

I · *The French Romantic Movement*

D.G. CHARLTON

INTRODUCTION

The French Romantics collectively created one of the most prolific and wide-ranging movements in the history of any national culture. Mme de Staël once remarked: ‘Dans tous les genres, nous autres modernes, nous disons trop.’ It is easy to agree with her, but the sheer volume of their work was not only the consequence of a quite unusual energy and creativity. It followed in good part from the astonishing breadth of their concerns and the sheer diversity of literary, intellectual and artistic forms through which they explored and expressed them. Politics and history, ancient and modern alike; philosophy and religions of both past and present; the visual arts, music and opera: all these can be cited before one even considers the achievements in literature with which the Romantic movement is most often connected. There too their range was remarkable: a great enrichment of poetry, lyric, epic, political and philosophical all represented; a major transformation in the French dramatic tradition; a wide exploration of prose fiction in a variety of forms – personal, historical, and social novels, and the *conte* and *nouvelle* genres; literary theory and criticism.

The succeeding chapters of this work will attempt to describe and evaluate the Romantics in their intellectual and cultural significance understood in this very broad way, but one can at once note here that even an outline of the public careers and the works of leading Romantics indicates how extensive were their preoccupations. Chateaubriand, having received an army commission before the Revolution, returned from his American travels to fight with the Armée des Émigrés, being wounded at Thionville. After a period of exile in England, during which he published his first major work – his *Essai historique, politique et moral sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes dans leurs rapports avec la révolution française* (1797) – and started his apologia for Christianity, *Le Génie du christianisme* (1802), he began his diplomatic career under Napoleon in a post at the French Embassy in Rome. His political convictions, shocked

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as he was by the execution of the duc d'Enghien and by other Napoleonic actions and policies, quickly led him to resign, but his public career was resumed very soon after the Emperor's downfall – first as a Minister of Louis XVIII, later as French Ambassador in Berlin and London and then in Rome. As to publications, *Atala*, *René* and his autobiographical writings were only a minor part of his output. In addition to his earlier intellectual works, he wrote a prose epic of early Christianity, *Les Martyrs*, a number of political writings, including *De Buonaparte et des Bourbons* and *De la monarchie selon la Charte*, his *Études historiques* – four volumes in the Pourrat edition of his complete works – not to add several travel books, critical essays, an *Essai sur la littérature anglaise*, and a biography of the seventeenth-century Trappist Rancé. Both his career and his *œuvres complètes* suggest a man of convictions in religion and politics alike – the very reverse, one can note, of his character René.

The same was true of his contemporaries Constant and Mme de Staël. The latter was daughter of Louis XVI's chief minister Necker and thus born into an environment that combined political activity and intellectual culture. First married to the Swedish Ambassador in Paris, she herself created a salon of high distinction, and like Chateaubriand she had the courage during the Revolutionary period to oppose political régimes of which she disapproved – going into exile in England in 1792 and later to Switzerland. Under Napoleon too, most famously, her liberalism brought her into conflict repeatedly with authority and led again to her exile – in 1803, then in 1806, again in 1810. At her Swiss home at Coppet she again created an intellectual centre, and by her extensive travels, ranging from England to Russia and Sweden to Italy, she established cultural contacts, notably with such German intellectuals as the Schlegels, that were to be seminal through her mediation for French thought over the next generation. As to her many writings, she is remembered now less for her novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, than her works of intellection: a pioneering study in cultural history and the sociology of sensibility, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800); *De l'Allemagne* (1810), which both continued the enquiries of the earlier book and offered a wide-ranging though selective account of German literature, art, philosophy and religious thought; and a number of philosophical, political and critical treatises, including an *Essai sur les fictions* (1795), *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations* (1796), *Réflexions sur le suicide* (1813), and *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* (posth., 1818). Her great friend Constant – described by contemporaries as one

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of her few equals in intelligence – was even more emphatically involved in both scholarship and politics. Like her he was exiled by Napoleon for his liberal views but, although he attacked the Emperor in a celebrated essay *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation* (1813), his political career began during the Hundred Days. But his real work as a politician came during the Restoration when, as a *député* and by his writings, he established himself as a leader of the Liberal opposition. His political works form a substantial part of his published works, but even more important to Constant himself were his major scholarly studies of religious systems, especially Greek and Roman polytheism. He was preoccupied from his youth until his death by his work *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements* (5 vols., 1824–31), and it remains his greatest intellectual achievement. His most famous book, *Adolphe*, its unfinished companion-novel *Cécile*, and his *Journal intime* and *Le Cahier rouge* have a more minor place in his life and work than might appear from histories confined to literature.

