

# Romanticism and Creation

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## Abstract:

This article aims to question the concept of Romantic creation within its historical and philosophical context. A veritable turning point in aesthetics, the rise of Romanticism established the predominant role of the subject in art, and of the autonomous work. For the first time in art history, the classical concept of imitation of nature was deeply called into question, in favor of a philosophical, even mystical, investigation of the inner foundations of the creative act. In doing so, Romanticism was seeking an ideal and certainly mystical synthesis, between humankind and the universe, from which the human was excluded, due to a desire for freedom. Romantic creation gives rise to reflection upon several essential notions of modernity: expression, imagination and collective creation.

*"We all are necessarily potential creators, but few are those who are actual creators."*

(Novalis, 2004, p. 238.)

## I. Introduction: Romanticist Creation, a Polysemous Concept

If there is a defining concept of the Romantic period, it is certainly that of *creation*, as can be understood in multiple ways. From a syncretic point of view, Romanticism attributes a major role to divine creation, often blending ancient Pagan mythology, Spinoza's pantheism and Christian eschatology, not to mention contributions from alchemy and magical thinking. This interpretation of God in the creative Spirit or in vital Nature corresponds to the concerns of the Romantic Philosophy of Nature, particularly regarding the theory of evolution developed by Goethe, after Kant, and by Schelling. Therefore, we can say that the human act of artistic creation that we are concerned with here, is situated at an intersection point between God and Nature. Thus the issue of artistic creation, in this period, goes beyond the strict framework of aesthetics and fine arts, calling upon theology, philosophy and the natural sciences. "Only an artist can interpret the meaning of life," Novalis succinctly notes. (Novalis, 2004, p. 159), a truly Goethian affirmation that neither Baudelaire nor Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* would deny.

This notion is indissociable from the the historical context of the Romantic period, particularly from the political and cultural upheavals that Romanticism alternately revealed, expressed and was a symptom of. Before becoming a style or an existential stance, Romanticism, word which doubly evokes both the medieval Roman language and also the novelistic form (*roman* being the French word for the written novel), questioned the main western religious, philosophical, political and artistic values and traditions. The Romantic movement is tightly linked to the concept of revolution, be it historical, philosophical or artistic. As Friedrich Schlegel noted, in a passage from the literary magazine *Athenäum*, "The French Revolution, the Doctrine of Science by Fichte and Goethe's *Meister* are the three major trends of our era" (F. Schlegel, 1978, p. 127). The Romanticist crisis took the form of a revolutionary and utopian Romanticism in which, conversely, it elicited a reaction sometimes considered to be backwards or conservative, in opposition to the progressive rationalism of the Enlightenment. The Romanticism of Jena, organized around the journal *Athenäum*, by the Schegel brothers, between 1798 and 1800, is emblematic of the first Romanticist tendency, whereas the religious painting by the Nazarenes (led by Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pferr), conforming to the iconographic codes of the early Renaissance, are emblematic of the second.

The Romantic movement truly emerged in Germany, at the end of the eighteenth century, in the wake of the first French Revolution. Its influence extended throughout Europe at least up until the 1850s. The French Revolution of 1848, led against the declining July Monarchy, represented a major political and artistic turning point. The Industrial Revolution in Europe and Realism in art, assailed by Baudelaire, strong proponent of modern Romantic spirituality, tended to replace Romantic ideals and utopias, even if the distinction between Romanticism and Realism is not as clear and simple as it may seem (Charles Rosen et Henri Zerner, 1986). Furthermore, a distinctive feature of Romanticism is that it breaks down chronology, categories and historical divisions, making it difficult to say, with certainty, when this movement ended. We certainly haven't finished with Romanticism, nor it with us, since "The Romantic poetic genre is still taking form; and its very essence is to but forever be becoming, to never be completed." (F. Schlegel, 1978, p. 112).

