map but aspiring to appear on it, as in Italian or German lands, or almost the whole of Eastern Europe. This story, not that of some solipsistic Romantic individual, is the West's cultural matrix during the years 1776–1848, from Moscow to Montevideo. The entire region was a concert of new nations, real and imagined—and thus *international*, to use a word coined at the time. This book presents key texts reaching from Russia to Argentina, showing the history of these nations' art within the timeframe of their struggle for nationhood. If 'Romanticism' is to mean anything, as the Lovejoy-Wellek debate once wondered—that is, if the term is to mark a historical moment—then we may expect Romantic data points across the broad field of cultural production. And we can perhaps identify such data if we look. This is a wide range of information, but it is held together by nationhood and by the ideas of representative government and credit in which it is grounded.

The outline has some interdisciplinary scope. It engages beyond literature with the spectrum of cultural production, touching not only on the humanities—literature, politics, economics, philosophy, music,

the fine arts—but also on technology and the sciences. It oversteps century, nation, and language boundaries in an effort to present the Romantic phenomenon as it was once lived by its creators and audience.

Chapter One, “Romanticism and the Nations of the West,” echoes Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* in format, presenting twelve different Romantic artifacts in ten European languages and reviewing each piece and its context in turn. The format is: a painting or short text in verse or prose; an English translation if needed; a brief biography of the creator; and a contextual commentary. The works covered are: Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*; Germaine de Staël, *Corinne ou l’Italie*; Francisco Goya, *Tres de mayo 1808*; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*; Alexander Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*; James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*; Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*; Hans Christian Andersen, *Eventyr*; Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*; Esteban Echeverría, *El Matadero*; Hendrik Conscience, *De Leeuw Van Vlaanderen*; João de Almeida Garrett, *Viagens na minha terra*. That means this long chapter covers the years 1800–1846 and, globally, German lands, France, Spain, the British Isles, Russia, the United States, Eastern Europe (Poland), Northern Europe (Denmark), the Italian peninsula, Latin America (Argentina), the Low Countries (Belgium), and Portugal. It thereby sketches out a substantial Romantic field.

Chapter Two, “The Frankenstein Conundrum. Romantic Disavowals of Romanticism, 1800–1830,” argues that a common thread indeed unites Europe’s Romantics, from Saint Petersburg to London: it is precisely their disavowal of what they created. The chapter further proposes that what is at work is not simply dislike of the term, but instead a synthetic vision shared by these artists seeking to reconcile Neoclassical and Romantic art, past and future within a new, Hegelian synthesis—a vision obliterated by less subtle hangers-on, as the term and original agenda were co-opted, if not hijacked.

Chapter Three, “Romantic Novel and Verse Romance. Is There a Romance Continuum?” follows the hypothesis that verse romance and the historical novel—Romantic verse and prose respectively—are complementary, with a genre border between them that is more porous than sometimes thought. It follows the two genres across the century 1750–1850, and through German lands, the British Isles, France, the Italian peninsula, Northern and Eastern Europe, Iberia, the Low

Countries, then finally the Americas, for an extensive tour of Romantic extended narrative, a topic which is sometimes neglected. It further makes the argument that Romantic novel and verse romance represent a lost corpus, indeed a lost continuum in Romantic-era production, long hidden by a focus on short lyrics and 'the Realist novel.' This corpus is marked by epistemological crisis and the arabesque, for which the tools of a Lukács are gravely, if not grotesquely, unsuited.

Chapter Four, "*Racine et Shakespeare's Sleeping Partners. The Return of the Repressed,*" offers an in-depth case study in what the French long called 'Preromanticism' and in the hermeneutic consequences of an exclusively national approach. Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823–1825) seems well suited to a case study both in Romantic internationalism—our proposed method—and in the nationalism or parochialism it supersedes. A detailed review of French, German, English, and Italian sources for Stendhal's famous manifesto reveals the systematic plagiarism—disguised to some extent by misrepresentation—at the root of this famous treatise. Sources uncovered include Staël, A.W. Schlegel, and various British and Italian Romantics. The chapter reviews Stendhal's complex relations with his international sources, some of whom he had met, across two decades, 1803–1825, and the factors involved both in his decision to borrow from them extensively and lie about it, and in the French tradition's willingness to accept his complex and playful text at face value. Foundational national texts are not always what they appear from a national perspective, and that seems worth underlining.

Chapter Five, "*Thoughts on the Romantic Hero, 1776–1848,*" ranges from Rousseau to Heine and from Russia to South America, in order to investigate the nature of the Romantic hero—that Protean being. It argues that the originary act constituting the Romantic hero, across seven decades and a wide geographical and linguistic sweep, is one of compassion, if not empathy. In 1755, Voltaire found Rousseau unintelligible: for the Romantics, almost to a man, existence in human society involves recognizing not just the Other, but the downtrodden, the outsider and the outcast—Quasimodo or Jean Valjean, Ourika or Byron, Heathcliff or Jane Eyre, Faust, Werther or Ortis, Pechorin or Onegin, Hester Prynne—and making of them not just an interlocutor, but the hero of the story: a 'Hero for Our Time,' in Lermontov's words.

This act of faith is taken not, in fact, by the character on the page, but by author and reader together. Romantic heroes exist in a liminal space, and the chapter points out that like Vigny's Moïse, these liminal individuals, outside the common run as they are, find themselves caught in a contract with the nation of solitary readers from which they arise—they represent it. In that Romantic social contract, a better dream of the social order is juxtaposed (as, say, in the interleaved verso-page autobiography of E.T.A. Hoffmann's bourgeois Tomcat Murr) with the social order as constituted. This may suggest a revolution brewing, and the age is not without them, from 1776 through 1848. The chapter ends with a section on Romantic drama, and another, "Romantic Women Authors: The State of the Field," which follows up on the women authors featured notably in Chapter One by searching for women Romantics throughout the period and asking why broadly speaking, they will not be found. It adds various French and German women Romantic authors to the better-known British list, inviting readers to join this search and to ponder what its necessity tells us. Finally, the book ends with an overview of Romanticism outside the Western ambit: in the Ottoman Empire, in Japan, in South Asia.

What, then, remains to be done? A few things, which may come down to a different way of seeing. First, the curious might read fresh texts: foundational Romantic texts from Eastern and Northern Europe, from the Caribbean and Latin America, or by women Romantics outside the British Isles, in France and Germany to begin with. Indeed, any rediscovery of a substantial women's corpus lying outside the British Isles, France, and Germany—where some documentation does already exist—might well complicate a variety of hypotheses put forward here. Second, readers might extend their gaze both forward and back, looking from that explosion for the Western world which was the 1776 Declaration of Independence, on to 1848, the year which saw both the *Communist Manifesto*—a different vision of the folk or people—and Metternich's Restoration Europe in revolt. "We, the people," begins 1787's United States Constitution, and this contested era devoted considerable energy and imagination to enacting that vision of citizenship. Third, readers might focus on overcoming disciplinary divides—between history, economics, and political thought; between gardening, fashion, music, and architecture—in order to sense the Romantic continuum as it was

lived then. From this perspective, readers might find some subsequent received ideas losing their explanatory power. A web of *a posteriori* distinctions and divisions might fall away from the field, much as a chrysalis falls away to reveal the adult. It seems time.