If we turn to the succeeding generation, Lamartine provides a first illustration of a similar combination of thought, literature and action. His earlier career was as a diplomat – at Naples, Florence, and elsewhere – but after 1830 he moved into political activity, becoming in 1833 a *député* of independent and liberal views, popular and influential through certain of his speeches – on the death penalty, press freedom, and the abolition of slavery, for example – and in 1848, for a few months, he became the virtual ruler of France. His political writings and speeches are often ignored in favour of his poetry, yet a short essay like his *Politique rationnelle* (1831) is worth reading for its understanding of the more significant political issues of the day as well as for his own programme of reform. And though he has been criticised as a historian, especially for his later works, his *Histoire des Girondins* (1847) still warrants attention from students of the Revolution. It would be difficult to claim for him as acute an intelligence as a Constant, but even much of his poetry is less emotional, more intellectually involved, than such poems as ‘Le Lac’ which are commonly taken as most characteristic of him: epics like *Jocelyn* and *La Chute d'un ange*, or, earlier, the philosophical poem of 1823, *La Mort de Socrate*, inspired by Plato, not to add the philosophical poems of the *Méditations* themselves.

Vigny's life presents a less active picture – though certainly not by his own desire. As a youth he sought a career in action in the French army, in which he remained until 1827, but with the final fall of Napoleon all chances of military glory had disappeared. In later life he tried, briefly, to enter politics, but was unsuccessful. His existence was thus far more

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withdrawn and inactive than he wished. Yet he of all the Romantics had something of the philosopher about him, as his poems suggest, and his *Journal d'un poète* contains numerous references to thinkers – Kant, Pascal, Cousin and others – that reveal a mind that knew and could shrewdly judge the intellectual trends of his age. He was no less concerned as a writer with social issues: the role of the artist in society, as in *Stello* and *Chatterton*; the defects of capitalism, notably in this latter work; the rights of the soldier and the conflict of public duty and private conscience, as in the short stories in *Servitude et grandeur militaires*; the role of the aristocracy – a question underlying his historical novel *Cinq-Mars*.

Hugo perhaps came closest of all his contemporaries to being a universal man. Son of one of Napoleon's generals, his first career was none the less as a man of letters – poet, novelist and dramatist. Yet his earlier works already show fully his concern with politics – first as a royalist, then as a liberal – and with religious and other questions. His later role, it is all but needless to note, is almost as much political as literary. Supporter of Louis-Philippe and, after 1845, a *pair de France*, the Revolution of 1848 made him a republican and a representative in the Assemblée Législative and, as such, an ardent advocate of universal male suffrage, free education, and other progressive causes. Following Louis-Napoléon's accession to power, personally disappointed to receive no political office and shocked by the *coup d'état* of 1851, he chose exile in Belgium and the Channel Islands, refusing to return, despite the offer of an amnesty, for so long as the Emperor remained in power. He went back to France after the fall of the Second Empire and was elected first to the Assemblée Nationale and later as a senator, and though his influence on public policy appears to have been slight, he remained until his death almost a symbol of republican socialism, apotheosised as such by burial in the Panthéon.

Comparable involvement is seen in other Romantics. The historians treated in a later chapter were also philosophers of history and culture, and some of them became major political figures and statesmen: Guizot, Thiers, Michelet, and more minor writers like Duvergier de Hauranne. Mérimée too became Inspector-General of Historical Monuments from 1834 and achieved much to preserve the French architectural heritage, and during the Second Empire he would become a senator and a close friend of the Empress Eugénie. Even those Romantics who assumed no such public roles often became, by virtue of their social and intellectual commitments, revered public figures to an extent we now find hard to appreciate. Two instances must suffice here. So hard-headed a judge as Taine would see Musset as a major intellectual: 'Y eut-il jamais accent

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plus vibrant et plus vrai? Celui-là au moins n'a jamais menti... Il a imprimé sa marque dans la pensée humaine: il a dit au monde ce que c'est que l'homme, l'amour, la vérité, le bonheur.'¹ Or again, George Sand not only played a distinctive role in the diffusion of utopian socialism and the encouragement of *la littérature ouvrière*; her successive novels were eagerly awaited by readers from America to Russia, and admiring fellow writers included Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Matthew Arnold, Renan, Walt Whitman, and Henry James.

