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Romanticism: Breaking the Canon

Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer

Le romantisme n'est précisément ni dans le choix des sujets, ni dans la vérité exacte, mais dans la manière de sentir.

—Baudelaire, "Qu'est-ce que le romantisme?" *Salon de 1846*

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Baudelaire's celebrated definition of Romanticism makes one thing clear at the very outset: by describing Romanticism as an alternate "way of feeling," as a novel outlook on what is already there, it signals the movement's fundamentally revisionist intent. Romanticism thus ushers in the history of modernism by being the earliest manifestation of a concerted and antiphonal "counter-discourse" whose goal was both to break and, at the same time, revitalize moribund traditions preserved by a dominant order.¹ Both Romanticism's proponents and detractors agreed on this point, albeit from vastly different perspectives. "Thus, properly speaking, Romanticism is in practice a coalition prompted by various interests, but which has one common goal, war against the rules, against the rules of convention," wrote a pro-Romantic French newspaper in 1825.² In turn, the anti-Romantic author A.D.*** spoke of Romanticism's "revolt against experience, in its hatred for all sorts of subjection, in its contempt for old traditions. . . . What is Romanticism? It is independence from all rules and consecrated authorities. . . in a word it is the absence of taste."³

Classicism was paired with the past and with reaction. Romanticism harked to the future, to modernity and progress. The old order was symbolized by aged and cranky aristocrats or middle-aged bourgeois ordinariness; renovation assumed the guise of youthful dandy and bohemian eccentricity.⁴ Such stark dichotomies were common currency among observers of the time. "I feel," wrote the Romantic Italian poet Giovanni Berchet in 1816, "that I can call the former [classical poetry] the poetry of the dead and the latter [Romantic poetry] the poetry of the living."⁵ It is such an approach to Romanticism as revision of established cultural and aesthetic values that the articles in this issue pursue, each from a different angle.

Romanticism's assault on established authority paralleled the libertarian goals of the political upheavals that span the movement's historical course—from the American and French revolutions to wars for national independence in Greece, Italy, Poland, and Latin

America. War and revolution became handy metaphors for referring to the embattled Romantics. Critics in France described Romantic painting as the "canon of 1789" or the "14 July of taste."⁶ The concept of an allied artistic and political vanguard, modeled on military paradigms and jointly marching toward aesthetic and social reform, took shape, significantly, in the 1820s, during the very years of Romanticism's wholesale cultural emancipation.⁷ In turn, the vagaries of aesthetic conflict provided the symbolic battleground on which the fortunes of opposing ideologies—conservatism against progressivism—were played out. As the liberal French newspaper *Le Globe* put it:

Two great principles are fighting over the world these days, authoritarianism and liberty. In philosophy, in politics, in religion, in literature even, we encounter them everywhere; and if the war they wage on this latter territory [i.e., literature], under the names of Classicism and Romanticism, does not sound very threatening, still this is no reason why they should not deserve the full attention of the observer.⁸

Even ideologically conservative strands of Romanticism, such as among the French Romantics prior to 1824, had a rebellious edge, if not a political or social one, most certainly an aesthetic and cultural one. Indeed, Romanticism's association with revolt and upheaval, persisting well into the twentieth century, often caused the movement to be retroactively regarded with suspicion. In France, for example, during periods of cultural and political calls to order, such as followed the Franco-Prussian War and World War I, Romanticism (perceived in addition as Northern and Germanic) was virtually ostracized in favor of its opposite, classicism (seen as Latin and Gallic).⁹ So that, in 1909, Maurice Denis could declare that "Romanticism is ridiculed. In literature just as in politics the younger generation has a passion for order."¹⁰ And in the aftermath of the Great War, the movement was reportedly tolerated only if "chastized" by classicism, as André Gide's famous pronouncement suggests: "The classical work will be forceful and beautiful as a result of its subdued Romanticism."¹¹

