

Michael Ferber

Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction.

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The chief benefit of Ferber's work on romanticism is to force one to rethink the phenomenon. It was not a school, or a circle (though there were these in different countries), but a movement. As such, it represents a moving target. In the end, the author dubs it a revolution. It spanned different countries and laced through all the arts, philosophy (Schelling) and theology (Schleiermacher) as well. The author acknowledges the difficulty of a definition. He settles on Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances'. In other words, he views it like pornography: 'you know it when you see it'.

Ferber concentrates his attention on the earlier exemplars of the genre, roughly those from 1760-1860. In the absence of a definition, the author initially tries to derive it from the medieval romances, but does not pursue the issue. He briefly toys with contrasting it with rationalism and/or the enlightenment or with classicism and/or neo-classicism (but the latter both follows and precedes the movement).

His primary emphasis is on poetry and literature, especially English romantic poetry, though he makes a serious bow in the direction of the Continent, the early German romantics, Mickiewicz, Pushkin, thus pointing to the international character of the movement. On this score he rightly emphasizes the importance of the belated reception of Spinoza in the shift from the subjectivism of Fichte to the natural philosophy of Schelling (pp. 87 ff.), which leads into the nature mysticism of the romantics, seeing the divine as immanent in nature. This sometimes slips into animism and thus a surrogate religion; but the romantics also evince the menace of nature and the monstrous.

Romanticism spills out of the arts and into other areas: into science, though not into Newtonian mechanics (as with Kant and Spinoza) but, rather, into a more organic view of nature. Romantic science could verge upon the weird (phrenology) and the bizarre (animal magnetism). But in the same way that the continental romantics were, by and large, cool toward Kant's critical philosophy so the English romantic poets failed to find their aesthetics in the empiricism of Locke and Hume.

The romantic poets were social critics. They were sensitive to the politics of the time, their individual views shifting from the right to the left, from left to the right, and back, in reaction to events of the day, especially the French revolution and its course, Napoleon, etc.

In passing the author notes romanticism's reaction to the industrial revolution, the rise of linguistics and history, the recovery of folk tales, the stirrings of women's liberation, and dalliance with the Orient (conclusion: inscrutable). Above all, the

movement was about imagination (the primal organ for the romantics), sensibility, feeling, and longing, longing for the past, longing for the future—just plain longing.

One item I found missing was the role of drugs, which both feed into and bleed out of the lives and imaginations of the denizens moving in and along with the movement.

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