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978-1-107-64710-7 - The Romantic Movement in French Literature

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IN FRENCH LITERATURE

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THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT IN FRENCH LITERATURE

TRACED BY A SERIES OF TEXTS
SELECTED AND EDITED

BY

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE INFLUENCE OF ROUSSEAU AND CHATEAUBRIAND	1
Text. Madame de Staël: <i>De L'Allemagne</i>	4
THE INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN LITERATURES	38
Texts. Lamartine: <i>Préface des Méditations</i>	40
<i>Des Destinées de la Poésie</i>	48
THE ROMANTIC BATTLE	57
Texts. Sainte-Beuve: <i>Tableau de la Poésie française</i>	63
Article on Alfred de Musset	69
Article on Victor Hugo	75
Alexandre Guiraud: <i>Nos Doctrines</i>	82
Victor Hugo: "1824"	87
"1826"	98
"1828"	104
Émile Deschamps: <i>Préfaces des Études françaises</i> <i>et étrangères</i>	106
THE ROMANTIC DRAMA	123
Texts. Victor Hugo: <i>Préface de Cromwell</i>	130
Alfred de Vigny: <i>Préface du More de Venise</i>	171
Théophile Gautier: <i>Histoire du Romantisme</i>	182
THE HISTORICAL NOVEL	190
Texts. Victor Hugo: Article on <i>Quentin Durward</i>	195
Alfred de Vigny: <i>Journal d'un Poète</i>	199
THE DECLINE OF ROMANTICISM	202
Texts. Alfred de Musset: <i>Première Lettre de Dupuis</i> <i>et Cotonet</i>	207
Sainte-Beuve: Article on Théodore de Banville	232
INDEX TO NOTES	243
	a 3

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

THE Romantic movement is decidedly out of favour in France at the present moment. Few critics can refrain from throwing a stone or two into the Romantic garden. But they aim rather at the movement itself than at the individual writers. Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Hugo, Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, Michelet, are by common consent among the princes of French literature. It is assuredly not any question as to their merits that has delayed the admission of the last three to M. Jusserand's hospitable Valhalla, which already includes Dumas, Vigny, Alfred de Musset, George Sand, Mérimée, and Gautier. In fact, no twelve years in the whole history of French literature has witnessed the rise of so many constellations of the first magnitude as the period from 1820 to 1832. How are we to reconcile the alleged badness of the school with the successes of its scholars? Is it, as some would have us believe, that the majority of the writers are not really

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

PREFACE

Romanticists, and that even Victor Hugo would have been a greater poet if he had not been a Romanticist? These suggestions are neither of them according to the rules of logic. The first is a *petitio principii*: the second is not a legitimate hypothesis. But, logic apart, one thing is certain—the Romantic movement has affected the whole subsequent course of French literature. You can no more understand the literature of to-day without a knowledge of the Romantic movement, than you can understand the France of to-day without a knowledge of the French Revolution. Now the best way of understanding a cause is to let its supporters speak for themselves, and the object of this book is to provide such an opportunity. Beginning, therefore, with Mme. de Staël, who is the first to use the word *romantique* in a special sense, we have printed a series of texts so as to give a more or less continuous history of the whole Romantic movement. The extracts from *De l'Allemagne* and from Lamartine will shew that it was in the first place a reaction against the exclusive devotion to the Reason and the *goût* of the eighteenth century, that it was a plea for the heart and a plea for liberty. It was not till four years after the publication of Lamartine's *Méditations* (1820) that the contest between the old and the new, between classicists and romanticists began in earnest. The first campaign, which centred

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

ix

chiefly round lyrical poetry and ended triumphantly with Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales* (1829), is illustrated by several of our texts. First, three extracts from Sainte-Beuve furnish a convenient survey of the whole campaign. Then Guiraud's *Nos Doctrines* and the prefaces of Victor Hugo and Émile Deschamps enable us to follow the fortunes of the contest through its successive stages. Our next two sections deal respectively with Romantic Drama and the Historical Novel, the region, that is, in which the success of the Romantic school has been most questioned. But let it be remembered that it was the historical novel as conceived by Scott that led Balzac to create the novel of social life, and that modern French drama derives largely from the elder Dumas.

The advance of the Romantic school was stubbornly contested by its opponents, and as a school it was never accepted by the Old Guard. But by 1830 it had gained the support of nearly all the younger generation, and before long it conquered the *bourgeoisie*, whom the Revolution of July brought to power. But even in the moment of its triumph its decline began. While the great *Conquistador*, Victor Hugo, from his balcony in the Place Royale, was receiving the plaudits of his admirers, his old companions in arms were gradually drawing away. He had taken so much for

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

PREFACE

his own domain, that they were driven to conquer fresh provinces for themselves. It was thus with Alfred de Musset, whose wayward genius forbade him to remain for long under any banner, and the first of whose *Lettres de Dupuis et Cotonet*, of which we print the greater part, wittily satirises the foibles and eccentricities of Romanticism. The extravagance which Musset derides was no doubt largely responsible for the next literary movement, but Realism, although in one sense a reaction from Romanticism, was in another sense a development of it. The leaders of the new school could not shake off the spell of the old. Flaubert and Leconte de Lisle never lost their enthusiasm for Victor Hugo; the most fervid admirer of Alexandre Dumas *père* was Alexandre Dumas *filis*. In a word, the romantic theory of life with its exaggerations and puerilities has passed away: the romantic theory of literature abides. French literature has never again become subject to the tyranny of *les règles* and *le goût*. It has never abandoned the great principle which the Romantic movement, like all vitalising movements in literature, came to teach—that a work of art springs from the emotions and is shaped by the imagination of the individual artist.

To the texts which tell the story we have subjoined some notes by way of explanation and illustration. The short introductory narratives

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

xi

will serve as a brief sketch of the movement in its bare outlines. We have found especially helpful M. Jules Marsan's introduction to his edition of *La Muse française* (1907–1909), and an article by the same writer in *La revue d'histoire littéraire*, XIII (1906), 573 ff., entitled, *Notes sur la bataille romantique (1813–1826)*; M. Des Granges's *Le romantisme et la critique* (1907); M. Léon Séché's *Le cénacle de la Muse française* (1909); and for the historical novel, M. Maigron's *Le roman historique* (1898).

H. F. S.

A. T.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

OPPORTUNISM has been taken, in reprinting this book, to add an Index to the Notes.

The omission of Balzac from the series *Les grands écrivains français*, referred to in our original preface, has now been made good by M. Faguet's volume, recently published.

In deference to a wish expressed by several of our critics a companion volume of passages in verse and prose by Romantic writers is in preparation and will shortly be published by the Cambridge University Press.

H. F. S.

A. T.

CAMBRIDGE,

September, 1913.