In its attempt to overthrow an authoritarian and elitist cultural hegemony, Romanticism directed its assault against the official

institutions—academies, schools, awards, and exhibition systems—and the official aesthetic—academic classicism—they stood for.¹² As *Le Globe* urged:

*Let us start, therefore, by tearing down this literary Bastille [i.e., the Académie Française] erected by two centuries of habit. . . . Let us direct all our efforts against its battlements. Let the rule of the unities, the absolute separation of the genres, the declamatory style of the Music Conservatory, and the pompous style of the Ecole be demolished one after another under the blows of common sense. . . . Genius will do the rest.*¹³

As an alternative to univocal and highbrow academic classicism, Romanticism fought for a democracy of taste. In his review of the explosive 1824 Salon, in which classicism and Romanticism collided head on, the liberal critic and journalist Adolphe Thiers compared “le joug académique” to a repressive political regime and paralleled Romanticism’s comprehensive all-inclusiveness to a democratic representative government:

*The call for independence has been spread among the artists. Everyone has followed the route he preferred. . . . all tastes have their share, all styles have their spectators. . . . During fifteen years, one single direction has been given to the arts, the sciences. . . . What a vast reform has spread in the last ten years, thanks to the debates of the representative government, . . . in the arts, what variety, what novelty of subject matter thanks to the freedom from the academic yoke which is beginning to take place.*¹⁴

A new aesthetic ideal emerged, egalitarian and all-inclusive. Friedrich von Schlegel’s celebrated definition of the movement in his *Fragment 116* of 1798 described Romantic poetry as “universal” and comprehensive in its attempt to encompass diverse manifestations of the human experience, intellectual, emotional, social, and aesthetic. Consequently, the Romantic work would be a gigantic composite uniting literature, philosophy, science and rhetoric, high and popular art, tragedy and comedy, prose, poetry and epic, beauty and ugliness, the past and modernity—a total work of art or, in Schlegel’s words, “a mirror of the whole surrounding world, a portrait of the age.”¹⁵

Romantic all-inclusiveness forced the narrow thematic and stylistic confines of canonical art into newfound tolerance. It signaled the beginnings of the aesthetic and ideological acceptance of previously marginalized “Others,” social, racial, cultural, and aesthetic. Thus, Goya, Géricault, and Hugo delved into the somber facets of human existence, the lower depths of crime, madness, and sickness. Delacroix, Gautier, and Hayez evoked an exotically unfamiliar East. Wordsworth and Coleridge embraced the simple language and the “incidents of common life.”¹⁶ Schiller, Baudelaire, and Courbet valued the art of the child and childlike naïveté above the polished sophistication of learned art. “Genius is but childhood rediscovered,” wrote Baudelaire.¹⁷ Arnim, Brentano, Fauriel, and Runge were fascinated by folkloric poetry and popular artifacts, such as woodblock prints and silhouette cutouts. Delacroix was both collecting and making caricatures.¹⁸ Balzac and Hugo tried their hand at popular terror novels. Melodramas, wax museums, and crude *canards* recounting sensational *faits divers* competed for popularity (and often won) against such hallowed pillars of tradition as grand opera and the Comédie Française, the Salon and the Louvre’s old masters. In *Le Globe*’s words:

*Art must be free and free in the most unlimited fashion. Everything that constitutes part of the universe, from the most elevated object down to the most lowly one, from the celebrated Madonna of Pope Sixtus to the Flemish drunkards, deserves to be part of our representations since Nature has thought it worth including among her works.*¹⁹

The aesthetic upshot of such ventures beyond the “center,” into the cultural and social “periphery,” was the annihilation of classicism’s absolute and canonical ideal beauty. Romantic theorists, including August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Simonde de Sismondi, and, in their wake, Madame de Staël, Stendhal, and Baudelaire posited instead the relativity and multiplicity of the concept of beauty. “There are as many beauties as there are habitual manners of looking for happiness,” Baudelaire—echoing Stendhal—declared in 1846.²⁰