During the twentieth century, by contrast, the Romantics seem to have gradually but largely lost their former power to challenge and disturb. The tides of taste have flowed towards, for example, the symbolists and surrealists, the existentialists and the culture of absurdity, and as commonly presented (mainly in university departments of literature) they have often seemed of little more than historical interest and, stylistically, to be too rhetorical, even garrulous, for the undemonstrative, satirical, understated preferences of our time. Even now one senses in many older and younger readers alike a certain dissociation from the French Romantics, whatever be true of their counterparts in England, Germany and elsewhere. As recently as 1969 Henri Peyre could reasonably, if controversially, declare that 'of all the eras of French literature (and perhaps of other literatures), the romantic age has, for over half a century, been the least studied, the most misunderstood and distorted'.² That view may undervalue outstanding scholarship in the twenty years or so before the Second World War, to which we are still indebted – from Bray, Moreau, Martino, Souriau, Evans, Hunt, Guillemin, Flottes, Leroy, Van Tieghem, and others. But during the twenty years or more after the War, despite the expansion of university staffs over that period, the impression was one of comparative neglect, notwithstanding valuable studies and initiatives from a minority.

It had not been so even in the earlier decades of our own century. The fierce ideological attacks of Lemaitre, Brunetière, Seillière, Maurras and Lasserre – astonished though one may be that they and Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* could have been valued by young T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme and others – were none the less paying a more comprehending tribute to the Romantics than many of the more anodyne literary-historical surveys that were to succeed them. Pierre Lasserre's *Le Romantisme français* in 1907 attacked it as 'le torrent d'idées et de sentiments le plus subversif qui se fût jamais déchaîné parmi les hommes'; the Romantics purveyed 'la glorification, je dis plus, la déification de l'irrégulier, du paresseux, de l'impuissant, de l'insurgé et

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même du criminel'. By the following year Seillière was similarly diagnosing *Le Mal romantique* and linking it with neurasthenia, and soon Louis Reynaud would argue that this deplorable aberration had English and German rather than French sources. For Babbitt too it favoured 'every imaginable extreme' and was 'filled with the praise of ignorance'. However much we disagree, such views – and, at a higher level, the critical scrutiny of the Romantics' religious ideas in Auguste Viatte's *Le Catholicisme chez les romantiques* a little later – took the Romantic movement seriously as a major intellectual and cultural phenomenon. And in 1930, when the 'centenary' of the movement was acknowledged, criticism remained as evident as praise. To follow the account of twentieth-century evaluations of the Romantics prior to 1930 given by P. Mansell Jones's *Tradition and Barbarism* is to enter an atmosphere of ideological partisanship – on both sides of the debate, with their defenders as much as with their opponents – that refreshes one with its acknowledgment of the Romantics' living relevance.

The passionate involvement of those years is infrequent but not entirely absent in our own times. To take North America as example, a survey of 'recent research' could contend that 'Romanticism' has become almost a 'faith' for such scholars as Northrop Frye and Morse Peckham,³ and Jacques Barzun in *Classic, Romantic and Modern* (1961), a revision of his earlier study, offered a most stimulating defence of the Romantics as 'first of all constructive and creative'. By contrast, M.Z. Shroder, in a work published in the same year (by Babbitt's former university indeed), could allege the Romantics' 'messianic pretension' and conclude that their 'image of the artist is ultimately an unrealizable megalomaniac ideal of personal omnipotence'.⁴ Since then, moreover, there have been numerous illustrations of more dispassionate scholarship; it would be invidious to select particular individual studies here, but they are fully represented in the bibliographies to the following chapters. And at a more general and equally important level, the Société des Études Romantiques has been founded and its journal *Romantisme* (1971–), and various research centres in France and elsewhere have been created, as have such reviews abroad as *Studies in Romanticism* (1961–) and *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* (1972–). More specialist publications have also proliferated – devoted, for example, to Constant (from 1955), Chateaubriand (1957), Mme de Staël (1962), Vigny (1967), and others. So too have colloquia and special issues of other reviews devoted to the Romantics and to what can well be seen as a rediscovery of major but previously neglected authors such as (say) Mme de Staël, as in the cumulative work of the *Colloques de Coppet*, and as

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another straw in the wind, one can note that this present work offers the first overall study of the French Romantic movement to be published in English for many years.