## 2. Romantic Modernity and Subjectivity

To fully appreciate the considerable importance that Romanticism attributed to the creative act, we may recall that the “Romantic Revolution” is closely linked to the Kantian “Copernican Revolution”. In a way, early Romanticism put Kant’s major contribution from *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) into practice: Humankind actively questions nature, rather than submitting to a pre-defined order. The concept of a free and autonomous genius, from *Critique of Judgement* (1790) had a determining role in this Romanticism. Contrary to the mimetic tradition inherited from Aristotle, in paragraphs 43 and 46 of his third *Critique*, Kant considers that art productions cannot be reduced to simple productions of nature: the former are the result of a self-aware, free spirit (genius), whereas the latter are the result of an unconscious, mechanical process (instinct), that no higher or immanent spirit inspires. This promotion of the notion of a free, thinking subject that reflects upon what he or she creates (though, according to Kant, the human creator was incapable of being rationally aware of the origin such a genial gift) was critical for the Romanticist generation and its echo continues to sound through modernity. Early German Romanticism takes these notions of freedom and subjectivity to new heights, finding its theoretical roots in post-Kantian thought, particularly in Fichte’s philosophy of absolute freedom, that Novalis urged be developed further, into the field of art, which had been little studied by Fichte. “If we begin to prolong fichticizing, artistically, marvelous works of art may result” (Novalis, 2004, p. 122). However, some Romanticists and philosophers, including Schelling and Hegel, believed, rightly or wrongly, that this absolutization of thought took place at the expense of the objective world and phenomenal reality, such that the spirit would run on empty within the magic circle of it’s own representations. The major issue of Romanticism was, thus, to synthesize (or at the very least, strive to synthesize) the two opposing realms of freedom and nature into one work; in other words, to take up the torch of the Kantian program and to bring it to fruition.

Schiller noted in several essays, including *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* and *Lettres upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that the modern subject had lost the consubstantial link that had united the Greeks to the Cosmos. If a modern human was, first of all, a thinking subject, that meant that humankind had excluded itself from the Great Nature, from the Great All. Therefore, radical subjectivity and a sense of being separate and cut off from nature go together. Romanticism kept this in mind, being perpetually torn between the radical demands of a free subject and the desire to find one’s place in a nature lost, to recreate an ideal primordial mythical unity. In many ways, the Romantic theory of creation tends to soothe the dialectic conflict between self and nature, within the superior or rediscovered unity of an artwork. (Julie Ramos, 2008).

However, at first reading, the Romantic aesthetic is characterized by its rejection of classicism and its traditional mimetic codes, against which it opposes free creation, the power of expression and of imagination.

## 3. Romanticist Crisis of Imitation: Expression, Imagination and Spirituality

Erwin Panofsky notes in *Idea* that the Renaissance supports two potentially contradictory concepts about the creative act: the mimetic precision of nature and the emergence of the concept of original genius. Creative artists were scientists, as were Leonardo de Vinci, Brunelleschi and Palladio. If artists follow the

ancient Aristotelian precept of *mimesis*, creation remains subordinated to a system of objective (mathematic, anatomical, astronomical, etc.) laws, from which art is deduced or derived (Panofsky, 1968, p. 68). However, the artist who endeavors to know these natural laws, adheres to an ideal of beauty (without being able to explain the cause), which finds its origin in the spirit. The Renaissance, in highly modern fashion, theorized on an internal essence and the psychology of the creative act, while continuing to subordinate this act to an outer source, to a supra-human universal order.

One can say that Romanticism blew up this conflict, or that it became aware of its highly problematic nature, in its disassociation of original genius and *mimesis*. The debate took the form of an opposition between *poiesis* and *mimesis* (although the latter is not simply repressed from Romantic theory). From Novalis to the Schlegel brothers, from Stendhal to Delacroix, the mimetic crisis has taken many forms. “Who has one’s own mind, does not copy others,” painter Caspar David Friedrich frankly commented, he who, refusing to take the artistic journey in Italy to copy the Old Masters there, found the real elements of his creation within himself: in his heart, his feelings and his faith (C. D. Friedrich, 2011, p. 50).

This movement of *creative introspection* is made abundantly clear by Novalis’s comment on the power of artistic exteriorization. The artist, whether a musician, poet or painter, actively and dynamically use the senses, rather than passively receiving external data through these senses. Novalis notes that the artist sees towards the exterior– *er sieht heraus und nicht herein* –, that is to say, from inside to outside, and not from outside, which is a characteristic of the mimetic situation (Novalis, 2004, p. 172-173). Friedrich developed the same idea relative to landscape painters, to whom he famously recommended, “Close your physical eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring what you saw in the dark to the light, so that it may have an effect on others, shining inwards from outside” (C. D. Friedrich, 2011, p. 64).

Due to the subjective postulate that Romanticism had adopted, it favored forms of expression in which the spirit took precedence over matter, the infinite over the finite, the unlimited over the limited. Thus, this period gives great importance to poetry and music, in that these two art forms arise from the intellect and can be described as “abstract” languages, intellectually codified and full of symbolic meaning. In another way, painting translates natural forms onto a bi-dimensional surface, and thus is a subjective interpretation of external data. The creative act that originates in the self, therefore, proceeds to sensitively exteriorize the internal : It is resolutely *non-mimetic*. This is why music – the epitome of a nonrepresentative art form – played such an important role in this period. Many Romanticist theoreticians, like the young Wackenroder, didn’t hesitate to consider music as the most appropriate expression of emotion; a few notes suffice to convey our deepest moods, whose qualitative nuances our conceptual abstract language is basically unfit to grasp. Wackenroder thus considers music as the very language of the soul and of spirituality in its purest state (Wackenroder, 2009, p. 250-251).