Stendhal hinged such relativity on audience reception. In true Romantic and democratic fashion, the public and the anonymous individual were now to be the ultimate arbiters of taste. Beauty was

to be a popular affair, defined from "below." Aesthetic judgment exploded into an infinite number of splinters. Pleasure, that diffuse, sensuous reaction to the aesthetic experience, was to replace classicism's pointedly edifying austerities as the principal criterion for modern art. In 1823 Stendhal wrote:

Romanticism is the art of presenting to people the literary works which, in the actual state of their habits and beliefs, are likely to give them the greatest possible pleasure. Classicism, on the contrary, presents them with the literature that gave the greatest pleasure to their great grandfathers.²¹

Detached from absolute aesthetic imperatives, beauty also became dissociated from ideal moral demands. Evil and ugliness ("le Laid") were raised to rival ideal beauty's traditional attributes, goodness and truth.²² The thrill of terror replaced the pang of consciousness. In the celebrated preface to his play *Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo praised at length the aesthetic category of the grotesque, host to the ugly and the evil, and the antithesis to the sublime and the beautiful. In its marginality and opposition to the canon, the grotesque encapsulated not only the aesthetic and the spirit, but also the very counter-discursive (and "counter-culture") essence of Romantic modernism.

Amoral, nonhierarchical, and multifaceted, the Romantic "Beau moderne" paved the way for the avid and all-inclusive aestheticism of later artistic developments, such as the art-for-art's-sake movement and Symbolism. It was the latter that eventually became its heir and its culmination. For as, under the double impact of industrialization and all-pervasive middle-class values, nineteenth-century culture grew increasingly bourgeois and venal, Romanticism abandoned its former democratic universality for aristocratic hermeticism. As early as 1830, Stendhal's republican hymn to the "divina libertà" of 1804²³ was replaced by his exclusive dedication of *Le Rouge et le noir*: "To the happy few."

While very different in scope and content, the articles in this issue all, in one way or another, explore aspects of Romantic resistance to canonical aesthetic imperatives. The Romantic urge to synthesize apparently irreconcilable opposites is the underlying theme of both Barbara Maria Stafford's and Susan Sidlauskas's essays. Based on materials as varied as manuals of white magic and treatises of popular science, Stafford investigates late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century attitudes toward the traditional dichotomy of oral versus visual, and word versus image. She demon-

strates that, despite long-standing beliefs that opposed Enlightenment discursive rationalism to Romantic imagistic irrationalism, the two periods were in fact contiguous, linked through their shared notion that, as Stafford puts it, "imagery was the coefficient to thought." In turn, Sidlauskas focuses on works by Turner and Soane as she explores the Romantic unity of scientific and transcendental thought.

Romanticism's cultivation of notions of primitiveness, nature, spontaneity, and imagination, as means of countering such normative concepts as civilization, reason, and learning, constitutes the subject of the articles by Frances S. Connelly and Wendelin A. Guentner. Connelly explores Philipp Otto Runge's use of a primitivistic visual language inspired by the shape and perceived meaning of hieroglyphic signs as an example of the Romantic fascination with the origins of culture. Guentner approaches the Romantic quest for unmediated naturalness and innocent spontaneity by tracing the emergence of an aesthetic of the sketch in the critical discourse of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain.

The theme of the artist in confrontation with the social and political status quo informs the essays by Randall C. Griffin and James H. Rubin. Focusing on Thomas Cole, Griffin examines this confrontation within the conservative, insular setting of nineteenth-century American patronage, whose stolid mores, social and artistic, became threatened by Romantic nonconformism. By exploring the political and critical parameters of Delacroix's first Salon painting, *The Barque of Dante and Virgil*, Rubin, on the other hand, suggests that, when faced with a similarly hostile context in Restoration France, the artist astutely opted for a compromise between conservatism and liberalism, idealism and modernity.

