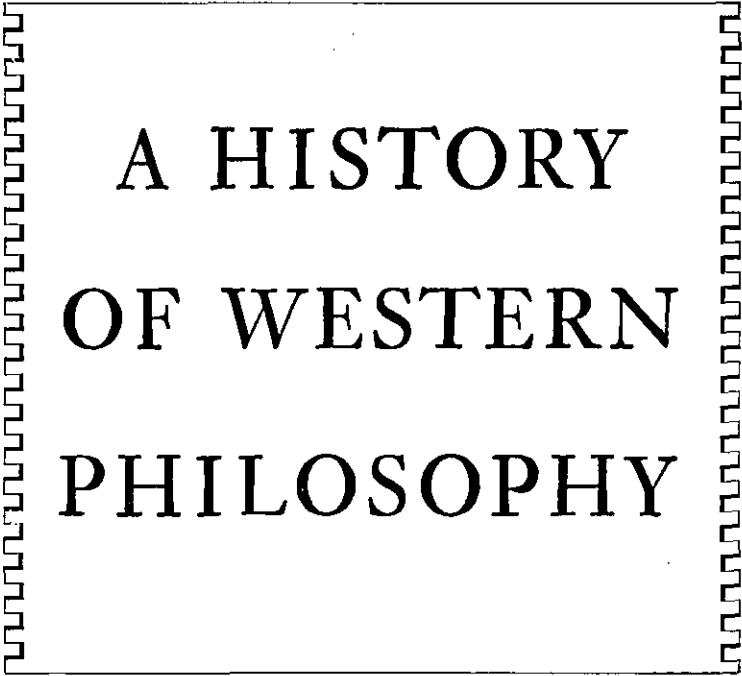


BERTRAND RUSSELL



A HISTORY
OF WESTERN
PHILOSOPHY

*And Its Connection with Political
and Social Circumstances from the
Earliest Times to the Present Day*

1945

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CHAPTER XVIII

The Romantic Movement

FROM the latter part of the eighteenth century to the present day, art and literature and philosophy, and even politics, have been influenced, positively or negatively, by a way of feeling which was characteristic of what, in a large sense, may be called the romantic movement. Even those who were repelled by this way of feeling were compelled to take account of it, and in many cases were more affected by it than they knew. I propose in this chapter to give a brief description of the romantic outlook, chiefly in matters not definitely philosophical; for this is the cultural background of most philosophic thought in the period with which we are now to be concerned.

The romantic movement was not, in its beginnings, connected with philosophy, though it came before long to have connections with it. With politics, through Rousseau, it was connected from the first. But before we can understand its political and philosophical effects we must consider it in its most essential form, which is as a revolt against received ethical and aesthetic standards.

The first great figure in the movement is Rousseau, but to some extent he only expressed already existing tendencies. Cultivated people in eighteenth-century France greatly admired what they called *la sensibilité*, which meant a proneness to emotion, and more particularly to the emotion of sympathy. To be thoroughly satisfactory, the emotion must be direct and violent and quite uninformed by thought.

The man of sensibility would be moved to tears by the sight of a single destitute peasant family, but would be cold to well-thought-out schemes for ameliorating the lot of peasants as a class. The poor were supposed to possess more virtue than the rich; the sage was thought of as a man who retires from the corruption of courts to enjoy the peaceful pleasures of an unambitious rural existence. As a passing mood, this attitude is to be found in poets of almost all periods. The exiled Duke in *As You Like It* expresses it, though he goes back to his dukedom as soon as he can; only the melancholy Jacques sincerely prefers the life of the forest. Even Pope, the perfect exemplar of all that the romantic movement rebelled against, says:

Happy the man whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
On his own ground.