We may note that these subjective forms of creation, primarily focusing on the self, favor the exploration of the psyche and the sometimes dark and hidden depths of the soul, as Albert Béguin brilliantly showed in his classical work, *L’âme romantique et le rêve* (The Romantic Soul and the Dream). Dreams and imagination were two major mental structures of this period that deployed a whole idealized and unreal fantasy life, through

novels (Tieck, Novalis, Nerval), fantastic tales (E. T. A. Hofmann), Turner's "cosmic" painting and also Karl Maria von Weber's haunting music (le Freischütz).

If the expression of moods or the tendency towards emotional outpourings, and the proliferation of clichés that these sometimes favored, made a fortune of this period. Romanticism, as we have noted, was, above all, seeking the point of contact and union between spirit and matter, between self and nature. Creative imagination, thus, played an important role in this period, because this ability, this hidden root of the human spirit, involved a metaphysical grasp of reality, according to Kant. Baudelaire, worthy heir of romanticism, in this respect, noted, in *Salon of 1859*, that the imagination is "the queen of faculties", meaning that the real world is nothing but an arrangement of signs, that the imagination confers meaning to. Inspired by Delacroix, Baudelaire defined what he called the "ideal aesthetic system": "The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value, [...]. All faculties of the human soul must be subordinated to the imagination, which puts them in requisition all at once" (Baudelaire, 1976, p. 627).

#### 4. Imitating Nature *Naturans*

In many respects, poetry is the watchword of Romanticism because the notion comprises, beyond its genre, the creative act itself. This paradigm of all of creation affects the other arts that are sometimes considered to be poetic. We can recall Balzac's affirmation about painting in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, "The mission of art is not to copy nature, but to represent it. You are not an abject copyist, but a poet." Likewise, he wrote of the modern artist Frenhofer "'He's even more of a poet than painter,' Poussin replied gravely" (Balzac, 1979, p. 418 et p. 437). Yet, this poetic paradigm refers more deeply to the Romantic reappropriation of the concept of *mimesis*. If art is the exteriorization of the internal in these symbolic realities that constitute artworks, then, as Hugo notes: "It's within oneself, that one must look outside" (Victor Hugo, 2001, p. 943). The artist's relationship to reality now occurs through the imaginative fantasy life of the subject. Far from simply renouncing the idea of classical imitation of nature, as a quick look at this period might incite us to do, the Romantic period reappropriates *mimesis*. Drawing inspiration from a distinction established par Spinoza in *Ethics* (book I, proposition 29, scholia) in 1801, A.W. Schlegel considered the goal of art was not to copy Nature *naturata*, but to imitate the invisible and immanent process of life which underlies exterior phenomena, that of Nature *naturans* (divine efficient cause for Spinoza). "If we take Nature in its noblest sense – not as a mass of products, but as that which also produces –, and if we also take the expression "imitation" in the noblest sense, in which it doesn't mean the antics of the outer manners of a person, but the appropriation of the maxims of one's actions, there is nothing left to oppose nor add to the principle: art must imitate nature. Indeed, this means that art must create, like nature creates: autonomously, being organized and organizing, to shape living works that aren't moved by an alien mechanism, like a pendulum, but by a force residing within themselves, similar to the solar system, and which return to themselves completed." (A. W. Schlegel, 1978, p. 346).

Eloquent passage that reminds us that Romantic human creation aims to rediscover natural, even divine creation, not as a way to submit to an external model, but as a way of rediscovering the invisible principals of creation, beyond visible appearances, while drawing inspiration from the circular and self-reflexive structure of

life. Putting an end to the pre-eminence of the *Enlightenment's* mechanical model, Romanticism indeed gives considerable importance to the notion of the autonomous artwork, curling up on itself, like an organism, this "self-organized and self-organizing being," analyzed by Kant in paragraph 65 of his third *Critique*. This reflexive internal reading of natural phenomena influenced Baudelaire's "supernaturalism" (see his *Salon of 1846*). It reappears in Paul Klee's thought on the natural matrix, source of artistic creation, and the forms extracted from it, abstracted, in the original sense of the word. In particular, in *On Modern Art* he says, "The artist doesn't give the same importance to nature's appearance as to its numerous realistic detractors. Still forms don't represent the essential in the creative process in nature, to the artist, who is not truly subject to them. Nature naturans is more important than Nature naturata." (Klee, 1982, p. 28).

Whether a living being or modeled after the organic model, a Romantic work is ever becoming, as part of an interminable and infinite process. That is why the overall ambition of this period – to unite Spirit and Nature through art – remains an open and often problematic proposal. Romanticism paradoxically best satisfies its desire for organic plenitude in fragmentary and unfinished works, whose final word would appear to be indefinitely deferred.