Romanticism as an artistic sensibility surviving into our own era is discussed by Robert Rosenblum in the essay that concludes this issue. In an earlier book, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (1975), Rosenblum posited the inherent continuity between nineteenth-century Romanticism, rooted in a northern cultural tradition, and modern Abstract Expressionist painting. In this essay, however, in which he turns his attention to the Neo-Romantic movement of the 1980s, Rosenblum comes to a significantly different conclusion, as he argues that contemporary Neo-Romanticism cannot be viewed as organically linked to its nineteenth-century forerunner, but should be regarded instead as yet another by-product of postmodernism's nostalgic "retrospection" and revival of past historical styles.²⁴

Considered together, the articles in this issue have, however,

yet another, larger goal. They are meant to point to new avenues of study in the field and to the benefits to be derived from applying varied methodological approaches. This, along with the renewed topicality of the movement in our own times, should prompt more scholars to undertake new research.²⁵ For, now that Neo-Romantic retrospection challenges the art historian, what better way to find an answer to today's puzzles than to look back into the prophetic roots of the modernist venture?

Notes

Translations are by the author. For the epigraph, see Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1961), 879.

1. I am borrowing the term and the concept of cultural counter-discourse from Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 13 and passim.
2. *Le Globe*, April 2, 1825, 443, in Pierre Trahard, *Le Romantisme défini par Le Globe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 1924), 24.
3. A.D.***, *De l'influence de la Révolution sur la littérature et du style romantique* (1825), a twelve-page brochure reviewed in the *Journal des Débats*, December 1, 1825, 3.
4. Alan Spitzer, *The French Generation of 1820* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). See also Pierre Barbéris, "Mal du siècle, ou D'un romantisme de droite à un romantisme de gauche," in Louis Girard, ed., *Romantisme et politique, 1815–1851: Colloque de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure de Saint-Cloud* (1966) (Paris: A. Colin, 1969).
5. Olga Ragusa, "Italy: Romantico—Romanticismo," in Hans Eichner, ed., *Romantic and Its Cognates: The European History of the Word* (Toronto: Manchester University Press, 1972), 312.
6. A. Jal, *Esquisses, croquis, pochades, ou Tout ce qu'on voudra sur le Salon de 1827* (Paris: 1828), iii–iv; and L. Vitet, "De l'indépendance en matière de goût," in Trahard, *Le Romantisme défini par Le Globe*, 19–30, 41–53. Vitet's article was published in two installments in *Le Globe* of April 2 and April 23, 1825. On the use of political metaphor in nineteenth-century art criticism, see Francis Haskell, "Art and the Language of Politics," in *Past and Present in Art and Taste: Selected Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 65–74.
7. Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *American Historical Review* 73 (December 1967): 339–66; and idem, *Social Radicalism and the Arts: Western Europe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 119ff. See also Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3–15. Huyssen remarks (p.5) that "throughout the 19th century the idea of the avantgarde remained linked to political radicalism," a point also made by Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France 1830–1880," in Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery eds., *Avant-Garde Art* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968), 3–24. See also Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde, Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), vii–xvii, 4.
8. "Situation du romantisme au premier novembre 1825," *Le Globe*, October 29, 1825, 920.
9. Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), passim. A great deal of the distaste for Romanticism in France and Italy of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s had to do with its alleged German provenance. One of the earliest associations of Romanticism with Northern, particularly German, cultures was due to Madame de Staël's book *De l'Allemagne* (1813). In his essay "Qu'est-ce que le romantisme?" of 1846, Baudelaire also declared, "Le romantisme est fils du Nord."
10. Maurice Denis, "De Gauguin et de Van Gogh au classicisme," in *Théories, 1890–1910: Du Symbolisme et de Gauguin à un nouvel ordre classique* (Paris, 1913), 258.
11. "L'oeuvre classique ne sera forte et belle qu'en raison de son romantisme dompté"; André Gide, "Billets à Angèle (1921)," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1936), 11, 38–39. Valéry also condemns Romanticism as "incoherent" and "foreign"; see Paul Valéry, "Situation de Baudelaire," *Oeuvres de Paul Valéry* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1937), 2, 145ff, in which Valéry goes as far as co-opting for the classicists the Romantic Baudelaire on account of his "faculté raisonneuse." The same idea of a Romanticism "chastized" by classicism underlies Bergson's