The poor, in the imaginations of those who cultivated sensibility, always had a few paternal acres, and lived on the produce of their own labour without the need of external commerce. True, they were always losing the acres in pathetic circumstances, because the aged father could no longer work, the lovely daughter was going into a decline, and the wicked mortgagee or the wicked lord was ready to pounce either on the acres or on the daughter's virtue. The poor, to the romantics, were never urban and never industrial; the proletariat is a nineteenth-century conception, perhaps equally romanticized, but quite different.

Rousseau appealed to the already existing cult of sensibility, and gave it a breadth and scope that it might not otherwise have possessed. He was a democrat, not only in his theories, but in his tastes. For long periods of his life, he was a poor vagabond, receiving kindness from people only slightly less destitute than himself. He repaid this kindness, in action, often with the blackest ingratitude, but in emotion his response was all that the most ardent devotee of sensibility could have wished. Having the tastes of a tramp, he found the restraints of Parisian society irksome. From him the romantics learnt a contempt for the trammels of convention—first in dress and manners, in the minuet and the heroic couplet, then in art and love, and at last over the whole sphere of traditional morals.

The romantics were not without morals; on the contrary, their moral judgements were sharp and vehement. But they were based on quite other principles than those that had seemed good to their predecessors. The period from 1660 to Rousseau is dominated by recollections of the wars of religion and the civil wars in France and England and Germany. Men were very conscious of the danger of chaos, of the anarchic tendencies of all strong passions, of the importance of safety and the sacrifices necessary to achieve it. Prudence was regarded as the supreme virtue; intellect was valued as the most effective weapon against subversive fanatics; polished manners were praised as a barrier against barbarism. Newton's orderly cosmos, in which the planets unchangingly revolve about the sun in law-abiding orbits, became an imaginative symbol of good government. Restraint in the expression of passion was the chief aim of education, and the surest mark of a gentleman. In the Revolution, pre-romantic French aristocrats died quietly; Madame Roland and Danton, who were romantics, died rhetorically.

By the time of Rousseau, many people had grown tired of safety, and had begun to desire excitement. The French Revolution and Napoleon gave them their fill of it. When, in 1815, the political world returned to tranquillity, it was a tranquillity so dead, so rigid, so hostile to all vigorous life, that only terrified conservatives could endure it. Consequently there was no such intellectual acquiescence in the *status quo* as had characterized France under the Roi Soleil and England until the French Revolution. Nineteenth-century revolt against the system of the Holy Alliance took two forms. On the one hand, there was the revolt of industrialism, both capitalist and proletarian, against monarchy and aristocracy; this was almost untouched by romanticism, and reverted, in many respects, to the eighteenth century. This movement is represented by the philosophical radicals, the free-trade movement, and Marxian socialism. Quite different from this was the romantic revolt, which was in part reactionary, in part revolutionary. The romantics did not aim at peace and quiet, but at vigorous and passionate individual life. They had no sympathy with industrialism, because it was ugly, because money-grubbing seemed to them unworthy of an immortal soul, and because the growth of modern economic organizations interfered with individual liberty. In the post-revolutionary period they were led into politics, gradually,

through nationalism: each nation was felt to have a corporate soul, which could not be free so long as the boundaries of States were different from those of nations. In the first half of the nineteenth century, nationalism was the most vigorous of revolutionary principles, and most romantics ardently favoured it.

The romantic movement is characterized, as a whole, by the substitution of aesthetic for utilitarian standards. The earth-worm is useful, but not beautiful; the tiger is beautiful, but not useful. Darwin (who was not a romantic) praised the earth-worm; Blake praised the tiger. The morals of the romantics have primarily aesthetic motives. But in order to characterize the romantics, it is necessary to take account, not only of the importance of aesthetic motives, but also of the change of taste which made their sense of beauty different from that of their predecessors. Of this, their preference for Gothic architecture is one of the most obvious examples. Another is their taste in scenery. Dr. Johnson preferred Fleet Street to any rural landscape, and maintained that a man who is tired of London must be tired of life. If anything in the country was admired by Rousseau's predecessors, it was a scene of fertility, with rich pastures and lowing kine. Rousseau, being Swiss, naturally admired the Alps. In his disciples' novels and stories, we find wild torrents, fearful precipices, pathless forests, thunderstorms, tempests at sea, and generally what is useless, destructive, and violent. This change seems to be more or less permanent: almost everybody, nowadays, prefers Niagara and the Grand Canyon to lush meadows and fields of waving corn. Tourist hotels afford statistical evidence of taste in scenery.