## 5. Conclusion

We can note, from these different points, three distinct approaches to creation within Romanticism, themselves at the origin of three figures of the artist.

1) Romanticism was the basis of modernity, because it involved a radical subjectivation of the creative act, conceived of as a free and thoughtful activity. As with poetry, in the original sense of the word *poïen*, indissociable from philosophy: Create and think now go hand in hand, a point that many modern artists have continued to reiterate, shattering the myth of the blindly inspired artist. We have seen that this return to oneself takes the mystical shape of introspection or an inner vision that, like Caspar David Friedrich's "law of feeling", brings light to its creation. Whether mystical interiority or philosophical self-reflection, the mimetic thesis of dependance on a model is, in any case, shaken. Baudelaire notes, "Delacroix starts with the principle that a painting must, above all, reproduce an artist's intimate thoughts, which dominate the model, like the creator dominates creation [...]" (Baudelaire, 1976, p. 433 *salon 1846*).

2) Yet, this period also promoted the idea of divine flashes of unconscious, blind inspiration. Clearly contradicting the rather theoretical and intellectual approach of the Jena generation, a number of Romantics, including Wackenroder, Hugo, Lamartine and William Blake, elevated artists to the level of emissaries of God on Earth: alternately magicians and prophets. This conception of inspiration is not a simple return to the "chain of the inspired" described by Plato in *Ion*. Romantics link inspiration and originality, interiority and sometimes delirious fantasies. Also, the nearly "Dionysian" version of Romantic inspiration may have influenced Surrealism, with its quest for marginal and dissident forms of spirituality, based on madness, dreams and nocturnal hallucinations.

3) Within this period, another representation of the creative act emerged, one less known, but just as decisive for modernity: that of collective or collaborative creation. Jena's first generation exalted what the Schlegel brothers and Novalis called to "sympoetize" and "symphilosophize": the art of creating and thinking collectively. With depersonalization, anonymous creation, collective art or the production of a total work made by all, Romanticism took on a resolutely political, even partisan conception of creation, that was echoed by Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier and Richard Wagner. Guilds and professional societies flourished in this period. Often they were connected to the religious and almost monastic aims promoted by certain representatives of Romanticism, such as was the case for the Nazarene painters. Romantic artists would sometimes say "we", rather than "I", or the "I" would be used in a universal sense. Either they were speaking for others or they were channels through which the spirit of a time expressed itself (Hegel would say the *Zeitgeist*). The ambiguity of this position can be found in a statement many times put forth by Novalis (in a potential form), and that Joseph Beuys echoed, "Every man is an artist".



## 6. Footnotes:

[1] English translation from Bell, J. *Caspar David Friedrich at the edge of the imaginable* (Oct. 26, 2012). London, UK: The Times Literary Supplement.

[2] English translation from Pappas, S. *Managing Imitation: Translation and Baudelaire's Art Criticism*, from *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Volume 33, Number 3 & 4 (Spring-Summer, 2005) Lincoln, Nebraska, USA: University of Nebraska Press, p.320

[3] English translation from Perloff, M. *Poetics of Interminacy, Rimbaud to Cage* (1981). Evanston, Illinois, USA: Northwest University Press: p.27. Original citation: "Tout l'univers visible n'est qu'un magasin d'images et de signes auxquels l'imagination donnera une place et une valeur relative [...]" from *Salon de 1859*.

[4] English translation from Mayne, J. in *The Painter of Moderne Life and Other Essays* (1986) NY: Da Capo Press. Original citation: "Toutes les facultés de l'âme humaine doivent être subordonnées à l'imagination, qui les met en réquisition toutes à la fois."

[5] English translation by Prescott Wormeley, K., *The Hidden Masterpiece*, (February 26, 2010) Project Gutenberg: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). Original citation: "La mission de l'art n'est pas de copier la nature, mais de l'exprimer ! Tu n'es pas un vil copiste, mais un poète!"

[6] English translation from *The Unknown Masterpiece and Other Stories* (1999), Collective publication edited by Negri, P. and Berseth, J., Mineola, NY, USA: Dover Publications, Dover Thrift Editions, p. 21. Original citation: "Il est encore plus poète que peintre, répondit gravement Poussin."

[7] Original citation: "C'est au dedans de soi qu'il faut regarder le dehors," translated by us.

[8] English translation of, "Delacroix part donc de ce principe, note Baudelaire, qu'un tableau doit avant tout reproduire la pensée intime de l'artiste, qui domine le modèle, comme le créateur la création [...]" translated by us.

[9] On this lineage, see the book by Jean-Philippe Antoine, cited in Bibliography (p. 385).

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