

Romanticism and Its Fate

The Two Cultures

From the complex matrix of the Renaissance had issued forth two distinct streams of culture, two temperaments of general approaches to human existence characteristic of the Western mind. One emerged in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment and stressed rationality, empirical science, and a skeptical secularism. The other was its polar complement, sharing common roots in the Renaissance and classical Greco-Roman culture (and in the Reformation as well), but tending to express just those aspects of human experience suppressed by the Enlightenment's overriding spirit of rationalism. First conspicuously present in Rousseau, then in Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and German Romanticism, this side of the Western sensibility fully emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and has not since ceased to be a potent force in Western culture and consciousness—from Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hölderlin, Schelling, Schleiermacher, the Schlegel brothers, Madame de Staël, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Hugo, Pushkin, Carlyle, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and onward in its diverse forms to their many descendants, countercultural and otherwise, of the present era.

To be sure, the Romantic temperament shared much with its Enlightenment opposite, and their complex interplay could be said to constitute the modern sensibility. Both tended to be "humanist" in their high estimate of man's powers and their concern with man's perspective on the universe. Both looked to this world and nature as the setting of the human drama and the focus for human endeavor. Both were attentive to the phenomena of human consciousness and the nature of its hidden structures. Both found in classical culture a rich source of insight and values. Both were profoundly Promethean—in their rebellion against oppressive traditional structures, in their celebration of individual human genius, in their restless quest for human freedom, fulfillment, and bold exploration of the new.

But in each of these commonalities there were deep differences. In contrast with the spirit of the Enlightenment, the Romantic vision perceived the world as a unitary organism rather than an atomistic

machine, exalted the ineffability of inspiration rather than the enlightenment of reason, and affirmed the inexhaustible drama of human life rather than the calm predictability of static abstractions. Whereas the Enlightenment temperament's high valuation of man rested on his unequaled rational intellect and its power to comprehend and exploit the laws of nature, the Romantic valued man rather for his imaginative and spiritual aspirations, his emotional depths, his artistic creativity and powers of individual self-expression and self-creation. The genius celebrated by the Enlightenment temperament was a Newton, a Franklin, or an Einstein, while for the Romantic it was a Goethe, a Beethoven, or a Nietzsche. On both sides, the autonomous world-changing will and mind of modern man were apotheosized, bringing the cult of the hero, the history of great men and their deeds. Indeed, on many fronts at once, the Western ego gained substance and impetus, whether in the titanic self-assertions of the French Revolution and Napoleon, the new self-awareness of Rousseau and Byron, the advancing scientific clarities of Lavoisier and Laplace, the incipient feminist confidence of Mary Wollstonecraft and George Sand, or the many-sided richness of human experience and creativity realized by Goethe. But for the two temperaments, Enlightenment and Romantic, the character and aims of that autonomous self were sharply distinct. Bacon's utopia was not Blake's.

Whereas for the Enlightenment-scientific mind, nature was an object for observation and experiment, theoretical explanation and technological manipulation, for the Romantic, by contrast, nature was a live vessel of spirit, a translucent source of mystery and revelation. The scientist too wished to penetrate nature and reveal its mystery; but the method and goal of that penetration, and the character of that revelation, were different from the Romantic's. Rather than the distanced object of sober analysis, nature for the Romantic was that which the human soul strove to enter and unite with in an overcoming of the existential dichotomy, and the revelation he sought was not of mechanical law but of spiritual essence. While the scientist sought truth that was testable and concretely effective, the Romantic sought truth that was inwardly transfiguring and sublime. Thus Wordsworth saw nature as ensouled with spiritual meaning and beauty, while Schiller considered the impersonal mechanisms of science a poor substitute for the Greek deities who had animated nature for the ancients. Both modern temperaments, scientific and Romantic, looked to present human experience and the natural world for fulfillment, but what the Romantic sought and

found in those domains reflected a radically different universe from that of the scientist.