The temper of the romantics is best studied in fiction. They liked what was strange: ghosts, ancient decayed castles, the last melancholy descendants of once-great families, practitioners of mesmerism and the occult sciences, falling tyrants and levantine pirates. Fielding and Smollett wrote of ordinary people in circumstances that might well have occurred; so did the realists who reacted against romanticism. But to the romantics such themes were too pedestrian; they felt inspired only by what was grand, remote, and terrifying. Science, of a somewhat dubious sort, could be utilized if it led to something astonishing; but in the main the Middle Ages, and what was most medieval in the present, pleased the romantics best. Very often they cut loose from actuality, either past or present, altogether. *The Ancient Mariner*

is typical in this respect, and Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is hardly the historical monarch of Marco Polo. The geography of the romantics is interesting: from Xanadu to "the lone Chorasman shore," the places in which it is interested are remote, Asiatic, or ancient.

The romantic movement, in spite of owing its origin to Rousseau, was at first mainly German. The German romantics were young in the last years of the eighteenth century, and it was while they were young that they gave expression to what was most characteristic in their outlook. Those who had not the good fortune to die young, in the end allowed their individuality to be obscured in the uniformity of the Catholic Church. (A romantic could become a Catholic if he had been born a Protestant, but could hardly be a Catholic otherwise, since it was necessary to combine Catholicism with revolt.) The German romantics influenced Coleridge and Shelley, and independently of German influence the same outlook became common in England during the early years of the nineteenth century. In France, though in a weakened form, it flourished after the Restoration, down to Victor Hugo. In America it is to be seen almost pure in Melville, Thoreau, and Brook Farm, and, somewhat softened, in Emerson and Hawthorne. Although romantics tended towards Catholicism, there was something ineradicably Protestant in the individualism of their outlook, and their permanent successes in moulding customs, opinions, and institutions were almost wholly confined to Protestant countries.

The beginnings of romanticism in England can be seen in the writings of the satirists. In Sheridan's *Rivals* (1775), the heroine is determined to marry some poor man for love rather than a rich man to please her guardian and his parents; but the rich man whom they have selected wins her love by wooing her under an assumed name and pretending to be poor. Jane Austen makes fun of the romantics in *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* (1797-8). *Northanger Abbey* has a heroine who is led astray by Mrs. Radcliffe's ultra-romantic *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which was published in 1794. The first good romantic work in England—apart from Blake, who was a solitary Swedenborgian and hardly part of any "movement"—was Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, published in 1799. In the following year, having unfortunately been supplied with funds by the Wedgwoods, he went to Göttingen and became engulfed in Kant, which did not improve his verse.

After Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey had become reactionaries, hatred of the Revolution and Napoleon put a temporary brake on English romanticism. But it was soon revived by Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and in some degree dominated the whole Victorian epoch.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, written under the inspiration of conversations with Byron in the romantic scenery of the Alps, contains what might almost be regarded as an allegorical prophetic history of the development of romanticism. Frankenstein's monster is not, as he has become in proverbial parlance, a *mere* monster: he is, at first, a gentle being, longing for human affection, but he is driven to hatred and violence by the horror which his ugliness inspires in those whose love he attempts to gain. Unseen, he observes a virtuous family of poor cottagers, and surreptitiously assists their labours. At length he decides to make himself known to them:

"The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection, was the utmost limit of my ambition. I dared not think that they would turn from me with disdain and horror."