This contemporary resurgence of interest has often been based, moreover, on most welcome perceptions of the multi-sidedness of the Romantics' collective achievements. The preface to *Romantisme's* first issue affirmed views that others increasingly share. Romanticism, far from being literary alone, represents 'une période de l'histoire culturelle'; 'nous nous adressons donc aussi aux historiens de toutes disciplines, aux philosophes, aux sociologues, aux psychologues, aux linguistes, aux musicologues . . . A chacun d'allonger la liste!' Complexity too was stressed; in the review's very first paragraph the editor emphasised 'incertitudes sur la nature du phénomène, disparité de ses manifestations, contradictions dans ses effets, ambiguïté de ses formes spécifiques d'expression . . .' – 'le fait romantique échappe à toute prise sûre'.

Such warnings were fully warranted then – and may still be needed now. For half a century and more, one may well claim, study of the Romantics had not only been largely confined to literary scholars; above all it had been bedevilled by countless definitions purporting to sum up the essentials of Romanticism, not only in France but, very often, in Europe as a whole – in England, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary and elsewhere. Lovejoy's celebrated article of 1924, urging the need to discriminate between different 'Romanticisms' has often been quoted but rarely obeyed, and even less heeded has been his warning about the very use of the term itself: 'The word "Romantic" has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign.' Yet even Lovejoy himself, in 1941, would offer his criteria of Romanticism – the concepts of 'organicism', 'dynamism' and 'diversitarianism' – and others, notoriously, have produced numerous and usually conflicting definitions. Barzun's 'sampling of modern usage' gives one list amongst others – since when many more have flowed under the academic bridge. Amongst the competing adjectives equated with 'Romantic' he notes 'realistic' and 'unreal', 'conservative' and 'revolutionary', 'materialistic' and 'mysterious and soulful', 'formless' and 'formalistic', as well as 'unselfish', 'futile', 'heroic', 'stupid', 'nordic', 'bombastic', and many others. And a more recent study of Romanticism as a 'critical idiom' cites examples that range from 'the cult of the extinct', 'vague aspiration' and 'sentimental melancholy' to 'the renaissance of wonder' and 'the fairy way of writing'. Well might its author refer elsewhere to

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‘the maze of Romanticisms’ – prior to offering her own inclusive summary!⁵ Paul Valéry summed up both the confusion created and the abstracted irrelevance of all such attempts at definition in laconic sentences that are frequently cited by those about to disregard them: ‘Il est impossible de penser – sérieusement – avec des mots comme Classicisme, Romantisme, Humanisme, Réalisme. On ne s’enivre ni se désaltère avec des étiquettes de bouteilles.’⁶

Such ‘words’, moreover, may all too easily come between ourselves and the works being studied. They may predispose us, for example, to stress in our interpretations those characteristics we have already defined as Romantic. They may also lead us to concentrate unduly upon those works within a given Romantic’s total achievement that seem best to exemplify them and to treat others as less typical and thus peripheral – to focus above all (say) on Senancour’s *Obermann*, with its depiction of Romantic *mal du siècle*, to the neglect of his *Libres Méditations*, even though he saw this later work as more important and definitive; on Chateaubriand’s fictional and autobiographical writings rather than his religious, political and historical works; on Lamartine’s lyric poetry more than his epics, and so on. Specific instances like these may in themselves be of minor significance, though symptomatic. More widely pervasive has been the influence of the most deeply fixed of all the definitions, underlying both such selectivity and many of the more partial summaries: that which isolates as the main features and criteria of Romanticism the twin cults of emotion and subjectivity.

In a valuable survey in 1951, J.-B. Barrère examined the statements of literary historians from Brunetière and Lanson to Jasinski and Castex and concluded: ‘Ces définitions mesurées s’accordent à mettre l’accent, avec Croce, sur le sentiment, ou avec Goethe, sur la subjectivité: ce qui revient à peu près au même.’ Since then similar assertions have continued. ‘Romantic literature glorified strong passions, unique emotions and special deeds’; ‘the Romantics emphasised individualism, imagination and emotion as their guiding principles’; ‘Romantic doctrine sees poetry above all as the spontaneous expression of personal emotion’: these are just three recent Anglo-Saxon instances of a persisting view – a view (it seems increasingly clear from much recent research) that mistakes the half-truth for the whole truth and distorts by extracting particular aspects from their far broader context. The starting point of at least the editor of this present work is nominalist revolt, and the purpose, even though never completely achievable, is to recapture the French Romantic movement in its complex totality and range. The ideal would be to look at the entire corpus of the Romantics’ work and to do so without preconceived expectations.

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‘THE FRENCH ROMANTICS’

Who *were* ‘the French Romantics’? To avoid abstract definitions highlights the more a question that is more difficult to answer than might at first appear.