Equally notable was the difference in their attitudes toward the phenomena of human awareness. The Enlightenment-scientific examination of the mind was empirical and epistemological, gradually becoming focused on sense perception, cognitive development, and quantitative behavioral studies. By contrast, beginning with Rousseau's *Confessions*—the modern Romantic sequel and response to the ancient Catholic *Confessions* of Augustine—the Romantics' interest in human consciousness was fueled by a newly intense sense of self-awareness and a focus on the complex nature of the human self, and was comparatively unconstrained by the limits of the scientific perspective. Emotion and imagination, rather than reason and perception, were of prime importance. New concern arose not only with the exalted and noble but with the contraries and darkness in the human soul, with evil, death, the demonic, and the irrational. Generally ignored in the optimistic, clarified light of rational science, these themes now inspired the works of Blake and Novalis, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, Hawthorne and Melville, Poe and Baudelaire, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. With Romanticism, the modern eye was turned ever more inward to discern the shadows of existence. To explore the mysteries of interiority, of moods and motives, love and desire, fear and angst, inner conflicts and contradictions, memories and dreams, to experience extreme and incommunicable states of consciousness, to be inwardly grasped in epiphanic ecstasy, to plumb the depths of the human soul, to bring the unconscious into consciousness, to know the infinite—such were the imperatives of Romantic introspection.

In contrast to the scientist's quest for general laws defining a single objective reality, the Romantic gloried in the unbounded multiplicity of realities pressing in on his subjective awareness, and in the complex uniqueness of each object, event, and experience presented to his soul. Truth discovered in divergent perspectives was valued above the monolithic and univocal ideal of empirical science. For the Romantic, reality was symbolically resonant through and through, and was therefore fundamentally multivalent, a constantly changing complex of many-leveled meanings, even of opposites. For the Enlightenment-scientific mind, by contrast, reality was concrete and literal, univocal. Against this view, the Romantic pointed out that even the reality constructed and perceived by the scientific mind was at bottom symbolic, but its symbols

were exclusively of a specific kind—mechanistic, material, impersonal—and were interpreted by scientists as uniquely valid. From the Romantic's perspective, the conventional scientific view of reality was essentially a jealous "monotheism" in new clothes, wanting no other gods before it. The literalism of the modern scientific mind was a form of idolatry—myopically worshipping an opaque object as the only reality, rather than recognizing that object as a mystery, a vessel of deeper realities.

The search for a unifying order and meaning remained central for the Romantics, but in that task the limits of human knowledge were radically expanded beyond those imposed by the Enlightenment, and a larger range of human faculties were considered necessary for genuine cognition. Imagination and feeling now joined sense and reason to render a deeper understanding of the world. In his morphological studies, Goethe sought to experience the archetypal form or essence of each plant and animal by saturating the objective perception with the content of his own imagination. Schelling proclaimed that "to philosophize about nature means to create nature," for nature's true meaning could be produced only from within man's "intellectual imagination." The historians Vico and Herder took seriously modes of cognition such as the mythological that had informed the consciousness of other eras, and believed that the historian's task was to feel himself into the spirit of other ages through an empathic "historical sense," to understand from within by means of the sympathetic imagination. Hegel discerned overarching rational and spiritual meaning in the vast data of history by means of a "logic of passion." Coleridge wrote that "deep thinking is attainable only by a man of deep feeling," and that the artist's "esemplastic power of the imagination" gave to the human mind the ability to grasp things in their entirety, to create and shape coherent wholes out of disparate elements. Wordsworth recognized the numinous vision of the natural child as possessing a deeper insight into reality than did the opaque, disenchanting perspective of the conventional adult. And Blake recognized "Imagination" as the sacred vessel of the infinite, the emancipator of the bound human mind, the means by which eternal realities came to expression and consciousness. Indeed, for many Romantics, imagination was in some sense the whole of existence, the true ground of being, the medium of all realities. It both pervaded consciousness and constituted the world.

Like imagination, the will too was considered a necessary element in the attainment of human knowledge, a force preceding knowledge and freely impelling man and universe forward to new levels of creativity and