But they did. So he first demanded of his creator the creation of a female like himself, and, when that was refused, devoted himself to murdering, one by one, all whom Frankenstein loved. But even then, when all his murders are accomplished, and while he is gazing upon the dead body of Frankenstein, the monster's *sentiments* remain noble:

"That also is my victim! in his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable genius of my being is wound to its close! Oh, Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being! What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all that thou lovedst. Alas! he is cold, he cannot answer me. . . . When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone."

Robbed of its romantic form, there is nothing unreal in this psychology, and it is unnecessary to search out pirates or vandal kings

in order to find parallels. To an English visitor, the ex-Kaiser, at Doorn, lamented that the English no longer loved him. Dr. Burt, in his book on the juvenile delinquent, mentions a boy of seven who drowned another boy in the Regent's Canal. His reason was that neither his family nor his contemporaries showed him affection. Dr. Burt was kind to him, and he became a respectable citizen; but no Dr. Burt undertook the reformation of Frankenstein's monster.

It is not the psychology of the romantics that is at fault: it is their standard of values. They admire strong passions, of no matter what kind, and whatever may be their social consequences. Romantic love, especially when unfortunate, is strong enough to win their approval, but most of the strongest passions are destructive—hate and resentment and jealousy, remorse and despair, outraged pride and the fury of the unjustly oppressed, martial ardour and contempt for slaves and cowards. Hence the type of man encouraged by romanticism, especially of the Byronic variety, is violent and anti-social, an anarchic rebel or a conquering tyrant.

This outlook makes an appeal for which the reasons lie very deep in human nature and human circumstances. By self-interest Man has become gregarious, but in instinct he has remained to a great extent solitary; hence the need of religion and morality to reinforce self-interest. But the habit of forgoing present satisfactions for the sake of future advantages is irksome, and when passions are roused the prudent restraints of social behaviour become difficult to endure. Those who, at such times, throw them off, acquire a new energy and sense of power from the cessation of inner conflict, and, though they may come to disaster in the end, enjoy meanwhile a sense of god-like exaltation which, though known to the great mystics, can never be experienced by a merely pedestrian virtue. The solitary part of their nature reasserts itself, but if the intellect survives the reassertion must clothe itself in myth. The mystic becomes one with God, and in the contemplation of the Infinite feels himself absolved from duty to his neighbour. The anarchic rebel does even better: he feels himself not one with God, but God. Truth and duty, which represent our subjection to matter and to our neighbours, exist no longer for the man who has become God; for others, truth is what *he* posits, duty what *he* commands. If we could all live solitary and without labour,

we could all enjoy this ecstasy of independence; since we cannot, its delights are only available to madmen and dictators.

Revolt of solitary instincts against social bonds is the key to the philosophy, the politics, and the sentiments, not only of what is commonly called the romantic movement, but of its progeny down to the present day. Philosophy, under the influence of German idealism, became solipsistic, and self-development was proclaimed as the fundamental principle of ethics. As regards sentiment, there has to be a distasteful compromise between the search for isolation and the necessities of passion and economics. D. H. Lawrence's story, "The Man Who Loved Islands," has a hero who disdained such compromise to a gradually increasing extent and at last died of hunger and cold, but in the enjoyment of complete isolation; but this degree of consistency has not been achieved by the writers who praise solitude. The comforts of civilized life are not obtainable by a hermit, and a man who wishes to write books or produce works of art must submit to the ministrations of others if he is to survive while he does his work. In order to continue to *feel* solitary, he must be able to prevent those who serve him from impinging upon his ego, which is best accomplished if they are slaves. Passionate love, however, is a more difficult matter. So long as passionate lovers are regarded as in revolt against social trammels, they are admired; but in real life the love-relation itself quickly becomes a social trammel, and the partner in love comes to be hated, all the more vehemently if the love is strong enough to make the bond difficult to break. Hence love comes to be conceived as a battle, in which each is attempting to destroy the other by breaking through the protecting walls of his or her ego. This point of view has become familiar through the writing of Strindberg, and, still more, of D. H. Lawrence.