1923 reference to French culture as "pénétrée de classicisme, d'un classicisme qui a fait la netteté de son romantisme"; Henri Bergson, "Les Etudes gréco-latines et l'enseignement," *Revue de Paris*, May 1, 1923. These positions were, however, further complicated by the various political sympathies of the writers, an issue too large to be treated here.

In the years before and after World War II, Romanticism knew another "low" period because it was associated with the Nazi movement. See Henry Remak, "Trends of Recent Research on West European Romanticism," in Eichner, ed., *Romantic and Its Cognates*, 475ff. Compare, for example, F. L. Lucas's *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 7: "Even in modern Germany, the Nazi movement shows a strong Romantic tinge with its homesick hankering to revert to the noble pagan, to Nature and the Soil, to 'thinking with the blood.'" More recently, we saw the vestiges of such perceptions in the uneasy contemporary response to the Neo-Romantic paintings of Anselm Kiefer.

12. Arno Meyer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). Meyer shows the persistence, throughout the nineteenth century, of the old conservative social orders and their sponsored classicist aesthetic intended to further their values.
13. "Situation du romantisme au premier novembre 1825," *Le Globe*, October 29, 1825, 920.
14. Adolphe Thiers, *Salon de mil-huit cent vingt-quatre, ou Collection d'articles insérés au Constitutionnel sur l'exposition de cette année* (Paris: Maradan, [1824]), 5–8.
15. *Fragment 116* was published in the 1798 issue of the periodical *Athenaeum* edited by the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich von Schlegel. For a discussion of that text in relation to the arts of Romanticism, see Rudolf Bisanz, "The Romantic Synthesis of the Arts: Nineteenth-Century German Theories on a Universal Art," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 44 (1875): 38–46; and Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking, 1984), 16ff.
16. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 226. Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* extolls "low and rustic life" as the source, model, and inspiration of Romantic poetry.
17. "Mais le génie n'est que l'enfance retrouvée"; Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," in *Oeuvres complètes*, 1159.
18. See Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *Eugène Delacroix: Prints, Politics and Satire, 1814–1822* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 7.
19. *Le Globe*, October 24, 1824, cited in Léon Rosenthal, *La Peinture romantique: Essai sur l'évolution de la peinture française de 1815 à 1830* (Paris: L. H. May, 1900), 97.
20. "Il y a autant de beautés qu'il y a de manières habituelles de chercher le bonheur"; "Qu'est-ce que le romantisme?" in *Oeuvres complètes*, 879. Baudelaire "lifted" this sentence from Stendhal's *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* (1817).
21. Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare: Etudes sur le romantisme* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1970), 71.
22. Victor Hugo's preface to *Cromwell* (1827) is the landmark theoretical text addressing this shift with special focus on the theater. Modern studies include Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (London: Collins, 1966). See also Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Géricault's Severed Heads and Limbs: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Scaffold," *Art Bulletin* 74 (1992): 599–618.
23. Stendhal, *Pensées: Filosofia nova*, 2 (Paris: Le Divan, 1931), 9. See also Albert Cassagne, *La Théorie de l'art pour l'art en France* (Paris: Hachette, 1906).
24. For a more detailed discussion, see Robert Rosenblum, "Romanticism and Retrospection: An Interview with Robert Rosenblum," *Art and Design* 11–12 (1988): 7–19.
25. For the relevance of Romantic concepts to our understanding of modernism and post-modernism, see Timothy Mitchell, "Right Angles and Burning Giraffes: The Content of Modernism," *Arts Magazine* 3 (March 1987): 72–77.

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