Certain usages of ‘romantic’ and ‘romanticism’ are easily excluded here. Some scholars have applied the terms, entirely properly for their purposes, to writers, painters and others from the Ancients and the Middle Ages down to the twentieth century. They have had in mind what has been called ‘intrinsic’, ‘perennial’ or ‘archetypal’ romanticism, an age-long spiritual condition or set of attitudes of which they then give a more or less justifiable description. Others have adopted a more limited but partially related ‘aesthetic’ usage, often contrasting works that are more imaginatively or emotionally inspired with the more realistic or documentary, but likewise treating the terms as potentially applicable to the cultural achievements of all ages.

Here, by contrast, the ‘historical’ usage is intended: ‘the Romantic movement’, ‘the Romantics’, as in countless histories of literature, art and music in particular. Yet this usage above all has given rise to confusions, and not least where it is mingled with notions of ‘archetypal’ or ‘aesthetic’ romanticism or both. ‘X is a lower-case romantic and lived between c. 1750 and c. 1870 and is thus properly to be considered as an upper-case Romantic’: such is the invalid syllogism.

Some examples of the resulting confusion are relatively easy to resolve, however – notably where a scholar moves backwards or forwards in time in order to discern ‘archetypal’ or ‘aesthetic’ romanticism in the immediate predecessors or successors of the earlier nineteenth-century Romantics. Mornet’s pioneering work on *Le Romantisme au 18e siècle*, for example, discerned in the period prior to 1800 so many detailed anticipations and influences that some were tempted – in the manner of Lasserre and Babbitt – to date the Romantic movement from Rousseau and others of his age. The concept of ‘le préromantisme’ served for a time as a convenient term of delimitation, as in the studies of Trahard, Monglond and others, but more recent criticisms have revealed such differences between ‘préromantiques’ and ‘romantiques’, alongside similarities, that its validity is largely undermined. Since a particularly trenchant colloquium devoted to it, only the boldest scholar would now rely on the notion, one may think.⁷ An analogous movement forward in time has been equally or more frequently made. Thus, for instance, Mario Praz’s celebrated study of *The Romantic Agony* traced its themes down to Huysmans and other *décadents* of the late nineteenth century, and it has been even more common, especially a few decades

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ago, to consider various mid-century writers as in some sense Romantics, almost as a final generation of the Romantic movement – and not inexcusably so given its impact upon them, in their youth in particular. It was none the less surprising that the quite recent and distinguished multi-volumed history of French literature from Arthaud should have given to all three volumes on the nineteenth century – those covering 1843–1869 and 1869–1896 as well as 1820–1843 – the collective title of *Le Romantisme*.

Yet, despite implicit assumptions that we may distrust in such practices, few of us are seriously misled. Most present-day scholars would not name Rousseau, Greuze, Vernet, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and others in the eighteenth century as ‘French Romantics’, nor would Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, Flaubert and others of their generation be included as members of ‘the French Romantic movement’. In practice, for the most part at least, the real difficulties in identifying who ‘the French Romantics’ were lie firmly within the first half of the nineteenth century. A not uncommon practice in some histories of French literature in particular has been to treat all the writers whose works fell within those fifty years as illustrative of ‘the age of Romanticism’. This may be defensible if it amounts to no more than a substitute for dates (and *their* misleading restrictions), but it has proved easy to slip into Hegelian-type preconceptions about the spiritual unity of such an ‘age’ and even to attribute causal force to what is, finally, an abstract noun. A comparably over-extensive usage is based upon birth dates, linked with the notion (albeit not without its utility) of ‘generations’. Thus Barzun, amongst other instances, defines ‘historic Romanticism’ as ‘comprising those Europeans whose birth falls between 1770 and 1815, and who achieved distinction in philosophy, statecraft, and the arts during the first half of the nineteenth century’. This may be helpful in bringing out how diverse and wide-ranging were the achievements of this chronological generation, spread, moreover, over the very different countries of Europe. What is less clear is the validity or helpfulness of subsuming such multifarious activity under a single name.

All the same, to abandon such all-inclusiveness presents distinctive problems. If not all who were born or who produced their works within given dates are to be treated as Romantics, how do we select the ‘real’ Romantics from amongst their numerous contemporaries? The selection, furthermore, may carry major consequences for interpretation. It would be simple, for example – it would, indeed, be almost tautological – to demonstrate (say) the religious, philosophical, political and social importance of ‘the French Romantics’ by including in their ranks such