Not only passionate love, but every friendly relation to others, is only possible, to this way of feeling, in so far as the others can be regarded as a projection of one's own Self. This is feasible if the others are blood-relations, and the more nearly they are related the more easily it is possible. Hence an emphasis on race, leading, as in the case of the Ptolemys, to endogamy. How this affected Byron, we know; Wagner suggests a similar sentiment in the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Nietzsche, though not scandalously, preferred his sister to all other women: "How strongly I feel," he writes to her, "in all

that you say and do, that we belong to the same stock. You understand more of me than others do, because we come of the same parentage. This fits in very well with my 'philosophy.' "

The principle of nationality, of which Byron was a protagonist, is an extension of the same "philosophy." A nation is assumed to be a race, descended from common ancestors, and sharing some kind of "blood-consciousness." Mazzini, who constantly found fault with the English for their failure to appreciate Byron, conceived nations as possessed of a mystical individuality, and attributed to them the kind of anarchic greatness that other romantics sought in heroic men. Liberty, for nations, came to be regarded, not only by Mazzini, but by comparatively sober statesmen, as something absolute, which, in practice, made international cooperation impossible.

Belief in blood and race is naturally associated with anti-Semitism. At the same time, the romantic outlook, partly because it is aristocratic, and partly because it prefers passion to calculation, has a vehement contempt for commerce and finance. It is thus led to proclaim an opposition to capitalism which is quite different from that of the socialist who represents the interest of the proletariat, since it is an opposition based on dislike of economic preoccupations, and strengthened by the suggestion that the capitalist world is governed by Jews. This point of view is expressed by Byron on the rare occasions when he condescends to notice anything so vulgar as economic power:

Who hold the balance of the world? Who reign
 O'er conquerors, whether royalist or liberal?
 Who rouse the shirtless patriots of Spain?
 (That make old Europe's journals squeak and gibber all.)
 Who keep the world, both Old and New, in pain
 Or pleasure? Who make politics run glibber all?
 The shade of Buonaparte's noble daring?
 Jew Rothschild, and his fellow Christian Baring.

The verse is perhaps not very musical, but the sentiment is quite of our time, and has been re-echoed by all Byron's followers.

The romantic movement, in its essence, aimed at liberating human personality from the fetters of social convention and social morality. In part, these fetters were a mere useless hindrance to desirable forms

of activity, for every ancient community has developed rules of behaviour for which there is nothing to be said except that they are traditional. But egoistic passions, when once let loose, are not easily brought again into subjection to the needs of society. Christianity had succeeded, to some extent, in taming the Ego, but economic, political, and intellectual causes stimulated revolt against the Churches, and the romantic movement brought the revolt into the sphere of morals. By encouraging a new lawless Ego it made social cooperation impossible, and left its disciples faced with the alternative of anarchy or despotism. Egoism, at first, made men expect from others a parental tenderness; but when they discovered, with indignation, that others had their own Ego, the disappointed desire for tenderness turned to hatred and violence. Man is not a solitary animal, and so long as social life survives, self-realization cannot be the supreme principle of ethics.

CHAPTER XIX

Rousseau

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712-1778), though a *philosophe* in the eighteenth-century French sense, was not what would now be called a "philosopher." Nevertheless he had a powerful influence on philosophy, as on literature and taste and manners and politics. Whatever may be our opinion of his merits as a thinker, we must recognize his immense importance as a social force. This importance came mainly from his appeal to the heart, and to what, in his day, was called "sensibility." He is the father of the romantic movement, the initiator of systems of thought which infer non-human facts from human emotions, and the inventor of the political philosophy of pseudo-democratic dictatorships as opposed to traditional absolute monarchies. Ever since his time, those who considered themselves reformers have been divided into two groups.